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October, 2004

A Project of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy
Middle East Media Project

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October 27, 2003 was the first day of Ramadan. It was also my first day at a new job as a contractor with the Coalition Provisional Authority, the American-led administration in Occupied Iraq. I had been hired to oversee the news department at Iraqi television.

I had been at the station barely an hour when news of a major attack broke: at 8:30am a car bomb had leveled the Red Cross headquarters. The blast was enormous, and was heard across half the city. When the pictures began to come in soon afterwards they were horrific. The death toll began to mount. Then came word of more explosions: car bombs destroying three Iraqi police stations. A fourth police station was targeted but the bomber was intercepted in route.

At times like this the atmosphere in the newsroom at CNN, the BBC or even a local television station is focused, if somewhat chaotic. Most news operations have a plan for dealing with big, breaking stories. Things in the newsroom move quickly, and they can get very stressful, but things do happen. Also, this was hardly the first time an atrocity like this had taken place. After six months of violence-wracked occupation it was reasonable to assume the staff of Iraqi television was fairly practiced at covering these sort of things. As it turned out, they were not. My new staff did not swing into action. Neither did they freeze up. They really did not do much of anything, which, in the news business, is worse than freezing up. Having been informed that the bombings were a big breaking story, people simply waited to be told what to do.

By the end of the day the death toll stood at 36 with more than 200 injured. In addition to the bombings at the Red Cross and the three police stations one of Baghdad's deputy mayors had been assassinated. "We are a long, long way from having a system to cope with this sort of thing," I wrote in my journal that night. "The potential is there, but it's going to take quite some time." It had been a jarring introduction to a basic fact of media life in Iraq: we were starting pretty much from scratch.

Rebuilding Iraq's media culture from the ground up has been a stated priority of the US administration in Baghdad almost since the day the occupation began. Moreover it touched on two of the acid tests of public diplomacy during the formal period of US occupation: could the Pentagon run a radio and television service that was professional and independent enough to achieve a level of credibility and trust with the Iraqi public? And could the coalition authorities, civilian and military alike, use the Arab media – state owned and private media in Iraq itself and the wider community of Arabic-language newspapers, radio and television stations – in an effective way, getting their views across to ordinary Iraqis and to the wider Arabic public?

Nearly 18 months after the entry of American forces into Baghdad the first question remains open, while the Pentagon has shown the answer to the second is a resounding 'no', despite high hopes, good intentions and the expenditure of a great deal of money.

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It is important to begin by understanding the nature of the television operation that existed under the American occupation. Coalition forces inherited control of Iraq's state-run media, centered on the Ministry of Information.

Under Saddam the ministry's television and radio broadcasts originated from studios near the Tigris River, a complex that was an early target of coalition bombing when the Iraq war began in March 2003. With the old studios in rubble the US resumed Iraqi radio broadcasts, initially, from a trailer operating inside a US military installation. By mid-summer 2003 the television station was back on the air, and both radio and television were operating from studios at the Baghdad convention center inside the Green Zone, the heavily fortified compound from which the coalition ran Iraq (and from which Iraq's nominally sovereign government now operates).

The convention center studios were originally designed as remote facilities for live coverage of events in the center itself. They were never intended as the permanent home of a network. The result was a cramped, and in some ways jury-rigged, operation strung along a corridor on the building's top floor. It was serviceable at best, and because the plan was to build new studios elsewhere little effort was made to make the convention center facility anything but functional.

Al-Iraqiyah, as the network is officially known, produced at that time a single 30 minute evening newscast along with four daytime bulletins of five minutes each. The signal went out through a small tower near the site of the old Information Ministry. The tower provided spotty signal coverage around Baghdad, a city of five million. A larger, far more powerful, transmission tower dominates the Baghdad skyline but looters had rendered it unusable. It was never put back into service because the tower sits flush with a main road and the station's security consultants judged it impossible to defend.

The Iraqi staff of the television station were a mixture of hold-overs from the Saddam era and new hires. Virtually all of the technical staff occupied the same jobs under the old regime as had the anchors. About half of the reporters and producers were new to broadcasting, in many cases young people straight out of university. The remainder had worked in low-level positions at the old state-run television network or at Shabab TV, a station run by Saddam's son Uday.

Exactly who was watching Al-Iraqiyah was difficult to measure. A CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll in late March and early April 2004 found that 95% of Iraqis had a working television set in their home.[i] A network of 18 repeater stations gave Al-Iraqiyah's signal coverage of most of the country's populated areas, but solid viewership data was much more difficult to come by. In homes equipped with satellite dishes Al-Iraqiyah's offerings had to compete with the established Arabic-language news channels, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, as well as with an Iranian-run news station broadcasting in Arabic from just across the border. These offered a more timely and professional looking news product and had the added virtue of novelty (satellite dishes had been banned under the old regime). There is no reliable information on how widespread satellite dishes are in Iraq, though it is clear the established Arabic-language news channels enjoy a wide following. A drive through the country readily indicates, however, that dish penetration is far higher in major urban centers than it is in rural areas.

By most accounts Al-Iraqiyah (then known as IMN) was slow off the mark during the first months of the Coalition occupation. Not only was there just a single daily newscast, but when I arrived in late October I was told the program had been broadcast live each night for just ten days (prior to that it was taped mid-afternoon). Reporters, I

also discovered, were accustomed to taking two to three days to prepare the sort of spot news reports that should have taken a few hours to put together.

The result was a slow and ponderous newscast that looked very much like what Iraqi television had aired under Saddam. In terms of both timeliness and general professionalism it could not compete with the coverage available from Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya.

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This was the situation out of which my colleagues and I were expected to bring some order. The inactivity of the news staff that first day highlighted the gulf in culture we would have to bridge.

The Iraqis wanted to wait to report the blasts until there was 'official confirmation' (presumably from CPA). My senior colleague, Ted Iliff (a former senior executive at CNN and Radio Free Europe), insisted that wire reports, news agency pictures of the carnage and the fact that we had sent a correspondent to the scene were more than enough. The Iraqis wanted the correspondent to put together a piece for the evening news. Ted insisted we interrupt programming to tell the story. When we did, eventually, do a live bulletin with an anchor and the correspondent who had been at the scene both stopped talking as soon as the pictures were put on screen. The idea of describing the video – a basic concept in western TV news – was alien to them.

These were the sort of problems we were supposed to overcome. Our employer was Science Applications International Corporation of San Diego, a defense contractor with a $100 million contract to rebuild and run Iraq's state-owned radio and television networks. Our seven-person team of international consultants represented SAIC's third attempt to find the right group to get Iraqi TV back on its feet.

Our brief, in the short term, was to turn Al-Iraqiyah into an independent news and public affairs voice, one that would earn credibility with its Iraqi viewers. The long-term plans were far more ambitious. These included opening news bureaus in other parts of the country and putting a 24-hour satellite news channel on the air by the end of 2005. These proposals, it should be noted were not SAIC's ideas. They were stipulations of the contract the US Department of Defense granted SAIC shortly before the war.

During the four months I spent at the station the Coalition authorities never tried to interfere in the daily newscast in an inappropriate way, though their approach to some of our longer form programming was open to question. In terms of daily news it would, if anything, have been nice to have had more contact with the coalition's press people, rather than less. It quickly became apparent in our dealings with the CPA press office that Arab media, Iraqi media included, were a low priority for the Americans.

The occupation of Iraq presented one of the great public diplomacy challenges of the modern era. Yet, instead of making a concerted effort to 'sell' the US presence in Iraq first to the Iraqis themselves and, beyond that, to the broader Arab world CPA's media office was staffed almost entirely by politically-connected press officers dispatched from Washington. The US and UK foreign services each provided a single Arabic-speaking diplomat to the press office (which employed about 10 full-time press officers). These were later supplemented by the addition of an Egyptian-American press officer.

Neither of the coalition's two main spokesmen, Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt and Dan Senor, spoke any Arabic. At first I wondered why CPA had not tried to find an Arabic-speaking officer and an Iraqi-American civilian to fill these roles. Clearly there were people available who would have fit that bill, so why give the job to an artillery officer with no previous public relations experience, and a Republican loyalist (Senor was a former deputy to Ari Fleischer, George W. Bush's first press secretary)? After a couple of briefings the answer was obvious: CPA did not much care what the Arab Press thought. It had long since written off major players like Al-Jazeera as irredeemably hostile, and it appeared not to regard the local Iraqi media as a high priority. The daily briefings were designed with the Western – especially the US – press in mind, because that was the only audience CPA and the White House really cared about.

The press office, for example, consistently refused to make either Kimmitt or Senor available for unilateral interviews with Al-Iraqiyah, though both regularly did unilateral interviews with all of the American networks. When I returned to Baghdad in the spring of 2004 as a producer for Fox News I discovered that Kimmitt regularly phoned Fox directly to offer comments on breaking news.[ii]

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While CPA generally remained professional in its dealings with the day-to-day news operation at Al-Iraqiyah, it did push the bounds of propriety with regard to two of our talk shows, “Meet the Press” and “Steps”.

“Meet the Press” was originally conceived as a replacement for weekly television addresses by Ambassador Paul Bremer, the US administrator in Iraq. Bremer began making these speeches shortly after he took charge of Occupied Iraq in May 2003. The speeches were about five minutes long, and were clearly modeled on the weekly radio addresses US presidents have made since the Reagan administration. Bremer’s speech was taped each Thursday by an Al-Iraqiyah producer and cameraman. During the day Friday, an Arabic translation was laid over Bremer’s voice. The final tape aired on Al-Iraqiyah Friday evening.

In mid-November we were told CPA wanted to replace the speeches with a weekly interview show. Bremer would come to our studios and spend half an hour answering questions posed by Iraqi journalists. The symbolism of this move was important. Bremer was Iraq’s de facto head of state. For the ruler of an Arab country, even an occupied one, to submit to unscripted questioning by local journalists and to do so at the television studio, rather than making the journalists come pay court upon him, was unheard-of. Few images could more clearly illustrate how things in Iraq were changing.

In reality it never worked out that way. “Meet the Press” lasted a mere five weeks (for two of which Bremer was away, leaving members of the US-appointed Governing Council to fill in for him). Its short, unhappy history said a lot about what was wrong with CPA, and raised questions about Iraqi TV’s independence.

First there was the issue of the show’s panelists. The ambassador’s staff wanted to pick the questioners while Al-Iraqiyah’s management felt it would be more appropriate for us, as an independent media organization, to do so. After some discussion a system emerged in which the general manager of Iraqi Radio & Television (an Iraqi-American woman working for SAIC) suggested names, but Bremer’s staff retained the final say over who did or did not appear on the show.

Then there was the question of the translation. Bremer does not speak Arabic and most Iraqi journalists do not speak English. Bremer would arrive at our studio

accompanied by a State Department translator who would interpret both the Iraqis' questions and Bremer's answers. Our equipment recorded the voices of both the translator and the participants, but Bremer and his staff insisted we have one of our own translators re-translate the entire broadcast, write out that translation and send it over to them to be verified on Friday morning. The voice-over was then to be re-recorded and laid back on top of the show's original audio.

This was not only hugely time-consuming, it was editorially disingenuous. Officially we had to do this to ensure the translation appearing on the show was as accurate as possible. An interview show, however, is supposed to be a spontaneous exchange between the interviewers and the subject. There may have been subtle inadequacies in the State Department translator's work, but those were what both Bremer and the Iraqi journalists heard and reacted to as the interview was taking place. 'Cleaning things up' altered that dynamic. It meant we lied when telling viewers they were seeing a spontaneous exchange between Bremer and the journalists.

Not that there was much real exchange. During the first taping the two journalists questioning Bremer were so terrified to be in his presence that the general manager had to stand just out of camera range and repeatedly prompt the 'panelists' (who preceded each question with gushing praise for the ambassador) to keep going. When Bremer responded with one upbeat, canned answer after another there was no attempt to challenge his assertions, let alone ask follow-ups. Meanwhile, in the control room, two of Bremer's press aides and a representative from the White House looked increasingly annoyed as the taping went on.[iii] Bremer's aides wanted the focus to be on reconstruction, and they made it clear they thought we at the station knew that. The general manager, however, had told the panelists to ask about whatever they thought was on Iraqis' minds, and they accordingly asked question after question about the security situation in the country as then ambassador's aides mumbled "that's not what this is supposed to be about."

For all the bad feeling at the end of the first taping the show clearly had promise. Given a couple of weeks I figured we would be able to smooth out the rough edges. The problem seemed to be that CPA had reached the same conclusion, but using a radically different definition of 'rough edges'.

The biggest sticking point was the panel. Al-Iraqiyah's general manager, Shameem Rassam, wanted more leeway to pick the questioners in hopes of getting more active and aggressive reporters onto the show. Bremer's staff wanted to be sure only 'pro-Coalition' journalists appeared, and demanded greater control with each passing week.

When Bremer returned after a two week break over Christmas and New Year's things quickly spiraled downwards. On one day's notice CPA informed us that the show's format was being changed. Bremer would no longer come to the studio. We now had to come to the palace. The panel of journalists would now be 12 people, not two, and CPA would pick all of them without our input.

For many weeks afterwards I wondered whose idea this was. Was Bremer himself dissatisfied with the way the program worked? Were his security people trying to cut out what they saw as an unnecessary trip (even moving Bremer around the Green Zone was a massive operation)? Were the staffers just being officious?

Whatever the reason, the change was a terrible idea on every level. The symbolism of Bremer, the leader, coming *to* the media now vanished. That, however, was soon the least of our problems.

The consultant in charge of technical arrangements for the show took one look at the room where Meet the Press would now be taped and was appalled. The ceiling was too low to light it properly, the shape of the room made shooting with the single camera CPA would allow nearly impossible, and the room's acoustics virtually guaranteed that much of the half hour would be inaudible. All this was explained to Bremer's staff. They did not care. This was the way they wanted it done. It was not negotiable.

Shameem, however, had one more bombshell to drop: were Bremer's staff aware, she asked, that they had chosen the same palace conference room where Saddam held his carefully stage-managed 'news conferences' with Iraqi journalists? Rather than admit a massive blunder Bremer's people made one small change: the ambassador, they decided, would sit in the middle of one of the long sides of the table, rather than at its head.

Sure enough, the visuals were terrible and the audio incomprehensible. The translators were nearly driven crazy trying to decode the exchanges Thursday night.

Perhaps, one of my colleagues remarked, when Bremer's staff saw how awful the resulting half hour was they would make some changes. They did: they cancelled the show.

The launch of "Steps", however, almost made "Meet the Press" seem bold. The purpose of "Steps" was to teach Iraqis about democracy. The concept was to create a conversation in a coffee shop, a comfortable, familiar setting for viewers. Three or four people – CPA or Iraqi government officials, Iraqi intellectuals, journalists – would be seen drinking coffee and chatting about what democracy means, and what it requires of a free people: the need to participate in open debate over political issues, to approach politics in a spirit of healthy competition but without resort to violence and intimidation, to accept defeat in a fair election and then fill the role of loyal opposition rather than challenging the vote or taking up arms.

As had been the case with Meet the Press, CPA insisted on controlling who went on the show. They also wanted a firm idea what was going to be said beforehand. The show was supposed to be a free-flowing discussion, but Bremer's media staff wanted to be sure everything said meshed with their own agenda.

The idea of setting the conversation in a coffee house was a good one. Coffee houses are a time-honored Middle Eastern institution, a place where people (men, mainly) meet to do everything from plotting revolution to discussing the evening's soccer scores. Ideally we would have found a real coffee house in a safe-ish neighborhood of Baghdad[iv], paid the owner a few hundred dollars and taken it over for an afternoon. The security people rejected that idea out of hand. Instead, the initial installment of Steps was filmed in the coffee shop of the Al-Rasheed Hotel (which is inside the Green Zone), a setting light-years removed from the places actual Iraqis gather to drink coffee and tea. The Al-Rasheed, however, posed a number of TV-related problems: the ceiling was too low for it to be lit properly, the tables have built-in lamps that make for awkward camera angles, and the hotel demanded a ridiculous amount of money for three hours use of part of their (virtually empty) coffee shop. Most importantly, however, the Al-Rasheed sent the wrong visual message: democracy, it implied, was something foreign, something imported either by Americans or by the kind of westernized exiles who hung around in places like the Al-Rasheed.

Our solution made a bad situation worse. Subsequent episodes were taped in a *faux* coffee shop we put together in an unused room in the convention center. We did not even attempt to make this look traditional: it was a fake international hotel coffee shop. The final absurdity was the weekly ritual of the show's producer turning up in my office to borrow the coffee-maker. In our fake coffee shop our panel drank American-style filter coffee from large American-style cups rather than thick, sweet Arab coffee in its distinctive small cups. How could anyone look at this and not see it as just another example of the Americans heavy-handedly forcing a message down Iraqis' throats? We could not get the coffee house right. We could not even get the coffee right. It looked ridiculous. It was very CPA.

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Eight months after SAIC's (and my own) departure where does this leave Al-Iraqiyah and the broader project of rebuilding Iraq's media culture from the ground up?

There can be little doubt that Al-Iraqiyah has found a niche in the local media landscape. A February 2004 survey by Oxford Research International found that 50% of Iraqis polled expressed confidence in the network, an 11 point increase on a poll taken three months earlier.[v]

At the same time, however, the station has been losing many of its best staff. Though CPA dissolved the Ministry of Information and declared Al-Iraqiyah to be part of a new, independent public service broadcasting authority (modeled on the BBC and National Public Radio) it continued to insist that Al-Iraqiyah's journalists be paid third-world public sector salaries. In a market where western news bureaus will pay an Iraqi cameraman $800 a month and private television stations are offering good reporters $1000, Al-Iraqiyah's insistence that $120 was a decent monthly salary was bound to catch up with the network eventually.

With the formal transfer of sovereignty to an Iraqi interim government Al-Iraqiyah staff say there have been more frequent attempts to influence the content of the station's news and public affairs programs.

In the months since SAIC left there have been great strides in the station's infrastructure. The new contractor, Harris Corp. of Florida, sub-contracted the network's

editorial operations to Beirut-based LBC television. LBC has rotated advisors through the station at regular intervals, but has also invested significant sums in building new studio facilities. Some of the more ambitious goals, such as a 24 hour news channel, appear to have been abandoned, but news programming has expanded (principally by lengthening the main evening bulletin to 60 minutes from 30).

The long term prognosis remains uncertain. If something like the Red Cross bombing happened today (and, unfortunately, atrocities approaching that scale now happen in Baghdad about once a week), would the staff at Al-Iraqiyah react any differently than they did a year ago? Some would and some would not. Like any media organization it has its stars and its deadwood, its fast learners and its laggards. While Al-Iraqiyah has often been able to cover events other media shied away from, former colleagues tell me they have been as affected as everyone else in Baghdad's journalistic community by the rising violence, some of it specifically targeting the media. Whether the new government will allow the station to retain its independence is also an open question. Like so many other institutions in that troubled country, its future is, at best, cloudy.

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About the Middle East Media Project: The USC Center on Public Diplomacy Middle East Media Project is funded by a grant from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy. The project examines core issues at the intersection of media and public diplomacy in the Middle East. It aims to answer the following questions: How do the Arab and western media interact and perceive each other? How are U.S. foreign policy goals promoted to and perceived by people in the Middle East? And most importantly, what sort of new initiatives could be effective in deepening mutual understanding between the Arab and western worlds?

Notes

[i] "Liberated and Occupied Iraq: New Beginnings and Challenges for Press Freedom", special report from Freedom House, Washington DC, August 2004, p. 5.

[ii] To his credit Charles Heatley, Senor's opposite number from the British foreign office, did occasionally come to our studio to speak on-camera. This was particularly valuable since Heatley, unlike Senor, spoke Arabic.

[iii] The White House representative was Scott Sforza, a former ABC News producer who now works as one of President Bush's main image-makers. He is generally credited with the arrangements for the President's May 2003 visit to the USS Abraham Lincoln to declare the end of major combat operations in Iraq. See "Keepers of Bush Image Lift Stagecraft to New Heights", by Elisabeth Bumiller, *New York Times*, 16 May 2003.

[iv] As I write this in October 2004 the idea of a "safe-ish" Baghdad neighborhood may sound crazy, but 10 months ago such things did exist.

[v] "Liberated and Occupied Iraq", op. cit. pp. 5-6.