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# The Press and Political Processes in Contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan

## Preliminary Report

John Hogan and John Trumpbour

*Dr Hogan and Professor Trumpbour, operating out of both Middlesex and Harvard Universities, are leading an international comparative and collaborative research project, where they are conducting an investigation into the dynamics of the print media environment in Iraqi Kurdistan. Provided in greater detail in the endnotes, the aims and objectives of the study are, in brief, to critically analyse the opportunities for the Press to contribute to the deepening of democracy in Kurdistan. This project is supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Final Report will be made publicly available at the end of the 2 year project. The research leaders, with the assistance of a number of contracted researchers, have already made advances in the review and monitoring of key texts. They have conducted interviews and are engaged in ongoing correspondence with a number of contributors. Since the announcement of the research project they have been inundated with responses and positive encouragement, along with plenty of leads and questions. As part of the commitment to maximise involvement and in the Socratic tradition of dialogue and engagement as means of generating understanding and ongoing debate, Dr Hogan and Professor Trumpbour present below a series of answers to some of the main questions that have been advanced on this subject thus far, by way of a preliminary report.*

*The Research Team would very much welcome the collaboration of relevant actors and would like to hear from interested parties and engage in a productive dialogue through both electronic communication and face to face interview.*

*Anyone who considers that their views and experience can enrich this project should contact Dr Hogan and Professor Trumpbour at the following email address:*  
[kurdishresearchproject@googlemail.com](mailto:kurdishresearchproject@googlemail.com)



## **What do you think of the recent elections and the print media coverage of the campaign?**

Well, the first thing to say is that it is gratifying to see and hear that people in Kurdistan were obviously very excited about the elections and that there was space to talk about politics and the future of Iraq and Kurdistan. The coverage of the election and its aftermath are of central importance to our research project.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the spaces for communication and democracy is a matter of long standing concern for students of democracy<sup>2</sup>.

### ***Reasoned Debate***

The elections provided time for both passionate and reasoned debate. While passion and vigour are to be welcomed, key decisions made in any election are best made on the basis of reasoned and properly informed debate. Here, the press has a crucial role to play, not least avoiding the easy temptation to reduce complex political discussion to the consideration of a limited number of easily digested “scandals” or personalised “character assassinations”. In assessing the role of the print media in the election campaign, we need to consider how much of what the press published was based on fact and accurate information, how much was based on rumour and speculation, and how far outright fabrication played a role. In this respect, we need to consider also the extent to which newspapers are able to express views independent of power<sup>3</sup>. Is it meaningful to talk about neutrality? What are the forces which shape the press, even those publications that claim to be non-aligned? How far and deep is the understanding of the public with regard to the potential for hidden agendas to be expressed in their press? We have witnessed a great deal of discussion with respect to the issue of transparency. And this is quite right and proper. However, transparency does not apply to the government and politicians alone. The press must also be transparent. What does seem largely absent is the open discussion of possible underlying strategies in newspaper coverage and the effects that these may have on the public who depend on news outlets to keep them informed on the full range of important issues, which shape their decisions at the

ballot box. So, all who are part of and lead the debate on the elections, results and future prospects have a great deal of responsibility resting on their shoulders.

### ***Communication Breakdown***

There seems to be a concern that a breakdown in communication is taking place between some elements of the press and institutions of government and politics. It has even been pointed out that some newspapers and journalists took the step of boycotting press conferences organised by the parties and leaders facing the judgement of voters. Leaving aside the dangers of appearing partisan, such absence makes it difficult to maintain channels of communication necessary to the press to perform their key role, which is to keep readers informed. Likewise, when the work of the government is reported inaccurately or not at all, the political process may soon appear alien and distant from the concerns of the people. This is dangerous. There are few places in the world where strong bonds of trust between the people and their leadership are more necessary. Kurdistan is at the crossroads. These are very difficult and dangerous times. Leaders need to listen and explain. Independent, fair and professional news coverage is crucial to facilitating coherent, rational and deliberative democratic governance. We would like to know more as to why the decision to boycott press conferences was deemed necessary. In many countries, politicians are guilty of using press conferences to make announcements, and then they avoid questions. This did not seem to be the situation among the Kurdistan politicians, though we are open to hearing press complaints. Abandoning press conferences can be a dangerous step because, as the cultural historian and critic Christopher Lasch liked to say, the most important function of a free press is not supplying information but rather asking the right questions. As he expressed it in *The Revolt of the Elite and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995), "What democracy requires is vigorous public debate, not information. Of course, it needs information too, but the kind of information it needs can be generated only by debate. We do not know what we need to know until we ask the right questions, and we can identify the right questions only by subjecting our own ideas about the world to the test of public controversy."

What is already clear is that both government and the press need to consider the shape of the press and media environment and address the possible need for reform.

### **What role can the Press play in promoting democracy in Kurdistan?**

The rapid transformation of Kurdistan continues. With the focus turning once more to the day to day work of government, passions will inevitably subside and extra space will be created for rational and evidence based debate and discussion. The press play a crucial role in transmitting messages about how Kurdistan can move forward in the best way possible. We are aware of the historical origins and transformations that have taken place in the Iraqi Kurdistan press environment and are concerned to examine performance and the dynamics which shape contemporary relations between the Fourth Estate<sup>4</sup> and the political process and governmental outcomes. This debate is important as newspapers, columnists, journalists and other contributors play a vital role in shaping popular opinion and in transmitting this message to government. Government, likewise, must use the channels of communication and provide information so that a process of engagement is reached, where government can continuously justify its mandate by remaining close to the people, while all the while providing leadership, an asset which is crucial to retain in Kurdistan more so than in most places in the world.

#### ***Enlightenment***

The media have a critical role in deepening the public's understanding of what politicians do and plan to do on their behalf. In a democracy, the citizen's ultimate tool or power lies in the day of the elections when he or she can vote in or out one particular group. The citizen often largely bases that decision on the information they have received over the past few years and in the election campaign through the media. If the media are rife with speculation, gossip or fabrications, the citizen is making a judgement based on misinformation. This is particularly significant in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan which has gone through the agony of fratricidal war<sup>5</sup>. To avoid factionalism and develop a democratic culture is the work of both the

authorities and civil society groups, including media channels. A press that does not reflect the truth and the facts is doing a disservice. Government officials have a responsibility to provide information and communicate and the press have a duty to report the truth and facts in a fair responsible manner.

Through acting as the voice of reasoned debate and questioning, the press in Kurdistan have it within their reach to bring a pluralist and tolerant attitude towards maintaining unity in the face of external adversity and the challenges that have been identified by commentators and politicians alike. There is a great deal to discuss with regard to the strategies available to deal with the complex and shifting geo-political situation and the global significance of Kurdistan's success in developing and maintaining a long period of relative peace and security. These debates are inextricably linked to the shape and direction of relations on the domestic front, with many issues up for debate, including, for instance, the legacy of Baathism, the position of women, the uneven effects of rapid economic development, challenges faced by youth, and so on.

### ***Government Press and Media Strategy***

As Hiwa Osman has pointed out, "The government ...need to strengthen their press offices and the skills of their spokespeople to ensure that the information reaches the public."

(See:<http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2009/8/independentstate3065.htm>).

While one can assume that political parties and various politicians in Kurdistan have ready access to the outlets under their direct control or ownership, it is apparent that in Kurdistan the government does not have a centralised press and media strategy. Nor is it the case that there is a Government Communications Department. Such an office is of critical importance in modern democratic government and is seen in governments around the world. Certain officials have already shown their ability to present the case for the government. Falah Mustafa Bakir, the head of the Department for Foreign Relations, and Dr Fuad Hussein, the President's Chief of Staff are highly respected. The diplomatic talents of Qubad Talabani are ready to see

<http://rudaw.net/details.aspx?lang=English&page=articles&c=Exclusive%20Interview>

[s%20&id=10646](#)), while the cool composure of Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, KRG representative to the UK, was demonstrated admirably during the post-election analysis broadcast on Al-Jazeera.<sup>6</sup>(See: <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/insideiraq/2009/07/2009731122325534444.html>).

### ***Towards a Government Communications Department***

There are many advantages that could be derived in Kurdistan with the establishment of a government communications department. It could be useful for journalists, acting as a port of call when pursuing a line of inquiry, to verify claims, to provide opportunity for the right of reply, and so on. For the government, by having a centralised communications department, news stories can be more speedily brought to the attention of journalists. Professional and informed responses to news events can be shaped and disseminated, and through devising and adhering to a good record keeping system, the government would benefit from gaining information from journalists which might be used to improve specifically the systems and performance of government and more generally act as a bridge to bring government and people closer together. This function is illustrated in cases of honour crime, a phenomena all too often shrouded in secrecy. One example, amongst many to be sure, of the press acting as a bridge between the people and authorities has already been found in the work of *Rudaw*, a weekly privately-owned newspaper. In the case of a woman who was killed and buried in a house in Shawez, Arbil governorate, local people informed the newspaper first and it was *Rudaw* that then went on to inform the police of the crime.

To develop a critical, well thought out understanding of the direction that Kurdistan is taking and in order to address the question, "What is to be done?" requires a framework of communications that is open, effective and professionally conducted. If the Press can maintain high standards and the government listens and is able to inform in an effective and transparent way then the space of communication can be shaped, fit for the purposes of bringing Kurdistan closer of the ideal of full participatory democracy.

**These are early days in the life of the research project, but can you comment on the specific way in which allegations of corruption are processed in the press?**

### ***Suspicion of “Outsiders”***

These are early days, so it would be wrong to pass judgement before thorough investigations have been conducted and concluded. However, we have had a look at the reporting of the work of the Ministry of Sport and Youth (MOSY). And we have observed a rather curious pattern. The Minister has been focussed upon, as is the case for a number of his staff, in particular Asos Shafeek. Profiles produced have been derogatory and personalised in nature, some might say perhaps more provocative than productive. Again, we must add that our explorations are at an early stage and we certainly do not wish to prejudge the outcome of our deliberations. But, we are struck by what appears to be a tendency to reserve particularly severe criticism for those politicians, ministers and officials who have returned from the Diaspora to serve Kurdistan<sup>7</sup>. Why there should be a desire to focus upon these “outsiders” requires further and deeper research.

### ***Ministry of Sport and Youth***

One story that has caught our attention is the report which appeared in *Awene* on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009 a piece published under the title, ***“Awene publishes details of MOSY’s corruption”***. While the title of the piece would indicate great promise the content failed to deliver. Included were references to the purchase of bicycles and cars, the lack of public knowledge about the salary of one of the officials, and the fact that the Minister, Taha Barwary performs additional duties for the government and travels a great deal. Admittedly, the article does question the remit of the Ministry’s work and the accounting procedures deployed to ensure that public funds are deployed effectively and properly. Now, while the latter questions are pertinent, to present these allegations as the detailing of corruption is unconvincing. One could argue that it is a mistake to confuse underdeveloped accounting systems or the overlapping jurisdiction of different ministries with systematic wrong-doing. More importantly, from the point of view of sound journalistic practice, it is important to

approach a story with objectivity and to guard against falling prey to the temptation of relying upon partial and limited information. It is apparent that, in this instance at least, *Awene* permitted publication of the allegations based upon little more than the testimony of Arez Abdulla, the Head of the Kurdistan Parliamentary Commission of Culture and Communication. It would appear that the paper did not check to see if the views articulated represented those of the commission as a whole, before going to press. This would have been a wise move. On August 16<sup>th</sup>, the Kurdistan Parliamentary Commission of Culture and Communication publicly distanced themselves from the report in *Awene* and the Head of the Commission, claiming that they were satisfied with their relationship with MOSY, that allegations against the Ministry had been investigated by them and found to be untrue and that the head of their Commission had acted beyond his authority and was motivated by personal animosity to the Ministry. We are aware that *Awene* has prided itself on being a publication independent of political interests. We do not wish to imply that all of the paper's work falls short of the highest journalistic standards, but in this case at least it would appear that something has gone wrong. It is with this type of instance in mind that we shall be looking at the training provided for journalists and the codes of practice that the profession adheres to.

### ***Reputation and Honour***

Yet, while we are mindful of the damage to reputation that can be inflicted on a periodical, it is important for us to consider the impact upon those who are subjected to public critique. Building a government and new system of administration takes immense effort and commitment from all those involved. We are aware that the issue of corruption has dominated the Kurdish media literature in recent years. It is the role of impartial and well-informed journalists to uncover wrongdoing of their politicians. However, unfounded criticisms and allegations of corruption can have demoralising effects. Equally disheartening and corrosive is the tendency to ignore or diminish real achievements. Remaining with MOSY, we have taken the trouble of interviewing a number of those who have observed the work of the Ministry at first hand. Typical is the statement of Dr Choman Hardi, a prominent Kurdish poet and intellectual. She has stated "I have worked with MOSY and I have observed Asos Shafeek at work.

He made sure that the young people he works with were given the resources and encouragement to make decisions and to organise events. While there were many examples of extreme dependency and fear of acting outside of direct guidance, Asos and his colleagues at MOSY insisted that front-line activism should be as autonomous as possible, regardless of the political persuasion or party affiliation of those involved.” This corresponds with our own observations. We have had the opportunity to meet with Taha Barwary and a number of his staff and the many volunteers he has persuaded to come to Kurdistan to lend their energy, expertise and commitment to the service of the nation, through the NGO, known as KOMAK. Together with the Education Ministry, KOMAK and MOSY have made great strides forward. Particularly impressive is the mobilisation of experts and volunteers to promote a new set of teaching techniques in Kurdish schools, in a programme of training that promotes democracy in the curriculum and looks to improve the welfare of youth, to build democratic capacity for the future. By promoting a less authoritarian teaching environment and encouraging students to be empowered in the learning process, to critically analyse and discuss issues in view, MOSY is laying the groundwork for future generations to intervene more effectively in the decision making processes of their nation and to bring independent critical minds to the task of analysing and even formulating the policies of government.

Now, while it is possible that positive reporting may have escaped our attention, the searches we have conducted do not draw attention of newspaper readers to the considerable and important achievements that we have witnessed, ones that have a long term and direct impact upon the development of democratic capacity. If readers can point to discussions of this important work we would be most grateful. But, if our initial assessment is correct, then perhaps explanations might be provided. As Kurdistan has a large proportion of young people, the work of MOSY delivers significant impact on Kurdish society. Likewise, the way its work is portrayed may affect youth, as well as their families, and those who interact with them (schools, universities, sports clubs, the army etc). If MOSY is being targeted” for misrepresentation in the press, how could this be justified and what is the motive? Either way, as with any question, we would be grateful for any relevant dialogue.

## **Is it not the case that a press that exposes corruption is a servant of democracy?**

### ***The Role of the Press***

The role of the press is to inform the public about their world (politics, culture, science, development, crime, corruption etc) in a fair and accurate way and to pose the questions the public would like answered by politicians and other leading figures in society, so that decisions can be made based on fact and reality. Exposing corruption is one part of that. The work of the investigative journalist can be a hazardous one. The risks can be considerable. Society and government need to protect journalists from unlawful attempts to impose silence. In this regard, it is encouraging to see, as highlighted in the Amnesty International Report 2009, ***The State of the World's Human Rights*** that lawmakers in Kurdistan have abolished imprisonment as a penalty for defamation.<sup>8</sup>

However, the rule of law and the spirit of fairness are still applicable to journalism. Stories must be true and backed up by robust evidence and reliable testimony. The accused must be given the right to reply. It is a widely accepted principle of natural justice that the accused must have the right to a fair and open trial, free from the perils which follow from individuals who forget that it is, at the very least, immoral to "bear false witness". It is therefore the case that the media environment should be shaped by structures, procedures, codes and laws which set out clearly the terms of mutual responsibility.

### ***Training***

Yet, the issue of responsible journalism cannot be reduced to knowledge of local legal frameworks and codes of practice alone. Solid training for journalists and government officials can also play a role, as can an awareness of the evolution of press freedom and regulation in different national settings. Such knowledge might have averted some of the basic errors that have appeared in recent years. For instance, the reproduction of an article first published elsewhere is no grounds upon which to disavow responsibility for content. In the UK, for instance, carrying a

defamatory article, even if presented before and by another publishing outlet, is no defence in law.

### ***Transparency***

But beyond avoiding making basic errors, it is also the task of responsible journalism and editorial judgement to question the motivation and agenda behind works to be published. Returning to the issue of corruption, and not for a moment excusing wrong-doing, there is always the danger that the effect and in some cases intention is to portray Kurdistan as a sea of corruption. Here, the nation is diminished in the eyes of the world. Good will is eroded and international solidarity is diverted from Kurdistan. Of course, the demand for national unity cannot justify the suppression of press freedom. However, responsible commentators must consider the possibility that manipulation is at hand in the contemporary representation of Iraqi Kurdistan. Even a cursory glance at the indices of development and markers of peace and prosperity tell us that there have been great leaps forward and that the problem of corruption is not the only and certainly not the most important aspect of Kurdish society. Painting Kurdistan as totally corrupt detracts from the nation's strengths, puts questions in the minds of friends and makes it more difficult to create new alliances, new business and investment contacts and new cultural exchanges. When Kurdish politics is presented as irredeemably corrupt, one cannot help thinking that world opinion is being prepared for the re-imposition of external rule, justified on the grounds that Kurds are venal and incapable of self-government.

In his book *Scandal and Civility: Journalism in the Birth of American Democracy* (2009), Marcus Daniel suggests that "scandal and incivility" seem "closely linked to the creation of a more democratic and participatory political culture". So a certain amount of scandal-mongering and incivility can be expected in democratic polities, but media institutions have a responsibility to put bad behaviour in proper perspective and not fuel beliefs that an entire people are sunk in depravity. In a very interesting article, published in *Hewler* newspaper during the election campaign, readers were pointed to serious allegations levelled against BBC Monitoring, that highlighted such concerns (See: <http://www.hewleronline.com/pdf/579/7.pdf> and <http://www.hewleronline.com/pdf/578/8.pdf> ) and which raises further questions

about the role of outside agencies and sectional political interests in shaping the reception of society and its press in the minds of the wider world and how these are relayed back and forth. This story is certainly worth following up and we shall do so. We would very much welcome the insights of anyone who wishes to comment.

### **How important is the KRG's announcement of the Good Governance and Transparency Plan?**

We anticipate that there will be a widespread welcome for this initiative. But we should not forget that this is one of several projects the KRG is involved in. Others pointed out to us include the training of civil servants in Quality Assurance, in a training programme organised by the UK's National School of Government, which trains British civil servants. This programme is designed to help KRG officials determine how to ensure the value of a project for example by assessing whether something is needed, why it's needed, the best way to procure or commission and organise it, etc. Further training for civil servants is planned, focusing on financial management and human resources; Price Waterhouse are also helping with the development of the KRG's IT Strategy, to improve communications within the KRG, as well as with the citizens of the Kurdistan region and the outside world, while there have been a number of short term training programmes undertaken by USAID to promote transparency. So, the Good Governance and Transparency Strategy is part of a suite of reform initiatives which have an ongoing history.

#### ***Opportunity for the Press***

The government's *Good Governance and Transparency Strategy* should help the press to be more effective and for the public to develop a greater sense of what their government does. The reason why this is the case is that the process of investigating the best way forward means taking a look at existing practices and the gaps in the system which might provide opportunity, or at least get suspicious minds speculating and gossiping, about the potential for corruption. The elaboration of anti-corruption rules, disclosure procedures, enforcement mechanisms and sanctions,

provides all concerned with measures against which to judge performance and results. In the absence of such rules, it is impossible to gain a complete picture of the extent to which corruption is a major problem. When anecdotal evidence is relied upon alone, generalised claims must be regarded as not necessarily wrong, but not necessarily right either, and must be deemed unwarranted and unsafe. And, as many in the world of the social sciences would say, claims based on flimsy evidence need to be discarded.

By bringing in Price Waterhouse to conduct the study and a roadmap for “good governance”, the outgoing Premier Nechirvan Barzani signalled that there is a serious desire for change and improvement, a commitment that his newly elected successor, Prime Minister Barham Saleh, will no doubt wish to see followed through. Price Waterhouse is a world class consultancy firm. They have a reputation to defend. They produce very high quality research and their team would find it unthinkable to present sub-standard recommendations.

With clearly planned procedures and structures of reform on the table, the public and the people’s press may have a golden opportunity to forge a closer understanding of government performance. There is a public and firm commitment to the rule of law and therefore to the formal equality of all citizens. For journalists, in particular, the Good Governance and Transparency Plan represents a greater opportunity to provide properly informed comment. It appears that newspapers should be in a much better position to break free from dependence on the gossip and rumour that is allowed to flourish when decision making processes are kept too firmly hidden behind closed doors. So, yes opportunity beckons. The question that remains is, will the different estates of the realm, including The 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, seize the opportunities presented and make it work to the benefit of the people of Kurdistan. We look forward to observing and recording progress.

## **We hear much talk about the need for the government to reform, how might the Kurdistan press improve?**

This is a very good question and it goes to the core of our research project. To provide a definite set of answers now would be to prejudge the outcome of the investigation. These are still early days. However, it is useful to share some of the recommendations we shall be assessing. In addition to some of the ideas rehearsed above, it has been suggested that the Press in Kurdistan would benefit from adhering to the principles of transparency, ethical good practice and equal opportunity. The press should be open about their sources of funding and how this shapes editorial direction<sup>9</sup>. There is the proposal that newspapers should provide training to their staff, of an internationally recognised standard. The need for the development of a code of ethics has also been highlighted. The position of women is also a cause for concern. The promotion of women into the journalism profession and into senior editorial positions would not only bring the Press up to the comparatively more progressive gender representation exercised in government and parliament but might also provide a more inclusive perspective on the totality of concerns within Kurdistan's society. In this regard it has been pointed out to us that greater female representation might provide, for example, a better understanding of how to report cases of honour crime or violence towards women, as well as provide a generally better balance in the coverage that newspapers provide, with sharper analysis of other issues, such as services, schools and healthcare.

### **A Final Note: "May a Thousand Flowers Bloom"**

Above, we have explored a number of questions that have arisen since we began research on the press and political processes in Kurdistan. We have no doubt that there will be many more questions that will be presented to us in the coming period. We are not seeking to prejudge the outcome of our research, but to set the stage for an ongoing dialogue. We are very much committed to providing spaces for the different voices that need to be heard and hope that as many people as possible will share their views and take the opportunity to shape understanding. We welcome and encourage contributions in any language or dialect. But please be patient. We cannot answer all questions immediately, but in time we shall respond. In addition

there will be opportunities to arrange face-to-face appointments, when the research team makes field trips to Kurdistan, which will be several and over the tenure of this two-year project. To contact us, email: [kurdishresearchproject@googlemail.com](mailto:kurdishresearchproject@googlemail.com)

## Notes on authors:

Dr Hogan is a Senior Research Fellow at the Business and Law Faculty at the University of Middlesex. His first degree is in Government from the University of Essex, which was followed by an M.A. and PhD from University of Leeds. His primary area of research focuses upon the implications of new media for the politics and processes of organization. He has been a plenary and invited speaker, as well as refereed conference paper provider, at a number of international conferences, including events at the Institute of Advanced Studies, the Universities of Cambridge, Cornell, Harvard and Montreal, along with the World Congress of Sociology in Stockholm. His work is published and cited within the fields of industrial relations, organization theory, geography, political science and sociology. He has acted as a reviewer for Leverhulme and British Academy grant applications and has been appointed by the ESRC to be the lead *Rapporteur* to assess major end of award reports. Dr Hogan has and continues to act as reviewer, editor of special issues and member of a number of leading international academic journals. In September 2008 Dr Hogan took up a Visiting Fellowship at Harvard Law School, Harvard University.

Professor Trumpbour is located at Harvard University Law School, where he is Research Director for the Labor & Worklife Program. As a historian, trained first at Stanford University and then Harvard University, where he gained his doctorate, Trumpbour is recognized as a prize-winning scholar with a global reach. He has published critically acclaimed work on the USA, China, India, France, Germany, southern Europe, south Asia, Australia and the Islamic world. His expertise ranges across a number of issues, such as US foreign policy and global media culture, the banking and pharmaceutical industries of India and China, the politics and society of France and Germany, globalization, technologies of innovation, theories of communication, migration, governance, labor, and the politics and social structure of southern Europe. In addition to the various awards conferred and membership of prestigious Harvard committees and Journal editorial boards, recognition of Trumpbour's standing is also highlighted by his work at the US Congress and long-standing membership in the Science and Engineering Workforce Project (SEWP) at the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in the USA. Finally, he is a frequent contributor to public debate, authoring and contributing to articles that appear in prestigious national and international news periodicals, including *Frontline: India's National Magazine*, *The Nation*, and *New York Times*.

## **Endnotes:**

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<sup>1</sup> The announcement of the research project was sent through to a number of publications in Iraqi Kurdistan in July and notification of the project aims has been distributed in a variety of forms, including for example a posting on Kurdishmedia (see <http://www.kurdmedia.com/article.aspx?id=15956>). The notification is reproduced below:

### ***An Investigation of the Press and Political Processes in Contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan***

In an international comparative and collaborative research project, scholars from the UK and USA, led by Dr John Hogan and Professor John Trumbour, are conducting an investigation into the dynamics of the print media environment in Iraqi Kurdistan. We are pleased to say that the KRG, in keeping with its transparency strategy, has signalled cooperation with this study. The main aims of this study are:

1. To investigate the performance of the Press and its relationship with other actors within the political process responsible for the dissemination and processing of information and debate and to evaluate the implications of these practices for government performance, accountability and civic responsibility in contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan.
2. To investigate how the role and performance of the press in contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan is understood by the main stake holders within society and polity.
3. To compare the practices, development and understandings of the press environment in Iraqi Kurdistan with environments within different national settings.
4. To provide:
  - a) Robust research evidence about the quality of press coverage and its contribution to democratic discourse in contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan.
  - b) An action plan based on good practice for the benefit of the Kurdistan Regional Government, policy makers, educators and Press representatives to strengthen the democratic role of the Press in Iraqi Kurdistan.
  - c) Suggestions, where and if appropriate, for reforms and initiatives in the fields of public policy, law and regulation to strengthen the role of the Press in promoting democracy in Iraqi Kurdistan.
5. To be a catalyst for an ongoing public debate about the role of the print media in society and the limits and possibilities of legitimate journalism for the functioning of the nation and democratic representation in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The research team request, through interview and correspondence, the views and insights of the following actors and agencies within the media environment pertaining to and within Iraqi Kurdistan:

- The Press (editors and staff, along with occasional contributors to the press).
- Government Ministers.
- Parliamentarians and the political parties of Iraqi Kurdistan
- Lawyers and Judges who specialize in or who have considered cases pertaining to press freedom.
- Kurdistan Union of Journalists and other media bodies dealing with media regulations and freedom of speech

The Research Team would very much welcome the collaboration of relevant actors. We would like to hear from interested parties and engage in a productive dialogue through both electronic communication and face to face interview. Anyone who considers that their views and experience can enrich this project should contact Dr Hogan and Professor Trumbour at the following email address: [kurdishresearchproject@googlegmail.com](mailto:kurdishresearchproject@googlegmail.com) (Please note that this account is dedicated to this research project. In the event of experiencing communication problems, please contact Dr Hogan at [j.Hogan@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:j.Hogan@mdx.ac.uk) ).

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<sup>2</sup> The study of written and oral communication, the subject of Rhetoric, occupies a special place in philosophical and political inquiry at least as far back as ancient Rome and Greece. Closely associated with this concern was the idea of Republican virtue, a preoccupation revived in the civic humanism of the Italian Renaissance, to be reproduced later in the American and French Revolutions. Here we see stress placed upon the responsibility of the citizen to engage and participate actively in public life and the affairs of state. Thus, attention is drawn to the longstanding concern of students of democracy with the relationship between the print media, government and political communities.

With the advent of modern print media and newspapers in particular we witness an important force developed for the forging of national consciousness. Through the privileging of printed communication, the role of the intellectual becomes apparent. In his work on *National Identity*, Anthony Smith claims that intellectuals play a pivotal role: *"It is the intellectuals....who have proposed and elaborated the concepts and language of the nation and nationalism and have...given voice to wider aspirations that they have conveyed in appropriate images, myths and symbols"*. According to Benedict Anderson, in his study of nation building, the press has historically played a crucial role in dissolving localism by making readers aware of spatially separated constituencies, the unity of which is the object and precondition of nation building. Yet, the promise of the media goes further, to be the connective tissue of democracy, the principal means through which citizens and representatives communicate in reciprocal efforts to inform and influence.

<sup>3</sup> While print media is correctly identified as an important means of information, crucial for the establishment and maintenance of political communities, as well as for the functioning of government transparency and accountability, it would be reckless to assume that relations of power are absent from these processes. The political philosopher Edmund Burke was credited with coining the term Fourth Estate to describe the press and the power they wield (See endnote 4 below for further clarification). More recent studies have highlighted the exercise of political and economic power, bias and propaganda in reportage and silence, whether at the level of content, language use or editorial priority, or, on the other hand, in the treatment of journalists, along with disclosure provided and access allowed by the other Estates.

Moving beyond the consideration of specific agencies of political power, although never far from view, the definition of purpose by both producers and "consumers" of print media is a subject for consideration. Recent studies have called attention to the dangers contained within media strategies that equate news with entertainment, as media output is reduced to the common law of the market, where circulation, sales and profit are prized above the republican virtues of informed, deliberative and responsible citizenship. For example, work conducted in the US context has argued that journalistic cynicism, coupled with trivialization and personalization of media coverage of politics, has undermined the possibility of the kind of healthy and substantive political debate that democratic government requires. In South Africa, media activists have expressed anxieties about politicians having ownership stakes in private media, but state officials push back with their own warnings about commercial pressures leading to skewed and vapid journalistic output. As Richard Gunter and Anthony Mughan have pointed out, in their book *Democracy and the Media*, *"the media are accused of devoting undue attention to ephemeral, non-substantive matters like current public opinion poll standings and the personalities, character and foibles of the leading political figures. Voters are increasingly obliged to reach conclusions and make choices on the basis of criteria that are unrelated to the real business of government. Their choice among competitors for public office is trivialized and the accountability of public office holders is thereby weakened."*

A degraded media environment is one that erodes the promise, to use the language of the German social theorist Jurgen Habermas, of a mature "public sphere", a zone for "discourse" in which ideas are explored and a "public view" can be expressed. Or, to put in the terms expressed by Roberto Michels, one time student of Max Weber and a key theorist of elite domination, the impoverishment of the masses in the field of communications and access to information and knowledge, underpins popular subordination to oligarchy, the rule of the few over the many.

However, such a state of affairs cannot be regarded as an iron law of history. There may be considerable barriers to popular participatory political community and democracy, not least the sheer size, complexity and spatial separation of modern societies; but as is suggested in the work of John B. Thompson, contemporary social theorist of the media, the press has a vital role in generating a deliberative form of democratic citizenship. A print media encouraged to pursue and committed to executing high quality and accurate debate and reporting can play a crucial role in generating republican virtue, in the cause of national and democratic aspirations.

It is thus the study of the dynamics of the media environment and the substantive outcomes, along with an appreciation of the profound implications for the shape of the nation and the possibility of democratic politics that serves as the point of departure for our research project.

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<sup>4</sup> The political philosopher Edmund Burke long ago took the view that the Press should be regarded as a power in its own right, a Fourth Estate of the political realm (in Burke's time the three other Estates of the political realm were church, nobility and commoners, or in the language of today: clergy, military/political/economic elite, and masses).

As the great Victorian social commentator Thomas Carlyle observed, in his work, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, published in 1840, "Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all. It is not a figure of speech, or a witty saying; it is a literal fact, very momentous to us in these times. Literature is our Parliament too. Printing, which comes necessarily out of Writing, I say often, is equivalent to Democracy: invent Writing, Democracy is inevitable. ....Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority. It matters not what rank he has, what revenues or garnitures. The requisite thing is, that he have a tongue which others will listen to; this and nothing more is requisite. The nation is governed by all that has tongue in the nation: Democracy is virtually there. Add only, that whatsoever power exists will have itself, by and by, organized; working secretly under bandages, obscurations, obstructions, it will never rest till it get to work free, unencumbered, visible to all. Democracy virtually extant will insist on becoming palpably extant."

<sup>5</sup> We are aware of the history of and at times troubled relationship between the leading national liberation forces in Kurdistan. This is a history that featured the fratricidal war that started in 1994, rolled on for much of the 1990s and resulted in the establishment of two separate regional governments. The KDP-run administration in Arbil and the PUK-run government in Sulaimaniya did not officially merge until as late as May 2005. It has been brought to our attention the claim that there is residual resentment and mistrust between the officials of the 2 main parties and that this is having a damaging effect upon the ability of the unified government to function at maximum efficiency and has a significant impact on the output of the press and media in general. We are very interested in exploring this observation in greater depth and would welcome the input of all those who have something to say on this matter.

<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps worth mentioning that in the Al-Jazeera broadcast, Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman stated the welcome given to the normalisation of politics through the ability of voters to freely express disagreement, while the spokesperson for the Goran List, Mohamad Tofiq was ready to express unity with the government in relation to territorial disputes, in a discussion that was measured and calm, which ran against some of the more sensationalist, some might say provocative, pre-election talk of possible civil war.

<sup>7</sup> Kurdistan is hardly alone in harbouring fear of returning "outsiders": Pakistan long resisted prosperous muhajirs, and China's bureaucracy debates whether the so-called Sea Turtles deserve to be on the fast track to the command posts of Chinese institutions.

<sup>8</sup> It must be noted that our preliminary research has revealed to us claims that the new law has not been implemented across the entire jurisdiction of the Kurdistan Region and that implementation mechanisms have been absent. We shall, of course, seek further information on the problems which may have arisen and consider, if appropriate, what measures might be required to bring law and practice into line. We welcome further information and the insights of informed commentators on this matter.

<sup>9</sup> See Serge Halimi's article, *Where do we go from here?* in the October 2009 issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, available at <http://mondediplo.com/2009/10/01press> for a discussion of the relationship between funding and press output.