



VICE on HBO: Reporting from the Frontlines (2/13/18)

00:00:27 Danielle Hodes: Good evening. My name is Danielle Hodes, and I'm the manager of public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial Museum. It's my pleasure to welcome you all to tonight's program. And as always, I'd like to extend a special welcome to our museum members. And if you are using social media, please consider sharing your thoughts about tonight's program using the hashtag #911MuseumTalk.

00:00:51 Initially launched in 1994 as a punk magazine, VICE has expanded into an extensive multimedia network. As part of that network, the multi-award-winning "VICE on HBO" documentary series features a raw approach to storytelling, highlighting a variety of global issues, many that speak to and spring from the 9/11 attacks.

This resonance is clear, as tonight's event is the third program that we've been fortunate enough to partner on with VICE. And tonight we are joined by producer Nicole Bozorgmir and Adam Kerlin, who will discuss the final episode of the latest season. The episode aired two stories, "After ISIS" and "Cubs of the Caliphate."

00:01:32 Nicole is an award-winning producer for "VICE on HBO" who has covered a wide range of global stories, including transgender youth, constitutional referendums in Turkey, the Rohingya refugee crisis, and the children of ISIS. Prior to joining VICE, she worked on several PBS documentary shows, including "Frontline" and "American Experience."

Adam is an associate producer for "VICE on HBO," focusing primarily on U.S. defense policy and the ongoing war on terror. Prior to joining VICE,

Adam focused on print investigations, conducting research and co-authoring reports at Reuters and "USA Today."

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And due to the nature of tonight's program, please be advised that some potentially disturbing media will be displayed as part of the discussion. We are deeply grateful to Nicole, Adam, and VICE for their continued interest and collaboration on our public programs. We would also like to thank the David Berg Foundation for supporting the museum's 2017/2018 public program season.

Without further delay, please join me in welcoming Nicole Bozorgmir and Adam Kerlin in conversation with executive vice president and deputy director for museum programs Clifford Chanin.

(applause)

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Clifford Chanin: Thank you, Dani. Welcome, both of you, welcome to everybody here. I want to just welcome you particularly-- it's the beginning of our winter/spring public program calendar, so I see some familiar faces, but many new faces. So that's our first pitch of the evening, we'll have more in the course of our conversation.

But it's particularly timely, I think, to come back to a conversation with VICE because VICE Media has been following this story in great depth over a number of years, and the first program we did here was with Ben Anderson, the correspondent on the first clip that we'll see, "After ISIS."

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But let me ask, you know, when the word goes into the newsroom that, you know, it's time to do another story on this, and I realize you guys are keeping up with this on an ongoing basis, but, you know, does everybody jump up and say, "I want to go," or are they having a hard time finding people who want to get over there and do this kind of reporting?

Nicole Bozorgmir: I don't think they're having... We're not having a hard time finding people. I think there's a lot of people on our team, on the weekly show, that are really eager to cover these stories. Sometimes it may be even a little bit of a fight between us who actually gets to go and do it.

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I worked for a long time with Ben. I started at VICE about four years ago, and I worked with Ben on a number of projects, and then started branching off a little bit and doing my own. But I think you sort of take hold of different topics or beats that you're hoping to cover over and over again, and it's a... you know, sometimes you can sort of lay claim a little bit to one type of story, or one type of region, although it is fair game for anybody on the team. But I think Middle East, ISIS, any of that, so many people on our team are eager to cover.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah, yeah.

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Adam Kerlin: Yeah, I mean, it's an important topic, and it's also one, I think, that... We've never had them approach the newsroom and say, "Hey, we need another story out of this." Like, "What are your ideas?" It's usually eight people with a bunch of different angles at how you could approach it, and I think... I still see with this piece, maybe compared to the previous ones that you guys have shown, they all try and look at it through a different lens, and also, like, bring it forward. I think that what our program has tried to do a lot is to, like, show the complexities of the issue and how minor victories, you know, are just one step in a process that's going to take some time.

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Clifford Chanin: Yeah, I mean, you can tell from the coverage that, you know, each piece is kind of a chapter in an ongoing story, and I think VICE has gotten ahold of that in a very careful and compelling way. But, you know, this is an ongoing story, and I'm wondering, you know, how far back do you have to go, do you think, to really understand the current chapter? Is it self-evident from the moment you get there? Has the story changed so much over the course of time that it really doesn't have a whole lot to do with what happened two, three, five years before? Or are

you conscious of telling another chapter in an ongoing saga that does have a continuity that runs through it?

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Nicole Bozorgmir: I would say it's a little bit of both. I think you really, to understand a story like this and to communicate a story like this, you yourself have to be well-versed in the history, and you have to go back more than a couple of years to really understand the roots of what's going on today. The challenge as a filmmaker and a storyteller is, what do I need to tell the audience to sort of keep moving with where things are today?

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And what's sort of the essential information that we need to convey, because you can go down so many rabbit holes, and so many different nuances, that we really certainly rely on our editors and our story producers to help us hone in on that. But I also think there is a sense, especially working with someone like Ben, who has been covering this for so many years, sometimes there are even references back to other pieces we've made in current films.

But it's always in the framework of helping move the story forward and understanding where we are today, because we don't have, you know, ten minutes to do a history lesson in every single piece.

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Adam Kerlin: I think, like, as Nicole said, as a storyteller, context is incredibly important, and I think as a society, with how we ingest news, it's becoming less and less important to some people, or there's less and less time for it, because we move on so quickly. So I think with this topic in particular, where there is so much of it, and you can make so many links to events in the past, you almost have to trust that there is some type of knowledge, or, what is the most important context for me to provide so they can have the best takeaway from what I'm trying to show them now? You know, just so it has the greatest impact on the viewer. You can't force them to view everything we view, but I think that for us, it's important that we've been well-versed in the, like, very, very, very beginning roots of all of this.

00:08:04 Clifford Chanin: Let me ask, though, because we'll set up the first clip we're going to show by... Let me ask Adam. So you're working with Ben on this piece, which is called "After ISIS," which tracks the end of the campaign to drive ISIS from Mosul. What's the setup for this? How do you sort of launch the team over there? Now, Ben has done this for many years, he's got contacts and so on and so forth, but what's the effort that you have to gin up to put together a piece like this?

00:08:34 Adam Kerlin: So it starts with understanding that the retaking of Mosul was essentially going to be a major point in this larger topic that we're discussing, or this, like, war against extremism, ISIS. And... But, you know, if anyone remembers following when that was even going to start, like, you know, you heard different dates for months and months and months.

00:09:00 So you had to be prepared for that, and then at that point, you also had to be prepared to know that it was going to take a year, or a long time. And in planning for the type of dispatch that Ben was on, it comes from the context you get for years and years and years in that you need a very good fixer or a local producer, someone who has contacts in a variety of different areason the ground, and for him, especially, it's getting good contacts with the Iraqi military.

00:09:32 You know, they're kind of-- as you'll see in this piece-- they were his security, you know? For a film like this, and he does a lot of reporting on the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well, it's him and a shooter, and for it to be any more than that, it would be extremely dangerous.

Clifford Chanin: So it's just two people from the VICE side of things?

Adam Kerlin: Two people, yeah.

Clifford Chanin: And essentially, they embed, in this case, with this Iraqi military group that's fighting against the ISIS entrenchment in Mosul?

Adam Kerlin: Mm-hmm.

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Clifford Chanin: Okay. How long were they on the ground shooting the material that we're going to see?

Adam Kerlin: So it was... He went three times over the course of the offensive, and each shoot was probably anywhere from eight days to, I think... The one at the end was, like, nearly three weeks, because it was... you know, we realized we were getting close. Do we stay until they finally, you know, clear the entire city? And I mean, it really just depends on, like, what's safe for him, as well, you know?

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Clifford Chanin: Right, right, and who makes that call? Is that principally his call?

Adam Kerlin: It's a big discussion with him and a lot of people at our organization whose job it is to deal with risks and security measures like this. You know, obviously, Ben wants to be there for the important stories, and he knows, he knows a lot about his own personal safety, because he's been in these situations a lot. So his word is very important to everyone around, and if he's saying he's safe, that takes, you know, a high precedent, but obviously it's a very large discussion with a lot of people.

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Clifford Chanin: Yeah, yeah. So I think this clip is going to take us into sort of the tail end of this campaign, and as you say, he and the cameraman are embedded with this Iraqi military group. And what's so striking is just the state of the city that so much conflict, so much fighting is being spent on, just what it is physically that they turn out to be fighting for. So this is a clip of about six minutes in length, and I will turn it over to our folks in the control room to show it to us.

- 00:12:00 Clifford Chanin: So we hear of the fog of war, but this is certainly a representation of that. What, you know... It certainly captures the complete uncertainty and lack of security of a situation like that, but, you know, what does Ben add to this in terms of the texture and the reporting? When he comes back, I mean, what is that dynamic in terms of description of what this was and how you contrast it with putting it into, you know, a somewhat comprehensive or comprehensible narrative?
- 00:12:33 Adam Kerlin: I mean, when, especially, like, for this. I think this snippet that we just saw was the middle shoot that he was on of the three dispatches. So there was a large conversation about how do we comprehensibly try and make a film about the fall of Mosul-- or the retaking of Mosul-- and include all of the segments to kind of really give the viewer the impression of the long, yearlong crime that it was.
- 00:13:05 And there's a lot of things, especially with him, and as you saw in that footage, just how embedded he was with the Iraqi security forces. And that was their kind of, like, front-line, special operations, like, Navy SEALs on our end, what it would be. And I mean, a lot of it is trying to just convey to the viewer the reality of what's going on on the ground and how hard this was.
- 00:13:31 I mean, the retaking of Mosul is probably the most intense urban warfare there was since World War II. So not only are people not really seeing, you know, footage from wars that are going on, but this was, you know, something that we hadn't seen in the world in a very, very long time. So I think he really wanted to convey that with this piece. He came back and said that it's very important to kind of convey.
- 00:13:52 And also just, you know, how much uncertainty there really is. I mean, you kind of saw in the middle there, that before they did that storming of the school, they were waiting for an airstrike. It was a U.S. airstrike. So there's a lot of collaboration between them, and it's, like, how much of the retaking was dependent on those airstrikes? A lot, a lot of it. And I think that was something else, if you see kind of the entirety of, of the segment, you know, how much there was a reliance on that and, you know, where we might be without that.

- 00:14:23 Clifford Chanin: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. So, Nicole, you're picking up this story with the second piece, and let's talk about that a little before we show the clip. But by the time you get there, the fighting has, by and large, calmed down. It's moved out of the immediate area that Ben is reporting from. But what do you find, and what's your impression of the kinds of scenes, not just that you see on camera in that clip, but that surround you completely? The entire city is devastated.
- 00:14:54 Nicole Bozorgmir: Absolutely, I mean, I think we were there about a month after Ben's last trip. And certainly, parts of Mosul, eastern Mosul, was back to life, shops were reopening, it looked fairly functioning. But when we moved into the Old City of Mosul, which was sort of the seat of where the ISIS fighters were digging in, digging tunnels, literally, and where the bulk of the really heavy fighting was, it still looked completely destroyed.
- 00:15:29 I mean, to this day, not that much progress has been made in the Old City in clearing it out. I mean, the day that we were there, I felt almost like I was on the set of a movie, it looks like a Hollywood film. I mean, every single building has been hit by an airstrike or bombed out. You know, like I said, a month later, there were still the bodies everywhere that hadn't been... that hadn't been cleaned out yet.
- 00:15:56 So it felt very much like we were picking up right where Ben left off. And that's in the Old City. Outside of the Old City, like I said, things are starting to go back to normal, although there were still... And to this day, I think there are still about two and a half million people who are displaced inside the country, so it's a slow process. It's a very long process.
- 00:16:20 We were just there for the very beginning of it, really, and I think it's something that's going to have to continue for months and years. I mean, when you see the scale of the destruction.

Clifford Chanin: The piece that you worked on there is called "Cubs of the Caliphate," and it deals with young people and what they were forced to do or confronted in this environment. But tell us how that piece evolved. So what was the lead that you were following? What was the team you put together? How did you arrange it? We heard about Ben and his experience with fixers and so on-- I'm sure it's similar, but you're really starting from scratch, in a way, that he wasn't, having gone three times.

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Nicole Bozorgmir: Yeah, absolutely, I think... So we've all been kind of following this situation unfolding in Iraq, and as the battle for Mosul was going on, it's becoming clear that, you know, whether it's a month or several months, ISIS is going to be pushed out of this area. And so the inevitable work of, in this case, finding who is responsible, who is actively participating with ISIS, who was passively participating with ISIS, who was doing it to survive-- it has to begin at that point.

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And I think when you bring children into the mix, the situation becomes so much more complicated, because there's questions of how much agency do they really have, what is their capability to really think through the actions that they're embarking on?

And so something that was interesting about this piece in particular is that we were really going in with a lot of questions. I honestly thought, when we were heading out there, that we were going to find a lot more evidence of rehabilitation programs for these kids, and we just... We just didn't see that much of that at all. We didn't know, sort of, what the answer was.

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A lot of times, you go into the field, and you have, kind of, all of these beats outlined on a piece of paper, you have an idea of your thesis, and the structure, and we had sort of a broad idea of that, but it really changed when we were on the ground and we saw that, you know, there really aren't so many programs for these kids right now, and a lot of them are being put in prison. A lot of them are in hiding, and fearful for their future. So you kind of have to pivot and follow where the story's going.

Clifford Chanin: How many of you were there on the VICE team and how long were you there?

00:18:46 Nicole Bozorgmir: There were four of us that went to Iraq: Isobel, of course, and two camera operators, and one of them is here today, Niall Kenny, who did a phenomenal job shooting this very difficult piece. And yeah, so our team was slightly bigger, it was kind of a post-conflict time. There wasn't as much of a need to be as compact as Ben's team usually is. And so, typically, we have four to five people on our shoot.

00:19:17 Clifford Chanin: And even though the shooting has stopped, you can't be sure of the security in such circumstances, so what precautions, or how did you proceed, taking that into mind?

Nicole Bozorgmir: Totally. I mean, the security element of a story like this starts weeks before you go. It starts, really, when you have the idea that maybe we want to do a story like this, and it's a whole team of people we have at the office, our production managers and coordinators, and independent security teams, that are sending us constant reports on what's the situation on the ground this week, what developments have there been.

00:19:51 Everyone who goes to these hostile environments goes through hostile environment training before, at some point before you go. And we have systems in place. I mean, it happens on a sort of case-by-case basis, but for example, there's always one person in New York that you're checking in with at least twice a day. If you're doing something particularly dangerous, maybe you have more check-ins than that. And we're always listening to our fixers and our local producers who really don't get enough credit for the work that they do on these stories, because they know so much more than we ever will reading reports before we go, and we have to follow their lead and their guidance.

00:20:34 Clifford Chanin: Now, with Ben's clip, it's obvious what the risks are.

Nicole Bozorgmir: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: It doesn't take any interpretation whatsoever. But, you know, what was your sense of the risks you were taking as the four of you were doing the reporting on this?

Nicole Bozorgmir: Um... I mean, the biggest risks were, there was still very much an active hunt for sleeper cells. In the Old City, there were still ISIS fighters that they were continuing to find in the days and weeks after we were there who had been in hiding.

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And there was also a concern about unexploded I.E.Ds., especially in the Old City, because, as we saw, ISIS fighters... I mean, they left booby traps for people that were coming to clear out the area. When we weren't in the Old City, the risks were... I would say it wasn't as risky being outside of that area. But again, it's just, it's a matter of communication, and always checking in, and our drivers, too, who know the lay of the land, who know which roads are open today and what's happened here, and, you know, their sort of institutional knowledge of the situation is really key to getting around that terrain.

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Clifford Chanin: So where were you staying during the shoot, and how far were you from the shooting location?

Nicole Bozorgmir: We were so far. I think the crew wanted to kill me by the end of the trip. We were staying in Erbil, which is in the northern part of the country, it's Iraqi Kurdistan. It's very easy to get around there, it's very open, it's very safe to stay there. To get to Mosul, to get to Hama Ma'ala Lil, it took, I mean, two to three hours one way every day. It was the safest way to go about doing this, because we didn't have embeds like Ben did, where you had to be staying there overnight.

00:22:31 So it was the safest way to do it, although, you know, six hours in the car every day on bumpy, unpaved roads, sort of a logistical challenge that you don't really think about so much before you get there, but...

Clifford Chanin: But you certainly think about it while you're in it.

Nicole Bozorgmir: Yeah, yeah. Niall can tell you all about that...

00:22:48 Clifford Chanin: So here we're going to pick up-- and Isobel Yeung is the reporter on this-- she's really talking with young people, some of whom have been involved with ISIS for one reason or another, others of whom have been the victims of what ISIS has done. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the set-up for the clip we're going to see?

Nicole Bozorgmir: Um, no.

Clifford Chanin: Okay, good.

Nicole Bozorgmir: Let's watch it.

Clifford Chanin: So this is going run about, a little more than eight minutes.

00:23:23 Clifford Chanin: Yeah. You know, for all of the physical devastation that we saw in the first clip, it seems to pale in comparison to the human devastation of this. So, you know, what are you thinking, and obviously you've revealed what you're thinking, in terms of the direction of the piece. But the impact of seeing this and encountering kid after kid after kid and families devastated, and, you know, how do you put the pieces back together is just the aching question for all of it.

00:23:52 Nicole Bozorgmir: Yeah, I'm afraid I don't... I don't have the answer to that. It was-- it sounds a little naive, but I wasn't totally prepared for how difficult it would be to hear so many stories like this on the ground. I think you read news headlines and there's one, you know, horrific statistic or, you know, horrific breaking news thing after another, and it's very different when you're sitting there with somebody, one-on-one, hearing the story from them.

00:24:18 And Isobel does an incredible job of drawing that out of, in some cases, very young kids, which can be really challenging to do sensitively and thoughtfully, but it's an enormous and daunting task for this whole society to try and rebuild from what they've been through.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The first kids who were sitting, were they in a home of some kind or some kind of facility? Where their faces-- the first kid who's talking in, the face-- says he's looking out the window-- is obscured.

00:24:52 Nicole Bozorgmir: So, no. We actually, we met him with his family, he was at home. But he was-- they were all getting ready to move, and specifically because they were worried about, you know, potential for revenge attacks against him. I know since we filmed with them, we've kept in touch through our local producers. I know they have left that area in the hopes that he can kind of restart and do normal things that, you know, 16-year-olds do, go to school and play sports, which he loves to do. But it's... yeah, we were definitely happy to hear that he had left that area.

00:25:35 Clifford Chanin: Was there a sense in terms of both of these reports that the presence of ISIS is over now? That whatever else has to be done and all of the challenges that still have to be faced aside, that at least that issue, because of this level of fighting, this level of conflict, is done? Or is there this sense that the cycle could continue again and pick up again?

00:26:01 Adam Kerlin: Yeah, I mean, I think, I think that that... I hope that people would take that away from this, because I think a narrative that you often see in news coverage of, you know, the... You saw it in an archival clip there, but just kind of, like, them yanking down the statue of Saddam. I think there are a lot of pivotal moments, and a lot of fights against oppression or terrorism that people latch to, and for whatever reason, maybe it's just because it's nicer to think that that might kind of be the end of it.

00:26:33 But with this topic and with this country especially, I think that a lot of what people have to come to terms with is that this is not a quick solution. You know, there are problems with the military solution that, you know, make the problems that come along with the, you know, making society kind of whole again even more difficult. And you know, you kind of think that you can't do one without the other, but then it's, like, well, if we get rid of that one...

00:27:00 I mean, it's a very complex problem, it's kind of why this is still going on. But I think that both films wanted to kind of, you know, convey the point that this wasn't really an end, you know.

Clifford Chanin: It seems clear, and I mean, I'll ask you to pick up after this, but it seems clear that in these kinds of circumstances, losing has a clear definition, but winning really doesn't.

Nicole Bozorgmir: Absolutely. I mean, I don't think... I don't think we met a single person who felt like this is over and done with. Obviously, there's a tremendous amount of relief that the sort of physical hold that the caliphate had has, you know, disintegrated. But nobody that we were with was kind of so naïve to think that this is the end of the story.

00:27:41 And the little boy who has the final line of the piece, who we filmed in silhouette, one of the things he said to us-- Isobel asked something like, "What are you thinking about for the future? Are you hopeful? Are you scared?" And he said, "I'm scared. They came so quickly the first time, who's to say they can't come back again?"

00:28:01 Because I think we forget how... I mean, it was, you know, In a matter of days, all of a sudden, everyone heard about ISIS or ISIL, I.S., whatever it was at the time, it was so fast, and they took over so much territory so quickly, how could that happen? And I think that's something that gets lost a couple of years later in this sort of narrative.

Clifford Chanin: But it raises the question, and it's for both of you, too, that, you know, there are the opponents who were dealt once ISIS takes over, and then there are the supporters, and then there's this vast group of people in the middle, and the question is, are they passively resisting, or do they simply swing in the direction of who's ever holding the guns at any given moment?

00:28:43 Nicole Bozorgmir: I mean, absolutely the crux of the problem, and you have, you know, several million people who were living in ISIS territory for three years. It's hard to know how you could survive that time without... Kind of like acquiescing in some way. You have to do something to survive, but for them, to sort of weed out who could be a potential problem in the future, there's no easy way to do that. It's a huge and ongoing process.

00:29:18 Adam Kerlin: It also speaks to the really extreme problem of your solution: How do you fix it? And there, you know, foreign policy is a difficult thing always, but with something like this, where, you know, we are trying to basically help this country put itself back together, you know, there is really no easy solution. You know, it's like with this middle ground that you're kind of talking about, like, who has the gun, who's doing this...

00:29:42 You know, the people there are extremely affected, and you know, I think a lot of the U.S. foreign policy going into this entire offensive is that this is something the Iraqi forces have to do. You know, they have to do it for their country, you know? But people in the middle that are losing loved ones to airstrikes, or just dying in the crossfire, maybe at the hands of ISIS, you know, they might attribute it to that.

You know, they're people that have, like... You know, the expert at the end said, you know, they're kind of a generation that has been under war for the past 16 years. So it's easy to come along and push someone in one direction or the other when they're just looking for something better than a war.

00:30:27 Clifford Chanin: Yeah. So talk about this kind of long-form reporting, because it doesn't really happen that much anymore, and VICE is one of the new media that's doing this. But, you know, some of the legacy media have, for a variety of reasons, walked away from this kind of commitment. I mean, it's an enormous institutional commitment, expense, personnel, everything else, and of course, getting the time, in this case, with HBO to do it. So how does this evolve that VICE has sort of staked its claim in this kind of reporting?

00:31:01 Nicole Bozorgmir: That's a great question. And I really-- I'm sort of very happy to hear that, because I think one of the challenges that we kind of face as producers is, we always want our pieces to be longer, and we always think we deserve more time than we're getting to tell our stories, because they're more important than the other stories.

But I think that... I don't really know how VICE has done it over the past, you know, five years, but I think they managed to find this sort of niche, and we're very lucky that HBO is not only willing to continue with these seasons, but they're always expanding. Every year, we've done more and more episodes.

00:31:45 This year, I think we're doing 32 episodes, for the first time ever. And I think that in spite of what people say about, you know, millennials or young people: They don't have an attention span, they don't, you know, they don't want to read things, they don't want to listen. I don't think that's really true. And I think that, you know, the kind of content that we're making, a lot of it is focused on young people and youth around the world, and what they're thinking and what they're feeling. I think there is a real appetite for that, and it's a worthy project to invest in, and I hope

that more people start doing it, because too often, you know, just hearing a talking head or a pundit or a headline-- you're not really getting any of the story. And I hope that more and more places will invest in reporting like that.

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Clifford Chanin: So what's... I mean, if as, indeed, seems to be the case, your target audience is a millennial, younger audience, what is the difference in the approach to reporting than if CBS News had decided to do something as long as that or, you know, as detailed as that? Is there a difference in the style of reporting? Is it simply the matter of time and getting someone on the ground? Or are you really doing this a different way to respond to a generational perspective?

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Adam Kerlin: I mean, I think part of it is with the natural approach to our content, which is to show people exactly what's going on on the ground. You know, like, in reference to Ben's piece, it's the authenticity of that. You're not questioning, you know, what he's saying. He's not saying a lot about the Iraqi forces, he's allowing you to kind of see it. And I think a younger audience kind of demands that, you know, with this divulge of information and content you can now kind of see, you know you can find the real thing, you know? You don't need someone to kind of tell it to you, and I think that it takes more time to allow something to play out, and then you kind of take your own opinion from it.

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So our length is almost a necessity of the type of content, you know, that we're creating, but I think that young people value that, and I would hope that everyone kind of values it, but I think that you really latch onto that audience a lot because they're so accustomed to so much content, and a podcast, or... You know, you can pick and choose what you pay attention to, so you want to weed out the things that, you know, probably aren't giving you, like, the real gist of what's going on.

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Nicole Bozorgmir: I think we also... Something that's unique about our show is how immersive our stories are. When I first came to VICE and I was pitching different ideas, I kept being told that there's too many interviews, there's too many sit-down interviews. We don't do all these sit-down interviews. And I couldn't understand, what's the issue? I need

to interview all these people for the story. But that's something we really... I mean, we try to make the scenes active, and we try to get into the middle of something that's unfolding.

00:34:38 I mean, Ben's piece is an incredible example of that, I think. Just being there, being on the ground, and Adam, you said it so well, I mean, there's no... He's not putting a spin on it. This is just exactly what's happening and what's unfolding in front of us. And I do think that that element, that immersive visual element, does set us apart from some other shows.

00:35:09 Clifford Chanin: I mean, it does strike me that as compared to talking heads on TV, you know, actual reporting establishes a certain authority-- authenticity-- for the organization that's doing that reporting. I mean, everybody has opinions, but to actually go to a place and with all the compromises and so on of editing, you know, picking a story and telling it, but that's radically different in terms of what, you know, 80% at least of what we see on TV today actually is. And I'm wondering if, you know, you think your audience is now back to that. Is it sort of a counter to what opinion-spouting dominant media give us? I mean, is this sort of the niche that you can find? Which is a very old niche, even if it's been reinvented this way.

00:35:58 Nicole Bozorgmir: I think, to some extent, that probably is true, because we also have, in the last year, we started a nightly news show on HBO, "VICE News Tonight." Which is more of the... I mean, it's nightly news, breaking news, but a lot of the stories are kind of told in the same way as what our weekly show has been doing. And so I think kind of the success of that so far speaks to an increased appetite for that kind of reporting.

00:36:32 Adam Kerlin: I absolutely agree. I mean, I think that what the show's been able to do, and to get to that point where Ben's with the Iraqi forces or Isobel's in a house with a family having the first meal back with those kids, you have to do a certain level of the reporting on the front end, like, before you even go, and then let the story happen while you're there, you know, that you would do if you're writing a print story.

00:36:58 So a lot of the reporting in the journalism is there in a way, I mean, like, I wanted to be an investigative reporter for print, you know, and that's kind of what I started out doing. I loved the amount of time they'd give you to reporting a story, because I thought that was the real value of journalism. And I think that the show kind of translates into that, because we read about something forever.

I mean, like, we're just-- we dork out about this topic. We think it's very important, but we think the value in teaching people about it is that you know it so well. So before we send people into the field, or we go into the field, you know, and then even on the back end, it's so vital for our editors to also be a big part of the process and understand the story.

00:37:37 It's a conversation, I think, at the beginning, in the field, and, like, at the end. You know, how do we really get as close to what's actually going on with the narrative and, you know, what characters we focus on, and, you know, what time we give to experts. You know, like, are they really adding to what we think is closest to the truth?

00:37:57 Clifford Chanin: You know, it's interesting, because the feel of it is not rushed, so, okay, you're not trying to fit it into a two-minute segment on a nightly news show, so you don't have that constraint.

But nonetheless, it does feel like the story is allowed to develop at its own pace, and even though, as a producer, you want more, I mean, you've sort of-- you hit a happy medium. I mean, the finished product is obviously the result of sort of a thoughtful assessment of what really needs to be in there. But it doesn't feel rushed.

00:38:26 Nicole Bozorgmir: I have to give a lot of the credit for that to our editors. I work a lot with Paula Salhany, who worked on this piece, and I think the editors on our show are really-- they're also story producers. And they invest a lot of time before they start cutting anything in really understanding what the story is. We have a lot of conversations, they do their own research, they send me articles that I haven't seen before. And I think part of that is just the ethos of the whole team, and really

investing the time and effort to understanding the story so she can figure out what are the moments that we have time to pause on, and what are the things that we need to keep moving through.

00:39:08

Adam Kerlin: And when it gets to when we're crunching down, and like you said, you... From an outsider perspective, you're looking at it and you're, like, you know, it feels like you let it breathe and you give it time. It's, like, painful when we're cutting this down, you know. All of them start so long, and you're just, like, "No, that is so important, and this..."

And they're so involved in the process that... The editor that we work with, (inaudible) Kelly-- Ben and I have been working with him a lot over the past year, year-and-a-half, and he's amazing-- and I will go in depth about what's going on with these soldiers. I was, like, "It's really important," like... You know, "They don't have that much direction, they're dealing with the U.S. military at the same time, all of this stuff, and I think that we need this whole two-minute sequence to convey that."

00:39:49

And I come back and he's made little arrangements, and he's able to convey it just in a shot selection of their reaction to what's going on. And, like, you get that. You kind of see the fear in their eyes, now you get this. And it's, like, it shows their talent as editors, but it also kind of plays into, you know, that dialogue that needs to happen, and how do you give the viewer the most context and the most, you know, real takeaway from the story, and, like, there's a multitude of ways to do that.

00:40:13

You can say it in a voiceover, you can do it with, you know, choosing an interview over this interview, or you could just do it with, you know, one simple shot that kind of says it all.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah. Let's see if there are any questions from the audience. Hang on a minute, and we're going to ask for you to wait before you speak so that we can get you a microphone so you can be heard. We can bring the lights up, would we? Sir, in the front. Hang on one second for the mic.

00:40:45

Man: I just was curious whether these troops that they were, Ben was embedded with, were they central government or the Kurds?

Adam Kerlin: They were Iraqi government forces, yeah.

Man: The central government, right. I just wanted to know that.

Adam Kerlin: Yep, yeah, yeah.

Clifford Chanin: Okay, good. Short and to the point, we like that. (laughing) I saw someone in the back? Did I not? You're hiding now-- we'll come back to the front. Sir, over there.

00:41:15

Man: Thanks. I'm a big fan and I admire your work. In today's climate, and, you know, the political scene that we live in, when you bring up articles or the videos that I see, you know, from your show, some people would say, "Well, that's only the angle that they want to show you," and that "you're getting what they want you to think, and this is liberal media, this, that." I'm not saying that, but I want to see how you would fight that back and say, you know, "No, this is actually what's happening in the field." How would you argue against... Against that, that... You know, that comment?

00:41:57

Adam Kerlin: I mean, I think we should both kind of answer this, because we get that a lot, and I think the content, like... You could call this liberal media, both stories, and make a case and have a debate, but I think it goes back to kind of the point we were just discussing, and getting it as close to what actually happened on the ground.

And obviously, even with choosing what to put in the final film in relation to everything you shot, a lot of selecting goes on, but it's kind of picking the best moments. It's not that we chose to speak to someone else or

focus on a different group. Like, luckily, with the content here, especially, I think that there really wasn't a choice.

00:42:42

Like... it's not like we could've gone two blocks over and something else was going on, you know? Like, this is basically kind of, like, the lay of the land over there. And I think we deal with that a lot, and you just kind of have to... You know, it's getting harder and harder, also, you know, to fight that. Because I think we are getting so segregated in terms of liberal and conservative, and you know, now we're fighting over, like, what's real conservative, this is conservative conservative. And you know, the liberal conservatives, and it's this, it's this kind of battle, and it's, like, no, the closer we get to the center is the closer you kind of get to the truth, and I think that that's what we're trying to do.

00:43:23

And I think that's why we tried to strip a lot of talking heads and interviews from our show. We kind of went that direction, I think, for a season. We started to do that a little more, and we're, like, "Let's just go back to what we know, which is what's going on in front of us." So I think that that's... I guess the best-case scenario is to just tell people that there wasn't a lot of decision-making in terms of, we're going to go pursue this or this. It's, we're just going to go there, and we're just going to go...
(inaudible)

00:43:45

Nicole Bozorgmir: Yeah, I mean, it's a great question. It's a really hard one to answer. I think what you saw in this clip is... It's the very end of the piece, and there is sort of... You know, some kind of conclusions you come to at the end of the story, I think, if you watch the whole segment.

We didn't try to sugarcoat the involvement of these kids in ISIS, and I think, watching it as an audience member, you feel a little bit conflicted about, what should we really do with these kids? They could be a huge problem in the future. And I think that that sense of conflict is really important to any story, really, because there's always nuance, there's always that tension.

00:44:34 The second piece that I'll say about it is, you know, the sort of conclusion that we're coming to in the end of this piece-- it really comes from talking to a lot of experts on deradicalizing child fighters and people who've worked extensively with child soldiers. I'm not that person, but I...

You know, in part of our research, we've talked to many people, and there is sort of a general consensus that if you put programs in place, these kids can be rehabilitated, and that is perhaps a safer long-term solution, so... I think that's a really important piece of this is that it's not so much that we're saying what we think in the piece, it's from talking to the experts in the field and kind of allowing them to give us a framework for the story a little bit.

00:45:24 Clifford Chanin: One more, right here up front.

Woman: Thank you. It's really, really refreshing to see news as news again instead of news as opinion. And you talked about that in terms of a millennial approach to stuff. What other myths about millennials do you think you've busted? And my other question is, what other stories would you like to treat this way, apart from the major story that you've been treating for so long?

00:45:59 Adam Kerlin: Those are good questions.

Nicole Bozorgmir: You're a millennial-- I'm not really a millennial, so...

Adam Kerlin: We're two years apart, so...

(laughter)

Adam Kerlin: I don't know what line is drawn, but it's right in the middle there.

Clifford Chanin: A vast gulf, obviously.

Adam Kerlin: I mean, is your question in the context of what we were discussing and what millennials will latch onto?

(inaudible)

00:46:31 Adam Kerlin: Mm-hmm. Well... I really don't know, but if I were to piggyback off of that, and you kind of, like, look at it from a, you know, bird's eye view, if you take that into mind, that, you know, you have to take into context what millennials are kind of growing up with the opportunity to do, which is a lot more, or at least, like, see and take in. It really needs to not just, like, how long you'll spend watching a video, but I think how you need to communicate with them.

00:47:11 You know, and the honesty and straightforwardness that I think needs to return to everyday conversations. Because I think that there are so many different ways that you can now convey something to someone: digitally, you know... It's, like, before, it was just, you know, it's, like, "Are you lying to me, or are you not?" Or, like, "What does he mean by these words he wrote?"

00:47:34 But now it's kind of, like, you can put anything in front of anyone, and you can take larger meaning from the multitude of mediums that we now kind of have in front of us, and I think if we kind of just go back-- it sounds simple-- but to just, like, the core honesty of a back-and-forth about your own feelings and what you're thinking and what you want, then, you know, you're going to get more output from, you know, that generation.

Clifford Chanin: Nicole, from the older-generation point of view?

(laughter)

00:48:09 Nicole Bozorgmir (sighs): I know. I mean, I think if anything, the thing also is, it feels like the world is getting smaller and smaller, or maybe it was always that way, but it seems that we're more aware of that now, and that things that happen in one part of the world are never isolated to just that part of the world.

And I think there's a much deeper understanding of that more recently, and I think that's part of what drives a real, genuine interest in things happening all over the world. And I think that young people are engaged. I don't think that they're as apathetic as people say, and certainly, you know, in the past year, with the new administration in the White House,

00:48:50 I think we've seen that more than ever. And I think that's something we'll see in our show, too. I think in this upcoming season, we're covering a lot more domestic stories, a much greater percentage of them than we have in the past, because there is so much to cover. But I think sort of just that realization that things happening all over the place somehow have implications for you, as well, that for a long time, that part of the world seemed like that part of the world, and it doesn't really matter for us. And I think that myth has been busted for everybody, but young people, as well.

00:49:25 Adam Kerlin: Mm-hmm. And just kind of going off the smaller-world aspect of that, some of that is, like, your own choosing now. You know, you can choose to only think that this is important in the world because that's what you choose to focus on, and we now have the ability to focus on anything we really want to.

So I think that in trying to reach a younger audience, there needs to be a level of helping them weed out what's important and what isn't, and that's just not from a, like, you know, "I think this is important, so you should," and you're trying to convince them of any one thing. It's just, like, the broad topic areas of, as a human, you should be focusing on this.

00:50:01 Think about it how you will, but, you know, we need to kind of remind the kids growing up, you know, the pillars of society that I think hold this up and that we need to pay attention to. Pay to attention to how you... Well, I'm not going to tell you what to think about it, but you should be thinking about these broad topic areas.

Clifford Chanin: Let me just ask to close, without giving away trade secrets, what are you working on for the coming season?

00:50:26 Nicole Bozorgmir: Yeah, well. I think I could say a little bit about it. I actually just got back from Bangladesh where I was covering the Rohingya crisis. Again, you know, we try to take topics that have been covered extensively in the news and look at them a little bit... a little bit more deeply. So that's one of the things.

Clifford Chanin: That's fine.

00:50:46 Adam Kerlin: So... The name of the film "After ISIS" actually came because we thought that we were going to maybe possibly make that a larger thing that looks beyond what happens when they lose their caliphate. And that wasn't a part of this film, but I think it's something that we're pursuing for this season. And it kind of harks back to what we were saying at the beginning of this, it's, like, "Is this really an end? Is this kind of a finale?" And it's not.

00:51:11 And we're looking at the way in which it isn't, just because, you know, of this victory, you know, like, what does that mean? And, you know, what's kind of the next step in trying to have what people would determine a total victory? And then also kind of looking at how-- you know, our domestic approach to combating this, you know, from a defense perspective. I think that's something that we, you know, like, touched on in some of our films, but we're kind of looking at taking a deeper dive into, you know, how U.S. defense policy... You know, what effects it has beyond just building up a military force.

00:51:45 Clifford Chanin: Okay, great. Well, that's where we're going to stop. Although I will say you have both sort of refuted your minimization of talking heads. You are two excellent talking heads, and I would encourage you... I would encourage your heads to keep talking.

But I do want to... I promised a pitch before the end of the evening. Next Thursday night, the 22nd of February, we're doing a program with Mary Jo White, who was the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York. February 2018 is the 25th anniversary, February 26, of the first bomb that was set off in the World Trade Center, killing six people-- of course, 9/11 being at a much greater scale-- but we're marking here at the museum the 25th anniversary of that attack with a whole series of programs around that theme.

00:52:30 And Mary Jo White, the U.S. attorney who prosecuted not just the '93 bombers, but a whole succession of cases during the '90s, and who left the U.S. attorney's office at the end of 2001, she'll be here to talk about, you know, the development of this whole jurisprudence of prosecuting terrorists in these attacks on the United States. So I would invite all of you to think about coming back, to becoming members of the 9/11 museum, but in the meantime, let's all join in thanking Nicole Bozorgmir and Adam Kerlin. Thank you.

00:53:02 Nicole Bozorgmir: Thank you so much.

(applause)