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*Sherry Ricchiardi\**

## Iraq: the Deadliest Reporting Assignment

Since the beginning of the war in March 2003, at least 139 correspondents and media assistants have died while try to do their jobs, more than double the number killed during 20 years of war in Vietnam.

### Sažetak

Irak je najsmrtonosnije mjesto za novinare na svijetu. Prema podacima nevladine organizacije „Reporteri bez granica“ od ožujka 2003. do kraja 2006. u Iraku je poginulo najmanje 139 novinara iz cijelog svijeta.

Autorica, novinarka i profesorica novinarstva na Indiana University u SAD, koja je česti gost hrvatskih novinara i gostujuća profesorica na hrvatskim studijima novinarstva, analizira profesionalne aspekte izvještavanja s ratišta, poglavito iz tako specifičnog kao što je to Irak. Novinari su izloženi životnoj opasnosti, pa je upitna kvaliteta izvještavanja i podataka koje prikupljaju. Autorica u razgovorima s iskusnim američkim izvjestiteljima ukazuje na probleme kojima se suočavaju.

**Ključne riječi:** Irak, novinari, rat, hotelsko novinarstvo

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*Editor's note: The war in Iraq has become the deadliest for journalists since World War II, according to the Paris-based group Reporters without Borders. Since the beginning of the war in March 2003, at least 139 correspondents and media assistants have died while try to do their jobs, more than double the number killed during 20 years of war in Vietnam.*

*For the fourth year in a row, Iraq remained the most dangerous country for the media, with 39 journalists killed there compared to 24 in 2005.*

*Correspondent Sherry Ricchiardi talked to journalists in Iraq about what they do to survive in this hostile environment. The original version of this story appeared in American Journalism Review magazine.<sup>1</sup>*

For Deborah Amos of National Public Radio, headquartered in Washington, D.C., survival begins with a glance in the mirror. Checking her appearance before she ventures outside the protective walls of her living quarters into the wilds of Baghdad has become a ritual: Are the eyeglasses she's wearing too foreign-looking? Maybe it's best to take them off. Could the western-style shoes give her away? Better to change into something more "Iraqi." Does the scarf hiding her hair and the long, traditional black robe provide enough cover?

Once she is satisfied the look is right, the veteran reporter for NPR slips into the back seat of the car, reminding herself that a conservative Muslim woman stares straight ahead, avoiding direct eye contact with drivers on the road or passers by. The demeanor is part of the disguise as she heads to an assignment in the heavily guarded Green Zone, home of the United States Embassy and the Iraqi government.

As the car slowly pulls into the street, Amos' eyes dart back and forth to see if any vehicles are following. She knows spotters can be anywhere the beggar in a squalid alleyway, a cigarette vendor who rushes up at a stoplight, the young boys hawking newspapers on the side of the road.

Anyone can punch a number into a cell phone and report to would-be assailants that a "soft target" is on the move.

"Is that BMW still with us?" she nervously asks the driver as they move along a carefully planned route. Using a two-way radio, Amos stays in

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<sup>1</sup> Tekst je objavljen u American Journalism Review (AJR) a skraćenu verziju objavljujemo uz dopuštenje autorice i uredništva

touch with her safety net a follow-up security vehicle, popularly known as a “chase car”, that is ready to intervene in case of an ambush. Traffic jams are especially unnerving. Anyone who comes near the car or attempts to peer into the back window is a potential threat.

At the entrance to the Green Zone, the reporter does not breathe easier.

One considered an island of safety, the fortress in the heart of Baghdad has been hit dozens of times by rocket fire and suicide bombers. “You are on guard every step of the way . . . and pray you make it back,” Amos wrote in an e-mail message.

Every day, dozens of journalists covering Iraq face a gut-wrenching decision: do they venture out in pursuit of stories despite the high risk or remain under a form of self-imposed house arrest, working the phones and depending on Iraqi stringers to act as surrogates? A constant feeling of vulnerability adds to their anxiety. They know once they leave heavily guarded hotels or walled compounds they could end up in the hands of masked gunmen, pleading for their lives in a grainy video posted on the Internet.

Or, in a stroke of bad luck, be within striking distance of an IED improvised explosive device a major killer in the Iraqi countryside.

The situation took a turn for the worse in 2004 when insurgents kidnapped 22 media workers and beheaded one of them, Italian correspondent Enzo Baldoni.

With the brutal murder and mutilation of four American contract workers in Fallujah that same year, open season on foreigners had begun. Increasingly, journalists found themselves in volatile situations viewed at any given time as collaborators, infidels or Coalition spies.

The pressure to lay low has spawned terms like “hotel journalism” and “rooftop reporting” as correspondents struggle to cover the biggest story of our time without being kidnapped or killed. During Vietnam, the press corps was relatively free to roam, producing a daily diet of human drama that helped shape the public conscience on the war. In Iraq, the stranglehold on boots-on-the-ground coverage has kept the press corps from developing that kind of highly telling narrative. Reporters simply cannot risk wandering into Baghdad’s seething slums, a breeding ground for the resistance, or the war-plagued villages.

“When news coverage is impacted this way, it limits the national debate,” says Sydney Schanberg, who covered wars in Vietnam and Cambodia. This comes as the conflict is heating up and threatening to further destabilize the volatile Middle East.

Some media companies with a strong presence in Iraq, such as the New York Times, CNN, ABC News and the BBC, have spent millions of dollars to build elaborate compounds that provide a small amount of safety so their staffs can continue to operate. Concrete blast walls topped by coils of razor wire protect offices and living quarters. They hire security consultants, many of them former military commandos who teach journalists tactics like “surveillance hindrance.” Round-the-clock bodyguards carry AK-47 automatic rifles. Correspondents move around in armored vehicles that cost upwards of \$100,000.

Before cars enter these compounds, guards search under the hood, in the trunk and run a mirror underneath in search of bombs. Every one who comes in is patted down. One media company keeps two belt-fed machine guns ready to fire from the roof. Those with lesser resources reside in heavily fortified hotels or guarded apartment houses around Baghdad.

Despite all these efforts to keep them safe and working, journalists in Iraq say that many important stories still remain out of reach. What is possible to cover is eroding over time. Amos, for instance, no longer goes out to mosques, hospitals or certain Baghdad neighborhoods. Social life has been shut down; there is little interaction among journalists, except in their self-contained bureaus. The reporter recalls a time before the rebellion turned ugly when, “We were free to roam the country . . . we could talk to anyone. There is simply no comparison to those earlier days.”

In January 2006, the kidnapping of American freelance reporter Jill Carroll and the explosion of a roadside bomb that seriously wounded ABC News anchor Bob Woodruff and cameraman Doug Vogt, stunned the American press corps. At the time of their mishaps, the journalists were operating in dramatically different modes.

Carroll, 28, who often worked for the Christian Science Monitor, chose the “soft option,” maintaining a low profile, traveling in regular cars without bodyguards, and wearing traditional garments to blend in. She had visited a Sunni area for an interview the day she was kidnapped in western Baghdad. Her translator was murdered during the incident.

Woodruff, 44, and Vogt, 46, were embedded with the military and standing in the open hatch of an armored vehicle when they were hit in Taji, 12 miles north of the capital. Both were wearing body armor that likely saved their lives.

For the press corps in Iraq, assessing risk has become an obsession. Bureau chiefs tell of grueling daily meetings to determine priority for coverage and the safest way to approach it. E-mails, phone calls and instant messages fly back and forth to foreign editors at home who weigh in on decisions. At CNN and ABC News, senior management must sign off on all trips outside of Baghdad. At the New York Times, the bureau chief makes the call.

Chris Cramer, managing director for CNN international, refuses to send in correspondents who have not had Iraq experience and insists on a hazard assessment before every assignment. "It is the most dangerous place on God's earth it is awful. There is something potentially alarming around every corner," says Cramer.

As the occupation has dragged on, the press corps dwindled. In January 2006, CNN reported that around 70 foreign correspondents cover the story on a regular basis, a far cry from the rush of news hounds at the start of the war. At that time, according to the Pentagon, more than 600 were embedded with coalition forces; hundreds more operated on their own. With fewer watchdogs on the scene, the inevitable question is raised: what stories are journalists missing?

For the most part, the Sunni-led insurgency remains a mystery and is the hardest story to crack, says John Burns, Baghdad bureau chief for the New York Times. Burns has won Pulitzer Prizes for his reporting in Bosnia and Afghanistan. Instead, reporters are forced to rely on Sunni intermediaries and politicians or Islamic religious leaders who may or may not actually speak with authority for the insurgents.

Among unanswered questions about resistance forces: How much support is there in the countryside for foreign fighters linked to Al Qaeda? How do insurgents go about recruiting men and boys in villages? Who's footing the bill for weaponry? Who hides them out when American soldiers show up?

Last January, New York Times' reporter Dexter Filkins turned to a trusted source to set up meetings in Baghdad with insurgents in an effort to

document a rift between local resistance fighters and Al Qaeda's forces.

His story included detailed accounts of the clashes provided by men claiming to be part of the action. Even then, he wrote this disclaimer: "While their membership in the insurgency could not be independently verified, the descriptions the four men offered of themselves and their exploits were lengthy, detailed and credible." Was he worried about being betrayed?

"I knew the person who set up these interviews and I trusted that person. And he trusted the insurgents he knew. That's not an iron-clad guarantee," admits Filkins, who won a George Polk award for his Iraq reporting in 2004.

"In a society like this where a person's word counts for a lot, you can still do a story like this even now. Could it have gone wrong? Yes, it could have. I was interviewing sources that hang out with people who kill people who look like me."

The violence also has kept reporters from documenting more about how ordinary Iraqis are faring under occupation and reconstruction. NPR's Amos recalls a time in 2003 when she roamed villages and Baghdad neighborhoods checking what was on grocery stores shelves and in outdoor bazaars, noting how long gasoline lines were, and talking to people about their hopes and fears. "It is now impossible to get any feel for daily life. That avenue is shut," says Amos, who lists the Sunni neighborhoods and cities outside of Baghdad as the most glaring gaps for news coverage.

More western news organizations are turning to Iraqis to act as eyewitnesses in the field. During an assignment in Baghdad for New York Times Magazine in 2006, Orville Schell described what he calls "a whole new ecology of reporting."

"Iraqi translators, stringers, even drivers have become the seeing eye dogs for those who write the story," says Schell, the former graduate dean of journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. The out-sourcing of assignments to Iraqis, he says, has become common practice.

NPR foreign editor, Loren Jenkins, says that Iraqis serve a critical role in the reporting process for his company. "We basically have trained a whole cadre of local reporters who are our eyes and ears in places we can't go," says Jenkins. That, too, takes a certain amount of juggling. Shiite reporters cannot enter Sunni territory without the risk of being shot.

Instead, that reporter would be assigned to Shiite cities like Najaf or Karbala, says Jenkins.

Iraqis media workers often have been in the line of fire. Some, employed by local publications, were murdered because of an anti-insurgency editorial stance or other political disputes. Those attached to the international press corps may have been perceived as collaborators.

In September 2005, men claiming to be police abducted New York Times reporter Fakhre Haider, an Iraqi, from his home in Basra. His body was found days later with a gunshot to the head. In 2004, two of CNN's local staff, a driver and a producer, were killed in an ambush on the outskirts of Baghdad. That same year a driver for the Associated Press was killed by gunmen near his Baghdad.

On February 22, 2006, three journalists for Al-Arabiya television, including a high-profile female correspondent, were kidnapped and killed while covering sectarian violence in Samarra, the site of an explosion that destroyed one of Shiite Islam's holiest shrines. One crew member escaped and reported the kidnapping to police. Al-Arabiya, based in Dubai, already had lost eight correspondents in Iraq, including five who died in a car bombing of their Baghdad bureau in October 2004.

The threat to Iraqi staffers also has increased greatly as the level of civil conflict has worsened over the past year says Ellen Knickmeyer, Baghdad bureau chief for the Washington Post. Translators, guards, drivers, house cleaners and reporters face greater danger from thugs, some of them wearing Ministry of Interior uniforms, at checkpoints and neighborhood sweeps.

"Living for [Iraqis] is more difficult and more dangerous," the bureau chief said.

To deflect risk, some western journalists have given in to being embedded with the military despite limitations. San Francisco Chronicle reporter Anna Badkhen has worked both sides as an independent and an embed. She recalls a time in fall 2003 when she could jump in a car and make the 30-minute drive from Baghdad to Fallujah unescorted to report on the bombing of civilians. She went with an interpreter into homes, talked to victims, called a military spokesperson to get a comment, wrote the story and went out to dinner back in Baghdad. Today, that scenario would be impossible, she says.

When the reporter returns to Iraq later this year she reluctantly will embed. "You have to go where the unit takes you. If you happen to be at a raid in a village, you can't say, 'I'm going to stay behind and talk to families to see how they feel about this.'" says Badkhen who was embedded three times in 2005. "That is the big gap in coverage we can't provide the full story of what it's like to be an Iraqi in Iraq."

Photojournalists also find themselves facing a dilemma: to do their job, they have to be on the scene with equipment in full view, making them highly visible and provocative targets. A camera, positioned to make a picture, could be mistaken for a weapon, says Detroit Free Press photographer David Gilkey, who has had several close calls.

He was operating on his own in late summer 2004 when he was attacked by a gun-wielding mob in Sadr City and "beaten to a pulp." His translator frantically dialed the number of a local cleric who rushed to the rescue. As attacks against foreigners escalated, Gilkey, who describes himself as a "bald white guy with a goatee," felt increasingly vulnerable.

For freelance journalists operating in Iraq, the stakes are even higher.

Most enter the country with little logistical support, such as safe ride along the dangerous road from the Baghdad airport or a hotel with proper security. They bear their own expenses for an interpreter, car and driver.

If they are wounded, they most likely are uninsured. The high cost and risks cause some, like David Axe, to opt out.

Back home in U.S., Axe says he has no plans to return. "To be honest, trying to get there just isn't worth it anymore. Except for a handful of major media, journalists are getting out," says Axe, who believes there is a declining demand for news out of Iraq. His stories have been published in the Washington Times, The Village Voice and Salon.com. He went to cover the war, he said, because "It is the biggest story in the world . . . but I also don't want to die."

Award-winning war reporter Sydney Schanberg, who covered Vietnam and Cambodia, sees vast differences in how the press corps in Iraq is forced to operate. He explains that in Vietnam, there was a strong nationalist movement led by Communists from the North, a clear-cut enemy fighting for independence from foreign powers. In Iraq, there are any number of insurgent groups, some home grown and some foreign based.



In Vietnam, Schanberg didn't worry about going down a road unless it was completely deserted. He talked to peasants and villagers who knew where the fighting was. "There, you weren't scared all the time," says Schanberg, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his war reporting. "In Iraq, journalists are wandering into a snake pit. They don't know whether they are going to get bitten by a cobra or a mamba snake. In both cases, it is deadly."

None of the media managers interviewed for this story even vaguely hinted of closing down their operations or seriously scaling back coverage. What they did talk about was a constant re-assessment of the hazards, re-evaluation of safety measures and efforts to mainstream Iraqis into newsgathering with their western staffs.

"We are all assuming it is going to get much worse," said John Burns of the NYT. Despite that grim prediction, he is betting that some journalists would have more difficulty deciding to leave Iraq than to stay if matters worsen.

"I would know I was giving up the most compelling story of our time. That's a very hard thing to do. Besides, this is an American war; we have to be here. We have no choice," says Burns, who is in his fourth year on duty in Iraq.