

Comment: Let's Support Al-Iraqiya

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It's high time to let Iraqis deliver news and commentary about their own country.

Like many Iraqis, I get angry while watching programmes on certain Arab satellite television stations. They clearly alter their news broadcasts to meet the preconceptions of audiences in other Arab countries.

They want the American project here to fail, stopping the development of a new Iraq, no matter how much instability and bloodshed we Iraqis must suffer. If a bomb blows up in a school, they'll go so far as to suggest that the Americans were perhaps responsible - even if there's no evidence whatsoever to support such a claim.

These Arab TV broadcasters use Egyptian, Lebanese and other non-Iraqi commentators to tell us what's happening in our own country. They use words like "collaborator" to refer to Iraqis who work with the Coalition and "resistance" to identify people who we believe to be more like saboteurs.

We need news with an Iraqi perspective - both for us at home, as well as to communicate our point of view to others in the Arab world and beyond. There is an Iraqi terrestrial station called al-Iraqiya, which is run by the Iraqi Media Network, or IMN. I mainly watch al-Iraqiya when my satellite dish isn't working. Although a poll of urban Iraqis conducted in September by the US State Department says that some 36 per cent get most of their news from al-Iraqiya, that figure falls to only 12 per cent among people with satellite access.

However obnoxious their coverage may seem to many viewers, channels like al-Jazeera or al-Arabiya are at least on top of the news, and they broadcast dramatic footage from the scene of events. Al-Iraqiya is good for press conferences, or an important football game with an Iraqi team, or for afternoon children's shows, but not much else.

I would not want to point an accusing finger at the al-Iraqiya staff. The station is stuffed into the back of a maze of corridors on the fourth floor and the basement of the Baghdad Conference Centre. That's no place for a TV station, but the facilities and studios of the former Iraqi television were looted after the fall of the old regime. As of October, al-Iraqiya did not possess a single satellite-transmission vehicle, needed for on-the-spot broadcasts. Requests from staff to purchase a 500 US dollar satellite dish to download the wire feed, an essential tool to follow the news, were turned down. Consequently, there's no way anyone can reasonably expect al-Iraqiya to compete with al-Arabiya or al-Jazeera in broadcasting news of the hour.

There's also the question of talent. Al-Iraqiya employees are considered Iraqi civil servants, and are paid Iraqi civil servants' wages averaging around 120 dollars per month. So it's no wonder experienced Iraqi broadcast journalists like Haydar Abdel Haq, Asil Sami, and Sabah Nahi have chosen to work instead for Arab stations that pay competitive wages.

According to a report by Index on Censorship, journalists have also seen their editorial freedom impinged upon - members of IMN's staff were asked to drop Quranic readings as well as interviews with ordinary people in the street, which were deemed too critical of Coalition policy. Some experienced Iraqi journalists who have given the station a chance, like Al-Iraqiya's former news director Ahmed al-Rikaby, ultimately left the station, claiming it had insufficient funding and a lack of editorial independence.

The problems with equipment and staff were not really due to a lack of funds. To manage the company, US firm SAIC - a defense contractor with little media experience - received a budget reported to be 40 million dollars. However, much of this funding has gone to pay foreign consultants, whose time is reportedly billed at more than 200 dollars per hour. Apart from being an uneconomical way of spending the company's

funds, such rates of payment are demoralising to the hugely underpaid Iraqi staff.

Thanks to much-deserved criticism of SAIC's management, the Pentagon has not renewed the company's contract with IMN. Instead, the broadcast contract has gone to a partnership of the US-based Harris Corporation and Lebanon's LBC, while IMN's newspapers will be published by Al-Fawares, a Kuwaiti company with significant Iraqi ownership. IMN management has announced it has devised a new plan to bring al-Iraqiya's news broadcasts up to an international standard. I hope part of that plan will see the inclusion of Iraqi journalists who have appropriate international experience in broadcasting. I also hope the plan will include the financial resources and editorial independence needed to turn al-Iraqiya into a real success story.

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