

Journalists Seen as Enemies

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Ministries move beyond press releases to provide the media with tailor-made stories - but it is still propaganda.

In December, people in Iraq did not receive their monthly ration of flour, and everyone was unhappy. So this month the Ministry of Commerce wanted to please the public, and decided to do so through the media.

The ministry provided reporters with a pre-written, complete article, rather than just a press release. The idea was that reporters would just add their by-line and publish it as if it was their own.

We never publish pre-written stories. But in this case, the article was announcing an increase in the flour ration. That would certainly make people happy, and as the editor of al-Moutamar, I thought it was an important issue.

But I wanted to know two things. First, I wanted a proper source, someone with authority in the ministry who would put their name to the announcement. There was no source in the story they provided.

I also wanted to know by how much the ration was going to increase, how much it was going to cost, and whether the ministry's budget could afford it. None of this information was provided in the article.

No one at the ministry would respond to our inquiries. It turns out the story was just propaganda. There wasn't any real information there to work with, so we spiked it.

In Iraq, this kind of thing happens all the time. As a rule, officials have no understanding of the role of the press and treat journalists as the enemy.

But at least at national level, ministers and senior officials sometimes speak to the press, so you can get some information.

At the local level, the situation is much more difficult. When local government officials talk to the press, they always demand that you publish any information they give you exactly as they provided it - using the same order, format and context.

If you do not do this, you will be banned from entering the particular office concerned, or even from the entire building. In effect, you will be boycotted.

Should you decide to publish nothing at all, officials will think that you are plotting against them and are conspiring with their enemies.

Frequently, local officials use the media as a vehicle to promote their own position. They try to impose news of their activities on reporters, and tell them exactly what to write. But most of the time, the

information they provide is untrue. This happens all over the country, in every governorate.

Before elections or ahead of a big meeting, officials will summon journalists to a press conference to give them their views. However, certain journalists will be singled out for special treatment - they will be given gifts, including even laptops, as long as they write what officials want. Sometimes officials offer more direct bribes.

Al-Moutamer is in a good position because we have commercial revenue, and officials need us more than we need them. I teach my reporters how to establish direct relationships with a number of sources within each institution. They play these sources against each in order to get as much information as possible, and try to reach the truth that way.

Spokesmen get very angry if we go around them and speak directly to people inside the official agencies. But if our reporters get harassed, I never call up and beg officials to treat them nicely. Instead, we just say OK - and we boycott those officials in return. In extreme cases, I may speak to the editors of other papers, and we can coordinate our actions.

If officials don't want us to cover their news, it's their loss.

On many occasions, reporters stumble across dangerous information, for example in corruption cases. We do receive physical threats, but even when we don't, we still have to apply a degree of self-censorship, watering down the full extent of what we know in order to protect our journalists.

My newspaper was the first to publish documents concerning corruption in the defence and electricity ministries two years ago.

Shortly afterwards, I received threatening phone calls from anonymous callers. "The information you are publishing is inaccurate and it will create a lot of trouble for you if you don't stop," they told us.

I found a way to respond to this. "Fine, I agree," I would say to them. "I'll take your word for it. Just send us the correct information and we will print a correction." But they never sent anything.

The perspectives of officials, especially at local level, haven't really changed since Saddam's time.

What has changed is that journalists now have the freedom to write what they want. The minister hasn't changed, but the journalist has. That is the key. If I am not afraid of an official even when he threatens me, then I can write about him freely.

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