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The Future Of Iraq Project



Free Media

Working Group

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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Free Media Working Group

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The Free Media Working Group conducted only one meeting. Follow-up meetings were not held because many of the Iraq participants were hired by Department of Defense contractor Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) due to their expertise in this area.

(* Reflects consensus of the participants in the working group. Other papers reflect the views of their authors.

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Framework for “ Immediate media reform in Iraq”

The most important guideline:

Building communication channels the citizens can trust

After a change of regime in Iraq the media will soon be at the centre of everyone's worries and hopes, no matter how this regime change comes about. The media will be, by their nature, the *intermediaries* between any government and the people.

The natural thing to happen on Day 1

Iraq is not Haiti, Somalia or Afghanistan. The media legacy of Saddam's regime will not be a void, a media desert, but a quite *big propaganda infrastructure*, with sophisticated equipment, that can produce instantly after liberation newspapers and magazines, radio and TV programmes – unless this is destroyed in a war. The existence of this infrastructure is a blessing if managed well.

So, the situation will resemble that of Germany or Italy immediately after defeat. The 'politically correct' contents and titles of media outlets will change in one day. On Day 1 there will be very different media, without any pressure from anybody. Incredible.

The worst offenders among the Baath-journalists will leave the scene, the others will fight to demonstrate and defend the cultural capital they think they possess.

Solutions for Day 1

We can obviously notice the similarity between Iraqi case and Bosnian one. While the comparison with other three European examples gave us a clear idea and importance of the Code .

This piece of moral and political and legal guidelines will be the safeguard of the society. Unfortunately we expect a lot of violations of those moral and national lines by the political parties rather than the individuals. But nevertheless there will be possibility to witness similar violations by Investors and Post- Saddam millioners like what happen in Kosovo as mentioned below.

Democracy publishers and Editors used their powers to punish democratic journalist and through them out .

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Challenge of Transitional Period:

The visions now circulating on the takeover of the existing media infrastructure can be divided in those that focus on *control and ownership* of this infrastructure and those that focus on the *services* they must provide. Privatisation is no immediate solution for matters of control and ownership, let alone the services. Iraqi politicians might want to avoid the well-known Russian disaster, when state property was sold for a penny to former party friends and mafia-friends of the party.

In a situation of 'state media only' or after a military defeat there is no other solution than to impose control (by victors and opposition groupings) and to reorganize immediately the internal structure of the state media.

If this reorganization is based on providing *services* to the public instead of treating control over state media as part of the 'spoils' for the opposition parties, it might meet with considerable support from the old guard - because not the government's or the parties' message is number one, but specific information/truth/knowledge/entertainment needs of the people.

A kind of psychological transition space has to be created. Let the old and the new guards of journalists find out together what these needs are. Let them manage together 'town-meetings', polls, discussions with specific professional groups etc.

We already said: the infrastructure comes with the people working in it. *Initiatives of the old guard of the journalists* have to be expected and welcomed: they will either want to be part of liberation and democratisation, or simply save their employment and privileges. Both are human reactions.

The process of *sorting out the journalists who cannot be rehabilitated*, will be necessarily messy and *rehabilitation* will take considerable time.

The old hands and the former opposition or expatriate journalists who will move into Iraq, will need to find ways to *work together*. Both groups must be ready to mix on all levels, the opposition journalists must not all end up as editors in chief and managers. This will enable the boards of the media to give a high degree of autonomy to specialised desks (economy desk, health desk etc.), as a prelude to future autonomy of individual journalists. Desks could have a rotating 'censor' out of their own midst who only checks products according to criteria of democratic journalism (completeness, fairness, non-partisan, objectivity etc.). Desks could be entitled to facilities (training, time for meetings, hiring freelance experts on journalism or their speciality etc.). Desks take decisions on requests for such facilities together.

Choices on Day 2

In their function of intermediaries the journalists in the media will either see themselves on the side of the government (party) or on the side of the people or on their own side (if they go for making a profit, to be really commercial). *A choice has to be made, by every media-outlet*. The choice in Iraq seems inevitable to be in favour of defending the interests of the people first, because for more than thirty years so

many crimes have been committed in the name of the people, against the people. Nevertheless, the media will take different sides and that's good. But the choice has to be transparent, publicised (as a kind of mission statement), to speed up recognition of standpoints by the public.

Iraqi journalists offer the talents for all three choices: quite a few (former) friends of the regime know exactly how to make themselves popular with decision-makers, an authority on something, receiver of 'He is a victim too'-goodies, a respected professional (without deserving it). The ways in which Iraqi artists in exile have behaved, may serve as a warning here. Any government will find enough journalists to obey or cooperate for the wrong reasons. Other journalists will prove to be excellent, talented spokesmen, who do their work in a democratic spirit. Other journalists again will be driven by a genuine hatred of political parties and compassion with the people, a dislike of spokesmen and bootlickers of all kinds. And others again have commercial talents they want to exploit with or without being tapped on the shoulder by the government, a party or the public.

Beyond this level of personal choices, the population always needs *reliable* media they can *trust* and – this is a more recent insight - media they know they can *correct*. The people will need to be able to correct mistakes, false information etc. not only to instill some democratic accountability into Iraqi journalism but *also* because in the beginning there will be no functioning market to reward the good journalism and to punish the bad. Something has to replace this market mechanism. So, institutions such as an ombudsman, a fixed page/time for rectifications, procedures in the court etc. are necessary.

New forms of propaganda are totally out of the question, even with the best of intentions, if only because very essential *practical* information on health, food, employment, elections and justice issues will have to be given to the people through the media. *The help the media can give in keeping the social peace* (which is actually their natural role in a democracy) and preparing for elections etc. is too important to be spoiled by a continued lack of trust from the public. The media will reach every corner of the country, unlike other institutions. This opportunity shouldn't be missed. For this reason ngo's of all kinds, facing weak institutions or an absent state in other countries turned to the media.

The choice for defending the interests of the people first doesn't mean trampling on the *legitimate* interests of the government, the political parties or whoever shares in the power. If for example the American army leads an occupation, its Military Authority will demand, we can safely assume that civilians, and particularly journalists, will not all the time get under its feet. Journalists and governors need a kind of *rules of engagement*.

The legitimate interests of those in power, who will be governing under difficult circumstances, need *professional conduct of journalists*.

Against their *illegitimate* interests the journalists need *protection by the law and a social fund* (for unemployment benefits, legal help etc.). As well as *an organization of their own* (trade union, whatever).

What media reform will look like in practice

After liberation, many mechanisms for reform will present themselves *at the same time* if we analyse what happened in other former dictatorships and what happened inside Iraq and among Iraqi exiles.

A flourishing of dozens new independent initiatives

First of all there will be, as we expected, a rush by Iraqis from outside to establish politically and economically independent media. They will be small in the beginning but with a promise to grow fast, esp. in urban areas. Actually radio and TV don't need huge technical infrastructures anymore. Technically, these media will be of reasonable quality. They will be popular if they are critical of the government; they can grow into a social role through investigative reporting and research on corruption, bad government services, theft of government money, local conflicts etc.

These media should be given access, should be promoted, supported and given all possible freedom, except during election time in which they will have to follow the general guidelines for reporting established by an Election Monitoring Board, guidelines which will have to apply to all media. This is a lesson learned in many countries (see Reader of the Forum for Iraqi Journalists).

Some of these new independent media may be very small, have few persons working in them, but they can be very influential (like fax newspapers with only a few hundred subscribers). Esp. as Iraqis have still trouble working together and in a team, the country might 'face' dozens of such initiatives, a phenomenon that will lead quickly to calls for libel laws. We advocate no specific libel laws for the media, but an independent council to deal with complaints (with a board similar to that of the media fund). Any citizen or politician should be able to ask a decision from a court, in the case of material damages, damage to a reputation etc.

The natural tendency of the now active opposition media will be to try to survive as well and to enlarge their audiences inside Iraq. We see no signs that these media will close forever on Day 1. Some of these media offer the same challenges as the state media, because they are in the hands of parties, whether or not these parties are incorporated in a transitional government structure.

The question with these media is, in short, mainly one of guaranteeing professional quality and real independence.

For these media and all others, an obligatory internal complaints procedure, or ombudsman, should guarantee swift public treatment of complaints of citizens, who will be educated in the basic principles of sound journalism. All media could publish these principles so that the public develops criteria by which it can measure performance.

Schools of Journalism, independent from the university system, are a good tool to introduce and maintain professional quality, esp. if they work on establishing a bi-weekly or monthly or, even better, ask a 'corner' in the media to monitor what the media do and report, whenever necessary, on mistakes, complaints etc.

State laws against direct financing by foreign governments should come into being. Foreign governments could however participate in a general fund to promote democratisation, quality and expansion of independent media. This fund probably needs to be managed by representatives from civil society (education, health/safety experts, justice, economic activities, arts), from the government and from the journalistic profession itself in a kind of tripartite system, with equal voting rights from each sector.

These small independent media will probably advocate the abolition of all state media, but not necessarily for unselfish reasons. Abolition of state media gives them a commercial chance. The problem is, for example, that any transitional government will need channels of communication with the population, esp. when the plans now forged to have local elections after some six months become reality. The solution seems to keep state media to the minimum: 1 TV channel, 1 radio channel, 1 newspaper, with strict budgets under parliamentary control and no paid advertising by government companies or institutions.

Financing by foreign ngo's and governments

Secondly, foreign powers will probably offer financing of new independent media, esp. western ngo's and governments from the region.

Financing of new print media financing through governments of neighbouring governments leads not only to total indifference towards (the number of) subscribers (see Reader), but also to predictable interference in Iraqi affairs.

Radio and TV financing by western ngo's produces the same indifference and interference in terms of themes these ngo's think are important (gender issues etc.).

On top of that Ngo-financing usually produces very poor quality as they focus on servicing local communities (see Reader), while foreign governments might want to support something that looks at least as 'smart' and professional as the state media.

Western ngo's will mainly try to team up with the small independent initiatives mentioned above or offer training for journalists in existing state media.

Western ngo's suffer from two misconceptions: they either believe the state and its media can be reformed just by training the journalists (without changing the power relations and culture of these institutions) or they dismiss the state, because they have low expectations from the state, if they are not outright anti-state. The reality was summarized recently by an expert of the OSCE. She complained that

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'hundreds' of training sessions and courses for Yugoslav journalists 'didn't help at all'. The Kosovar state media for example are on the right track thanks to senior BBC-colleagues who stayed over a year to help them to be non-partisan etc., while one of the independent media, owned by a Kosovar millionaire living in Switzerland, continues to commit all the old sins. The millionaire is not impressed by fines of 20,000 dollars.

We repeat here the idea that foreign governments (whether western or regional) should be allowed only to contribute to a general fund. One cannot stop ngo's to spend money on useless training courses. Only Iraqi journalists can convince them to invest money and energy in quality projects. For this purpose also, Iraqi journalists need to organize, not to repeat the example of Bosnia (see Reader).

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MEDIA INFORMATION IN POST CONFLICT IRAQ

Iraq suffers under the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein, the worst example of information deprivation of citizens virtually anywhere in the world. Once the despised regime goes, there will need to be not only a radical overhaul of the role, ownership and operation of all elements of cultural education, arts but especially that of the media of Iraq and the role it has been playing to enhance the personality cult of Saddam Hussein.

There will be an absolute need for public re-organisation of not only the media but also of the providing of information, both at a government and private level, so they can re-think how they would appropriately communicate with all Iraqi citizens on a mass basis and attract their attention in order to provide them with intelligent and genuine information, particularly about what governments can and propose to adopt internally and in the international arena

They will need also to consider what would be the best to offer the people of Iraq so as to enhance their awareness of their needs and their rights as equal citizens despite their difference in colour, race and language as all citizens of Iraq must be equal whether poor or rich.

At present either the Ba'ath Party or family members of Saddam Hussein indirectly own and manipulate all the media outlets. The regime bans or tightly regulates new forms of media services, all with the aim of restricting citizens' access to information so the regime can practice the worst excesses of deliberate manipulations of the perceptions of citizens.

It is known that on one occasion a fellow friend was summoned by Saddam Hussein and requested to convince his friends to go forward and apply to establish a new party. But when that person asked Saddam to allow the party to own a newspaper, the president responded by declaring that he will never give approval for a private paper which would criticise the government and demand better food and better vegetables for the people.

We have in another paper canvassed the seizing after the removal of the regime of all media outlets and their disposal by, say, auction on reasonable terms to the citizens of Iraq through Iraqi corporate entities and with or without international corporate participation plus the complete freeing of the access of citizens to information from anywhere in the world by any mediums – press radio, TV, broadband and including the Internet.

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A. The Media of Iraq

Further consideration of press, radio and TV services leads to the following requirements to meet the information requirements of a democratic system:

- One of the current Iraqi daily newspapers may be maintained by the interim administering authority as its "official organ" but be published only in English and besides news, carry intelligible announcements of legislative/administrative decisions. All Arabic-language newspapers must be turned over to the community through Iraqi corporate entities. These newspapers can draw on the "official organ" as they see fit.
- One of the current Iraqi national radio networks to be offered to a public broadcasting entity as a public multicultural broadcaster, funded by government grants, along the lines of the Australian SBS radio network, broadcasting programs in the various languages of Iraq – the Kurdish dialects, Assyrian, Chaldean, Sabian-Mandaean, Turkmen, Armenian, Syriac etc. as well as some Arabic and English.
- One of the current Iraqi TV networks be likewise offered to a multi-cultural public broadcasting group to offer a wide selection of intelligent and attractive TV programs again along the lines of the Australian SBS TV network.
- Foreign TV services such as Al Jazeera, Egyptian Space and Nile and the TV services of the Syrians, the Saudis, the Kuwaitis and other Arabian channels plus the foreign services from Russia and France and the BBC, CNN and Deutsche Welle which provide programming in Arabic and English should be invited to offer their programs either by direct broadcast or by pay subscription. This will ensure a diversity of programming from international as well as national sources. In this regard the successful experience of the United Arab Emirates in encouraging major networks to establish a base for their Middle East coverage should be noted, as well as the loyalty this has engendered..
- It is critical that the Iraqi News Agency (INA) be immediately seized from the Ba'ath Party and the regime and developed by the initial administering authority as an outlet for the relay of international news about Iraq from all sources and for the relay to all points in Iraq of legislative, administrative, legal and political decisions that affect some or all of the communities of Iraq in an authoritative but readable and intelligible manner.

B. Government Information

It is axiomatic that in a democracy the government must have no direct control whatsoever over the content of any public medium. But equally there is a requirement of a democratic government to ensure that it functions transparently and accepts the challenge of keeping the citizens it serves as fully as possible. Yet the nature of the news and public affairs coverage in a free public media system is highly competitive.

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This then poses a dual challenge for a democratic government. Firstly it must be prepared to keep citizens as fully informed as possible of decisions, programs and policies that they feel will have either a direct or indirect impact on them and their lives and their plans for their futures. Secondly it must establish the public information apparatus that will enable it to fulfill this responsibility in an environment it cannot and must not control but in which it will find much competition for the attention of citizens.

Each unit of government must therefore engage and properly fund their own public affairs section that will prepare the information about government activity in an intelligible attention-getting and fully professional fashion.

For a country like Iraq which has never experienced in living memory any requirement to keep citizens fully informed, rather only to tell them what the regime wanted them to hear, this is a challenge of a new and different kind.

To this end --

- There can be no Ministry of Information in a new and democratic government of Iraq. Each government organisation must be responsible for its own public information program and information people.
- the various organs of the new system of democratic governments that will emerge in the post conflict period may need international help in recruiting and training suitable Iraqi public affairs professionals from bodies like the UN; and
- selected Iraqi universities should be requested to design and offer special bachelor degree and postgraduate diploma programs in public communications; and
- an award from these tertiary institutions should be made a requirement for professional employment in the public affairs units of government organs.

These are among the measures that would make a start on an important aspect of the building of democratic institutions and an informed citizenry in a post-conflict Iraq.

In conclusion we believe that a major challenge of the country is to disseminate the right information about Iraq and the Iraqi people. We do not need to fabricate lies and false information. We should rely on presenting in a very reliable manner the facts that will serve to enhance the image and reputation of the Iraqi people and their aspirations for peace and progress, as well for a peaceful coexistence with all other nations in order to maintain sound relations and to help serve the peace in the region and in the world based on equal opportunity and justice.

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Public Information and the Arts

- Special attention must be given to setting up and expanding public libraries around the country with books from all the world no matter what their position toward Iraq, Arabs or Islam might be. There is a need to educate the new generation of Iraqis to be immune from fear of the influence of foreign propaganda.
- Special attention must also be given to the re-invigoration of the arts and the theatre in Iraq, but on the basis of artistic freedom and creativity. No longer can artists and writers cower from centralised demands to worship a leader and his party. Because of this Iraq is now the least artistic nation in the Middle East. Government grants through independent Councils must be provided to artists, writers, actors, producers and film-makers along with encouragement to speak their critical artistic minds without fear of the new democratic system to come in Iraq.

Finally ...

As the world shrinks and Iraqis become a more active in this smaller world, we must realise that our own affairs and destiny are matters that can affect others in the world particularly through trade and economics and even in stockmarkets anywhere . We need to understand that the meaning of independence has been changed by new international rules, conventions and practices - and that any event that could happen in our domain is likely to attract strong media interest and international reaction.

Iraq must prepare for this setting up in Iraq a strong and independent system of press and electronic media and a strong and professional approach to the providing of full and comprehensive public information by government and public and private organisations staffed by professional people - and by removing Iraqis from the artistic straightjacket.

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December 2002

Framework for “ Immediate media reform in Iraq”



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The most important guideline:

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Iraq is not Haiti, Somalia or Afghanistan. The media legacy of Saddam's regime will not be a void, a media desert, but a quite *big propaganda infrastructure*, with sophisticated equipment, that can produce instantly after liberation newspapers and magazines, radio and TV programmes – unless this is destroyed in a war. The existence of this infrastructure is a blessing if managed well.

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Solutions for Day 1

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This piece of moral and political and legal guidelines will be the safeguard of the society. Unfortunately we expect a lot of violations of those moral and national lines by the political parties rather than the individuals. But nevertheless there will be possibility to witness similar violations by Investors and Post- Saddam millioners like what happen in Kosovo as mentioned below.

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The visions now circulating on the takeover of the existing media infrastructure can be divided in those that focus on *control and ownership* of this infrastructure and those that focus on the *services* they must provide. Privatisation is no immediate solution for matters of control and ownership, let alone the services. Iraqi politicians might want to avoid the well-known Russian disaster, when state property was sold for a penny to former party friends and mafia-friends of the party.

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If this reorganization is based on providing *services* to the public instead of treating control over state media as part of the 'spoils' for the opposition parties, it might meet with considerable support from the old guard - because not the government's or the parties' message is number one, but specific information/truth/knowledge/entertainment needs of the people.

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Against their *illegitimate* interests the journalists need *protection by the law and a social fund* (for unemployment benefits, legal help etc.). As well as *an organization of their own* (trade union, whatever).

What media reform will look like in practice

After liberation, many mechanisms for reform will present themselves *at the same time* if we analyse what happened in other former dictatorships and what happened inside Iraq and among Iraqi exiles.

A flourishing of dozens new independent initiatives

First of all there will be, as we expected, a rush by Iraqis from outside to establish politically and economically independent media. They will be small in the beginning but with a promise to grow fast, esp. in urban areas. Actually radio and TV don't need huge technical infrastructures anymore. Technically, these media will be of reasonable quality. They will be popular if they are critical of the government; they can grow into a social role through investigative reporting and research on corruption, bad government services, theft of government money, local conflicts etc.

These media should be given access, should be promoted, supported and given all possible freedom, except during election time in which they will have to follow the general guidelines for reporting established by an Election Monitoring Board, guidelines which will have to apply to all media. This is a lesson learned in many countries (see Reader of the **Forum for Iraqi Journalists**).

Some of these new independent media may be very small, have few persons working in them, but they can be very influential (like fax newspapers with only a few hundred subscribers). Esp. as Iraqis have still trouble working together and in a team, the country might 'face' dozens of such initiatives, a phenomenon that will lead quickly to calls for libel laws. We advocate no specific libel laws for the media, but an independent council to deal with complaints (with a board similar to that of the media fund). Any citizen or politician should be able to ask a decision from a court, in the case of material damages, damage to a reputation etc.

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