



A New Voice in the Middle East: A Provisional Needs Assessment for the Iraqi Media



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1. Executive Summary

Stabilisation and development in post-war Iraq depend on the creation of new forms of representative government in a country that has suffered decades of war and brutal dictatorship. A prerequisite for success is the emergence of a professional and independent media, to convey reliable facts, support responsible debate and represent the diversity of communities and views within Iraq.

Iraqis are confronting this huge challenge with considerable energy, but face serious obstacles. In the weeks since the end of hostilities, dozens of new newspapers and magazines have been launched in the capital, Baghdad, while the busy media culture in Iraqi Kurdistan – established during the decade of self-rule – has continued. Much of this output is due to the entrepreneurial and professional skill of Iraqis from within the country, and returning exiles bringing technical ability and mobilising financial and other outside resources. Meantime, the United States, through the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA, formerly ORHA) has launched radio and television programming and two newspapers.

Yet the difficulties are extreme. Iraqi civil society has been destroyed, the economy is in ruins and security is poor. Rival political interests jockeying for position are establishing highly partisan media which could be destabilising in a fragile post-conflict environment. Infrastructure for effective production, distribution and broadcast are inadequate and in many cases destroyed through bombing and looting. Reliable communications systems – essential for effective media – are non-existent.

The majority of media professionals have politicised backgrounds, either with the opposition or government media, or the Ba'ath Party itself: there are few experienced journalists, editors and managers to operate truly independent media. The absence of the rule of law, and of a broader democratic culture, impede the free flow of information and debate essential to open media. Poor planning and bureaucratic in-fighting within the international authority responsible for reconstruction have inhibited efficient and effective media development. Practical local reporting on humanitarian issues is absent. The lack of an Iraqi authority, the lack of basic security and services, and the absence of a reliable Iraqi voice are all contributing to a sense of powerlessness and, among some, anger.

The key is a coordinated and strategic approach that will encourage media diversity while seeking to ensure a balancing core of independent reporting and responsible debate. This cannot be delivered by any single body, but will require transparency and consultation, and a willingness by coalition authorities to engage Iraqi media organisations and media professionals, and draw on the expertise of multilateral bodies and international media development organisations and associations.

This independent snapshot of the media environment in post-war Iraq reviews existing and known new media in planning, and suggests areas for further monitoring and research.

Meantime the report identifies priorities for the emergence of a truly independent media culture. The prerequisite is for the US to clarify and firmly separate its public diplomacy agenda from any media development strategies. Confusion on this fundamental issue has contributed to the failure of both. More broadly, competent Iraqis must be given greater control over media projects for Iraq. In specific:

- *Transparent and Inclusive Media Policy:* The CPA should publish a consultative paper on media policy and law and engage in open debate with Iraqi and international media experts through meetings, public discussion and a major conference in Iraq. It should draw on extensive NGO contributions to draft policy and regulatory frameworks.
- *Rule of law:* The occupying powers, and emerging Iraqi authorities, should expedite the promulgation of regulatory frameworks for broadcast frequencies, and laws guaranteeing the legal rights and responsibilities of Iraqi media. This must include a substantial consultative process within Iraq, involving coalition authorities, international organisations, Iraqi independent institutions and political parties, and Iraqi media professionals.
- *Independence for Iraqi Media Authorities:* Regulatory responsibility for frequency licensing should be removed from the CPA and be given to an independent body, which should also be separated from any public broadcasting agency. An independent professional body should be established for monitoring broadcast and print output.
- *Independence for the Iraqi Media Network:* The CPA's Iraqi Media Network should be dismantled and the constituent parts all located within independent institutions. A clear policy for handing over its TV and radio to an independent broadcaster, outside direct control of any new ministry, should be confirmed. Newspapers should be given formal independence and senior staff removed from the payroll of government contractors.
- *Media Professionalisation:* Steps to professionalise the output and clarify a strategy for the public broadcaster should be implemented immediately. This should include reviewing all consultants and staff and establishing appropriate management, editorial production and staff training.
- *Iraqi Professional Bodies.* Early support should be provided to assist in the formation of new independent Iraqi journalist associations, to strengthen Iraqi voices in the policy debate and provide a base for Iraqi efforts to defend freedom of expression and security for journalists.
- *Official information:* The CPA should urgently improve communications and the dissemination of official information, especially to the Iraqi press. This should include communicating in Arabic and Kurdish and establishing accessible contact points outside militarily protected compounds and former regime presidential palaces so local journalists can readily contact officials.
- *Training:* Training programmes for journalists, editors and media managers should be initiated as a priority, ideally through a coordinated strategy in partnership with local institutions to improve professional levels and build long-term training capacity.
- *Regional Media:* International donors should reserve development funds for incubating regional media, especially in southern Iraq, and national media which can improve the flow of reliable information from and to regions outside the capital.
- *De-Ba'athification:* International policy on removing ex-members of the former ruling party should be clarified, and vetting procedures agreed for media projects operated or funded internationally, to clarify current staffing and remove uncertainty for those who remain.

In addition, the importance of broader issues outside the remit of this report should be recognized for the critical impact they have on the media and any civil society efforts. Lack of security remains a serious concern for all civilians, inhibiting movement by anyone, including journalists, especially after dusk. The lack of telecommunications systems seriously impedes all communications – a particular obstacle for working journalists.

2. Mission Background

This independent report has been undertaken as a joint mission by the Baltic Media Center (BMC), *Index on Censorship* and the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR). Financial assistance and project conceptualisation has been provided by International Media Support, Denmark, with additional support from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office via *Index on Censorship*, and the Dutch government via IWPR, which provided overall project coordination.

The mission was undertaken May 15 to June 15 by Antti Kuusi (BMC), Rohan Jayasekera (*Index*) and Anthony Borden, Julie Flint and Duncan Furey (IWPR). Research support was provided by Jaafar El-Ahmar. Mission members visited Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, Kerbala, Najaf and Suleimaniya. Meetings were held with Iraqi editors, publishers, producers and journalists, CPA representatives, advisors and other contractors with the US Department of Defense, donor representatives, as well as Iraqi, US and British political officials. The mission was developed at a coordinating meeting of international media development organisations held in London April 24. The mission benefited from several media and NGO reports on the media sector, including a recent report by the BBC World Service Trust.

The views expressed in this report reflect those of the mission members alone. It is a provisional snapshot at an early stage of a dynamic situation. As such it is presented as a discussion document, to be supplemented by further research and assessment.

3. Ba'athist Media

Media under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein were under total government control, fully instrumentalised for the purposes of supporting the regime and glorifying the president. As a primary tool of official power, the media were under the authority of Saddam's widely feared son Uday, and thoroughly infiltrated by the security services.

Journalism at most levels was the domain of trusted party loyalists. Dissent was out of question – even in private circles, where individuals could be reported on for making critical remarks and suffer physical punishment, prison terms or both. In effect, the entire country was turned into a population of potential reporters – filing secret reports on each other in service of the regime. Satellite dishes were banned. The Ministry of Information controlled all media and served as official censor, requiring prior approval of all copy and programming. A student in the journalism faculty claimed he had been jailed for three years for an article published in the student newspaper. Mission members heard another story of a graphic designer being severely beaten for publishing a line drawing which entirely unintentionally contained an image which could be taken to resemble Israel's Star of David.

As in other dictatorships, the media served to promote the image of the president. Especially in periods of conflict with the United States – as observed by mission members who visited the country before the war – state television presented a noxious mix of Arab victimisation, glorious Iraqi struggle and anti-western propaganda. Shortly before the onset of fighting, the foreign editor of the Iraqi News Agency boasted that his agency had never experienced conflict with the government over any of its reporting in his several decades as a journalist. The primary state newspapers, representing the party and the army, competed to reproduce the largest front-page photograph of the president (often therefore looking nearly identical). In the run-up to war they took painstaking effort to present every western voice against the looming US-led attack as a declaration of support for Saddam Hussein.

Uday Hussein was proprietor of the main “non-state” newspaper, *Babel*, the country's most widely read publication. Boasting high production values, including full colour photographs and a sharper writing style, it was spared the requirement to lead with every day's new image of the leader. It also contained selected (and largely incoherent) foreign news and advertisements for unachievable modern

goods such as computers and the latest audio equipment. Entirely unreported in the media was any real information about life within Iraq, particularly the rule of fear which dominated the country for more than three decades.

Up to 4 million Iraqis, out of a total population of 24 million, went into exile. Among these, a number continued or entered journalism, taking up senior positions in leading Arab media, such as the London-based newspaper *al-Hayat*. One Iraqi journalist boasted that there are more Iraqi editors and reporters working for Middle Eastern media than from any other Arab nation.

Many Iraqis engaged in ill-starred exile productions: many of these were highly propagandistic anti-Saddam vehicles promoting various opposition factions, and controlled by Egyptian, Saudi Arabian or other local intelligence agencies. The most ambitious enterprise was a TV and newspaper operation run by the Iraqi National Congress from London, supported by the US State Department until political differences and alleged misappropriation of money (never proven) led to the revocation of funding and the closure of the operation.

Following the first Gulf war of 1991, and the establishment of self-rule in Iraqi Kurdistan under US and UK protection, Kurdish media flourished. Countless television channels, radio stations, newspapers and magazines emerged throughout the territory, joined later by dynamic websites featuring reporting from the ground and analysis and comment from Kurdish, Arabic and international experts around the world. Nevertheless, Kurdish media was riven by the deep political divide between the two main parties, and in a close-knit traditional society unaccustomed to internal criticism (much less leadership change), meaningful independent journalism failed to emerge.

While media in government-controlled Iraq languished, many within a highly motivated and educated population followed reliable ex-territorial broadcasting services such as the BBC World Service, and the US-funded Radio Sawa and Radio Free Iraq. Iraqi journalists like to boast of the country's history of innovation in Arab media, especially the supposed golden years before the 1950s. Iraqis have shown an enduring desire, even through the stultifying decades of Ba'athist rule, to be informed. Despite the problems, the potential for a responsible media, and sophisticated audience, is evident.

4. US Media Operations

Planning for media policy and media development has been poor. As part of its constitution-drafting effort, the US State Department's Future of Iraq project sketched basic concepts of independent media, but did not elaborate detailed policy. The Iraqi Media Network (IMN) was established in January 2003, led by Bob Reilly, a former director of the Voice of America, and Mike Furlong, a long-time Defense Department contractor who had worked on broadcasting issues in post-war Kosovo. A budget of \$15 million was confirmed in February, a month before fighting began.

The US assembled a diverse team of exile Iraqi consultants, to serve as an editorial group to establish a TV station, a radio station and a newspaper, and to act as a policy unit, to advise on media strategy. Several westerners were employed, to provide journalism, technical and logistical support. Consultants were hired through Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), an employee-owned services company with a long record as a Defense Department subcontractor. By mid-April, the overall media team comprised more than two dozen people, largely based in Kuwait. Contracts were set to expire, and the entire operation due for review by the coalition authority, on June 10.

During the war the US adopted a "psyops" strategy, broadcasting *Towards Freedom*, predominantly military information, from a converted cargo plane overflying the country. Leaflets instructing Iraqis to remain at home were dropped on the territory. An anti-regime station Radio Tikrit, named after Saddam's home town, was initiated.

The IMN team began radio broadcasts from Um Qasr on mid-March (later moved moved to Basra to improve country-wide coverage). With the collapse of the regime, IMN's TV output was launched on May 13, from Baghdad. *Al-Sabah*, a CPA sponsored newspaper produced in Baghdad by a SAIC employed Iraqi exile, was launched May 15. On May 28, the first issue of a second CPA sponsored newspaper, *Sumer*, produced in Kuwait, was distributed in Baghdad.

In late May, IMN was considering options for the dispensation of a regulatory authority, the licensing of newspapers and the establishment of the IMN as a public service broadcaster. Plans were discussed for closing all non-US authorised broadcasters (excluding Iraqi Kurdistan) and holding a frequency competition, with proposals due in June and decisions for 90-day allocations to be taken in July. The Iraqi Ministry of Information was abolished on late May, sacking its nearly 7,000 staff and handing its assets over to IMN.

The Authority's ruling giving the IMN responsibility for both overseeing regulation and operations is problematic. It creates an unavoidable conflict of interest that could spark considerable controversy. Recognising that ultimate decisions such as the status and funding of the state broadcaster will be taken by a future Iraqi government, debate within IMN focused on whether to transfer responsibility for broadcasting to an independent board outside of ministerial control, as with the BBC, or to fold broadcasting within one of the emerging ministries, such as a ministry for communications. Meantime, the confusion over its role as media and as a tool of public diplomacy are enshrined in apparently contradictory requirements to "promote . . . excellence" in journalism and to "provide an information service to the CPA".

From the start, the media project was beset by problems. Bitter disputes erupted between senior US representatives on the IMN, leading to chaotic and at times directly competitive decision-making. Hiring was ad-hoc, and although consultant salaries were high, posts and experience levels were often not well matched. Equipment purchases were poorly planned, internet access was not established. Fierce internal rivalries emerged between projects with the network itself. Budgets were undefined and not devolved, restricting the ability of staff to get on with the job. No serious professional training was offered, and programme planning was non-existent. Hiring of local staff in Baghdad was not systematic, with very little pre-vetting for political links or professional capacity. Of the approximately 130 staff, of which around 25 are journalists, IMN officials estimated that more than 90 per cent were former employees of the Ministry of Information.

The plan for TV was for two hours of output, from 18:00 to 20:00, and then repeated, comprising 30 minutes of news and 90 minutes of children's programming, old documentaries and files. Controversy arose immediately over supposed "censorship": the IMN broadcast team refused demands to pre-screen the output, and Iraqi staff insisted on starting the day's broadcasting with a standard reading from the Koran, against objections.

Ye the real issue was quality, particularly TV. With a skeleton staff of around a dozen, the *Voice of New Iraq*, broadcasting via AM from the south and not properly audible in Baghdad, still achieved a basic quality news service, mixed with extended interviews, talk shows and music over a six hour output. But the TV news was very weak. In the period under assessment, information during the 30-minute news programme was primarily conveyed via public service announcements, with occasional news shorts. The presentation was confusing and often just dull. There was no coverage of the core political issues facing the country and no systematic reporting on the humanitarian effort.

The dramatic absence of any quality programming was highlighted by the delight of IMN staff in locating 300 old VCR tapes from one of Uday Hussein's palaces, a typical scattering of Hollywood capers, romance and comedy – with, intriguingly, a copy of a book by one of Uday's body doubles in the pile. But still, tapes without legal rights negotiated to broadcast could only remain on the basement floor, unused.

As a result, the authorities lost a critical opportunity to present a fresh and dynamic face for a new Iraq, and failed in its duty to provide basic information to a frightened and traumatised population. Experienced professionals have no doubt that a well-prepared team could have been parachuted in to launch reasonable broadcasting quickly. Alternatively, it would have been more effective to present simple informational announcements until an effective media operation could have been put in place. Many Iraqis complained about the coalition's fundamental lack of communication, and expressed bewilderment that an occupying army would not exploit the airwaves for this obvious purpose.

As this report was being completed, at least one senior US member of the IMN team had been transferred from his position and one experienced exile media professional resigned citing "nepotism and incompetence". Reilly, the head of IMN, opted to discontinue with the project, and at least one other senior Iraqi team member declined to renew his contract. But plans to approve a further \$34 million on the project appeared on course. In a continuing sign of the Defense-State Department rivalry, the contract for SAIC with the Defense Department to employ the IMN staff was renewed, but only for one month. Further turmoil seems likely.

5. Media Explosion

Outside the confines of the presidential palaces from which the international authority operates, Iraq is experiencing a media boom. In the weeks since the end of fighting, up to 150 new publications have been launched in central and southern Iraq. Radio stations have also begun to proliferate. Each morning, newspaper sellers on the commercial Al-Saadoon Street and outside major hotels mark out broad swathes of sidewalk on which to lay out the latest titles on offer.

For those who can afford it, satellite dishes offering access to international TV stations are on sale for around \$200, well more than an average annual salary. The BBC has established FM re-broadcasting, while the Iranian TV station Al-Alam broadcasts slick 24-hour programming from across the border, 150 kilometres from Baghdad.

Yet amid this media chaos, and evident explosion of open speech, the provision of balanced reporting, especially about local issues and humanitarian concerns, remains scant.

Baghdad Media

In Baghdad, the content of most of the newspapers is essentially the same: politics and current affairs, domestic issues, features, entertainment and sports. A few publications address culture or non-political topics. With internet only beginning to appear, and no telephones, there is a distinct lack of international news, dispassionate analysis of the Iraqi situation or detailed local reporting. The first issues of most newspapers appeared rushed out, with poor design and editing, but for those that continued beyond that first step, the appearance improved.

Yet in the absence of a functioning economy and trained reporters, truly independent and reliable journalism is almost impossible. Outside business and political interests are all seeking a foothold in the country via the media. The publications can roughly be divided into party organs run by various religious, ethnic or political factions; relatively professional appearing titles mostly produced by veterans of the Ba'athists press, many of whom were senior figures in the party; and likely fly-by-night productions by local printers, even a sweet-seller – apparently anyone with a bit of funds wanting to put their name out into the fray.

Among the first new papers to start publishing in Baghdad was *Azzaman* ("Time"), owned by Sa'ad al-Bazzaz, former editor-in-chief of the state-owned *Al-Jumhuriya* who defected in the mid-1990s. It is run as a slip edition, with the bulk of the pages produced in London, and locally produced front and

inside pages inserted in Baghdad before printing. Its production values are high, and it is widely seen as the most popular newspaper. Yet the proprietor has made no secret of his own political ambitions. "To spend all this money, to make all this investment, to take all this risk, it is because I am a politician," Bazzaz told *The New York Times* in May. "And to be a politician, you have to use the media as a channel." The articles often bear an anti-Shia tone.

Al-Saah ("The Hour") is published by Sheik Ahmed al-Kubeisy, a Sunni Muslim cleric who voluntarily left Iraq a few years ago to work as an advisor for a senior sheikh from the United Arab Emirates. He had a weekly religious program on Abu Dhabi TV. *Al-Saah* is regarded as a platform for an Iraqi Sunni agenda. The paper's editor-in-chief is Adeeb Shaaban, a former special secretary to Uday Hussein who fell foul of his boss a few months before the last Gulf war. His appointment has angered some Iraqis and his name has been removed from its masthead, though he continues in his post.

Fajr Baghdad ("Baghdad Dawn") bills itself as "Iraq's first democratic and independent newspaper." Its front-page generally focuses on daily worries such as the lack of gasoline and electricity, and the looting and lawlessness that have swept the nation since Saddam's ouster.

The most influential Islamist papers are likely to be *Al-Da'wa*, the organ of the Al-Da'wa party that was the first to fight against the Ba'ath; *Sadr*, the organ of radical Shias who seek an Islamic Republic of Iraq; and *Al-Adallah*, the organ of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Republic in Iraq of Ayatollah Hakim. For the moment, neither *Al-Da'wa* nor *Al-Adallah* criticise either other parties or the occupation forces. An anti-occupation agenda is apparent in *Sadr*. Kurdish parties have established several newspapers, as well as radio stations.

Al-Sabah, one of two US-sponsored newspapers, is an unremarkable news review, providing extensive space to official statements and steering shy of critical analysis of the CPA and the US. *Sumer*, the second US-sponsored newspaper, could present greater competition for *Azzaman*. It is edited by Hassan Allawi, a former spokesman for Saddam Hussein in the 1970s who has been in exile for many years and edited the Iraqi opposition newspaper *Al-Mutamar*. *Sumer* has attracted leading Iraqi and Arab writers with wide-ranging debate and analysis. But produced in Kuwait, early issues were short on news and information from Iraq. As this report was completed, discussions within IMN arose, subject to the usual rivalries, about merging the two US-funded titles, and the future was unclear.

The Shia South

Outside of the Baghdad newspaper hot-house, there is still considerable activity. Media in the Shia south of Iraq will play a critical role in the coming years. The Shia, Iraq's most oppressed and neglected community, form a majority of the Iraqi population and will be a key to stability in post-war Iraq. In the absence of any post-war government, sections of the Shia community who have not been permitted a voice for 35 years are already emerging as a radical, destabilising force, backed by a flood of new publications in Baghdad and the south.

There is also a wealth of initiative and raw talent outside the capital – a result, one teacher-turned-journalist said, of intellectuals fleeing the centre in the days of the Ba'ath hoping to escape the worst excesses of the regime.

Like Baghdad, the south has seen a flood of indigenous publications since the disappearance of the Ba'ath. Almost all are in the hands of religious groups or small collectives of intellectuals – or even single individuals – keen to capitalise on the new freedom of expression. The assessment team visited four cities – Basra, Amara, Najaf and Hilla. It found two local television stations and several dozen publications, the vast majority of them in the holy city of Najaf, long a centre of learning and a meeting point for Shias from many countries and cultures.

Few of those working in the new media have had any experience of journalism. Most publications observe an Islamic tone, and highlight the speeches and declarations of various senior clerics, with large photographs of the religious leaders dotting the front and inside pages. News – especially balanced reporting from throughout the country – was essentially absent. Indeed, most proprietors or journalists seemed to be publishing/broadcasting simply because they could at last have a voice. Profit was not the main motive. Everyone was losing money and did not appear overly concerned. Those who lacked the resources to sustain these losses were walled out, notably in Basra, where efforts to open local newspapers have been stymied by the number of Baghdad and Kuwait produced papers given away free in the city, including Bazzaz's *Azzaman*. A rainbow-coloured tabloid sports paper was launched in the city at the end of May.

Basra boasts the main radio station which was operating in the South at the time of the assessment mission besides the IMN operation in Um Qasr. The 24-hour Radio Nahreen (“Two Rivers Radio”) appeared to have gained a considerable audience, and affection, for its lively mix of Arab and European music, military messages and public service announcements, and twice hourly news gleaned from the web and news wires. Produced by a British Army Psychological Operations unit and run by reserve Col. Colin Mason, a former BBC broadcaster now working in commercial radio, it launched on the eve of the war, broadcasting towards the Fao peninsula from the Iraqi desert, and moved steadily north until it arrived in Basra at the end of March. It broadcasts 24 hours a day – live only in daylight hours – with news gleaned from the web and wires on the hour and local news gathered largely from the military, “because most of the initiatives in Basra are military”, on the half-hour.

A dozen local restaurants and businesses get free advertising in return for advertising the radio on their premises. The hope is that advertising revenue will make the radio self-sustaining when it is eventually handed over to Iraqis. Its five energetic young Iraqi broadcasters each received three days' training, having been selected for their youth and lack of baggage – i.e., without experience of the Ba'athist media. On May 27, *Radio Nahreen* began to be re-broadcast by the CPA radio that had moved a few days earlier into Basra from Um Qasr. It was expected that the station will be handed over to the CPA as the British wind down their military presence in Basra.

Directed by Ali Qashif el-Ghita, son of a prominent clerical family, the heavily-Islamist *Najaf Television* broadcasts from a relay station appropriated from the former regime. It can only be received in Najaf and environs and pumps out a combination of religious material, children's cartoons and pirated news programmes from *Al-Jazeera* and *Manar*, the television station of Lebanon's Hezbollah party, for approximately 10 hours a day.

On May 19, the US-backed civil administration in Najaf ordered *Najaf Television* to put itself under US control. El-Ghita refused, even though it would have meant salaries for his staff. He declines to broadcast tapes given him by the administration. However the station is not popular in Najaf, where most people dislike its heavy diet of Islamic lectures, many by Iranian-based clerics. El-Ghita says he has no financial backers, but many in Najaf question this. The general view in Najaf is that a takeover of *Najaf Television* by the occupation forces will be regretted only by the religious hard core, but only if the station retains a minimum of religious content. If religious content is scrapped altogether, the occupation forces' claim to be creating an independent media network will be discredited and the move will be seen as anti-Shia.

The station's main competition presently comes from the city of Hillah. *Hillah Television* uses a relay transmitter seized locally from the Ba'ath and can be received in Najaf, where it is more popular than *Najaf Television*. Manager Sabah el-Taee owned a video shop under the Ba'ath and says his aim is “to change the old philosophy: from concentrating on one person, to cover all people and all problems”. The station broadcasts for 6-7 hours each day, from early evening until midnight, with two local news bulletins each day and pirated national and international news. There is very little religion. “People want entertainment, not just religion,” el-Taee says.

Among the many publications that have sprung up since the war ended, the range extended from newspapers and tabloid-sized colour magazines that purport/attempt to be independent to religious pamphlets masquerading as newspapers. Those behind the secular publications in Najaf and Amarah tend to be intellectual opponents of the Ba'ath – translators/poets/novelists. The technical quality of their papers is poor, but the content is often informative and non-partisan. Only one newspaper was identified in Hillah - *El-Fahya*, financed by a local businessman, which gives prominence to local politics and the US occupation forces.

Iraqi Kurdistan

Long-established during the past decade of autonomy from Baghdad, Kurdish media is sharply divided between pro-Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) operations centred around Erbil, and pro-Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) efforts, in Suleimaniya. The media environment is extremely active, but also bound by the lack of training and resources, uncertain legislation and heavy party political and other traditional influence.

According to the best estimates available during the assessment mission, there are 344 media outlets registered in Iraqi Kurdistan. These are split between 132 print media and 24 TV and radio stations in Erbil, and 110 print and 78 TV and radio station in Suleimaniya.

The vast majority are supported by political parties or specialist organisations contained within or directly associated to these parties. (In Suleimaniya, a Council of Independent Media has been established to support independent media efforts, though its council is strongly PUK-led.) There is little advertising. All political parties have at least one print publication, often more. The faces of Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, the KDP and PUK leaders, respectively, dominate the front pages of the publications in their respective power-base cities.

In recent years a small number of less partisan print publications have begun to appear, while the broadcast scene, both radio and TV, remains entirely politically dominated. In addition to financial support, sometimes the political connections are more direct: the wife of Jalal Talabani plays a senior managerial role in the satellite channel KurdSat, the “private” terrestrial TV station Khak TV, and Media House, with three print publications.

Much of the publications are made up of political comment, social issues and sports as well as a high percentage of letters from readers. Few have any international news and few have correspondents outside Iraqi Kurdistan. Many of the journalists spoken to saw their primary role as agents for change and campaigning.

Both main Kurdish political parties sponsor a major satellite-broadcasting channel, the PUK's KurdSat and the KDP's Kurdistan TV. These are large operations: KurdSat boasts easily the most modern equipment seen in Iraq on the mission. It has access to VOA TV and APTN news feeds. The majority output is in Kurdish, with some Arabic and English programming. Cultural programming and Kurdish folk music dominate, along with extended interviews and live discussions on political issues.

There are also a total of 62 terrestrial TV and radio broadcasters registered with the two respective Ministries of Culture in Erbil and Suleimaniya, with 24 in Erbil and 38 in Suleimaniya. While some, making no claims of independence, overtly represent either political or religious parties or movements, the editors of others claim independence editorially, if not financially. These claims to independence were disputed by other media professionals and some officials in both cities.

Output is mixed between some news and extended political debate, a Koranic section, cartoons and western films, all interspliced by live Kurdish folk music. Some stations visited produced their own news bulletins from correspondents within Iraqi Kurdistan. Others drew from news on the BBC, Al-

Jazeera and the Internet. Others simply recorded and re-broadcast segments of Arabic news, mixed with news read by presenters in Kurdish. Many of the radio stations are based in the same premises as the TV broadcasters, and thus are similarly politically dominated. Most equipment observed was very basic. Programming was a combination of Kurdish and Arabic music usually played from cassettes, and studio interviews either with important political personalities or folk music singers.

The entire Kurdish media scene is complicated by lack of clarity over the legal framework. Kurdish authorities in the autonomous region established separate legislation over the past decade, some of it covering the media. But it appears incomplete, with some legislation from the Ba'athist period still in place. Despite official commitment to freedom of speech, there is a sense that political and tribal habits against public criticism of leaders remain strong, and that, in any case involving the media, the judiciary are inclined to support the political parties. The relationship between Iraqi Kurdistan and any new legislation or regulatory system established by the coalition authorities from the centre in Baghdad is also unclear, and leave the entire Kurdish media scene in uncertainty.

Meantime, with the fall of the Ba'athist regime, the political context in the Kurdish areas has shifted. Reacting to the new environment, the fierce competition between the two parties is formally, if slowly, being put aside, in favour of a more common position to represent Kurdish interests vis-à-vis Baghdad. This could reduce support for so many competing politically oriented media, although whether it opens the space for a gradual de-politicisation of Kurdish reporting remains to be seen.

7. Journalism Institutions

University of Baghdad Faculty of Mass Communications. Journalism courses started at Baghdad University in 1964 and throughout have relied on regime-adjusted interpretations of Soviet ideas on the role of the media in society. Journalists say the department was heavily infiltrated by security services. After the war, the university's media department was completely stripped clean by looters and its remaining staff is not better equipped to tackle a modern journalism training programme. Courses restarted in May but it is not clear if anything can be salvaged from the existing university setup. The faculty includes courses in public relations and media studies as well as conventional "journalism" but not use of print technology or the internet. Recent changes within the department do not give confidence of an infusion of fresh thinking. Given that the *de facto* state broadcasters at the Iraqi Media Network will be required to set up or contract out for staff training and that international NGOs are already beginning training schemes for the rest of the media, some thought could be given to running parallel journalism and media production courses for university students as a separate module or a post-graduate course – but this would have to be under entirely independent management and tutorial jurisdiction from the university, until the university is completely reformed.

Iraqi Journalists' Associations. With the collapse of Ba'athist dominated media clubs and journalist unions, a wholly new national journalists' association with a balanced management structure should be created. This new body will be better equipped to provide an open and effective forum for the defence of freedom of speech and freedom of information, to reach consensus on key issues of editorial independence and self-regulation of media, and to encourage debate about the ethics of journalism, public service values in broadcasting and political/commercial influence over the media. In Iraq, where community divisions based on religious and ethnic differences threaten stability, its journalists should work together to agree the rules and standards for ethical conduct. As the International Federation of Journalists notes, "unless Iraqi colleagues are fully involved in setting the standards for journalism, a rush to regulate will hinder efforts to build a free and independent media community. The priority must be to place journalism firmly in the hands of media people themselves, not to impose rules that will undermine an emerging democratic process." Individual journalists should not be required to be accredited by either the authorities or a journalists' association in order to carry out their duties.

Kurdistan Journalism Training. The Erbil Technical Institute offers a two-year journalism course, and will graduate its third class of students this year. Yet placement of students through a Central Admissions Department results in very mixed classes, and the focus appears to be on theory rather than practical training. The University of Suleimaniya offers a new four-year course through a journalism faculty, with a stronger emphasis on modern journalistic practices and practical training. Nevertheless, lack of funding has limited equipment and textbooks, and faculty themselves appear to have limited experience in the media. Neither faculty have sufficient funds to operate a student newspaper.

8. Getting to Grips

Despite chaos on the airwaves and at the news sellers, and turmoil within the CPA's Iraqi Media Network, there were some positive signs. There appeared to be some recognition that expertise in media development and policy could usefully be drawn from professionals with experience in other conflict areas. Despite the overriding obstacles, efforts by the IMN crew were being made to improve and expand the output, and as with the newspapers, gradual improvements could be noted.

While the explosion of Iraqi media showed no sign of slowing, the BBC World Service Trust developed plans for launching a new radio station in Basra, and donors began to express interest in supporting training and other development projects on the ground. Some of the organisations represented on this mission launched their own training efforts, and were developing other projects to support programming, policy debate and the establishment of independent Iraqi media institutions. These included plans for further assessment, especially into training needs, research into the developing market and monitoring of media content. Discussions have also continued towards a joint conference in Baghdad to help bridge the gap between the international debate over Iraqi media policy and Iraqi media professionals themselves. (For further information, contact the organisations involved in this assessment.)

Meantime, the US non-profit agency Internews, with funding from the US Agency for International Development and the Greek government, has completed a detailed media policy and law project, and produced extended draft legislation and other proposals for the authorities.

The document, produced by a small working group of international, Arab and exile Iraqi media experts, provides policy recommendations for legal and regulatory measures. These include an official revocation of all Ba'athist media laws and the adoption of an interim media law providing for a press and broadcast council, an interim media commission, an independent broadcast authority, a media appeals board, and freedom of information, and the adoption of a clear public service broadcast policy.

Concluded at a conference in Athens, with a wide number of international, Arabic and Iraqi experts and media professionals, the recommendations, if adopted, would provide an important framework for forging democratic media in Iraq. But its compilation has so far suffered from a lack of information from inside Iraq on the current situation there; some of its proposals had already been superseded by events by the time they were published. The document has yet to be debated among the Iraqi population and media community, but its conclusions – a standard international framework with lessons drawn from other conflict areas – are available in Arabic. IMN director Reilly attended the conference and agreed to take it back to the IMN for consideration, but then departed the project.

In the last days of May, CPA senior administrator L. Paul Bremer drafted and released strict new rules on the operation of the media. All Iraqi media must now be registered. Licences will be revoked and equipment confiscated from media sources that break the rules. Individual offenders "may be detained, arrested, prosecuted and, if convicted, sentenced by relevant authorities to up to one year in prison and a \$1,000 fine". Appeal is to Bremer only, and his decision is final.

His nine point list of “prohibited activities” include incitement to racial, ethnic or religious hatred, advocating support for the banned Ba'ath Party, and publishing material that “is patently false and is calculated to provoke opposition to the CPA or undermine legitimate processes towards self-government”. Officials say the order is intended to stop “hate speech” – the kind of language they say could trigger violence between Iraqis and westerners, or Sunni and Shi'a or Arab and Kurd. Appropriately used in fragile circumstances, such mechanisms could be a necessary tool of last resort. But ham-fisted efforts to impose a pro-western view would only backfire.

So major challenges remain, from within Washington as well as Iraq itself.

Baghdad, London, Copenhagen
May-June 2003