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### **Confusion, Contradiction and Irony: The Iraqi Media in 2010**

By Deborah Amos  
Shorenstein Center Goldsmith Fellow, Spring 2010  
Correspondent, National Public Radio

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Harvard University  
John F. Kennedy School of Government

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## ABSTRACT

*After the fall of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, Iraq's news media environment transformed almost overnight from the tightly controlled propaganda arm of Saddam Hussein's rule into one of the most diverse and unrestricted news environments in the Middle East. Built in an atmosphere of chaos and conflict, Iraq's media landscape now reflects the ethno-sectarian divide in the country. These deeply partisan news outlets have the potential to widen the gap between communities and weaken the national identity.*

*However, new studies show the majority of Iraqis have learned to read the media landscape, sampling news programs across the sectarian divide with a high level of distrust for all news outlets. This paper describes the Iraqi media and raises key questions: Is the Iraq news media an environment that encourages democracy and state building? What are the prospects to retain an open and pluralistic media landscape within Iraq's sectarian system?*

## INTRODUCTION

*Understanding Iraqi media is easy. They are like Fox News; they give away their political leanings immediately. Just reading their election headlines looks like reading campaign spin of various coalitions. Iraqi blogger Arabia Deserta, 2010*

In the early spring of 2010, Iraqis were captivated by their television screens, watching almost nonstop coverage of the parliamentary election campaign. This was a tight race and, unlike most elections in the Middle East, the outcome was far from certain. Politicians packaged their messages for the small screen because large gatherings were still risky even with improved security across the country. The Al-Mir'at media monitoring group found that some private broadcasting

outlets devoted more than 90% of coverage to the national campaign including news reports, paid political advertisements, discussion programs, and U.S. funded “get out the vote” education drives.<sup>1</sup>

By 2010, television had become essential in reaching Iraqi audiences. On an average day, nearly 16 million Iraqis are exposed to TV media which was more than any other source of information including newspapers, radio and the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Iraqis watch television at home and while smoking hubbly bubbly in Baghdad cafés. They gaze up from plates of lamb and blackened tomatoes over lunch at outdoor restaurants and catch glimpses of Iraq’s demonstration of democracy on small screens behind the grocery shop cashier. Which channel are they watching? The choice was often an indication of sectarian identity.

Iraq’s media landscape had become a mirror of Iraq’s political-sectarian divisions. This divide had driven the country to devastating violence from 2005 to 2007 and now has evolved into a political power struggle with satellite television ownership representing the power players. There are no neutral outlets. In a landmark 2007 study, researcher Ibrahim Al-Marashi described Iraq’s media as powerful sectarian empires “coalesced around ethno-political groups in Iraq who have print, radio and TV communications at their disposal.”<sup>3</sup> Broadcasts are funded by ethnic political parties, political Islamists, Arab business interests representing sectarian groups and the Iraqi government. This diverse system played a role in the 2010 election campaign, observed Hiwa Osman, a Kurdish journalist and media development specialist who said that “the majority of Iraqi media today follows one political party or the other depending on who funds them.”<sup>4</sup>

The dramatic conclusion of the parliamentary vote also played out on Iraqi TV screens when Iraq's Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, appeared on the state-run broadcasting service to announce he was challenging the results. Maliki's political coalition had won 89 seats in parliament, well short of the winning formula of 163 seats. Maliki refused to accept that an alliance led by challenger Iyad Allawi had won more parliamentary seats than his bloc had.

These two Iraqi politicians shared similar backgrounds: a lifetime of working to overthrow Saddam Hussein, membership in underground political organizations, and being a part of Iraq's majority Shiite community. Each had returned to Iraq when the American military toppled Saddam. But in the 2010 national election, they had taken different political roads.

In the 2010 campaign, Maliki's party was primarily a sectarian political list of Shiite candidates with a few Sunni political figureheads. In contrast, Allawi's political coalition was a cross-sectarian list. While Allawi is a Shiite, he headed a party consisting of Sunni political leaders from western and northern Iraq and some Shiite politicians who believed it was time to move beyond sectarian politics if Iraq is to achieve national unity.

In Iraq's short history of free elections, Shiite candidates have a demographic advantage. Shiites are approximately 60% of the population, and Iraqis voted almost exclusively along sectarian lines in the 2005 national elections and the 2009 provincial vote. Maliki also had a media advantage. The state-run national news network did not accept paid campaign advertisements, but freely broadcast extensive reports of Maliki's election appearances and campaign speeches in evening news bulletins. On the eve of the vote, state TV broadcast a documentary highlighting the Prime Minister's visit to security checkpoints

around the capital. Maliki is widely credited with an improvement in the day-to-day security in the capital and in the south, but his pre-election inspection of the security checkpoints was seen as a long campaign ad. According to domestic media monitoring reports of state-run television, Al-Iraqiya, Maliki's political coalition received by far the "highest positive coverage" when compared with all other political parties in the campaign.<sup>5</sup>

When it came to the vote, Allawi demonstrated that sectarian voting patterns could be broken. A small percentage of Shiites voted for a party that included Sunnis on the ticket which helped deliver the two-seat lead.<sup>6</sup> Prime Minister Maliki charged widespread fraud and demanded a recount to prevent "a return to violence." He pointedly noted that he remained the commander in chief of the armed forces.

Was Maliki threatening violence? Was he using the platform of state-run media to suggest that his Shiite-dominated government would not relinquish power to a Sunni coalition despite the election results? His meaning was ambiguous, but his choice of media was widely understood to be part of the message. Iraq's state-run news channel, Iraqiya, is seen as a megaphone for Shiite power in Iraq, which is why Maliki's assertion of his right to retain power raised international concerns.

Allawi was at a distinct disadvantage. He did not directly control a private media outlet or a satellite broadcasting station. However, during the campaign Allawi enjoyed almost exclusive campaign coverage from a satellite channel that Iraqis consider "Sunni TV."

Al-Sharqiya is the multi-million dollar commercial media franchise founded by Iraqi entrepreneur Saad Bazzaz. Bazzaz, a former Baathist, opened the channel in

2004. It became the first private media company in Iraq. In 2006, he ran afoul of the Shiite-dominated government, which accused him of “running a pro-Sunni media organization which actively discriminates against the country’s Shiite population.”<sup>7</sup> The Iraqi government ordered Sharqiya’s offices closed in Baghdad. Bazzaz moved his headquarters to Dubai. Media monitoring reports shows that Sharqiya’s broadcasts “backed” Allawi’s coalition while directing the most negative coverage to the Prime Minister’s party.<sup>8</sup>

When Iraq’s electoral commission certified the vote tally with the surprising outcome for a Sunni political alliance, Sharqiya TV celebrated along with the Sunni population broadcasting hours of raw video footage—mostly cell phone recordings—of spontaneous street parties in the predominantly Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad and Mosul. Since the 2006 government closure, Sharqiya had no Baghdad-based news correspondents but maintained a presence in Iraq through paid stringers and “citizen videos.” The network punctuated the hours of election celebrations with highly produced music videos that featured well-known Iraqi singers proclaiming Iyad Allawi as “the new leader” of Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

This unbalanced coverage on Iraqi television came as no surprise to Iraq media researcher Ibrahim al-Marashi. In 2007 he published the first comprehensive study on the Iraqi media including detailed research on ownership, funding and the political and sectarian biases of the major broadcasting outlets. Iraqis see Iraqiya as “Maliki TV,” explained Marashi, rather than a public service broadcasting outlet that projects the interests of all Iraqis. “The state reflects a sectarian image,” he concluded.<sup>10</sup> As for Iraq’s many private channels, there are biases, too, said Marashi. He pointed to the most popular channel, Sharqiya, which has won a large audience-share with entertainment programs and dramas, despite a noticeable slant in the news programming. “Sharqiya is a Sunni

channel. It has its own agenda. It covers “Shiite news,” but there is always a negative spin with any piece of news having to do with [Prime Minister] Maliki. What we have is a continuation of the sectarian system which is reflected in the media.”<sup>11</sup>

Iraq’s state-run system failed to offer a neutral media space to all of the candidates and parties running in the election, despite a \$500 million U.S. effort to make Iraqiya a national public service system. Douglas Griffin, a media consultant with Albany Associates who has done extensive work with the Iraqi media since 2003, characterized state-run broadcasting as a stenographer to power, changing editorial focus to reflect the prevailing power in Baghdad.<sup>12</sup> “The director general of Iraqiya TV will switch his allegiance right after an election.” Criticism of state-run media also comes from Theo Dolan, who heads a media innovation program at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., and has extensive experience in media development in Iraq. He offers this assessment of the state-run network: “Maliki has his grip on that channel. Initially, the U.S. attempts to rebuild the Iraqi media failed.”<sup>13</sup>

Did Iraq’s sectarian media make a difference in the election outcome? While the Iraqi media has had a revolution since the fall of the Saddam regime, Iraqi media consumers have revolutionized their viewing habits, too. Since 2003, private media channels have grown in professionalism and sophistication to challenge state-run media. In this complex media marketplace, state-run media has lost audience share to competitors from inside and outside Iraq.

A 2010 media study published by the National Democratic Institute showed state-run broadcasting outlet has also lost significant credibility with Sunnis and Kurdish viewers.<sup>14</sup> In the NDI study, pollsters asked respondents: “From which

television station do you get most of your information about politics?" While 21% of Shiite respondents listed Iraqiya TV as a source of political information, only 5% of Sunnis did.

In the predominantly Sunni province of Anbar, 7% of the respondents named Iraqiya TV as a source of political information. The number dropped to 3% in Nineveh, a mixed population of Sunnis, Kurds and Iraqi Christians. In the predominantly Kurdish provinces in northern Iraq, the percentage of those who get political information from state-run broadcasting dropped to zero.<sup>15</sup>

In the sectarian media landscape there is an opportunity to self-select media that confirms ethno-sectarian identities. Nevertheless, new media studies conducted in 2010 suggest that the majority of Iraqi viewers have learned to read the media landscape.<sup>16</sup> Mohamad Abdul Dayem, program coordinator for the Middle East and Africa at the Committee to Protect Journalists, explained why Iraqis are turning to Iraq's private news outlets despite obvious sectarian biases: "You may or may not be pro-government. You don't want to be hoodwinked," said Dayem. "You still want to get decent news. And you don't want to get your news from the one source that is criticized as being most closely aligned to the government."<sup>17</sup>

Many viewers report watching more than five channels daily, which means they are sampling multiple opinions across the sectarian divide. It is a survival skill, explained journalist Hiwa Osman, who described the transformation from the Saddam era to the new Iraq: "We've moved from one newspaper and one radio to 1,500 outlets. If you land today in Baghdad, you need to watch five or six television news bulletins to get the full picture."<sup>18</sup>



At the same time, Iraqis bring a deep skepticism to the information presented. In 2009, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), a Washington based NGO that specializes in media development, commissioned a media usage survey that found, "Iraqis have trust issues with TV media."<sup>19</sup> While Sharqiya TV has more viewers than any other domestic or international outlets, only a third of Iraqis trust the channel as a news source.<sup>20</sup> The state-run news broadcasts on Iraqiya score even lower, with only 21% of those polled saying they trust the state-run channel as a news source.

As Iraq's sectarian political battles are increasingly fought in the media landscape, the participants appear to be more disconnected from the national interests of the country. The biases are well understood by the Iraqi viewers, said Griffin: "It's really about ownership in Iraq. I think people understand who owns what. You lack that sense of balance anywhere in Iraq."

The state-run broadcaster Iraqiya is no exception to this trend. Iraqis see the state-run service as a partisan channel, representing "the powers that be" rather than as a public service system for a unified Iraq. "The existing media weakens the Iraqi national identity," said Osman, "or takes it in one hundred directions. I think the younger generation is looking for a national identity. They are asking, what is it that binds us all together? It won't come from the existing media."<sup>21</sup>

**Percentage of Iraqis surveyed who get most of their information about news and politics from a particular station**

	Ethnicity				Arab	
	Arab	Kurdish	Other		Shia	Sunni
<b>Al Sharqiaya</b>	18	2	24	<b>Al Sharqiaya</b>	12	28
<b>Al Iraqiya</b>	14	2	4	<b>Al Iraqiya</b>	21	5
<b>Al Baghdadiya</b>	8	1	2	<b>Al Baghdadiya</b>	6	11
<b>Al Forat</b>	5	0	1	<b>Al Forat</b>	8	0
<b>Kurdistan TV</b>	0	15	5	<b>Kurdistan TV</b>	0	0
<b>Kurd Sat</b>	0	15	3	<b>Kurd Sat</b>	0	0

(Source: Poll conducted by the *National Democratic Institute*; report obtained by author, February 2010.

**THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE**

Under Saddam Hussein the government controlled the media, which produced five daily newspapers, operated four radio stations and broadcast two television channels. No views opposed to the government were tolerated. Satellite dishes were illegal and, while Baghdad’s elite often defied the ban with black market dishes hidden on rooftops, viewing outside media was limited due to neighborhood watch groups that turned in satellite lawbreakers.

In March 2003 the Saddam era media outlets abruptly collapsed when coalition forces toppled the regime and took control of Baghdad. In the power vacuum that followed, newspapers, private radio and television stations bloomed across the country. A BBC news report tallied the growing media scene:

By mid-2003, Iraq was home to more than 20 radio stations, between 15 and 17 Iraqi-owned television stations, and approximately 200 Iraqi-owned and operated newspapers, with smaller regional centers such as Najaf boasting more than 30 newspapers in a city of only 300,000 people.<sup>22</sup>

Iraq's neighbor, Iran, was the first to open a domestic news channel targeted to Iraqi viewers. Iranian funded Al-Alam, employed Arabic speaking news-readers, and began broadcasting even before U.S. troops arrived in Baghdad. In early 2003, Al-Alam was the most popular station in the capital and in the Shi'a-dominated south because it was a terrestrial station, and Iraqis could watch without a satellite dish, "thanks to the network's transmitters dotting the Iran-Iraq border."<sup>23</sup>

With the arrival of the Americans, prohibitions against satellite dishes disappeared; sales soon skyrocketed, "leading to one of the highest penetration rates [for satellite broadcasting] in the world."<sup>24</sup>

Iraqi TV and radio stations began broadcasting soon after. Some outlets were shoestring operations cobbled together from transmitting equipment looted from the Ministry of Information. Many were off the air within a year. Other stations were well-financed operations controlled by exiled political movements that had returned to Iraq when Saddam's regime collapsed.

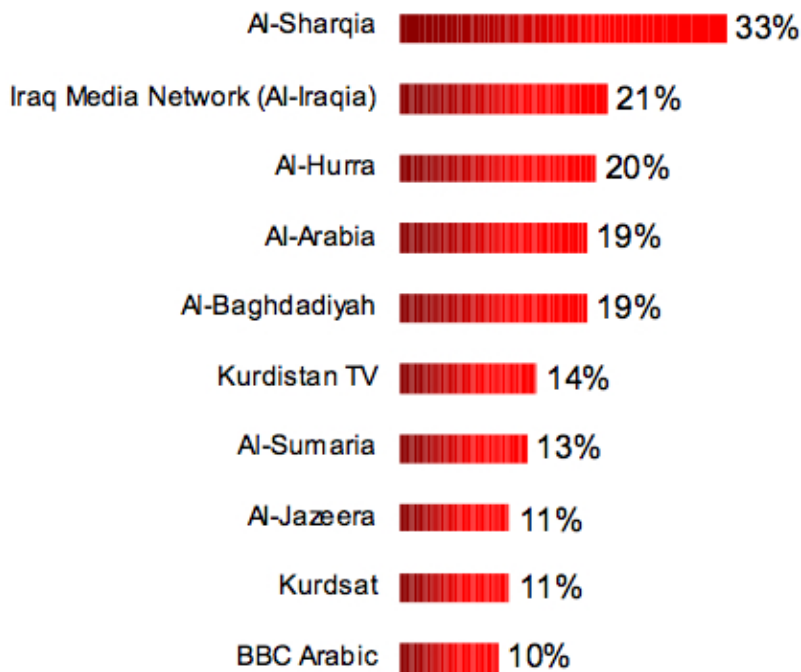
"Ownership and sponsorship was diverse," writes William Rugh in *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics*, a book about the early emergence of the post-Saddam media. "Nearly half identified themselves as official organs of political or religious groups."<sup>25</sup>

Iraq's diverse media landscape has evolved in the years since the U.S. invasion. The following broadcasting outlets have the largest Iraqi audiences and are examples of ownership and political-sectarian orientation.

**1. State-Owned, Terrestrial and Satellite Media:** The Iraqi Media Network (Al-Iraqiya) was established in 2003 by the Coalition Provisional Authority and

turned over to Iraqi government control in 2004. With terrestrial and satellite broadcasting, Iraqiya operates as a public broadcasting service with three channels: Iraqiya TV, Iraqiya TV2 and Iraqiya Sports. The channel was seen as a propaganda tool of the United States even after it was turned over to the Iraqi authorities because of Western news reports in 2005 that revealed a covert Pentagon media operation to place “positive stories” about the United States in Iraqi television and newspaper outlets. Employees of the state-run channel were targeted more often and suffered more deaths than any other television channel in Iraq.<sup>26</sup> Surveys carried out in mid-2004 showed that the channel was the most watched in the country due to its accessibility as a terrestrial station but by 2010, media surveys showed Iraqiya had lost substantial audience share to international and privately owned Iraqi competitors.<sup>27</sup> In a 2010 survey that asked, “Which stations do you trust?” Iraqiya scored substantially lower than competing stations.<sup>28</sup>

**Top 10 Most Trusted TV News Stations**



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**2. Media Ownership By Political Islamists:** Al-Furat (The Euphrates) is the broadcasting outlet for the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, a Shiite political party headed by Ammar al-Hakim. Baghdad-based and broadcasting since 2004, the station defined its sectarian bias in the 2005 election campaign by refusing to offer free airtime or paid advertisements from political parties other than those running in the Shiite Islamist coalition.<sup>29</sup> Exclusivity for Shiite candidates backed by the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council continued in the 2010 election coverage according to the Iraqi NGO Mir'at with the "lion's share" of positive coverage for the Iraqi National Alliance.<sup>30</sup> Kurdish journalist Osman observed, "Furat reflected only the Iraq National Alliance."<sup>31</sup> The INA represented the Shiite Islamist coalition, which included the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council. "Each party has their own candidate within this list," said Osman, "So no one could afford to give airtime or space for the other people who are not on this list."<sup>32</sup> Furat's negative coverage focused on the Sunni political coalition, headed by Iyad Allawi, in addition to highlighting negative reports about Prime Minister's Nouri al Maliki's party, which was a rival Shiite contender.<sup>33</sup>

**3. Media Owned By Ethnic Parties:** There are a wide variety of ethnic media outlets in Iraq that include Kurd, Turkmen and Christian Assyrian media. However, the broadcasting outlets that have the most viewers and appear to have the most influence in northern Iraq are owned by Kurdish political parties.<sup>34</sup> These channels got a "head start as they have enjoyed relative autonomy in the north of Iraq since the end of the 1991 Gulf war."<sup>35</sup>

The Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) funds and operates the Kurdistan Satellite Channel, which began broadcasting in 1999, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) funds and operates KurdSat. The programming on these two broadcasting outlets is the most watched in northern Iraq with more than 90% of those polled

saying they watched in a 2010 media survey.<sup>36</sup> These stations reflect the political priorities of the PUK and the KDP respectively, despite claims by staff journalists of editorial independence. The news content reflects the biases of the political parties and “suggests that both channels serve as mouthpieces for the parties.”<sup>37</sup> In the run up to the 2010 elections, the two major media outlets in Iraqi Kurdistan “only gave airtime for the candidates that they were following” and scrolled the names of Kurdistan candidates during news and entertainment shows throughout the broadcast schedule.<sup>38</sup> The political parties running south of Iraqi Kurdistan received almost no mention at all.<sup>39</sup>

**4. Private and Independent Media:** There are several satellite channels based outside Iraq that do not receive funding from political or religious groups. These outlets are commercial stations with additional financing by Iraqi and Sunni Arab investors. Some have additional support from Arab governments. While claiming independence, their critics argue that “due to sectarian ownership,” these channels have a clear Sunni Arab bias.<sup>40</sup>

Al Baghdadia ranks in the top 10 stations watched by Iraqis.<sup>41</sup> The channel began broadcasting from Cairo, Egypt, in 2004 and mainly focuses on news and entertainment. The bias of the broadcasts was described on the Newseum Web site: “The station is often critical of the new Iraqi government and of the U.S. presence in Iraq.” Dr. Awn Hussain al Khaskhlok, an Iraqi businessman who once worked for Saddam’s intelligence agency, founded the station and, despite his Shiite background, the station’s editorial policy reflects a Sunni point of view.<sup>42</sup> The channel became headline news outside the country when journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi threw his shoes at U.S. President George W. Bush during a press conference in Baghdad on December 14, 2008.

Al-Diyar (The Homeland) based in Beirut, Lebanon, began broadcasting in February 2004. The station is run by Faysal al-Yasiri, who worked in television and radio during the Saddam regime. The station's funding comes, in part, from Arab Radio and Television Network (ART), which is owned by Saudi billionaire entrepreneur Salih Kamil. Al-Diyar is primarily an entertainment outlet with some news programs.

Al-Sharqiya, launched in 2004, is the most popular television channel in Iraq, with a mix of original entertainment programs and news programming tailored to an Iraqi audience.<sup>43</sup> The drama and comedy productions are written and produced by Iraqis in an Iraqi dialect, mostly by exiles in Damascus and Amman. The only non-Iraqi content is the cartoons.

Sharqiya is owned by Iraqi businessman Saa'd Bazzaz, who once headed Iraq's state media but in 1992 broke with Saddam, fled the country and returned after the American-led invasion. Sharqiya earned a reputation among Shiite government officials as a "Sunni" channel, in particular when Sharqiya news-readers wore funereal black on the day that Saddam Hussein was executed. Soon after, the Iraqi government ordered Sharqiya's closure, charging Bazzaz with inciting sectarian violence. Bazzaz moved his operation to Dubai and continued to compete for the loyalty of Iraqi audiences. Often Sharqiya won the contest with witty comedies, contests and reality shows. In the 2010 elections, Sharqiya's coverage was skewed toward the Sunni coalition headed by Iyad Allawi. The Mir'at monitoring team concluded that the channel backed Allawi while negative coverage was directed at the Prime Minister.<sup>44</sup>

Since the fall of Saddam the Iraqi media landscape has emerged as a distinctly Iraqi model, explained Mohamad Abdul Dayem, an Iraq specialist at the

Committee to Protect Journalists. "The landscape is pluralistic, but not necessarily free."<sup>45</sup> Media researcher Ibrahim al Marashi described a system where freedom of speech is guaranteed in the constitution, but there is no guarantee that an Iraqi journalist can cover a story, and access to information is severely restricted. He notes: "Certain political parties are content when their media expresses their political platform, but will violently target journalist and media professionals who may report on news in a way that displeases them."<sup>46</sup>

## **WHAT ARE THEY WATCHING BY THE NUMBERS**

Seven years after the rebirth of the Iraqi media, there are some surprising insights from a series of extensive media surveys conducted in the fall of 2009 and the spring of 2010. While limited in scope, the data is some of the most detailed ever assembled in interviews across the country. The surveys show that the vast majority of Iraqis get news and information almost exclusively from broadcast outlets. Television news is the dominant means of political communication and information. While there are hundreds of newspapers published in Iraq, only a small segment of the population reads the daily press. The polling indicates that a vast majority does not use the Internet, although many of those surveyed indicate that they are interested in using this media tool. Those who do use the Internet are primarily under 30 and they treat the Internet as a means of communication, primarily in e-mails and web chats, rather than a primary source of news. The surveys show that almost every home in Iraq has at least one television, and the majority watches news programs for more than an hour a day. Many Iraqi viewers report watching more than five channels which means they are sampling multiple opinions across the sectarian media divide. But at the same time, there is deep skepticism of the news and information



available, a low level of trust in the information that is presented on Iraqi channels as well as the international outlets available.<sup>47</sup>

Iraqi viewer patterns would be a puzzle in a Western context. Matthew Baum, a professor of global communications at Harvard University, has done extensive research on American audience response in an increasing partisan media landscape. His research shows that viewers tend to avoid media outlets that don't support their point of view: "When you have perception of partisan media, 'a dog in the hunt,' people will be attracted to their side's message," said Baum, "because people tend to be cognitive misers and don't like to expose themselves to dissonance more than they have to. The bottom line is people are powerful dissonance avoiders, and that is universal."<sup>48</sup>

But Iraqis appear to invalidate this "universal" pattern by tuning in to a variety of news outlets that challenge their views or at least expose them to competing interpretations of events. "In a place like Iraq, where everything is volatile, where things can swing at any time and the institutions might collapse," said Baum, "you have a much greater stake than a western democratic citizen, so you might be more willing to look more broadly."<sup>49</sup>

## **STRATEGIC SOCIAL DATA**

One method to document the sectarian viewpoint of the various media outlets is to chart a particular news story that has sectarian connotation for Iraqis. How many times does the issue appear in news broadcasts? Who delivers the message? The story must have implications for all of Iraq's ethno-sectarian communities with a degree of national importance. Measuring the media

coverage is an indication of the editorial policy of the news broadcast in the sectarian media landscape.

One news event that meets the criteria concerns the actions of Iraq's Supreme National Commission for Accountability and Justice. In January 2010, the Commission disqualified more than 500 candidates for the March parliamentary elections in Iraq. The Commission, a Shiite-dominated governmental body, barred mostly prominent Sunni politicians because the candidates had alleged connections to the outlawed Ba'ath Party, which ruled Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Many Sunnis maintained that the commission is biased and operating on a sectarian agenda to exclude them from the political process. Philip Frayne, a spokesman for the United States Embassy, expressed his reservation on the Commission's role: "Our concerns about the way de-Baathification took place stem from the perception that it was being used for political gain."<sup>50</sup>

The Commission's actions were also condemned internationally. Human Rights Watch called the rulings arbitrary, subjecting candidates to "unreasonable restrictions."<sup>51</sup> Middle East director Sarah Leah Whitson charged, "We do not support the use of vague and secret powers to keep the government's political opponents from participating in an election."<sup>52</sup>

This paper examined the number of news reports on the Commission's actions over a four-week period in the spring of 2010 with the help of Strategic Social, a media and research company based in Virginia. The analysis examines media content surrounding a particular event that had ramifications for all of Iraq's ethno-sectarian communities.

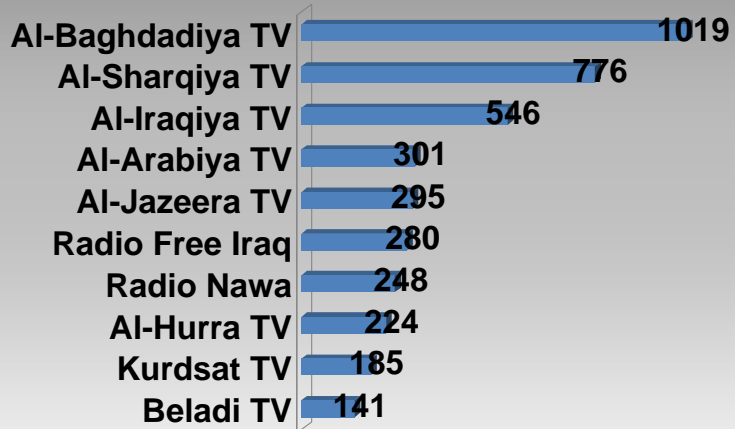
Strategic Social has been engaged in extensive monitoring of the Iraqi media for more than four years, using native Iraqi speakers to monitor news for content

and media messengers. Matt Tirman, the director of corporate development, agreed to provide data for this Shorenstein Center research paper charting the Commission story across Iraqi media outlets for the period pre-and post election. The monitoring was extensive, although the stories were not weighted for positive or negative content. The reports appear as part of regularly scheduled news broadcast. This Shorenstein Center research study limited the selections to five satellite broadcast stations. Those chosen for this review are 1. Sharqiya, 2. Iraqiya, 3. Furat, 4. Baghdadia, and 5. Kurdistan TV, because these outlets reflect the major ethno-sectarian outlets in Iraq.

The following chart from Strategic Social shows that the broadcast outlets most associated with a Sunni point of view present more news stories on the decisions of the Commission than channels most associated with a Shiite point of view. News broadcasts in Iraqi Kurdistan provided substantially fewer than the outlets that broadcast in the Arabic speaking part of Iraq. Furat, the broadcast arm of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, broadcast the least amount of all the outlets chosen.

# Top 10 Media Outlets

142 Total Outlets



The Commission's ban on mostly Sunni politicians had the most relevance to Sunni audiences according to the volume of coverage. The results, explains Matthew Baum, offers a validation of patterns that have been measured more extensively in the Western media. "Human beings pay more attention to bad news, things that are threatening, than positive news. It's an evolved trait," said Baum. Anecdotal news coverage in the Western news media demonstrated that Sunnis perceived the Commission's actions as a threat. Satellite broadcast news operations are interested in maximizing the number of viewers, and this particular story followed the Western news maxim, "if it bleeds, it leads." According to Baum, this is a classic media strategy: "The real core cause is we want to provoke as much anger and resentment as possible. Bad news riles people up and good news doesn't. Basically, bad news is good news." At least for broadcaster operations concerned with their core audience.

The news outlets most identified with the Shiite community, Furat and Iraqiya—the state-run media—broadcast the Commissions actions far less than Sunni outlets. “For them,” said Baum, “it’s not a threatening story. It’s consequential, but not a bad news threat. They are not going to pay as much attention.”

Matthew Baum’s global media analysis is similar to the conclusions drawn by media researcher Ibrahim Marashi in a content analysis he published in 2007.

Marashi analyzed the dynamics of the Iraqi media and concluded, “The content analysis of the various ethno-sectarian channels did not find coverage that directly demonized the other communities. However, each sectarian and ethnic group uses their media to demonstrate that they are the victims in Iraq’s ongoing violence.”<sup>53</sup> When Marashi was analyzing news content, sectarian violence in Iraq was evident on the street. In the context of the 2010 election, the sectarian tensions played out in politics, but the same patterns appear evident in the news coverage across the various sectarian outlets.

## **CREATING THE SYSTEM—THE LONG SHADOW OF EARLY MISSTEPS**

There are many studies and research papers documenting the failures of the Bush administration in creating a new independent media system in post-conflict Iraq. There is unanimous criticism of the Pentagon’s role in hiring a defense contractor with no media experience to transform Saddam’s state-controlled television, radio and newspaper outlets into a “free media” system modeled after the Public Broadcasting System within the first year of the U.S. occupation.<sup>54</sup>

Even before American bombs fell in Baghdad, the Pentagon’s Defense Contracting Command awarded a no-bid multi-million dollar contract to a San Diego-based defense contractor, Science Applications International Corporation,

to develop the “Iraq Free Media Project.” SAIC was tasked with goals outlined in a January 2003 Defense Department plan for a new media in Iraq that “can serve as a model in the Middle East where so much Arab hate-media are themselves equivalent to weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>55</sup> The Iraqi Media Network (IMN) began broadcasting in May 2003, but was not a model for Middle East broadcasters or for the private media channels that began to operate in the open environment of post-Saddam Iraq. David Hoffman, president of Internews Network, an international nonprofit organization that develops independent media, called the Iraqi Media Network the “worst mess I have ever seen in my life.”<sup>56</sup>

The alternative channels, financed by political parties by Arab businessmen, and Iraqi entrepreneurs, offered entertainment and news programs with an editorial bias that reflected the growing sectarian identity inside Iraq. Media researcher Ibrahim Al Marashi faulted the Coalition Provisional Authority for concentrating money and efforts on one channel and failing to make that channel a model for independent broadcasting: “One of the constructions of the CPA was an Iraqi media network with the aim of reinforcing a national identity, but the ability to accomplish that goal was mired in banal contracting and confused goals during a critical period.”<sup>57</sup>

The Harris Group, a company that manufactures broadcasting equipment, replaced SAIC after winning the Pentagon’s next multi-million dollar contract in late 2003. More experienced international media development NGO’s did not compete for the contract because the program was run by the Department of Defense rather than the State Department. The Harris Group partnered with a Kuwaiti telecommunications company and the Lebanese Broadcasting Corp. that offered the first organized media training for the Iraqi staff.<sup>58</sup> In the same year,

the CPA rebranded the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) as Iraqiya TV and hired J. Walter Thompson to launch a public relations campaign “to convince Iraqis that IMN or Iraqiya was credible.”<sup>59</sup> Despite the PR campaign, Iraqiya’s credibility and popularity only improved when the U.S.-run media was handed over to the Interim Iraqi Government in January 2005.<sup>60</sup>

As Prime Minister in 2004-2005, Iyad Allawi played a role in shaping the state-run network. He made his approach to media freedom explicit in the early days of his tenure when he stated, “... we will not allow some people to hide behind the slogan of freedom of the press and media.”<sup>61</sup> In November 2004, as the U.S. military carried out “Operation Al-Fajr” (Phantom Fury), a mission to recapture the town of Fallujah from Sunni insurgents and Al-Qaeda militants, Allawi warned Iraqi journalists to cover the battle in ways that reflected the official government stance or face unspecified consequences.<sup>62</sup> The government’s media regulatory body issued guidelines for news coverage of the Fallujah campaign, requiring news outlets to “set aside space in your news coverage to make the position of the Iraqi government, which expresses the aspirations of most Iraqis, clear.” The official guidelines concluded: “We hope you comply, otherwise we regret we will be forced to take all legal measures to guarantee higher national interests.”<sup>63</sup>

Iyad Allawi’s approach in shaping the state broadcasting policy in post-Saddam Iraq was a disappointment for all those who had hoped for a new era of media freedom in Iraq. The state broadcasting service, Al-Iraqiya, became a symbol of the complexity of building institutions in the midst of conflict. In 2006 the Christian Science Monitor presented a harsh assessment:

Al Iraqiya was meant to stand as a model of a burgeoning independent press, but seems to have instead become one more political spoil for its competing factions .... The Iraqi Media Network (Iraqiya) is another factor that is helping to turn Iraqi society into a sectarian society.<sup>64</sup>

## **THE LEGACY OF THE CPA**

The long legacy of the U.S. role in media development is not in the name of the Iraqi media network, nor its programming, but in creating the most significant measures in the early days of the occupation that remain media policy to this day. As head of the CPA, L. Paul Bremer issued three legal orders that created the Iraqi Media Network, crafted an independent government agency to regulate the Iraqi communications industry, and constructed the groundwork for censorship—a model adopted by successive Iraqi governments.

In March 2004, Bremer signed “Order Number 65: Iraqi Communications and Media Commission,” in which he designed an independent commission, the CMC, with an annual budget of U.S. \$6 million to regulate the Iraqi communications industry, including television and radio as well as the Internet and telecommunications.<sup>65</sup>

The CMC was designed as an independent body that reported to parliament rather than the Prime Minister’s office—a “watchdog” over the media in Iraq with authority to regulate licenses. Order 65 outlined the responsibilities of the CMC, which included investigating any potential wrongdoing and determining whether a violation had occurred and imposing any sanctions. However, the CMC failed to fulfill its mandate from the start, said Hiwa Osman. “They don’t exist. It is a joke and a scam. It was set up as if this was the United States.”<sup>66</sup>



When the United States handed over power in Iraq on June 28, 2004 to Iyad Allawi, the head of Iraq's interim government, one of the first casualties was the CMC. As Hiwa Osman observed in the weeks following the handover, "As soon as Allawi took over, he smashed everything. He disbanded the CMC and appointed his head of security as the head of the media commission and called it the high media commission. Then we ended up with an illiterate spare-parts dealer as head of the Iraqi media."<sup>67</sup>

The CMC was later reconstituted when Nouri al-Maliki became Prime Minister, but the "watchdog agency" was plagued by conflicts within an ineffective government bureaucracy. The United Nations Development Programme, (UNDP) the UN's global development network, issued a report in 2009 on the shortcomings of the media regulatory bodies in Iraq:

"Conflict between the CMC and the Ministry of Communications continues, as does confusions and lack of clarity regarding their relative roles. The CMC has officially asked the ministry a number of times to establish government policy so that the two bodies can coordinate on its implementation so far with no result."<sup>68</sup>

The conflict had consequences for shaping Iraq's media landscape. As the UNDP report pointed out, "a large percentage of broadcasters remain unlicensed and thus are illegally on the air," and licensing of broadcast outlets was largely halted. Another drawback to the authority of the media commission—the CMC's limited power is confined to Baghdad. The Commission has no offices in Iraqi Kurdistan or in southern Iraq. As the UNDP report confirms, "Contrary to legal requirements of Order 65, broadcasters in Kurdistan, Iraq, are not, in practice, licensed by the CMC, but instead, thru the regional authority."

Journalist and media development specialist Hiwa Osman points out that this self-imposed constraint means that Iraq has no national media policy. “Baghdad is Arab,” he explained, referring to the language differences between Baghdad and Kurdistan “There is no one in Baghdad who is able to monitor Kurdish media or even watch it.” Iraq’s multi-language reality is also not addressed on state-run television. There are no Kurdish language programs on the state-run media, said Osman. “Iraqiya is the only state-funded broadcasting outlet. Look at the numbers, how many Kurdish programs? None. We are 17.5% of the population. We are 17.5% of the money spent on Iraqiya. What do we get in return? Nothing.”<sup>69</sup>

#### **ORDER 14: FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES**

While there are draft laws under consideration in the Iraqi Parliament to replace the American-written Order 65 with an Iraqi crafted media law, there are no plans to dismantle Order 14 issued in the first months of the occupation. L. Paul Bremer imposed the order at a time of growing unrest in the country. Order 14 allowed the CPA to close down media outlets accused of incitement to violence, civil disorder, rioting, or actions against coalition forces.<sup>70</sup> Bremer, as CPA administrator, wanted a legal tool to rein in the media that he believed was undermining Iraq’s stability. Critics complained that Order 14 opened the way for arbitrary media censorship because of vague definitions of incitement.

One of the first applications of Order 14 was the closure of a newspaper, Al-Hawza, controlled by Muqtada al Sadr, the outspoken anti-American Iraqi religious leader and politician. Douglas Griffin, with the Albany Group, a media development NGO that worked on media policy in the run up to the U.S. invasion, said that outside experts criticized Order 14 as soon as it was issued:

“Order 14 is terrible. It was designed to shut down Sadr’s newspaper. It is exactly what we are advising against. Don’t act too heavily.”<sup>71</sup>

Simon Haselock, a member of the British Media Development team working alongside the CPA, also argued against implementing Order 14: “The most egregious element of Order 14 is its lack of due process, placing all power in the hands of the CPA Administrator and thus, by implication after the handover in June 2004, in the hands of the Interim Prime Minister.”

Order 14 remains a controversial tool because the definition of incitement is not in keeping with international standards, according to the 2009 UNDP report. “It allows the government to impose sanctions directly on the media. It does not establish fair enforcement procedures or guarantee adequate due process protection. It includes the sanction of imprisonment.”<sup>72</sup>

In the months ahead of the 2010 parliamentary elections, the Iraqi government began to flex unused regulatory muscles over the Iraqi media. The role that the media would play in an election was still a matter of conjecture. Polling data was not conclusive enough to make connections between media campaigns and voting patterns. However, this election differed from the first two national ballots in that the election lists were “open.” For the first time, Iraqis would be able to vote for individual candidates rather than political parties and coalitions. In the 2010 parliamentary campaign, individual names mattered. Considering that the vast majority of Iraqis turned to broadcast and satellite channels for news, information and political communication, the media could play a role in the campaign. The U.S. Inspector General’s 2010 report noted a quiet change in the government’s approach to media regulation:

“Since 2003, Iraq’s media outlets have operated in an atmosphere of unprecedented journalistic freedom from government censorship. This may be changing. The October 25, 2009 bombings of the ministry of justice and the Baghdad provincial council prompted a spate of negative media coverage of the performance of GOI officials. Shortly thereafter, the ministry of communications imposed a \$5,000.00 license fee on all broadcast media outlets operating in Iraq.”<sup>73</sup>

In addition to the licensing fee, the CMC issued a set of licensing standards that included prohibiting “material that incites violence or sectarianism,” with immediate sanctions, as well as closure for certain first-time offenses. The CMC also added a requirement that all media outlets submit a list of employees to the government. The new requirements stirred protests inside and outside Iraq.

#### **AN ‘UGLY TURN OF TIDE FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION’**

On April 12, 2010, Human Rights Watch called on the Iraqi government to “suspend media regulations that impose tight media restrictions on the country’s broadcast media.” In the letter of complaint, HRW charged that the new regulations “empowered the agency to cancel licenses even after the first minor violation” and called on the Iraqi Parliament to stop “intimidation and abuse aimed at muzzling members of the media,” in what HRW called a “general and ugly turn of tide for freedom of expression in Iraq.”<sup>74</sup>

The new rules and regulations issued by the Ministry of Communications and the CMC came after a year of legal threats against private, independent Iraqi media outlets. Government officials launched a wave of libel suits, an

unprecedented legal assault against private media using L. Paul Bremer's Order 14 and Saddam era laws that proscribed criticizing government officials.

In March 2009, the oil minister and the head of the Al Mansour Company sued the newspaper Al Baynanat al Jedidia for articles alleging corruption within the company. In addition to the libel charges, the Minister and the head of Mansour demanded over \$700,000 in damages.

In April 2009, the head of the state railway company sued the privately owned television station al Diyar over a report about poor working conditions for its employees in Anbar province. An appeal court awarded the company \$70,000 in damages. Sharqiya television was sued for "misquoting" a top military spokesman, and the court imposed a fine of \$74,278. In May, the Trade Minister sued over newspaper reports implicating him in alleged corruption involving members of parliament. Again, the damage claim was ruinous in the Iraqi economic climate, at \$124,000.

Reporters Without Borders, an international media watchdog group, publicly condemned the lawsuits. The watchdog group issued a stinging critique, claiming that freedom of the media was under threat: "The future of media has been jeopardized by heavy fines for damages. How can press freedom survive in Iraq in such an environment?"

The legal climate for journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan was even worse, said Mohamad Abdul Dayem: "In Kurdistan there is a boat load of these cases because in Kurdistan, the central power of the two parties that run the show is far more consolidated than the central authority in Baghdad. They've been suing journalists for years."<sup>75</sup> The CPJ's report, "Attacks on the Press 2009: Iraq," pointed to government harassment, assaults and legal action as the greatest risk

to journalists and cited Ziad al Ajili, director of the Journalistic Freedom Observatory, a local press freedom group, for his assessment of the government approach: "Officials don't want journalists to write about things such as security issues, violations of human rights, lack of basic services, and corruption," Ajili went on to further note that, "They are imposing restrictions on journalists—and the direction they are taking is a move toward authoritarianism."

There is irony in the government's approach, explained Griffin, "The libel suits are brought under the old penal codes from the 1960's and 1970's."<sup>76</sup> These are Saddam-era laws used by a government that in all other measures is committed to abolishing the repressive system as practiced under Saddam's regime.

"When the government doesn't like something, they have these laws that are very broadly and widely written," said Griffin, referring to the libel laws under Saddam's penal code. These libel laws are technically on the books until the Iraqi Parliament passes new legislation. "The government tends to use the old laws selectively, said Griffin. "The old penal code is terrible and its conflicted with the constitution."<sup>77</sup>

"The Iraqi judiciary depends on Saddam era laws," said Faisal Istrabadi, a law professor at Indiana University. "The question is, the law has to conform to constitutional principals. The law isn't bad, the system is bad."<sup>78</sup> The Iraqi constitution ratified in October 2005 guarantees "freedom of press, printing, advertisement, media and publications," as long as it does not "violate public order and morality." The constitution, forged at a time of intense sectarian violence, made freedom of expression conditional, which weakens the guarantee. Without additional clarifications by the Iraqi Parliament, the freedom of expression clause has been interpreted by government action, said Istrabadi, who

served as Iraq's deputy representative to the United Nations and helped to draft the Iraqi constitution. He criticized the government's use of the old penal code because it does not conform to the new constitution and because, he said, "the totalitarian nature of the previous regime is carried over by the enforcers of the law."<sup>79</sup>

### **THE GUARDIAN CASE: A WIDENING NET**

On April 30, 2009, the *Guardian* newspaper published a headline with a Baghdad dateline: "Six years after Saddam Hussein, Nouri al-Maliki tightens his grip on Iraq." The *Guardian* journalist, Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, quoted unnamed sources from the Iraqi intelligence agency describing their view of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's approach to governance. "Maliki is running a dictatorship. Everything is run by his office and advisers; he is surrounded by his party and clan members. They form a tight knot that is running Iraq now. He is not building a country; he is building a state for his own party and his own people."<sup>80</sup>

Within a month of publication, Iraq's National Intelligence Service filed a defamation complaint against the newspaper's chief editor, Allen Resberger and reporter Ghaith Abdul Ahed, demanding \$1 million in damages and the disclosure of the unnamed sources. When the suit was announced, the *Guardian* reported that Prime Minister Maliki had called for the legal action and charged that the suit was "misguided."<sup>81</sup> The Prime Minister publicly denied his involvement and in an email response to this author, the *Guardian* clarified the paper's understanding of Maliki's role, "Although Al-Maliki was not a party to the action, he has the appearance of a 'sleeping' partner throughout as the bulk of the expressed concerns relate to him."<sup>82</sup> This was the first time Iraqi officials had sued an international media outlet under Saddam-era publication laws.

The *Guardian* case set significant precedents, according to Ibrahim al Marashi, “it’s the beginning of state monitoring of what international journalist are writing. I would say it’s a curtailment, a set back for freedom of the press, and on a grander picture of what’s happening in Iraq.”<sup>83</sup> The *Guardian* case also incorporated a number of new strategies by the government to control the domestic media that has now extended to the international press. According to Marashi, “The freedom of journalists to use unnamed sources, for example, trying to register the activities of journalists, the state’s role in attempting to sue various foreign journalists, it is a state that is trying to exert control over the over the anarchy that allowed the media sphere to erupt in the first place.”

The *Guardian* newspaper challenged the libel suit and hired an Iraqi lawyer to contest the fine. An Iraqi court commissioned a report from a group of three experts nominated by the Iraqi Union of Journalists, who concluded the article was not defamatory and thus no compensation should be granted. The panel of experts addressed the findings to the Judge of the Al-Karkh Primary Court. “We did not find any statements or words of defamation in the article against the claimer [*sic*],” was the decision of the panel, and the findings cited Article 19 of the U.N.’s World Declaration of Human Rights. As the panel members pointed out, Iraq is a signatory of the U.N. declaration with includes the right of freedom of speech.<sup>84</sup>

Chris Elliott, an editor at the paper, continued the court narrative in an email to this author:

In October, the experts delivered a favorable opinion saying they did not believe the article was defamatory, that it was based on opinions, that sources should be protected and that the *Guardian* article did not breach



the standards required of the media. The court commanded a further report, this time from a panel of five experts, made up of journalists and lawyers. This was very critical of the article.

The court judges rejected the testimony of the first panel, composed of members of the Union of Iraqi Journalist, without explanation. The court selected a second panel that reached a different conclusion. This time, the panel found that the *Guardian* had violated the publications law by “interfering in the Iraqi internal affairs and harmed the reputation of the Prime Minister.” In November 2009 an Iraqi court ordered the *Guardian* to pay a \$75,000 fine.

“I think what caught people’s attention was how big the damages were,” said Mohamed Abdul Dayem, who has watched this case closely as the Middle East and North Africa program coordinator for the Committee to Project Journalist. “I have failed to find the defamation there. To question the performance of the head of state is not defamatory. It seems so elementary. Legally speaking, this is hogwash.”<sup>85</sup>

The demand for extraordinary damages has been much tougher on the domestic media, said Dayem. “They are far more than any local outfit can pay. When you look at Kurdistan, journalists there have been sued for \$5 million and \$10 million.” The damage demands have had a chilling effect on the domestic media, said Dayem, but he remained puzzled over the objective. “There are so many patterns you can’t tell what is going to happen. It’s impossible to determine when a case goes to court, is the intention to kill the publication, or to convince the editors that a journalist is a liability, or to scare?” The court rulings have been confusing, he said, “There are currently Kurdish journalists who owe money because they lost a case. They haven’t paid and are eating dinner at home with

their kids. There are others who owe and are put in prison. It's a little bit of everything."

The *Guardian* newspaper is appealing the Iraqi court judgment, but until the case is resolved, future coverage of Iraq had taken on added risks. Can the company continue to keep an office in Baghdad? Is it safe to send a correspondent into the country? Will *Guardian* reporters be subject to arrest at the airport? The case is unsettling said *Guardian* editor Chris Elliott and represents a threat against freedom of expression. "It is a very effective way to prevent Ghaith from working in Iraq," wrote Elliott, "We don't know what would happen if he went in." The *Guardian's* editor also wondered about the consequences of ignoring the court's findings. "That would mean we couldn't work in Iraq legitimately at all."

## CONCLUSIONS

For many years the major threat to freedom of expression in Iraq was the death threat, in a country where working as a journalist was one of the most deadly professions. However, by 2010, the security situation had dramatically improved with the lowest number of reported work related killings since 2003. But even as security improved, more complex impediments emerged to hinder journalists and domestic news outlets.

The election season presented new hurdles, including regulations issued by the CMC. For the first time, the government required a license for media outlets and the registration of all media personnel. The CMC regulations barred coverage that incited violence or sectarianism, but the definitions remained vague and unclear. During the elections, for the first time, some international media were required to have a government permit to record interviews on the street. CNN

was prevented from filing on March 1, 2010, because the journalist and production crew did not have a permit.

## **DOES THE IRAQI NEWS MEDIA CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT ENCOURAGES DEMOCRACY AND STATE BUILDING?**

In a 2005 speech, President George Bush said that all successful democracies are built on common foundations, one of which is a “vibrant free press” that “informs the public, ensures transparency and prevents authoritarian backsliding.” The president’s remarks underline the U.S. commitment to develop a free and open media in Iraq. However, in Iraq, the picture remains mixed. Iraqi media remains one of the most diverse in the region; this landscape is constrained by a government that seems intent on curbing freedom of expression.

As the violence had gone down, the central state has become more robust and has accumulated more power, explained Mohamed Abdul Dayem. “After 2006, fewer journalists are getting killed, but you see an increase in journalists who are beaten up by the military or prevented from entering a press conference or held for hours and days. There is an upsurge in that. Journalists can’t do proper journalism if everyday they leave the house, it is high likely they aren’t coming back, but they can’t do sustained journalism if they have to worry about an endless stream of defamation cases. They can’t do proper journalism if, when they go to a state agency and ask for crime statistics, and data that should be available, they are told to take a hike.”

Seven years after the invasion of Iraq, the country has not become a symbol for media freedom in the Middle East. “On paper, yes, it maintains and has one of

the most liberalized media in the region,” said Douglas Griffin. “It has a lot of diversity on the air, you do hear differences of opinion. The problem is the broadcasters are highly partisan. It’s a noisy atmosphere of conflicting opinion, but it’s not balanced.”<sup>86</sup>

As a 2009 UNDP study concluded: “Journalists face the challenge of reporting on other parties critically. Those journalists face difficulties getting information from politicians who are more inclined to give access to media affiliated with their own organizations. Journalists who are too critical of other factions often have been subjected to blackmail and death threats, if not death itself.”

At the same time, international media development specialists say that the highly sectarian nature of the Iraqi media may be its saving grace. There are too many voices for the government to silence, even as government officials move in a more repressive direction. Those voices remain highly sectarian, with outlets funded by political parties or sectarian interests, which is not likely to change in the current climate of Iraq. For Hiwa Osman, the sectarian nature of the Iraqi media is tied to economic development “until we have a true free market, until the security situation is settled. Only then can media survive on advertising. Now, it can’t.”

There is a long-term price for continued media polarization in a country that has gone to war over the sectarian divide. The “war” is now largely carried out on television screens rather than the streets, but the sectarian media messages prevent a national narrative from emerging and according to the UNDP report, “undermined the capacity of the weak state to govern, and the political parties had the capability of re-enforcing the country’s sectarian divisions.”

Is there evidence that a fractured media also fractures the national identity? Matthew Baum who has asked the same question in the U.S. context explained that there is not a consensus about the answer. "My opinion," he continued, "is there are a variety of sources of the 'commons' in any civilization. The media is not it, but is part of it. When most of the population is tuning in you get a common representation of the world that gives everybody a common basis of conversation. You start out with a shared premise even if you don't agree with the conclusion." But in the Iraqi media landscape there are different realities presented according to the ownership and political orientation of the outlet. "What fragmentation does is," said Baum, "it erodes that common space. Not only are we not agreeing on the conclusion, we are not agreeing on the premise. And that makes it hard to reach out beyond your own group."

In Ibrahim Marashi's 2007 study of the Iraqi media, he noted that "pluralism can be positive: it can contribute to power-sharing, help frame the idea of the nation, and reinforce the capacity to govern during a time of crisis and moderate violence." Instead, Iraq's pluralism appears to have contributed to a hardening of the sectarian divide. "Pluralism, without regulation, can also lead to the rise of media that can be abused as a means of encouraging violence," wrote Marashi in his 2007 report. It is hard to imagine how a weak Iraqi government can regulate the chaos of the Iraqi media landscape, or objectively determine when an outlet is inciting violence or promoting sectarian views.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Isakhan, “Manufacturing Consent in Iraq: Interference in the post-Saddam media sector,” *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, Volume 3, No 1, 2009.

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<sup>25</sup> William A. Rugh, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio and Television in Arab politics*, Praeger, 2006.

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<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Isakhan, "Manufacturing Consent in Iraq: Interference in the post-Saddam media sector," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, Volume 3, No 1, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> "Media Monitoring during the Iraqi Parliamentary elections in 2010," *Al Mir'at (Mirror) Media Monitoring Network*, Media Monitoring Period November 15 2009 – March 6, 2010.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>37</sup> Ibrahim Al-Marashi, "The Dynamics of Iraq's Media: Ethno-Sectarian Violence, Political Islam, Public Advocacy and Globalization," *Open Society Institute*, 2007.

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<sup>67</sup> Phone Interview with Hiwa Osman, April 2, 2010.

<sup>68</sup> 2009 UNDP/UNESCO “The Legal and Regulatory Framework applicable to media telecommunication and Internet in Iraq

<<http://www.albanyassociates.com/pubs/frameworktomediamandtelecomiraq.pdf>>

<sup>69</sup> Phone Interview with Hiwa Osman, April 2, 2010.

<sup>70</sup> Text of CPA Order 14 available at

<[www.ihec.iq/content/file/cpa\\_orders/cpa\\_14\\_en.pdf](http://www.ihec.iq/content/file/cpa_orders/cpa_14_en.pdf)>

<sup>71</sup> Phone interview with Douglas Griffin, May 4, 2010.

<sup>72</sup> 2009 UNDP/UNESCO “The Legal and Regulatory Framework applicable to media telecommunication and Internet in Iraq

<<http://www.albanyassociates.com/pubs/frameworktomediamandtelecomiraq.pdf>>

<sup>73</sup> January 2010 Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction

<<http://www.sigir.mil/publications/quarterlyreports/January2010.htmlUS>>

<sup>74</sup> Joe Stork, “Letter to the Communication and Media Commission of Iraq,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 12, 2010. Contents of Letter available here:

<<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/04/09/letter-communication-and-media-commission-iraq>>

<sup>75</sup> Phone Interview with Mohammad Abdul Dayem, May, 2, 2010.

<sup>76</sup> Phone interview with Douglas Griffin, May, 4, 2010.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Phone Interview with Faisal Istrabadi, February 24, 2010.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Six years after Saddam Hussein, Nouri al-Maliki tightens his grip on Iraq," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Martin Chulov, "Iraqi intelligence sues *Guardian*," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2009.

<sup>82</sup> Email correspondence with Chris Elliot from *The Guardian*, February 11, 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Phone Interview with Ibrahim al Marashi, March 7, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> English translation of legal documents obtained from the *Editorial Legal Department of Guardian News and Media Limited*, via email, February 17, 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Phone Interview with Mohammad Abdul Dayem, May, 2, 2010.

<sup>86</sup> Phone interview with Douglas Griffin, May 4, 2010.