

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a city at night. The city lights are visible, and their reflection is seen on a body of water in the foreground. The overall tone is dark and moody.

# Global Television

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## Satellites, Video, and the News

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**O**cean Earth is the first company to produce news reports with data from satellites. The company was begun in 1982, with a Falklands survey for the BBC and NBC, then a Beirut study for CBS. During the course of our analysis numerous intelligence discoveries occurred (e.g., detecting routes of attack), but so did interference from governments. Since 1982, including the four years when Ocean Earth was the only supplier of satellite-derived reports to television, the company found that reporting from space is more a political than technical challenge.

As a technical means of public observation and verification, satellite monitoring for news has been a "worry" for governments, and all the more so for governments in adversarial positions. Sales of authoritative information to the media in such countries usually entails a full-scale distortion. A sale to broadcast TV news in the United States, a cold-war superpower, does not mean getting the story broadcast. It means getting some of the "pictures" (as the trade-lingo goes) broadcast, with another story added. Take the case of coverage for CBS of the Iran-Iraq war.

In October 1984, seven months after beginning efforts to obtain civil-grade satellite data for the Iran-Iraq war zone (this lag time being typical of the long struggle to get data for sensitive sites), Ocean Earth handed over its results to a long-expectant client, CBS. The initial response was enthusiastic. Several days later, after review of the material with the State Department and the Defense Department, the story was telecast—but in a form considerably moderated, even reversed. Although the information reported was correct, critical facts were omitted, and the conclusion was the opposite of that presented by Ocean Earth's analysis.

The basic fact discovered by Ocean Earth was that Iraq, with Soviet assistance, had been building a massive river barrier along the border since before the commencement of the Iran-Iraq war, that is, before 1980. Iraq had begun to direct this barrier into Iran, cutting off Iranian land



Overall view of the Iraqi water system in July 1984 as broadcast on the *CBS Evening News*.

access to Iraq and to Iraq's allies Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and blocking access to the original border river, the Shatt-el-Arab, by diverting most of that river into Iranian territory. From 1984 to 1988 the barrier grew larger, extending deeper into Iran. Feeder canals were built to supply flood waters to first one, then a second, and finally a third channel.

Despite repeated telecasts worldwide of the steady advances of the Iraqi constructions—all with fresh Ocean Earth satellite evidence—CBS News ran only the one story on the subject, on October 10, 1984. Headed “Last Stand Ditch,” this short news bite suggested a Custer-like last stand by Iraq. This view was opposite to the truth, and opposite to information made available by Ocean Earth—information confirmed several years later by reports that surfaced in the Iran-contra hearings. What had been under construction for over seven years was described by CBS as being built in seven months, since the “last Iranian offensive.” Iran’s 800,000 casualties, which by then had shrunk to 30,000, were attributed to a battle “last February.” What was being extended northwards by thirty miles, then spilling across the border into Iran, was simply excluded from the computer graphic overlay on the satellite photograph. By cropping out spillage into an excavation in Iran, the CBS viewing public saw only a defensive barrier and not the essence of the system: expansion.

The ultimate achievement of the Iraqi excavation, a ten-channel, mile-wide flood raceway receiving waters from the Tigris and Shatt-al-Arab in Iraq (even from rivers in Iran) is targeted on Iran’s principal river, the Karun. The flood raceway will cut through the Karun and form a new channel for the Shatt-al-Arab, clear through to the Persian Gulf. By 1987, this project was set to receive floodwaters, smash through the Karun, and shift the border—defined as the Shatt-al-Arab—east inside Iran. It threatened not only to deny Iran access to its prime ports and oilfields, but also to cut through the dikes Iran had used so effectively early in the war (these appear as a giant chevron in 1981 satellite photos) to flood the land and thus bog down Iraq’s initial offensive. ABC’s defense correspondent ran several revealing stories on this development, with Ocean Earth imagery contracted from the higher-resolution French satellite. But the report had damaging consequences: the French publicly accused Ocean Earth of “overselling,” their satellite company strictly warned ABC against future reports without official clearance, and the data was declared contraband. Ironically, the illegal data ended up in protective custody in a (now unidentified) country leaning toward the only political stance suited to truthful news reports from satellites: neutrality.



Dan Rather reporting Ocean Earth findings on the Iran-Iraq war on the *CBS Evening News*, October 24, 1984.



Close-up detail of Iraqi defense system detected by Ocean Earth's analysis of satellite photographs.



Overall view of the Iraqi water system in May 1987, over two years after the CBS news broadcast, showing advances in the "defense" system, including flooding of the "tail" reservoir.



Close-up of the mile-wide, ten-channel flood raceway constructed by Iraq at its junction with the Karun River, May 1987.