

Media malfunctions

By Bill Berkowitz

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BAGHDAD, Iraq (Associated Press) – U.S. troops shot to death two employees of U.S.-funded television station Al-Iraqiya [correspondent Asaad Kadhim and driver Hussein Saleh] and wounded a third [cameraman Bassem Kamel] in the central city of Samara.

Last weekend, while MoveOn.org raised more than \$750,000 at “Bake Back the White House” bake sales across the country, Daniel Henninger, the deputy editor of The Wall Street Journal’s editorial page, had a different fundraising effort on his mind. Henninger’s Friday Journal column was devoted to publicizing the efforts of Jim Hake’s Spirit of America, an organization looking to raise \$100,000 to help counter the “hooey” presented by Al-Jazeera television.

By Henninger’s estimation, the biggest problem the Coalition Provisional Authority has faced in Iraq is its inability to win the “the war of ideas, images and public relations.” To improve the situation, the First Marine Expeditionary Force and U.S. Army in Iraq intend to “equip and upgrade seven defunct Iraqi-owned TV stations in Al Anbar province – west of Baghdad – so that average Iraqis have better televised information than the propaganda they get from the notorious Al-Jazeera.”

Henninger suggests that Americans who support President Bush write out their checks so Hake can buy the equipment in the U.S. and ship it to Iraq “and get Iraqi-run TV on the air before the June 30 handover.”

It boggles the mind that the Bush Administration can’t come up with the \$100,000 for equipment, considering the millions that have already been tossed at U.S.-sponsored media efforts. And, whether getting these television stations up and running will convince the Iraqi people the U.S. occupation is just is certainly a dubious proposition at best.

Meanwhile, these days in Iraq Bush Administration media manipulators are spread about as thin as U.S. troops.

Made up of former Bush campaign workers and PR hotshots, Team Bush’s spinmeisters in country are still trying to shine a positive light on the administration’s bountiful blunders. With the number of U.S. soldiers killed ticking ever upwards, and reports of a U.S. military

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massacre of women and children in Fallujah, even the most sycophantic reporter is no longer interested in doing a piece about a newly painted school or a story about a renovated soccer field.

According to columnist Molly Ivins, the Bush media team's press releases – with headlines such as "Beautification Plan for Baghdad Ready to Begin," and "The Reality Is Nothing Like What You See on Television" – reflect just how out of touch the occupation press people are.

At several recent press briefings, Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, the deputy chief of military operations in Iraq, and Dan Senor, the main US spokesman in Iraq, have been the unlikely front men for "Operation we Can't Figure Out What's Going On From One Day to the Next."

Since the situation in Fallujah started heating up, Brig. Gen. Kimmitt has taken to accusing the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera network of spreading lies and stirring up the Iraqi people by its reports and graphic images of dead civilians in that city. Brig. Gen Kimmitt angrily suggested that Iraqis should "Change the channel to a legitimate, authoritative, honest news station. The stations that are showing Americans intentionally killing women and children are not legitimate news sources. That is propaganda, and that is lies." You could hear echoes of the Vietnam-era "Damn that Walter Cronkite" in Kimmitt's remarks.

Because of the chaos and increased kidnappings of foreign nationals, the New York Times and a number of other major news sources are either restricting their reporters to Baghdad or are once again embedding them within military units. And, according to an April 15 Media Action Alert issued by FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting), occupation authorities have kept "a tight rein on the information flow from Fallujah, with only one small television network pool in the city that 'travels and operates' under the watch of the Marines."

Attacking the messenger, in this case Al-Jazeera and the United Arab Emirates-based Al-Arabiya, is a time-honored U.S. practice that may get the adrenalin pumping on the front lines, but it has resulted in deadly consequences for journalists from both networks: A recent Al-Jazeera documentary called "The Murder of the Witnesses" called attention to the U.S. bombing of its offices early in the invasion, and last month, two Al-Arabiya journalists were shot and killed by U.S. soldiers as they covered a nighttime rocket attack on Baghdad hotel.

In the long run, however, occupation authorities recognize that the best way for the U.S. to control the news coming out of Iraq is to control the major news outlets in the country.

Thus far, most of the millions of taxpayer dollars spent sponsoring pro-U.S. television networks have gone to naught.

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The Arab-language satellite television station Al Hurra – “the Free One” in Arabic – which is based in Springfield, Va., has “inspire[d] mixed emotions in its Middle East audience,” the Christian Science Monitor’s Gregory D. Johnsen recently reported. Launched in mid-February with a first-year budget of \$62 million, Al Hurra is supposed to be an alternative to news stations like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyya. While President Bush hoped Al Hurra would cut through the “hateful propaganda that fills the airwaves in the Muslim world,” and promote debate in the region, his hopes have not been realized. Instead it appears to critics that Al Hurra has already become just another state-run propaganda vehicle.

Hopes for another U.S.-backed television network the Iraqi Media Network and its broadcast channel Al Iraqiyah “have dimmed, despite spending nearly \$200 million on two Pentagon contractors hired to launch the media company,” the Los Angeles Times’ Edmund Sanders recently reported. The contract was recently transferred from San Diego-based Science Applications International Corp. to Florida equipment maker Harris Corp. According to Sanders, “The station has suffered from management turnover and poor ratings. Some U.S. and Iraqi advisors left, complaining that coalition officials tried to use the station as a public-relations vehicle.”

In his late-March piece, Sanders also pointed out that the U.S. had been trumpeting the fact that more than 250 newspapers – with a combined circulation of 300,000 (in a country of nearly 25 million) – had “sprouted since Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was toppled. Still, despite Iraqis’ reputation as voracious readers, newspapers have barely penetrated the market.”

“There’s a budding free press, but it remains weak,” Sanders wrote. “Although reporters theoretically are free to express their views, the U.S. military has raided the offices of newspapers it deemed to be aiding insurgents. The Iraqi Governing Council has banned some news outlets for being ‘disrespectful’; and the office of one U.S.-backed newspaper was recently attacked with a rocket-propelled grenade.”

On March 20, in one of those administrative orders that you hear or read little about, L. Paul Bremer, the chief U.S. administrator in Iraq, set up the Iraq Communications and Media Commission – which is based on the U.S. Federal Communications Commission. The Commission, which will consist of nine appointed members, will have the authority to license broadcasters, draft media laws and help develop professional and ethical standards. According to Sanders, the media commission will “open bidding for two licenses to set up national TV channels,” and have to work out “whether foreign ownership will be permitted and whether the stations will be affiliated with a particular party or religion.”

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Just how bad is the news from Iraq? So bad that the 4-person staff of “The Current News Early Bird,” the Pentagon’s highly valued news clipping service – and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s first read in the morning on his way to the office – has been told by Pentagon officials “to stop reprinting news-magazine articles and have quashed at least one controversial newspaper article,” the Wall Street Journal recently reported.

And here’s the best that Max Boot, the Olin Senior Fellow for National Security Studies at the Council for Foreign Relations and an ardent supporter of the invasion and occupation, can come up with regarding managing the message. In a recent Los Angeles Times column, Boot suggested that the U.S. replace Kimmitt and Senor with an Iraqi face. By having them make all the announcements, it “gives the rebels exactly what they want by furthering the impression that they are fighting against a U.S. occupation rather than an emerging democracy with broad international support.”

“Why not put an Iraqi face on current operations by having Iraqi officials brief reporters?” Boot asks.

Has anyone seen Baghdad Bob?