The face and the voice of the enemy," Peter Jennings said after showing Osama bin Laden's videotaped message following the attacks on Afghanistan Sunday. But as strange as it was to see the enemy with such sudden and chilling intimacy in our living rooms — that gaunt, incongruous figure in a traditional turban holding a modern microphone — the bin Laden tape was only the first dramatic marker of how different this televised conflict is from any war coverage we have known.

Yesterday, CNN and MSNBC carried a taped statement from a spokesman for Al Qaeda, the very man sitting at Mr. bin Laden's right in the first tape. He threatened more terror "in the heart of America," surely aware that America is already on edge.

The most obvious and frustrating problem with recent television coverage — the absence of pictures, with American cameras unable to reach into Taliban-controlled parts of Afghanistan — has obscured a more profound transformation. Instead of a monolithic American point of view, the audience today is receiving a global perspective, seeing news from the BBC and from Al Jazeera, the Arab television station that first carried the bin Laden and Al Qaeda tapes.

This diversity of sources exists whether the American networks want to admit it or not. On ABC's "Good Morning America" yesterday, Charlie Gibson introduced a report on Al Jazeera by saying that Arab viewers were also following war coverage, "although their channel of choice isn't one you're likely to find on your television." In fact, images from Al Jazeera are flooding network and cable television here. Yesterday afternoon, viewers of CNN, MSNBC and Fox News Channel got the most immediate view yet of the battle scene, carried live: they saw flashes of antiaircraft fire in the black night sky near Kabul, as the voices of Arab translators conveyed a report from Al Jazeera's correspondent.

But if American viewers are getting accustomed to "Courtesy Al Jazeera" in the corner of the screen, they are less accustomed to what that change means. The audience is now in the position of juggling multiple viewpoints, like the reader of a novel with several unreliable narrators. And this is not simply a matter of judging anti-American propaganda (though the bin Laden and Al Qaeda tapes clearly fit that category). Active viewers can flip around and get entire broadcasts from Britain or Canada, American allies who report with a vastly wider perspective and greater range. With BBC news already distributed to 160 PBS stations around the country and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation available on cable on C-SPAN2, the television universe has expanded far beyond anything that existed even a few years ago.

The multiple views available on screen reflect the way this conflict itself relies on communications that are even faster and farther-reaching than they were during the Gulf
War. At times lately it has seemed as if President George W. Bush and Mr. bin Laden were on an extended version of "Crossfire."

In his speech to Congress — and of course, through television, to the American people and the world — Mr. Bush defined the war against terrorism in stark, "with us" or "with the terrorists" terms. It has been noted frequently that Mr. bin Laden's videotaped remarks seemed to respond directly to that idea but redefined the split as one between Muslim believers and infidels.

On that same tape, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Mr. bin Laden's second-in-command, echoed a question that has pervaded American television from "Nightline" to "Oprah." He said, "American people, can you ask yourselves why there is so much hate against America?" (It is another significant mark of the changing news landscape that anyone who wants to see the bin Laden tape or President Bush's speech to the country announcing the attacks on Sunday can sit at a computer and call it up on CNN.com and other Internet sites.)

But "Crossfire" may be a less accurate analogy than cross-pollination. Two days ago, the British prime minister, Tony Blair, sat down at 10 Downing Street for an interview with Al Jazeera, explaining himself to the Arab people and to his own at the same time. "This is not about the West versus Islam," he told Al Jazeera, reinforcing a shared message he and Mr. Bush have often expressed.

American reporters and anchors are clearly uncomfortable with this influx of foreign information, whether it's friendly or not. On MSNBC, Brian Williams was almost apologetic about showing the bin Laden tape so often, saying with a tone of resignation that we do have a free press and, anyway, the tape would have gotten out somehow. (In the pre-cable, pre-Internet era, it probably would not have.)

Aaron Brown on CNN explained why his network was showing the tape, saying that we need to see the same thing the Arab world does if we're going to understand the situation, but that seemed like a fig leaf covering what was genuinely and irresistibly news.

Those anchors seemed abashed, but almost all American anchors have seemed flummoxed by what to do with so much information from so many perspectives. In most wars, with Vietnam the crucial exception, American reporting has been monolithic in its attitude. Today there is not one propaganda voice but many, including that of America. Especially earlier in the week, the Defense Department tried clumsily and conspicuously to feed the hunger for images of the war by offering its own film to the networks, including an often-played scene of one of the first Tomahawk missiles being launched, an American flag picturesquely behind the rocket's white glare.

The Defense Department also set up phone interviews for a pool of reporters with pilots involved in the first attacks, all of whom made glowing, positive remarks, including one that characterized the operation as running like a well-oiled machine. From Canada, a CBC reporter told his program's anchor, "We've heard the Americans describe their missions before as a well-oiled machine and it turned out not to be the case," a reaction that Americans might easily have shared but that was not voiced on American television. With Canada emphatically supporting the United States, the reporter's tone was that of healthy skepticism from an ally.

American anchors have frequently expressed their frustration — and their viewers' — at how little can be seen in this war. And from the start they have been responsibly skeptical about news coming from the Taliban, especially when its spokesman claimed that his forces had shot down an American plane. That need for skepticism will be ever more important as the battles go on and Taliban claims of civilian casualties are likely to rise. But the anchors
have done little to put comments from Americans pundits and officials into perspective. The networks are overloaded with military analysts, mostly retired officers who do less analyzing than cheerleading.

Every anchor has said recently that no one wants to endanger American lives or missions, and in this crisis there is already evidence of the media's compliance with the government when necessary. Reporters who were sent aboard a United States aircraft carrier before Sunday's attacks did not reveal what was coming in print or on the air. Meanwhile, Mr. Bush has decided to limit Congressional intelligence briefings and at a news conference yesterday angrily said that some members of Congress had leaked "classified information" to the press.

Looking to the past does little to illuminate the issue. The heavy censorship of World War II may, in fact, suit the national mood now, when there is a shared sense that we as a country are under siege. But in the 30's and 40's, news arrived at a creeping pace compared to today's. And now reporters have reason to be concerned in light of the severe restrictions imposed by the government during the Gulf War.

The issue of what viewers can and should know is bound to heat up, but it has to be viewed in the context of the new global world of television — one with which anchors often seem painfully out of touch.

As technology races ahead, our images outpacing our understanding, television desperately needs cultural analysis.

Like Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair, Mr. bin Laden is reaching and trying to influence a gigantic worldwide audience. But as Fouad Ajami, the Middle East scholar, astutely said about the bin Laden tape on Charlie Rose's program, "No translation can tell us how this man sounds to his own followers."