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The Story Hunter: Emmy Award-winning journalist talks about “Planet in Peril”

By José Puga, El Comercio



Photo: Craig O'Neal

In 2006 Vanity Fair called Anderson Cooper “the conscience of the nation” during the Hurricane Katrina coverage. Today he is the leading anchor of CNN, and the prevailing voice of US TV-journalism has fixed his gaze on Peru.

The second documentary “Planet in Peril: Battlelines” will show conflicts related to the management of natural resources in 13 countries and will premier worldwide on December 11th. It will include a report about the contamination that affects the population of La Oroya due to mining activity.

“We have traveled around the world, including Peru, to try to show the people, the battles waged for resources and the sources of energy. We have visited the Arctic, Africa, Asia and South America,” explained Cooper from his New York office.

During the filming, in March and April of this year, Cooper’s team (formed by prestigious journalists like Sanjay Gupta and Lisa Ling) conducted a series of analyses on the people of La Oroya, which rendered horrifying results. 97% of the children suffer levels of lead that exceed the World Health Organization’s permitted levels. In addition to lead exposure, researchers have found high levels of cyanide and arsenic in the water and sulfur dioxide in the air. The consequences: early death, cancer, and neurological, cardiac respiratory and gastrointestinal disease.

Golden Inheritance

Anderson Cooper is part of a lineage that only the nobles can boast. Even though he is member of the Vanderbilt clan, one of the richest and most powerful families from nineteenth century USA, the Emmy Award-winning

journalist knew how to disconnect himself from the comfortable future that awaited him as the son of the famous artist and New York socialite Gloria Vanderbilt. One event in particular marked him for life and influenced him to pursue journalism: the suicide of his brother in 1988. During a psychotic episode Carter Vanderbilt Cooper threw himself off a 14th floor building with his mother looking on.

The anguish of the loss made the host of “Anderson Cooper 360°” (CNN) show that he could survive in extreme situations. From a young age he has looked face-on at conflicts in countries like Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, Lebanon, and at disasters like the tsunami that thrashed the coast of Sri Lanka.

“I wanted to see history with my own eyes”

What work did your team carry out in Peru? My right hand in this production, Sanjay Gupta, went to La Oroya to see the impact of a mining company on this community. Scores of people, including children and women, have been found with high levels of lead contamination. Later we made a parallel between this case and the other company in the United States that has operated cleaner. There is a really big problem en La Oroya.

The problem has expanded some 80 kilometers along the Mantaro River and has contaminated more communities...

It's impacting. People have tried to lift their voices and have been threatened and harassed, but at the same time the people say that if the company leaves, they will be left without work. This case needs the attention of the international community.

Why didn't you come to Peru?

I would have liked to have gone, but unfortunately my program (“Anderson Cooper 360”) doesn't allow me travel many days, but I traveled to Peru two years ago, when I was on vacation, to see the ruins of Machu Picchu and Cusco.

People are saying that you have created a new way of reporting on television: “Emo-Journalism.”

Well, the truth is I feel more old-school. I studied the way that CBS covered the war in Vietnam. Furthermore, I believed more in writing stories and taking a look

for myself to see what was happening in the world. I liked to tell people what I saw and what I believed. From what I can remember, I have only been real emotional when I was reporting. That was during hurricane Katrina. I tried to be impartial and to not take sides, but I couldn't do it.

You have experienced horrendous wars in 2006. What happened in Katrina that marked your life in a different way?

Well, I was there when the storm destroyed everything and then a month later. Many reporters said that everything was under control when it wasn't true. The authorities hadn't reacted to the disaster. They were hard times and I think I was able to show that to viewers in a realistic way, what was happening.

The politicians were totally unconnected to the victims of New Orleans.

I have seen many things around the world, but I couldn't believe what was happening in the United States. The difference between what the politicians said and what was really happening was immense. Fortunately, I have the privilege of speaking with the people who survived it.

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Planet in Peril: **Battlelines**

CNN

9pm

December 11th

Photo: Jacob Goad

Dr. Sanjay Gupta reports in front of Doe Run Peru stack in La Oroya for CNN.