

# Perspectives

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## Iraqi Media: Freedom or Chaos

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The ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003 ushered in a new era for the Iraqi media landscape. It transformed from a few state-run ventures, propagating the government line, to a free press representing a diversity of actors, often with conflicting agendas, views, and affiliations. It has not been a painless transformation. While Iraqi media has enjoyed its fair share of successes, it has been hindered by violence, sectarianism, and the challenges of forging a public sphere that previously did not exist. As Iraq transitions away from an absolute dictatorship to the formative stages of a functioning democracy, it is important to understand the media's role in this transition.

Within a brief period of time following the fall of Saddam, hundreds of new independent Iraqi-owned newspapers, radio stations, and television channels emerged. By mid-2003 there were over 200 newspapers and close to 17 Iraqi-owned television stations (1).

The people of Iraq, who had for so long languished under strict governmental controls, were thirsty for unadulterated news and fed this media boom. Additionally, structural changes bolstered this development: the establishment of the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission and the constitutional ratification of a right to free expression.

From July 2003 to April 2004 I served as Chairman of the Media Committee in Iraq's Governing Council (GC). In this capacity I had the privilege to preside over the establishment of the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission: an independent body designed to oversee the regulation and development of Iraqi media in accordance with the tenets of a free press.

I was also deeply involved, along with all other members of the GC, in negotiating and finally producing Iraq's transitional constitution known as the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), which contained a comprehensive bill of rights. The right to free speech became a part of Iraq's constitution and was enshrined in Iraq's permanent constitution.

These developments marked a fundamental change in the way Iraqis related to the media and to their leaders. Journalists have adapted to this freer media environment surprisingly well and operate independently of the government.

Iraq's media sector is now free, diverse, and open. It represents a multitude of voices and opinions, some sup-

portive of the government, others not. For example, the Iraqi Media Network, the government's media outlet, now sponsors several channels in Iraq including the television station Al-Iraqiya and the newspaper Al-Sabbaah. On the other side of the spectrum, numerous media organizations, such as Al-Baghdadiya and Al-Sharqiya, often take a more critical stance toward the government and U.S. involvement in Iraq.

Recently, Al-Baghdadiya employee Muntather Al-Zaidi made headlines when he threw his shoes at then president George W. Bush. Demonstrations of support followed his arrest, and Al-Baghdadiya campaigned for his release. Despite the criticisms that his arrest received, it is important to note that these events would have been unthinkable under the previous regime.

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The public has more opportunities to express its opinions and enjoys greater access to its leaders through the media. New call-in radio programs have unprecedentedly given Iraqis the opportunity to express their views. Programs such as Radio Dijla have even become required listening for government officials to keep them abreast of the public's opinions (2). In the days of tight media controls, the

public had no avenue to air grievances. Today, these shows demonstrate that Iraqis are making constructive use of their new rights.

Despite the dramatic developments that have occurred, major challenges remain. Many of Iraq's new media outlets are tied to ethnic, sectarian, or political groups. Consequently, the Iraqi media has also been charged with fuelling and exacerbating sectarian divisions by presenting biased, unbalanced opinions (3).

It is true that affiliated media tends to be partisan, unbalanced, and narrow in focus. However, media reflects the

reality in which it finds itself; where there is polarization, the media will be polarized. Nonetheless, reliable media outlets will gain stature and public trust over time. As sectarianism subsides— which it is already doing in Iraq— Iraq will walk away from partisan media and shift towards the center of the political spectrum.

Given Iraq's history, it is perhaps unsurprising that disenfranchising the media would result in outlets tied to the interests of previously marginalized groups angling for a stake in their country's new future. This heterogeneous media environment may actually bring about greater participation in public affairs: a step fundamental to the function of democracy (4).

The challenge of partisanship can be partly attributed to the state of professional training and journalistic standards. After working for so long under government control and censorship, some Iraqi journalists needed training in the conduct of their craft in order to separate opinion from fact, and to report in an objective and balanced way by presenting a diversity of opinions on a topic.

Today, training and exchange schemes exist between Iraq, Europe, and the United States. Despite the multitude of partisan media, a large number of media organizations still attempt to adhere to the standards of unbiased reporting. One might argue that objectivity and independence are difficult issues for any country's media to grapple with, and with only six years of a free press, Iraq's media is doing surprisingly well.

Violence continues to be Iraqi media's biggest obstacle. It is still one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists 168 journalists have died in Iraq since 2003 – more than in any other country. Eleven died in this past year alone.

Although violence definitely hinders the functioning of a free press, journalists in Iraq have not stopped publishing and pushing the boundaries. One of the biggest successes of Iraqi media is its sheer resiliency and vitality.

The media is pivotal to the development of Iraq's democratic institutions and practices. Western ideals often focus on the media constituting a "fourth estate," providing governmental transparency and fostering an informed electorate. Iraqi journalists definitely perceive themselves as the guardians of freedom, monitors of bureaucratic excesses, and the disseminators of political and other information. During the 2009 provincial elections in Iraq, the media played a crucial role in informing the public about the candidates, exposing wrongdoing, and educating the electorate.

So the media in Iraq is now free, but is it responsible? This is an ongoing debate in Iraq. On the one hand, some in the government argue that journalists are irresponsible in their reporting. On the other hand, journalists argue that responsibility is not something for the government to regulate.

A recent attempt by some officials to close the newspaper Al-Hayat and the television station Al-Sharqiya for misquoting officials is an example of this tension. Such

claims are not new to any society. The goal is to ensure that adequate processes are in place to deal with such allegations that would not infringe upon the rights enshrined in the constitution. The fundamental point to be made here is that responsibility is not measured by whether the media exposes wrongdoing—that is fair game—but there should be legal sanctions on the incitement of hatred or violence, or the slandering of others by deliberately fabricating false stories or statements.

The hope I have for Iraqi media is the same that I have for the country itself: maturity. The end of the dictatorship left a vacuum in which individuals are grabbing what they can of power and influence. The media reflects this turmoil. The essential ingredients are ensuring that freedom of expression continues to be exercised as an ingrained right, and that these rights are exercised with responsibility. If we can guarantee this, Iraq will continue to advance towards stability, and with it, prosperity.

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