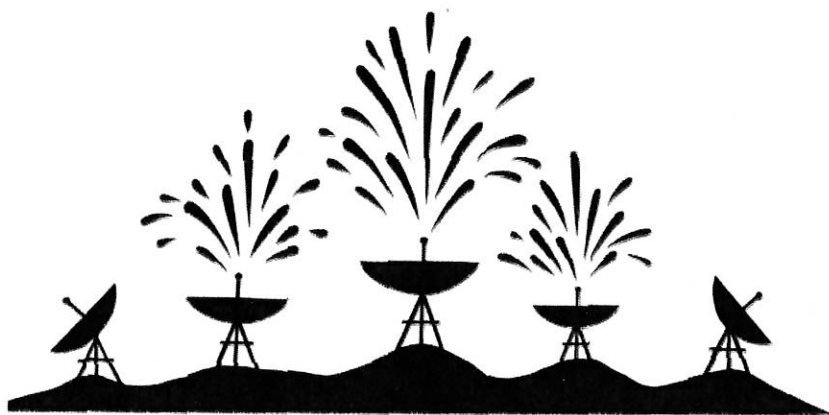


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Tune In to Democracy

By DAVID HOFFMAN

ARCATA, Calif.

After several embarrassing attempts to corral the news media in Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority is about to get it right. L. Paul Bremer, the authority's administrator, has signaled his approval of coming Iraqi Governing Council legislation that will establish an independent interim media commission. The commission will have the power to issue broadcast licenses, provide a system of self-regulation for the fragmented press and bring order to the way news and information flows in Iraq.

The council is also expected to issue a second law that will transform the coalition's faltering propaganda outlet, the Iraqi Media Network, into a PBS-style public interest broadcasting corporation. Together these changes will give Iraq the most advanced and detailed media laws of any developing country in the world. For Iraqis, who spent decades living under a repressive regime, the changes are essential to establishing an open, democratic and pluralistic society.

In the first months after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraqis were deluged with newspaper, radio and television reports from new Iraqi news sources (as well as some from neighboring Iran). The coalition, hoping to get across its own message and curb anti-American rhetoric, responded clumsily. Arrests of journalists, including some from Arab satellite channels; a threatened military takeover of an independent TV station in Mosul; and blatant propaganda on state television all

undermined the United States effort.

The new laws, which have backing across the Iraqi political spectrum, represent a radical shift toward an Iraqi-run democratic society. They also reflect a deeply held desire among Iraqis for freedom. (A recent Gallup poll found that residents of Baghdad regarded freedom of expression as the most important right to be guaranteed in Iraq's new Constitution.)

The framework establishes an Iraq

A new law is about to revolutionize the news media in Iraq.

Communications and Media Commission, an independent body that will license and regulate telecommunications and broadcasting in the country — essentially an Iraqi F.C.C. The commission will manage, for example, the allocation of radio and television frequencies, a critical resource for Iraq. It will oversee the use of broadcasting facilities. And it will be responsible for developing a national telecommunications policy that will help expand telephone service and Internet access, as well as promote a reliable regulatory environment that will attract investment in world-class technologies and services.

Most important, the commission would be made up of Iraqis and its hearings would be open to the public. The

framework also encourages the development of a code of ethics for the press — one that emphasizes the need for journalistic standards and the importance of self-regulation.

It's an ambitious agenda, and of course, the devil is always in the details. The commissioners will need to be independent and resistant to political pressures — something that is hard enough to guarantee in a well-established democracy, much less a fledgling one like Iraq. What's more, in the absence of a genuinely sovereign Iraqi government, the laws — though bold — are necessarily limited. Eventually, Iraq will need broader legislative review and reform to address issues like defamation and libel.

The commission will also need adequate financing to realize its potential. Some of the money will come from license fees collected from telecommunications operators and broadcasters who use Iraq's airwaves. Other resources will need to come from grants and donations, including funds already appropriated by the United States for the reconstruction of Iraq.

Western governments should support the new media commission, but they should not seek to control it. If the West is serious about promoting democracy in Iraq, its most powerful weapon will be its support for the expansion of pluralistic, independent commercial media outlets. Freedom has many voices. These new laws will help guarantee they'll always be heard.

David Hoffman is the president of Internews Network, a nonprofit organization that supports independent news media.