Chaos in the Iraqi Media

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The United States risks losing a major opportunity to forge an open media in the Middle East.

Efforts by the US-led authority in Iraq to establish responsible media are in crisis, with bitter inter-agency rivalry, senior staff changes and poor planning undermining early efforts to launch programming and lay out a framework for media development.

The stakes are high. A prerequisite for any kind of emerging democracy is a professional and trusted media, to convey facts, support responsible debate and represent the diversity of communities and views within Iraq. But the absence of a reliable Iraqi media exacerbates the frustration, and growing anger, felt because of the lack of an Iraqi authority and basic security and services. Powerless and uncertain, Iraqis need a voice.

There has been a dramatic post-war boom in local media, with the launch of up to 150 newspapers and many radio stations. Indeed, there is a bewildering - exciting - diversity of new voices for a changed Iraq emerging from decades of dictatorship. But the majority are highly partisan media established by rival political interests jockeying for position, and could be destabilising in a fragile post-conflict environment. Many are directly produced by political parties, or by former senior Ba'athists or other figures with a political, rather than a journalistic, orientation. Informed media with balanced reporting is largely absent.

These are among the conclusions of an independent needs assessment of the media in Iraq, coordinated by the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, in association with the publication Index on Censorship and the media development group Baltic Media Centre, with project support from International Media Support, Denmark. (See http://www.iwpr.net/pdf/Iraq_Media_Assessment_Report.pdf)

The central problem is a conceptual one: the US administration has not firmly separated its policies for media from its agenda for public diplomacy (otherwise known among hacks as spin).

Both are important objectives - the occupying authority has a responsibility to communicate with the population to allay fears, provide basic information and explain the purpose and potential of its intervention. But independent and reliable reporting is entirely different and must be structurally separate, which is not the case in Baghdad.

In particular, the Iraqi Media Network, the authority media team, has been tasked both with broadcasting and with regulatory authority, with producing media and with providing information for the Coalition Provisional Authority.

Compounding the problem, bitter rivalry between the US State Department and Department of Defence have led to an absence of strategy, bad hiring practises and purchasing, and debilitating internal dispute. TV programming, in particular, has been poor. As a result, the IMN television news neither provides clear and basic information to the population, nor serves as the flagship fresh face of a new and democratic Iraq.

The assessment report identifies a broad range of recommendations for contributing to a truly independent media culture. These include the need for:

* A transparent media policy. This must include consultation on media laws and regulation with Iraqi media

professionals, and should draw on international expertise.

* The dismantling of the Iraqi Media Network. IMN should be terminated and its separate competencies for media regulation and media production located in distinct independent bodies, including a public broadcasting corporation and a media commission.

* Media professionalisation. Efforts to help professionalise Iraqi journalism should include training and media monitoring and the formation of independent Iraqi professional associations and media institutions.

* Accessible official information: The CPA must speak to the Iraqi press in Arabic and Kurdish and must establish contact points throughout the country outside militarily protected former regime presidential palaces.

* 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.

The difficulties facing Iraq are extreme: a civil society destroyed, an economy in ruins, communications non-existent, continuing uncertainty and violence. It will not be easy to overcome years of censorship and brutal repression of dissent.

Yet Iraqis are confronting this huge challenge with considerable energy and initiative. The population has a whole, highly educated, has shown an enduring desire, even through the stultifying decades of Ba'athist rule, to be informed. The potential for a responsible press, and sophisticated audience, is evident - a potential revolution in open media for the regional as whole.

This only makes the loss of such an opportunity all the more disappointing. The information chaos in Iraqi undermines both Iraq's interests, and America's, and urgent steps to chart a fresh course for a clear new democratic media voice in the region must not be missed.

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