

# Manufacturing consent in Iraq: interference in the post-Saddam media sector\*

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## Abstract

*The toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 saw Iraq's media sector shift from a handful of state-run media outlets that served as propaganda machines, to a vast array of Iraqi-owned newspapers, radio stations and television channels which are being fervently produced and avidly consumed nationally. Not unexpectedly, several problems have accompanied this divergent, ad-hoc and highly volatile mediascape. Although recognizing important factors, including dangers faced by Iraqi journalists, and the dearth of appropriate press laws, this article focuses instead on attempts by certain key foreign and domestic political bodies to manufacture consent in Iraq via their interference in the post-Saddam media sector. These foreign influences are Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States, each of which funds, controls and manipulates different Iraqi media outlets. Not surprisingly, the United States has been the most active in this respect, utilizing both overt and clandestine propaganda techniques as well as forced closures to control the Iraqi media sector. Unfortunately, measures such as these are not limited to foreign governments: both the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government have used similar means to control and silence Iraq's nascent public sphere. The article concludes by noting the irony of limited press freedom in Iraq during this crucial phase of its transition from despotism to democracy.*

## Keywords

Iraq  
media  
post-Saddam  
propaganda  
manufacturing  
consent  
democracy

\* An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2008 Australasian Political Studies Association (APSA) Conference in Brisbane, Australia.

## Introduction

The technological developments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enabled human beings to communicate on a scale and with a speed that was unprecedented. Unfortunately, the political divisions and turmoil of World War I turned these miraculous new developments into powerful ideological tools in the hands of the great empires and nation-states of the time (Laswell 1971). Moving forward, the twentieth century is replete with examples of dominant political forces utilizing media as a powerful means by which to engender support for incumbent elites. Gradually, as Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Connell have demonstrated in their *Propaganda and Persuasion*, governments began to not only extend the deployment of media technology for domestic political purposes, but also developed propaganda into a permanent feature of their foreign policy apparatus (Jowett and O'Connell 2006). This is particularly true of radio, with the BBC World Service extending its programming as early as 1938

to include Arabic and German, followed by several other European languages at the onset of World War II. Throughout the Cold War, the use of media technology as a foreign policy tool became particularly common, as the United States, for example, began funding channels such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in an effort to stem the ostensible spread of Communism across Europe (Puddington 2000). As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argued towards the end of the Cold War, the media was in fact a systematic propaganda machine designed to 'manufacture consent' through mass dissemination of ideologies associated with specific political and economic interests (Herman and Chomsky 1994). Although their 'Propaganda Model' focuses largely on the manipulation of the North American press by governmental bodies and corporate interests, it does not extend past those very important domestic concerns to discuss the propagandistic deployment of media technology abroad. It might well be argued that many of the same forces which strive to manufacture consent within the United States also serve to influence that country's increasingly global influence.

Although this article addresses the role exerted by contemporary forces over the post-Saddam media sector, it is worth noting that throughout Iraq's modern history, a host of foreign and domestic political entities have sought to dominate its mediascape. One of the first acts of the British occupying forces following the end of World War I was to publish several daily newspapers in Arabic across the newly mandated nation (Ayalon 1995: 92). Although the era of British influence, embodied especially by the installed Hashemite monarchy (1921–1958), spawned a range of political parties virulently opposed to Western hegemony, many with their own daily newspapers, these movements were quashed repeatedly by the incumbent government and their imperial overseers (Dawisha 2005; Isakhan 2008d; Al-Musawi 2006: 37–71; Davis 2005: 29–81). The British were not the only foreign entity, however, to interfere in the Iraqi media sector. Popular Iraqi newspapers such as *Al-Alam Al-Arabi* [The Arab World] received funding from the German government prior to and during World War II, whereupon Arabic instalments of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* [My Struggle] were published in Iraq (Wien 2006: 56–57). The Iraqi Revolution of 1958 brought the promise of a postcolonial Iraq free from foreign interference and autocratic rule. However, despite progress during the brief incumbency of Abdul Karim Qasim, that promise was curtailed as Qasim's power was usurped by his former comrade, Abdus-Salam Arif, who violently suppressed Iraq's nascent opposition movements and their media outlets (Davis 2005: 137; Stansfield 2007: 93–94; Tripp 2000: 171).

These early efforts to control press criticism in Iraq were pale in comparison with those of the *Ba'th* [Awakening] party, not least under the tyrannical rule of Saddam Hussein. In an act which demonstrated its understanding of press power, the *Ba'th*, following its 1968 coup by sequestering Iraq's two major newspapers, *Al-Thawra* [The Revolution] and *Al-Jumhuriyya* [The Republic]. They also forcibly closed one of the country's most respected professional newspapers, *Al-Manar* [The Beacon, or The Lighthouse], and executed the head of the Iraqi Journalists Union, Aziz Abdel Barakat (Bengio 2004: 110; Daragahi 2003: 46, 50). Following Saddam Hussein's ascension to the Presidency in 1979, Iraq's

mediascape was further transformed into what Ofra Bengio has described as ‘an omnipotent propaganda machine [which] played the role of the Ba‘th regime’s watchdog, thus contributing significantly to its survival and longevity’ (Bengio 2004: 109–110). This autocratic monopolization was furthered during the early 1990s, when Saddam Hussein appointed his eldest son, Uday Hussein, to the Head of the Journalists Union,<sup>1</sup> making him responsible for managing and censoring most of the nation’s media (Bengio 2004: 111; Daragahi 2003: 47; Bengio 1998: 8). Uday Hussein’s approach to media freedom involved personally sacking 1000 writers in 1999 for not praising the President with the requisite enthusiasm (Bengio 2004: 111). In total, over 500 journalists, writers and intellectuals went missing or were executed during the rule of the Ba‘th, according to one French Human Rights organization, the International Alliance for Justice (as cited in: Daragahi 2003: 46).

Despite oppressive conditions, many of Iraq’s political, ethnic and religious factions gained considerable momentum and influence during the years of Ba‘th domination. The northern Iraqi Kurdish population, politically active since the founding of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1946 and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1975, gained autonomy from the central Ba‘thist government following the Gulf War of 1991. The Kurds thus established an array of informal political organizations, many of which controlled highly partisan newspapers, magazines, local television channels and radio stations (Al-Bab 2003b, BBC News 2002, RadioNetherland 2003i). Similarly, Iraq’s majority Shi‘i population has actively resisted the hegemonic Sunni elite since at least the founding of the *Da‘wah* [Calling] party during the late 1950s. At the onset of the Iran–Iraq War, many senior members of *Da‘wah* fled to Tehran, where they formed the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI 1982). From the safety of Iran, and with the support of the Iranian government, SCIRI set up several radio stations that beamed across the border into Iraq, advocating the overthrow of the secular Ba‘thist regime (RadioNetherland 2003b).

In addition to indigenous opposition movements, the United States and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom also attempted to manipulate the Iraqi mediascape. They did so via an extensive Psychological Operations [Psy-Ops] initiative aimed specifically at garnering public support for Western intervention in the region. This effort entailed the establishment of a handful of opposition parties and media outlets designed to undermine the authority and legitimacy of the Ba‘th party following the Gulf War (Myers 1999; Sussman 2005). The first such party, *Al-Wifaq Al-Watani Al-Iraqi* [The Iraqi National Accord (INA)], set up several popular radio stations that broadcast across Iraq, advocating the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and a more inclusive Iraqi state (RadioNetherland 2003b; BBC News 2003g; RadioNetherland 2003h). Similarly, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), designed and implemented by the CIA, was granted approximately US\$6 million to create a small media empire that would consist mainly of the popular television station, *Hurriya* [Freedom] (BBC News 2002; RadioNetherland 2003e). Subsequent to the events of September 11 and then-US President George W. Bush’s declaration of a ‘War on Terror’, the White House began an unparalleled public diplomacy

1 In 2002, the Journalists Union of Iraq awarded Uday Hussein the dubious honour of ‘Journalist of the Century’ (Tabor 2002).

campaign aimed at winning the 'hearts and minds' of Middle Eastern peoples (Taylor 2003; Van Ham 2003). A prominent American public relations executive, Charlotte Beers, was hired by the US State Department 'to find a way to counter the loathsome reputation of the US in the Islamic world, to concentrate attention on America's positives' (Rutherford 2004: 29). Not surprisingly, the campaign failed miserably and was halted in 2003 before Beers resigned (Rutherford 2004: 30; Taylor 2003; Van Ham 2003). Notwithstanding this first defeat in the propaganda arm of the War on Terror, the United States, along with other political powers both outside and within Iraq, would continue to deploy media as a weapon of mass persuasion following the 2003 invasion.

### **The post-Saddam Iraqi media: a brief overview**

After the fall of Baghdad on 9 April 2003, Iraq's media environment transformed almost overnight from the tightly controlled propaganda apparatus of Saddam Hussein into one of the most diverse, unrestricted, and complex media environments on earth (Zanger 2005: 106). By the end of April, the Iraqi Ministry of Information had been abolished, and its 7000 employees suddenly found themselves without regular income (Zanger 2005: 107). These former journalists and bureaucrats carried with them years of experience communicating – albeit under strict limitations – with the Iraqi people. Iraq also experienced an influx of expatriates, refugees and newcomers, who brought invaluable knowledge gained from living and working in Western countries, where they no doubt were able to witness, from a variety of perspectives, the functioning of the Fourth Estate. Their fervent labour and newfound freedom would soon be evident on the streets of Baghdad, where, by the end of May 2003, approximately 100 news publications and a handful of new broadcast outlets had become available, while more were launched concurrently in Basra, Kirkuk and Mosul (Daragahi 2003: 46). These numbers increased substantially throughout the year. By mid-2003, Iraq was home to more than 20 radio stations, between 15 and 17 Iraqi-owned television stations, and approximately 200 Iraqi-owned and operated newspapers, with smaller regional centres such as Najaf boasting more than 30 newspapers in a city of only 300,000 people (RadioNetherland 2003f; Finer 2005; BBC News 2005d; Whitaker 2003; Gerth 2005; Zanger 2005: 107). Iraqis were so keen for undoctored news that entire city sidewalks were taken up by street vendors spreading the many publications across the pavement, most of which would sell out by early afternoon (Baltic Media Center 2003e: 7; Oppel, Jr. 2003). Similarly, Iraqi citizens flocked to local retailers who had managed to import scores of Satellite dishes which, despite their high cost (approximately US\$200 – more than the average annual Iraqi salary at the time), were purchased widely by Iraqis eager to tune into more than 300 regional satellite channels and a growing number of indigenous satellite stations (Cochrane 2006; Oppel Jr. 2003; Price 2003; Baltic Media Center 2003e: 7).

Given that the United States had for years been supporting clandestine opposition media in Iraq, including its extensive Psy-Ops campaign of the 1990s, their launch of several Iraq-oriented radio stations in the lead up to and during the 2003 invasion is hardly surprising (RadioNetherland 2003a; Clark and Christie 2005: 148; Al-Bab 2003a; RadioNetherland

2003h; RadioNetherland 2003j; RadioNetherland 2005; BBC News 2003g; Westcott 2003). The day after the fall of Baghdad, coalition forces began broadcasting from their own television station, Nahwa Al-Hurrieh [Towards Freedom], located onboard a purpose-built Command Solo plane and launched with personalized messages from US President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair (Feuilherade 2003a; RadioNetherland 2003d; Rutherford 2004: 60; BBC News 2003f). On the arrival of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) on 21 April, Saddam Hussein's Ministry of Information was resurrected and renamed the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) (Rugh 2004: 116) and subsequently responsible for a plethora of new Iraqi media outlets. As Kai Hafez notes, such organs were 'largely geared towards gaining acceptance for US foreign policy. The American Broadcasters are pursuing a classic propagandistic programming concept in the Middle East, and making no attempt to achieve critical balance' (Hafez 2007: 120). With the ascension of the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) on 28 June 2004, most of the US-run media in Iraq were handed over to the new administration. Although moderately co-opted by incumbent Shi'i and Kurdish groups, the removal of US control lent these media unprecedented degrees of credibility and popularity amongst the Iraqi citizenry. Today, the state-run media of Iraq are as widely consumed and respected as any in the country (Finer 2005; Metcalf 2006; Al-Deen 2005; Al-Marashi 2007: 106; Cochrane 2006; RadioNetherland 2005).

The majority of Iraq's television stations, radio stations and newspapers, however, were not founded by the CPA or Iraqi government. Instead most of the seemingly countless political parties, religious factions and/or ethnic groups within post-Saddam Iraq own and control their own media franchises (BBC News 2007; Ghazi 2006; Cochrane 2006). Indeed, domestic politics in post-2003 Iraq is complicated by the country's numerous yet overlapping religious, ethnic and class positions. Iraq is not only commonly perceived as comprising three main ethno-religious groups Shi'i Arabs, Kurds and Sunni Arabs but it is also constituted by numerous smaller 'racial and religious minorities [including] Turkomans, Persians, Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Jews, Yazidihs, Sabeans, and others' (Batatu 1982 [1978]: 13). Yet each of these broad categories also comprises more intricate distinctions, including particular religious sects, varying ethnicities and political/economic sub-categories. These groups and their long and complex histories have contributed to the development of a highly partisan mediascape geared towards expressing the different policies and agendas of Iraq's variegated ethno-religious and political scene (Harmston 2003). As Ibrahim Al-Marashi points out, the Iraqi media sector has witnessed the rise of various ethno-sectarian 'media empires' which have evolved into 'quite a pervasive element in Iraq's Fourth Estate' (Al-Marashi 2007: 104). Iraq's media sector speaks for all manner of religious, ethnic and political factions, covering the diverse and nuanced interests which render the nation so complex. Not unexpectedly, enormous variations in quality and life-span exist between each of these outlets, ranging from the highly sophisticated, professional and broad-based to the short-lived, hackneyed and local.

Despite the complexity of the post-Saddam Hussein mediascape and the preponderance of foreign and domestic political interference in Iraq's

2 Since 2003, various reports by organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Iraqi Journalists Association (IJA), the Arab Press Freedom Watch (APFW), and the Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontieres [Reporters Without Borders (RWB)] have continued to point out the dangers faced by Iraqi journalists (*Asharq Al-Awsat* 2006d; Usher 2006b; Usher 2006a). However, as with the death toll of the overall Iraq War, the number of Iraqi journalists killed since 2003 increases daily, making reliable and up-to-date figures difficult to ascertain. For a recent, chilling account of civilian casualties in Iraq since 2003, and the efforts taken to control and censor their publication, see Richard Hil and Paul Wilson, *Dead Bodies Don't Count: Civilian Casualties and the Forgotten Costs of the Iraq Conflict* (Hil and Wilson 2007).

media industry, only a handful of scholarly studies have attempted to document and analyze the Iraqi media during this difficult period (Abedin 2006; Isakhan 2008a; Kimmage and Ridolfo 2007; Al-Deen 2005; Al-Marashi 2006a; Al-Marashi 2006b; Al-Marashi 2007; Barker 2008; Cochrane 2006; Isakhan 2007; Isakhan 2008b; Isakhan 2008c; Isakhan 2008d). Paul Cochrane makes a comparison between the diversity of Iraq's media and the myriad of ethno-sectarian media outlets that co-exist in contemporary Lebanon, arguing in an issue of *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* that such diversity represents a 'Lebanon-ization' of the Iraqi media (Cochrane 2006). Perhaps more disconcerting is a series of recent policy papers and newspaper reports, which argue that Iraq's complex and highly partisan mediascape may actually serve to exacerbate the ethno-sectarian schisms ostensibly fragmenting Iraqi society (Abedin 2006; Kimmage and Ridolfo 2007; Al-Marashi 2006a; Al-Marashi 2006b; Al-Marashi 2007; Ghazi 2006; Metcalf 2006; Roug 2006). Such arguments are countered in a body of previous work by this author, which illustrate the role played by the 'independent' Iraqi press in fostering a renewed public sphere in Iraq, particularly during its series of national elections and the referendum of 2005 (Isakhan 2007, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d). Although further studies are limited to criticizing the funding of Iraqi media by US organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy (Barker 2008), this article focuses its contribution on the practices engaged in by key foreign and domestic powers to influence and control the mediascape of post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. It concludes by arguing that it is this interference in Iraq's public sphere, rather than Orientalist notions that Iraq is antithetical or inhospitable to democracy, that is continuing to curtail the emergence of a genuinely democratic Iraqi media, a development which would potentially bolster its fledgling political order.

### **Interference in Iraq's media sector**

Several problems have accompanied Iraq's divergent, ad-hoc and highly volatile mediascape. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to detail each of these, it is worth mentioning that factors such as the absence of an appropriate legal framework, the ongoing dangers faced by journalists, whose death toll continues to climb<sup>2</sup> and the uneven quality and dubious professionalism of some media organizations have greatly affected Iraq's public sphere. Recognizing these serious problems and their ramifications for the Iraqi citizenry and media sector, the following analysis focuses on the hegemony exerted over the Iraqi media by certain key foreign and domestic political entities. Each of these entities has a vested interest in the evolving politics of Iraq, not only because of the country's vast oil reserves, but because of its geographical location, and the array of particular religious and ethnic factions vying for power within its borders. In order to manufacture consent in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq these various entities are supporting, controlling and manipulating elements of the Iraqi media, which serve as their respective mouthpiece within the nation's complex and convoluted political arena.

A first example of this phenomenon is Iran, which for many decades has supported Iraq's Shi'i opposition movements, particularly the SCIRI, which conducted its affairs from the safety of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War.

Today, the re-named Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) has accrued considerable political influence in Iraq (Davis 2008: 14; Karouny 2007). Although the Iranian government's role in continuing to support SIIC and its various media outlets is not yet apparent, SIIC's media remains at least sympathetic towards the Iranian government. Certainly there exist several Iran-based media outlets designed specifically for an Iraqi audience and easily accessible from across the border. These include over 30 Iranian-backed radio stations and several satellite television stations with at least some content in Arabic and designed for an Iraqi audience (Al-Marashi 2007: 139; Al-Bab 2003a; Al-Deen 2005; RadioNetherland 2005; Grace 2003). Foremost amongst these is the popular 24-hour satellite station, Al-Alam [The World]. This station began broadcasting in February 2003, just prior to the US invasion, and features numerous Iraqi news anchors and journalists. Its current availability across the Middle East and in Europe, as well as its accessibility in Iraq without a satellite dish has brought the station some of the country's highest ratings, especially in the Shi'i-dominated south (RadioNetherland 2005; Harmston 2003; Feuilhaerde 2004; Al-Qazwini 2004; Cochrane 2006). Its popularity, slick production values, and irrefutable distaste for the US-led occupation has earned Al-Alam the moniker, 'Al-Jazeera of Tehran' (RadioNetherland 2003f).

More discreet is Saudi Arabia's significant investment of petro-dollars in various pan-Arab media organs distributed or broadcast in Iraq. Saudi money has long supported the London-based pan-Arab daily, *Asharq Al-Awsat* [The Middle East], and helped establish the paper's Baghdad edition after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime (BBC News 2005d). The Saudi monarchy is also connected to pan-Arab satellite television stations such as Al-Arabiya [The Arab], which is enormously popular across the region. More locally, a handful of Iraq's 'independent' media has likewise received at least some funding from Saudi financiers. For example Al-Diyar [The Homeland], a terrestrial television station launched in 2004 and run currently by Faisal Al-Yasiri,<sup>3</sup> has received financial support from the Saudi-owned pan-Arab pay-television provider, Arab Radio and Television Network (ART) (Al-Marashi 2007: 118; RadioNetherland 2005). In addition, Saad Bazzaz's<sup>4</sup> multi-million dollar Iraqi media franchise (comprising the enormously popular and professional newspaper, *Azzaman* [The Times] and the Al-Sharqiya [The Easterner] television station), is allegedly bank-rolled by the Saudi government. In 2005, Bazzaz was accused of 'running a sophisticated covert propaganda operation funded by the Saudi Arabian intelligence' (2005c; see also: Barker 2008: 121–122; Pallister 2005). He has also been accused of running a pro-Sunni media organization which actively discriminates against the country's Shi'i population and using his enormous influence and wealth to bolster his own political ambitions (Baltic Media Center 2003e: 8; Al-Marashi 2007: 118–119; Metcalf 2006; Cochrane 2006; Daragahi 2003: 48). Insofar as Al-Diyar, *Azzaman* and Al-Sharqiya are widely regarded as three of Iraq's more popular and professional media outlets, allegations such as these are particularly disconcerting.

Although the extent to which Iran and Saudi Arabia may be involved in direct editorial manipulation of these outlets remains undetermined, their concerted interference in the post-2003 Iraqi mediascape indicates

- 3 Faisal Al-Yasiri was the head of Iraqi Radio and Television under the Ba'athist regime.
- 4 During the Ba'athist period, Saad Bazzaz held a succession of senior positions, including editor of *Al-Jumhuriyya* [The Republic], manager of the Iraqi National News Agency, and member of the Ministry of Information (Zengerle 2002). His disagreements with Saddam Hussein over quality control and his objection to the invasion of Kuwait led Bazzaz to defect to the United Kingdom in 1992. From London in 1997, Bazzaz launched Iraq's only independent pan-Arab daily, *Azzaman*, which quickly grew to include international editions issued from Bahrain and North Africa. With the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Bazzaz began distributing 75,000 issues from Baghdad and Basra, where *Azzaman* was an instant hit as the only full-colour, 24-page daily to report global, regional, and local events from a mildly Arab-nationalist perspective (Daragahi 2003: 48). Not stopping there, Bazzaz—nick-named the Rupert Murdoch of Iraq—has since ventured into television, developing Al-Sharqiya into one of Iraq's most-watched television channels, hosting comedy programs and Reality TV (Ciezadlo 2004).

- 5 At the time, Petraeus was in charge of various public works operations in Mosul. From 26 January 2007 until 15 September 2008, the promoted General Petraeus held the most senior position in Iraq as commander of the US-led Multi-National Force Iraq (MNF-I).
- 6 *Habezbooz* was originally published in the 1930s and contained sharp political satire and vitriolic critique of the British occupation (Ayalon 1995: 95; Daragahi 2003: 50; Wien 2006: 55). In 2003, the paper was relaunched by Ashtar Ali Yasseri to satirize post-Saddam Hussein Iraq and the US occupation (Daragahi 2003: 50; Price 2003).

the important role they ascribe to media as an international propaganda tool. Much scholarly and journalistic emphasis has been placed on Iran's alleged supply of clandestine military support to Iraq's Shi'i factions, and on Saudi funding of Iraq's Sunni forces (Hersh 2007; Roggio 2007), but little attention has been paid to the Iranian and Saudi efforts to garner political support via extensive, cross-border media campaigns. In addition to firearms, funds and fundamentalists, these powerful neighbours continue to supply post-Saddam Iraq with carefully crafted political propaganda, at best skewing media coverage in their particular favour, at worst deepening pre-existing Iraqi social schisms in ways that threaten to fracture this complex nation even further.

The efforts of Iran and Saudi Arabia are pale, however, in comparison with those of the United States. From the very first days of the battle phase of the invasion, US troops commandeered several 'independent' Iraqi television stations, including Mosul TV and Najaf TV. In the former instance, Major General David H. Petraeus<sup>5</sup> considered placing an army officer and a translator inside the station in order to censor content that he perceived would potentially inflame ethno-sectarian passions (Pincus 2003; RadioNetherland 2003c). After the fall of Baghdad, US forces re-launched Mosul TV, and by July 2003, the CPA was actively attempting to fold the station under IMN control (Sennitt 2003; Al-Bab 2003a; RadioNetherland 2005). Similarly, Najaf TV, a Shi'i channel airing Islamic lectures, was ordered initially to surrender itself to control by US forces (Baltic Media Center 2003e: 9). Bravely, the station's manager, Ali Khasif Al-Ghitta, refused US demands, claiming, 'We are an independent station. The CPA can't tell us what to say. They want us to tell everyone how good the governor they have appointed is when he is a crook and a Ba'thist' (Al-Ghitta as cited in: Kafala 2003).

Upon the cessation of the invasion's combat phase, and the arrival of the CPA, the United States promptly exerted its authority over the fledgling Iraqi media. This is best demonstrated by 'Order Number 14: Prohibited Media Activity', issued in June 2003 by Lewis Paul Bremer III, head of the CPA. Instead of providing a framework for renewing a lively public sphere, this document rendered illegal any organ which 'incites violence . . . incites civil disorder . . . incites violence against Coalition Forces or CPA personnel . . . advocates alterations to Iraq's borders', or 'advocates the return of the Iraqi Ba'th Party' (Bremer 2003: 1–2). The penalties for breaking these prohibitions were severe and included arrest, detention and prosecution with a possible prison sentence of up to one year, while in the case of 'emergencies', Coalition Forces were permitted to 'take direct action to prevent or defeat the threat' (Bremer 2003: 2). One of the first signs that the emerging media sector in Iraq was willing to criticize the ruling elite was its reaction to 'Order Number 14'. As Ashtar Ali Yasseri, the editor of the successfully re-launched Iraqi political satire magazine, *Habezbooz*<sup>6</sup> (a term from Iraqi folklore), stated, 'How can they say we have a democracy? That's not democracy. It sounds like the same old thing' (Yasseri as cited in: Hama-Saeed 2007).

Notwithstanding such criticisms, the CPA went on to illustrate that the threats contained in 'Order Number 14' were by no means empty. An immediate crackdown took place against the CPA's own IMN, which was ordered to

desist from man-on-the-street interviews, since they had proven far too critical of the occupying forces. The IMN was further ordered to stop broadcasting religious material, including readings from the Quran, and was instead asked to air programs detailing the recently issued Occupying Authority Law (Gourevitch 2003: 34–35). The following month, the independent Shi'i newspaper, *Al-Mustaqilla* [The Independent], was forcibly closed by the CPA, and its managing editor, Dhari Al-Duleimi, was arrested. Al-Duleimi was indicted for running headlines such as, 'Death to all spies and those who cooperate with the US; killing them is a religious duty' (*Al-Mustaqilla* as cited in: Gourevitch 2003: 36), and for thereby inciting violence (Price 2003). The editor later defended the paper's editorial choices, claiming that the headlines were simply quotes from a particular clergyman whose views were reflective of common sentiment in occupied Iraq. Contemplating the closure of *Al-Mustaqilla*, Al-Duleimi stated, 'If this is American or world democracy we reject it. Democracy means dialogue and exchange of views. Not attacking it in this way' (Al-Duleimi as cited in: Brahimi 2003).

In March 2004, Bremer signed 'Order Number 65: Iraqi Communications and Media Commission', which was apparently designed to 'develop, strengthen and maintain [the] professional working practices that support the media's role as a public watchdog' (Bremer 2004: 3). The Order outlined several lofty but admirable goals for the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi media, including the important role it was to play in the development of a 'functioning civil society by providing quality public education, current affairs and entertainment programming', along with expectations that it would 'encourage pluralism and diverse political debate and must empower rather than restrain independent and impartial commentary' (Bremer 2004: 2). For the purpose of achieving these goals, the Communications and Media Commission (CMC) was endowed with an annual budget of US\$6 million, and was given the authority to regulate the Iraqi communications industry, including Iraq's growing number of television and radio stations as well as its Internet and telecommunications sector (Al-Qazwini 2004; Al-Marashi 2007: 131; Piper 2004; Al-Deen 2005; Feuilherade, 2004).

Despite the official rhetoric of 'Order Number 65' and the idealistic promises it made to the Iraqi people, the CPA persisted to silence dissent and exert its hegemony over the Iraqi media sector. Just over a week after the signing of 'Order Number 65', the CPA closed two print organs produced by Moqtada Al-Sadr's *Sadr Trend*, *Al-Hawza*<sup>7</sup> (named after a Shi'i seminary in Najaf, where several leading clerics teach) and the quarterly journal, *Al-Mada* [The View, not to be confused with the independent Iraqi newspaper of the same name]. Both of these publications ostensibly represented Al-Sadr's political and theological views in favour of an Islamic republic in Iraq, and purportedly featured vitriolic critiques of Israel and the American-led occupation (Rosen 2004). *Al-Hawza* was targeted specifically for articles bearing headlines such as, 'America Hates Islam and Muslims'; its closure prompted thousands of protestors to gather at the paper's offices in central Baghdad (Rosen 2004; Gettleman 2004; Al-Sheikh 2004). Although relatively peaceful at the time, the protestors chanted slogans such as, 'No, no, America!' and 'Where is democracy now?', and vowed to avenge *Al-Hawza*'s closure (Gettleman 2004; Al-Sheikh 2004). In an ironic twist, it was the forced closure of *Al-Hawza*,

7 It should be noted that *Al-Hawza* appears to have re-opened as of 2004 under the defiant moniker, *Al-Hawza Al-Natiqa* [The Active Hawza] (Al-Marashi 2007: 139).

rather than anything printed across its humble pages, which ultimately gained Al-Sadr renewed reverence amongst his already loyal followers, and arguably incited his *Mahdi* [The Guided] army to violence (Al-Marashi 2007: 132; Rosen 2004). In addition, the closure of Shi'i newspapers such as *Al-Mustaqilla*, *Al-Hawza* and *Al-Mada* cost the CPA any respect it may have earned by its promise to facilitate a free press in post-Saddam Iraq. Iraqi journalists such as Basim Al-Sheikh of the 'independent' *Al-Dustour* [The Constitution] were quick to react to the CPA's actions, opining,

[W]e must conclude that there is someone lurking to see what is written in the newspapers. We thought that the censor had gone forever. But it seems he is still here, suspiciously inspecting every newspaper—despite all the new freedoms we supposedly now enjoy [. . .] Regardless of the reasons behind the closure of *Al-Hawza*, we are absolutely against the closure of newspapers no matter what justifications are given, especially considering that we lack laws governing mass communications.

(Al-Sheikh 2004)

Other US involvement in Iraq's fledgling media environment has been more sinister and clandestine. It has recently come to light, for instance, that the US Psy-Ops in Iraq was responsible for covertly planting more than 1000 news articles in twelve to fifteen Iraqi newspapers at a cost of between US\$40 to US\$2000 per item (Gerth 2005). These stories were written mostly by US soldiers who were part of the Psy-Ops program, then translated into Arabic by their Iraqi staff (Hama-Saeed 2007). These Iraqis then posed as wealthy freelancers, offering the shoestring local press money in exchange for publication ('U.S. war propaganda carries on' 2006; Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005). It was never disclosed to these papers that the articles, written typically from a purported Iraqi perspective, and designed purposefully to cater to specific ethnic or religious groups (e.g. Shi'i or Kurds) and to address key issues such as terrorism or democracy, were the cleverly disguised propaganda of the occupying forces. Although pro-American papers such as the INC's *Al-Mutamar* [The Congress] were not overly concerned about publishing these articles, others were not nearly as complacent. The editors of the well-respected independents, *Al-Dustour* and *Al-Mada* [The View, not to be confused with the Al-Sadr-backed journal of the same name], claim they had no idea the stories were written by US operatives, and have understandably expressed their outrage (Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005). Likewise, an editorial in *Azzaman* described the US actions as a blatant attempt 'to humiliate the independent national press' of Iraq (*Azzaman* as cited in: Gerth 2005).

In an initial response, the White House expressed its concern over the allegations that its foreign intelligence agency was engaging in disreputable operations within the Iraqi media. However, while the American public was assured that US law prohibits such operations within its domestic media, an internal review by the Pentagon claimed to have found no violations of US guidelines for Psy-Ops on foreign soil (Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005; Cochrane 2006; Mazzetti 2006, 2005a). The US government expressed subsequently that it intended to continue its media propaganda campaign in Iraq, and that the practices might well be extended to

other parts of the world (Mazzetti 2006). The stark contradiction here barely needs explicating. At a time during which Iraq is struggling to build a stable and robust democracy following years of Ba'athist repression, a concerted array of foreign forces are working to undermine one of the pillars of that emergent order, a free press. Whereas the efforts of Iran and Saudi Arabia are undoubtedly troubling and require further scrutiny, the contradiction between the US administration's rhetoric and its actions invites the greatest criticism. On the one hand, the Bush administration has insisted adamantly upon the integral relationship between the global proliferation of democracy, particularly across the Middle East, and its broader geopolitical agenda (Bush 2005; Rice 2008). At the same time, it has actively undermined Iraq's potentially free and independent press. It has attempted to manufacture consent in Iraq via the development of state media services, such as the IMN, that function according to US purposes; it has implemented forced closures in order to silence a handful of Shi'i newspapers; and it has intentionally subverted the 'independence' of several of Iraq's well-respected newspapers by covertly planting pro-US articles. In fact, although America persistently prides itself on the strength of its democracy and free press, its actions in Iraq – in terms of press freedom alone – are enough to warrant charges of First Amendment violations had such actions been conducted on American soil.

However, interference in the Iraqi media sector has not been limited to foreign governments. With the ascension of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) in July 2003, the new interim body immediately demonstrated its draconian approach to media freedom by repeatedly suspending two of the region's most popular pan-Arab satellite channels, Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera [The Peninsula], allegedly for inciting violence (RadioNetherland 2003g; Fisk 2003; Arab Press Freedom Watch 2003b; BBC News 2003c; Feuillerade 2003b). Similarly, when the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) replaced the IGC in June 2004, the newly appointed Prime Minister Iyad Allawi oversaw the creation of the Higher Media Commission (HMC) (Al-Qazwini 2004; Price 2004), a new body apparently even more repressive than the CPA-backed CMC, in that it allegedly threatened to 'license newspapers, impose requirements for publication that few existing news organizations can meet and punish unsubstantiated criticism of the government' (Price 2004). Indeed, Allawi seized the opportunity to render explicit his own approach to media freedom, stating, '[W]e will not allow some people to hide behind the slogan of freedom of the press and media' (Allawi as cited in: Polk 2005: 195). Acting upon such sentiments, the IIG followed the IGC's example by likewise suspending Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera under similar allegations (Hama-Saeed, 2007; Arab Press Freedom Watch 2004a, 2004b; Cochrane 2006; Al-Marashi, 2007: 131). Then, in November 2004, the HMC went so far as to pressure the Iraqi media industry to cover the unfolding events of *Operation Al-Fajr* [Phantom Fury], the US military offensive to recapture Fallujah, in ways that would reflect the official government stance – or face untold consequences (RadioNetherland 2005).

When the Iraqi National Assembly assumed power following the January 2005 elections, it drafted and ratified the new Iraqi Constitution. This document, finalized in August 2005 and ratified by the people of Iraq in October of that same year, guarantees 'Freedom of press, printing,

advertisement, media and publication', but only as long as it does not 'violate public order and morality' (Iraqi Government 2005b). As Kathleen Ridolfo has pointed out, the vagueness of the Constitution's wording in this respect leaves the Iraqi media vulnerable to the government's potentially subjective interpretation (2006). Indeed, the Iraqi media industry has continued to suffer since the Constitution's promulgation. In 2006, countless incidents were reported in which journalists were harassed, threatened, beaten, arrested, detained and sentenced to prison for daring to criticize their government or police force (Arab Press Freedom Watch 2006b, 2006c; Finer 2005; Von Zielbauer 2006; Ridolf 2006; Enders 2006; Hama-Saeed 2007). More recently, the Iraqi Parliament has urged Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki to close down Saad Bazzaz's media empire, including both the *Azzaman* newspaper and the Al-Sharqiya television station, upon allegations that the outlets were too critical of a recent draft law proposing to transform Iraq into a federal state (Azzaman.com 2006e). The Iraqi government has also ordered the closure of the controversial satellite channel, Al-Zawra [The Curved (City) – a popular soubriquet for Baghdad], for its airing of footage depicting successful insurgent attacks against coalition and official Iraqi forces (Al-Marashi 2007: 113–117).

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq has also implemented similar restrictions to its once relatively free press. Almost immediately after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, several Kurdish journalists were either threatened or arrested, including three who were incarcerated by the KDP for having questioned the party's finances (Hama-Saeed 2007). In 2005, the Kurdish authorities successfully sued Kurdistan's most widely read and respected 'independent' newspaper, *Hawlati* [Citizen], effectively imprisoning both its former and current editors for 6 months after they criticized a Kurdish official for failing to pay his telephone bill (Hama-Saeed 2007; Von Zielbauer 2006). In late 2005, a Kurdish Austrian man was initially sentenced to 30 years in an Iraqi prison after he posted several Internet articles which accused the powerful head of the KDP and current KRG President, Massoud Barzani, of abusing his position (Hama-Saeed 2007; Arab Press Freedom Watch 2006a). Thanks to strong diplomatic pressure from the Austrian government and other international bodies, the sentence was eventually 'watered down' to a year and one-half (Arab Press Freedom Watch 2006a).

The limited freedom accorded the Kurdish press has continued to deteriorate, as dozens of journalists across Iraqi Kurdistan have experienced harassment, detention and beatings since early 2006. During both March and August 2006, a series of largely peaceful demonstrations broke into angry protest against the KRG and its denial of basic public services to the region. Journalists covering both cases were themselves targeted by Kurdish security forces, with the August protests resulting in the arrest of 28 journalists and the confiscation of their cameras and other equipment (Ridolfo 2006; Hama-Saeed 2007). Also during 2006, the Kurdish authorities escalated their attacks against *Hawlati*, detaining several additional staff members, one of whom had been investigating a warehouse fire that witnesses claim was deliberately set by a Kurdish official desperate to destroy evidence of his black market dealings (Axe 2006). Furthermore,

as recently as September 2007, the KDP and the PUK each has demonstrated distaste for media independence, by agreeing to withdraw from further interaction with media outlets too critical of their leadership. The PUK also began to reprimand and sack several of its senior officials who were found to have made remarks considered unfavourable to the party and its leadership during media appearances (Mahwi and Abdullah 2007).

Hence, since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, both the central Iraqi government and the KRG have sought frequently to limit media freedoms in Iraq and to silence reportage characteristic of a genuinely free and democratic state. Their attempts to manufacture consent have led them to suspend some media outlets and close, or at least threaten to close, a handful of others. They have subjected scores of journalists to harassment, beatings, detention and prosecution for their criticisms of the government, and actively discriminated against media outlets which dare to scrutinize their leadership. The Iraqi government has gone so far as to admonish the Iraqi media sector against covering US military operations in ways inconsistent with the administration's views. Despite their official rhetoric, then, and notwithstanding their vitriolic critiques of Saddam Hussein's repressive control of the media during his incumbency, the meddling in the Iraqi media sector by many of the political factions now comprising the Iraqi government and the KRG symptomatizes their inadequate movement beyond the framework of media interference and control that had plagued Iraq under the former regime.

## **Conclusion**

Since its inception at the hands of a foreign imperial power and under the auspices of an installed monarchy, the modern nation-state of Iraq has been subject to an array of foreign and domestic political entities exploiting media power in order to coerce the Iraqi citizenry and, in recent years, to manufacture consent in Iraq. This is arguably most evident throughout the Ba'thist era and the incumbency of Saddam Hussein, who transformed the Iraqi mediascape into a vast propaganda apparatus. Following the invasion and occupation by coalition forces in 2003, however, Iraq experienced an unprecedented proliferation of media outlets, as Iraqis of all persuasions and orientations sought to produce and consume media free from political interference. In this context, regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have developed and funded a host of media designed to sway the Iraqi public towards specific political agendas. The United States, operating on a much broader scale, has established a network of media outlets in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq which speak on its behalf. Its malevolence extends to active suppression and manipulation of the Iraqi media, including forced closures of outlets that contradict or challenge its position and its undisclosed placement of intentionally biased articles in reputable and independent Iraqi newspapers. Recent events indicate that this trend has continued despite the election of an official Iraqi government, which also has sought to manufacture consent in Iraq by limiting media freedom. Similarly, the once thriving media sphere of Iraqi Kurdistan has been actively suppressed by the KRG, which has implemented various restrictions and penalties on the regional press.

Despite this troubling and controversial scenario, there is reason to be optimistic about post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi media. Thirty-five years of

Ba‘thist rule has left in its wake an Iraqi population with an ‘abysmal distrust of official news’ (Bengio 2004: 109) and that is skilled at navigating carefully crafted propaganda (Braude 2003: 141–142; Bengio 1998: 63; King 2003; Oppel Jnr 2003; Ali and Marzook 2005). Indeed, most Iraqis have exercised their right to eschew US-backed media in favour of local, independent press and pan-Arab satellite channels. As Nicholas Mirzoeff notes, the people of Iraq have ‘steadfastly refused to watch . . . the US official television station, seeing it as simply more propaganda’ (Mirzoeff 2005: 76; see also: Feuilherade 2004; King 2003). Even former employees of US Psy-Ops have noted that, for all the money and effort that went into it, their program was largely ineffective in Iraq, where people readily recognize American content (‘U.S. war propaganda carries on’ 2006f; Gerth 2005). Indeed the discovery that Psy-Ops had planted pro-US news items in the independent Iraqi press was ‘met mostly with shrugs in Baghdad, where readers tend to be sceptical about the media’ (Gerth 2005). It is also worth noting that, notwithstanding these obstacles, the Iraqi media sector played a decidedly positive role during the elections and referendum held nationally in 2005, offering important voting information, monitoring corruption, airing lengthy debates concerning constitutional government and democratic practises, and delivering detailed information about the key parties and policies (Isakhan 2008b,c).

If these positive trends are to continue, and Iraq is to build a genuinely robust and egalitarian democratic order, its media sector must be released from oppressive domestic restrictions and foreign interference. Powers that have intervened in Iraq’s media sector must relinquish control by allowing the Iraqi people their right to self-determination and, as such, a free and independent press, one that debates and discusses openly the merits and drawbacks of democratic governance, foreign intervention and US occupation, amongst other crucial issues. Failure in this respect could have devastating consequences for Iraq’s fledgling democracy, its national unity and the already deep rifts dividing Iraqi society. A genuinely democratic press, devoid of political propaganda, would open avenues to inter-community dialogue, helping placate ethno-religious violence and sectarianism, and facilitate the establishment of an inclusive political order, instead of encouraging the further centralization of state power and the censorship of multifaceted discourse and debate.

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### Suggested citation

- Isakhan, B. (2009), 'Manufacturing consent in Iraq: interference in the post-Saddam media sector', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 3: 1, pp. 7–25, doi: 10.1386/ijcis.3.1.7/1

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