Ice Wars: Burn the riches beneath melting Arctic sea

Contributed by Lily Dayton
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When CNN correspondent Kaj Larsen had the opportunity to head to the North Pole to report on geopolitical events that are surfacing as global warming, causing the Arctic ice to melt, he looked to his roots to help him tell the story.

“I knew I wanted to partner with production companies that had a talent for telling unknown but important stories,” says the Santa Cruz, California native.
So he called The Impact Media Group, a Santa Cruz/San Francisco, California production company, to collaborate with him on the project.

Alongside Impact’s cameraman Toby Thiermann, also born and raised in Santa Cruz, Larsen traveled from California to Anchorage, Alaska, where the duo hopped from ice plane to snowmobile to ice camp. After spending a sleepless night in a hut where they worried about polar bears, they rode a helicopter to the surface of the USS Connecticut, a nuclear powered hunter-killer submarine, which they embarked upon for a voyage to the deep seas of the North Pole.

What they documented there is a chilling reality, reminiscent of the Cold War era: As the Arctic ice melts due to global warming, one-third of the world’s supply of oil and natural gas will soon be accessible. This has caused silent sparring between nations that border the Arctic region—including Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark, Greenland and Norway—as each is poised to stake mineral claims beneath the ice, as well as control new shipping routes that will open up as the ice shelf recedes.

This story of politics, militarization and environmental impact will be told in “IceWars,” a mini-documentary that will headline a novel news magazine show for CNN called CNN Presents, premiering at 8 p.m. Sunday, July 17. Though filmed onsite in the Arctic, the movie was edited by David Sieburg, general manager of Impact, in Impact’s state-of-the-art studio in Santa Cruz.

With so many film production companies located in big cities such as Los Angeles or New York, what was the allure of Santa Cruz for such a large-scale production? For one, Larsen grew up in the beachside town. Before he went off and became a U.S. Navy SEAL—and then a Harvard graduate, reporter for Current TV’s Emmy Award-winning Vanguard Journalism series and correspondent and producer for CNN, Larsen started out as a junior lifeguard instructor in Santa Cruz, later graduating with a degree in political science from UC Santa Cruz.

But more than simply sharing roots with the media team, he knew that Impact has what it takes to produce a film of this caliber in the style of high-adventure journalism. “These are the people that really understand this new kind of journalism I’m trying to do,” says Larsen, who describes his reporting style as inquiry-based journalism that invites viewers to become part of the journey—and thus come to their own conclusions about the issue being investigated.

“There’s a tremendous waning interest in mainstream media,” says Larsen. “We wanted to tell this story in a style that is appealing to a younger demographic [so] we convinced the powers that be to present this in a different way. We’re trying to redefine the way we present news and information.”

The approach is “come with us, let’s discover this together,” says Bryan Rawles, CEO of Impact. Rather than a reporter filmed against the backdrop of images evoking a story, Larsen is immersed in the story. With pulsing music to match the intensity of this environmental crisis, Larsen takes viewers into the field.

“We’re taking a human approach and trying to pull back the third wall to make people feel like they’re there,” says Thiermann, who filmed 15 hours of footage—some of it from snowmobiles, some of it aerially from snow planes, some of it from within the twisted caverns of the USS Connecticut—that was later chiseled and sculpted in the studio by Sieburg to create 12 walloping minutes of video that narrates the overarching story while at the same time provides an emotional impact.

Scenes include a 2007 clip of two deep sea Russian submersibles diving 4,261 meters below the surface of the Arctic sea ice to plant a Russian flag on the bottom of the ocean—a Sputnik-like act that sparks an underwater international space-race. Then, viewers watch powerful footage of trembling Arctic ice as the U.S. submarine breaches the frozen surface in a saber-rattling gesture.

“There is a surface layer of cooperation that is happening,” says Larsen, cautioning that “Underneath the surface is real tension. The U.S. and Canada are allies in Afghanistan, yet we’re fighting over claims to the Northwest passage.”

Larsen is no stranger to this type of embedded journalism. His career as a media correspondent has included searching for Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan, hunting for land mines in Cambodia and voluntarily undergoing the experience of waterboarding so he could report on it.

Why would someone willingly risk his life to tell a story? When asked if it was adrenaline seeking that fuels his passion, Larsen laughs and says, “Well, there is that.” But his genuine response is more humble.

“I do it as a public service,” he says, explaining that the risk involved with his job is his least favorite part. “The problem is you have to go there to really understand. What I’m doing is still boots-on-the-ground journalism. I can give people information that I hope will help change the world.”

Thiermann adds, “Even if you have to take risks to tell the story, it’s worth it. That’s why you choose this path.”

In contrast to sensationalist media, the motivation of Larsen and the folks at Impact is to tell a meaningful story that might make a difference in people’s lives.

“I’d like people to learn about the issue and be able to tie it into individual action,” says Larsen. “Fossil fuels are melting the Arctic, which is giving us access to more fossil fuels that will melt the Arctic more. What we do as consumers in our cars in Santa Cruz is having an impact -- and causing us to send a nuclear submarine up there.”

Sieburg likens it to what the late anthropologist Gregory Bateson referred to as “the double bind”: “You go down the road that causes problems, but as you go further down the road it causes more problems. The only way to get out of it is to see it from a higher level.”

Thiermann adds, “Or, in this case, a deeper level.”

IceWars runs on “CNN presents” at 8 p.m. Sunday, Eastern time U.S., July 17. The show will replay at 11 p.m. and the following Saturday at 8 p.m. on CNN.

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This article appeared first in Good Times, a Santa Cruz, California weekly newspaper. Used by permission.

See the CNN version of the story, by Kaj Larsen, and see a video prior to the airing of 'Ice Wars' heating up the Arctic

Further reading and resources:

Petroleum exploration in the Arctic, Wikipedia. The "recoverable" oil represents "13% of the undiscovered oil in the world. Of the estimated totals, more than half of the undiscovered oil resources are estimated to occur in just three geologic provinces -- Arctic Alaska, the Amerasia Basin, and the East Greenland Rift Basins."

upi.com/
July 1, 2011 – Greenpeace in a letter to the government of Greenland demands to see the arctic oil spill response plan from Cairn Energy...

Arctic Oil Spill Would Challenge Coast Guard Scientific American,
June 20, 2011: "A major offshore Arctic oil spill could severely challenge the Coast Guard, with no available infrastructure to base rescue and clean-up operations, the Coast Guard commandant said."

Shell is Ready to Explore Off the Alaskan Coast

Obama and Democrats want more Alaska/Arctic drilling, but U.S. budget cuts may slow it.

Mark Begich, D-Alaska promotes oil and gas development in Alaska's Arctic. He met with federal energy management officials on July 14 - Bristol Bay Times

The Impact Media Group