

Broadcasting the Day After

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Radical reform of the media is essential for Iraqi democracy.

More than three decades of Ba'athist restrictions on free speech and the free flow of information have had devastating effects on the minds and perceptions of Iraqis in the country. Generations of Iraqis have grown up with a distorted world view and an extremely partial understanding of their own history and socio-political environment. Redressing this situation will require many years of concerted effort at all levels, from the radical overhaul of the educational curriculum to providing free and unhindered access to information and knowledge.

Media - print, audio-visual and electronic - will have a pivotal role to play in this process. It could well be argued that at least in the initial period after Saddam Hussein's removal, media will assume a principal function in influencing the thought processes of the people in Iraq.

As military confrontation with Saddam has commenced, it is high time seriously to consider what will be said on Iraqi radio and what images will be shown on Iraqi television the day Baghdad is liberated and beyond.

At the outset, the US should empower Iraqi democrats by providing them with a forum and the opportunity to address and influence their people. This would be more credible than packaging and transmitting an American voice with an Iraqi accent.

It is essential, therefore, that Iraqis are not only put in charge, but are also perceived to be so. In the world of media, perception is paramount - particularly in a region riddled with conspiracy theories, as in the Middle East.

Concomitantly, it is critical that the future Iraqi state media does not become the unique purview of any single political organisation, grouping or - even- a freely elected government. It has to provide a fair, impartial forum to all and cater for as wide a range of tastes as possible. It has to rise above the inter-Iraqi political fray.

Currently, the over-staffed Ministry of Information, which has an intimate association with the notorious security services, the Mukhabarat, controls all of Iraq's media and publishing operations. Odey, Saddam's son, is the head of the Journalists Union and has media outlets of his own.

Following the Soviet model, a substantial number of "correspondents" and other staff of the Iraqi News Agency and state television and radio are either Mukabarat operatives or report to it in one form or another.

This, combined with chronic bureaucratic inefficiency and professional ineptitude, render a far-reaching restructuring of the Iraqi state's media an urgent imperative after liberation. This should entail the wholesale change of senior, and, perhaps to a lesser degree, middle managements as well as all those associated with the Mukhabarat. This can be done in the context of a comprehensive plan that needs to mature in the first few months after liberation.

There is also a powerful case that, at some stage during Iraq's transition to democracy, the Ministry of Information be abolished and replaced with an independent authority to oversee the Iraqi state media and

publishing activities. A creative and imaginative adoption of a BBC or similar model comes to mind. Freeing media from the grips of the state and establishing it as a public service is a notion that is as foreign as the separation of state and religion is in the Muslim world. But that is no reason to shirk from it.

In all events, state monopoly over the media must be brought to an end within the framework of new regulatory measures that should be introduced in due course. It is to be expected that media outlets will proliferate during the transitional period since every political organisation will try to set up its own propaganda tools - as is currently the case in the Kurdish regions outside Saddam's control. However, the vision of a non-partisan state or public media at the service of all Iraqis, irrespective of their creed, should be zealously maintained. Therein lies one of the major challenges confronting us all.

Radical reform is the condition sine qua non for establishing a free and vibrant Iraqi media unencumbered by remnants of Ba'athist ideology and practices. Forming a new generation of journalists and other media professionals is part and parcel of such reforms. This cannot be accomplished overnight and may take several years. But appropriate moves should be taken as soon as feasible. Foremost amongst these is a new curriculum for the schools of journalism at Iraqi universities. The new teaching should not only include modern reporting techniques and multi-media programmes, but also compulsory courses in human rights and civil liberties. To this end, links and exchange programmes should be created between the schools and their American and European counterparts and media networks.

Despite Saddam's obsession with acquiring the latest weapons technology, Iraq is light years away from the digital age. All dictators fear modern communications technology because it facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and interaction with the outside world. Post-Saddam Iraq will need to make huge investments in its telecommunications systems if it is to catch up with the digitally driven, knowledge-based global society. The same applies to media technology.

Like all issues relating to post-Saddam Iraq, the stakes are very high. If the right approach is adopted, the future Iraqi media has the potential of becoming a beacon for the media throughout the region and the Muslim world at large. It could turn into a potent tool in the fight against religious fascism and a powerful advocate of freedom and democracy.

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