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Sub-contracting newsgathering in Iraq

International journalists in an increasing number of areas of conflict have become dependent on locally-hired journalists and fixers to gather news. News professionals are now targeted for kidnap and murder in much of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Iraq. This paper looks at how Iraqi reporters working for an international journalist 'sub-contract' their newsgathering because of risk. It investigates the ethical problems and the advantages of working like this. The article shows how an international editor in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq works with reporters in Falluja and Baghdad on a potentially hazardous story. This work offers a glimpse at the complexities of international and local reporters working together under great pressure. It may be a significant development towards a new way of reporting conflict.

Keywords: war reporting, sub-contracting, local journalists, fixers, Iraq

Introduction

Iraq has been the most deadly conflict for journalists ever. Between the American invasion in 2003 and 2010, some 230 journalists and media workers were killed (Reporters Without Borders 2010). Unlike in previous conflicts, they have become targets for kidnap and murder.

For a time during the most dangerous period, international journalists stopped going out on to the streets entirely. The acclaimed Independent foreign correspondent Robert Fisk called it 'hotel journalism' (Fisk 2005).

Iraq is currently somewhat safer than it was, but remains very dangerous for reporters. News professionals are now targeted for kidnap and murder in much of Afghanistan and Pakistan. As a consequence, international journalists in an increasing number of areas of conflict have become dependent on locally-hired journalists and fixers to gather news. This is a practice which Washington Post foreign correspondent Rajiv Chandrasekaran calls 'journalism by remote control' (cited by Shafer 2004). By this he means that international journalists, unable to report freely in areas of conflict, hand over newsgathering to locals.

The twist – and this is the subject of this research – is that these local journalists sometimes also find it difficult to work in certain areas. In Iraq, this may be because they are a Sunni who finds it unsafe to go to an area controlled by a Shia militia. A journalist may have been previously threatened by a militia leader, politician or other powerful individual. Sometimes one reporter may have offended a source and it would be better to send someone else instead. Or it may be that it is simply too far, and there are too many checkpoints to get to a story in time (al-Mukhtar 2010).

My interviewees talked about the different ways they hand on a story to someone else who may not be a journalist. This is what one might call 'sub-contracting'. Individuals who are sub-contracted to produce news for a reporter in this way may or may not be professional journalists. The main idea is to avoid risk. In particularly dangerous areas, this process of handing the story on may continue several times until a person feels that it is safe to step out of their house and interview someone in their neighbourhood, often an individual that is known to them. The news that has been gathered in this way then goes back up the chain until it reaches the international journalist, and ultimately the news desk.

This research is not an exhaustive investigation into the full extent of sub-contracting in either international news organisations or the Iraqi media. It is a snapshot in time of one particular organisation that brings together local reporters and the international news organisations. This work offers a glimpse at the complexities of international and local reporters working together under great pressure. It may be a significant development towards a new way of reporting conflict.

Sub-contracting throws up serious questions about the reliability of news coming out of these areas. But it may sometimes be the only
way of getting news out of some places. And it feeds into a wider debate about the changing nature of the foreign correspondent.

Sub-contracting newsgathering in one newsroom in Iraq
This paper looks at how a network of Iraqi reporters working for an international journalist sub-contract their newsgathering because of risk. Neil Arun is a British editor, based in Erbil, in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, who produces campaigning reports on press freedom, electioneering and security – topics covered only in brief by the international media.

Arun works for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), a news non-governmental organisation, which trains Iraqi journalists. IWPR is funded by Western governments, and its mandate is to bring Western standards of transparency and accountability to public discourse in areas of conflict. Its news stories go on to a website and Arun’s reporting team at IWPR can tackle often dangerous subjects in depth because his employers are not driven mainly by commercial concerns.

Success for IWPR is not so much about building its own audience, but having its stories picked up by the mainstream press. Moreover, the organisation’s newsgathering model requires Arun to rely on a nationwide network of local reporters, or ‘trainees’. These are freelances, employed by a range of other news organisations, both Iraqi and international. Through working intensively with Arun, they are expected to improve their skills as reporters.

At the height of the conflict in Iraq, international journalists were mostly confined to their offices and depended heavily on local reporters. IWPR uses the same model by choice as a method to train local journalists. In the news agencies local journalists work as stringers and often do not get the by-line. In the case of IWPR, the local reporter does get the by-line.

It may appear that the obligation to provide training makes IWPR an atypical organisation in the news business in Iraq. However, IWPR serves both international and local media in different ways. Some of IWPR’s freelances are local reporters who work for top international news organisations. And the product IWPR delivers must match the same standards of impartiality and accuracy that is expected of other international media in Iraq.

All Arun’s stories are approved by his superiors in IWPR’s editorial team, who are experienced journalists having held senior posts with top news agencies, newspapers and broadcasters (Arun 2010). Some IWPR journalists work at fixer level – they give logistical support to international journalists and can have some ability to take notes and gather quotations.

Others are experienced journalists who produce copy for international news agencies. However, their work does not require them to produce much colour (descriptive writing) or context, and these are skills they are learning from Arun. These reporters have had to adapt their working methods to the extraordinarily dangerous situations they face daily.

The reality facing local Iraqi journalists is stark. By far the majority of the news professionals killed in Iraq since the American invasion in 2003 have, in fact, been Iraqis (Reporters Without Borders 2010). ‘International journalists have some kind of security immunity,’ says IWPR freelance Uthman al-Mukhtar. ‘The police, the army and the government cannot touch them, unlike us. We are caught between the security forces and the militants with all their ugliness and extremism’ (2010). This is well understood by the local reporters, who feel threatened by both terrorist groups and the security forces answerable to the government. In such situations, the rules normally taught in journalism school do not always apply.

Research method
I spent a week in May 2010 with Arun as he worked with reporters in Falluja and Baghdad to investigate shadowy militia fighters. An election had been held across Iraq. But the result was inconclusive. People feared that the country would split once more along sectarian lines. Arun wanted to investigate whether paramilitary fighters – then on ceasefire – were planning to resume their violence. I filmed interviews with Arun and his staff about how they manage their reporters across Iraq. I also hired Iraqi news camera operators in Adhamiya, a district in Baghdad, and Falluja to film interviews with Arun’s reporters as they worked. My interviewees were:

- Neil Arun, an international journalist and editor at IWPR, who had previously worked at the BBC in London.
- Uthman al-Mukhtar, an award-winning freelancer based in Falluja, which is a former centre for the insurgency and still dangerous for foreign journalists to work in. Al-Mukhtar works for a major US news-
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• Baghdad-based reporter Khalid al-Ansary who also works for an international wire agency. Al-Ansary has previously worked for the BBC and The New York Times and is one of Arun’s most accomplished reporters.
• Salman Adil Turki, a local editor and Arabic speaker, who works in the newsroom in Erbil with Arun liaising with reporters who do not speak English – and so the majority.

I used intensive, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions for my informants. According to Wimmer and Dominick, the main advantage of working like this compared to unstructured or informal interviews is the wealth of detail it provides (2006: 135). This method of interviewing is also thought by these authors to be most likely to provide accurate responses on sensitive issues (ibid). I chose to work with IWPR in Erbil mainly because I had good access. This was a sensitive subject for my interviewees. I have used the terms stringer, fixer, local journalist or reporter and local producer interchangeably in this piece.

One day’s reporting
I filmed Arun and his reporters at work on 10 May 2010. It was one of Iraq’s most violent days that year. Car bombs killed more than 100 people in Baghdad and at other locations across the country.

Baghdad
On that day, Khalid al-Ansary was working in Adhamiya, a Sunni district of Baghdad which was until 2008 also a base for al-Qaeda (Antelava 2009). The last time he was here with a camera, he was threatened by paramilitary fighters. On the day of our filming, al-Ansary was working on a story about the Sunni ‘Awakening’ militia, known as Sahwa. These were fighters who were formerly with al-Qaeda. The Americans paid them to fight al-Qaeda, and the government’s concern has always been that they may switch their allegiance back to al-Qaeda.

The car bombs in Baghdad meant that it was difficult for al-Ansary to move around the city. We watched him on the telephone to Arun and then followed him as he interviewed a leader from the militia. The man agreed to film a discreet interview in a car park off the main street. The leader said that his militia’s ranks were under threat from the Shia-dominated authorities and from al-Qaeda. He warned his organisation would return to violence if Sunni Arab demands for political representation were ignored. It was indeed a dangerous place for al-Ansary to be.

The car park attendant ran off when he heard Khalid speaking English to Arun on the telephone because he thought the interview would attract the attention of the security services. Al-Ansary’s interviewee said separately that they were probably being watched by an informer for the security forces. Al-Ansary’s work that day did not end in Adhamiya; Arun wanted him to go an extra mile for the story. He asked him to find out about tensions in Abu Ghraib, a dangerous Baghdad suburb notorious for its prison.

So al-Ansary called an individual – not a news professional – to get the information he needed. It had been a long time since a reporter worked in Abu Ghraib without pre-planning. Like most Iraqi journalists, al-Ansary felt that the best way to gather news safely from Abu Ghraib was on the telephone.

Falluja
We also filmed with Uthman al-Mukhtar, an award-winning reporter from the town of Falluja, a former centre for the insurgency and attacked twice by American forces with devastating results in 2004, where journalists need to work carefully. Another Iraqi camera operator followed al-Mukhtar as he worked on the same story about the Awakening.

Research questions
Traditionally, one of the most important services provided by frontline journalists has been their role as eyewitness. It is extremely valuable for a reporter to be able to say: ‘I saw this with my own eyes.’ But when several people construct a story, who then ‘owns’ it? How is it possible to check whether information gathered by the sub-contracting method is true? Might it not be tempting to make something up, rather than take a risk? Are local newsgatherers always transparent with their editors about whether they have sub-contracted out a story? Is, though, the authenticity of the information gathered in this way necessarily compromised? After all, an unreliable witness could just as readily lie to a foreign journalist as to a local journalist. Does a skilled local journalist have a better chance of spotting the lie? Could there be advantages in working like this? Are local reporters in any case overdue to be acknowledged for the work they do? A solo foreigner who does not speak the language cannot
achieve much on their own. A growing body of work acknowledges that fixers and other locally hired journalists are indispensable to international journalists (Palmer and Fontan 2007, Garton Ash 2010, Murrell 2010).

How sub-contracting newsgathering works

Reporters sub-contract their reporting for three main reasons: difficulty, danger and distance. But primarily danger (Arun 2010). The way it works is like this:

Salman Adil Turki gives the example of a story featuring an insurgent (2010). The local journalist cannot go to the insurgents’ neighbourhood because reporters working for international news organisations are widely believed to be spies for the Americans. So the reporter calls up a cousin or a distant friend living in the insurgent’s neighbourhood. That cousin will speak to an individual who is known to him. The cousin relays what he believes to be an accurate version of the questions Arun and Adil Turki originally sent to the reporter.

There is no direct contact between reporter and interviewee, so everyone is protected. This is important because the role of the reporter is widely misunderstood in Iraq. Under President Saddam Hussein, all journalists worked for the government. So Iraqis expect reporters to have an agenda. The idea that someone can go around asking strangers questions to write a factually accurate, impartial piece of news is not widely accepted (Adil Turki 2010). ‘[Sometimes the reporter’s contact] doesn’t want to step out into the street and accost a stranger, a neighbour, and ask him some politically leading questions [the answers to which] are then going to appear in the press,’ says Neil Arun (2010). In Adil Turki’s example, the news that has been gathered in this way then goes back up the chain until it reaches Arun, who edits it into the finished piece.

‘The information for the story almost becomes like this thing that is transmitted through a circuit of relatively static reporters,’ says Arun. ‘It’s like the way you see soldiers hauling sandbags when they are building a wall. They stand in a line and the sandbag gets passed from soldier to soldier’ (ibid).

This way of working can lead to problems. It can be hard sometimes to work out exactly who is filing a story. Arun relates the example of an Iraqi reporter with reasonably good English, who telephoned one day to pitch what he called a ‘cracking story’ about some Mahdi Army militia men who were running a motor workshop and car wash (ibid). This was an incongruous human interest story about members of paramilitary group. However, Arun has, to this day, never met the man who was offering the story. This person was a reporter – and he obviously had excellent access to the Mahdi Army. So was the man with the car wash story a militia member? A relative of a member of the militia?

Though Arun was keen to chase up the pitch, he questioned the reporter about where it came from. When the reporter did not answer the questions, he decided to spike (journalists’ jargon for ‘not use’) the report. Arun says that the reporter may have felt his links to the militia could have endangered him, but for Arun there was no easy way of telling who he really was, nor to what extent was he objective (ibid).

Of course, how much a foreign journalist ever understands his/her fixer’s motives and affiliations has long concerned international correspondents. BBC World Affairs Correspondent Allan Little distrusted some of the fixers he had to work with in former Yugoslavia. ‘You can tell very quickly when someone’s trying to spin you a yarn. I worked with one young woman in Croatia who I could tell...was partisan. There [were things] she was not translating and other things she was translating incorrectly’ (Little 2011).

However in Iraq, sub-contracting sometimes comes unstuck because the reporter’s contact simply has not understood the questions. There are just too many links in the chain. Turki says when this happens, he goes back over the questions once more with the journalist. ‘We go back to the reporter again and say: “Go back to your middle man, give him these questions again,”’ he stresses (Turki 2010). He confesses it can be a time-consuming process.

The main risk with sub-contracting newsgathering is that inaccuracy creeps in somewhere along the line and may be undetected. Sometimes a report that comes in from a local reporter just does not ‘sound right’. Arun says that his instinct often tells him there may be a problem. ‘Sometimes it just smells funny. It can seem too good to be true. You ask for something and you get exactly what you asked for’ (Arun 2010).

For example, he may get a reporter who in one day manages to file vox pops (journalist jargon for random interviews) from six parts of the city. ‘You wonder then whether he really did that reporting himself, or did he sub-contract out to someone else?’ says Arun. In such a case,
he simply asks the reporter how he acquired the quotations. Among many Iraqi journalists, sub-contracting is viewed as nothing to be ashamed of. It’s a survival skill. Arun and Adil Turki say they take precautions to make sure the information they receive is accurate.

Arun says the first safeguard is working with reliable reporters, either recommended by international news organisations and preferably who have been checked out by IWPR themselves. The second defence, as he puts it, is to compare a story with what is already out there. Arun and his colleagues often commission other reporters to check details in the story. If he knows another reporter in the same town, he may have Adil Turki call him up and ask whether a certain shop mentioned in the story is on the street that the first reporter said it was (Arun 2010). The story is spiked (rejected) if there are any suspicions that the story is not right. It might also be spiked if the story itself checks out – but the way it was sourced is not transparent (ibid), as in the case of the Mahdi Army car wash.

Gabriel Gatehouse also had problems with sources when working with stringers at the BBC office in Baghdad. In 2009-10, Gatehouse checked a series of Reuters reports of a car bomb in another town and realised that the details he was receiving from his ‘second source’ were always identical to the first (Gatehouse 2011). For whatever reason, the stringer was cagey about whom he was talking to. ‘You would intuit something was wrong because AP and AFP always had a different version of events from us. But with Reuters it was always the same,’ says Gatehouse. ‘So we had to find another source’ (ibid).

As a rule, Arun says, his reporters were forbidden from sub-contracting their stories. It was permitted only in exceptional cases, where a reporter had no other means of gathering the information. Then too, only the most reliable reporters were allowed to use the method – and only under the careful supervision of the editors. Material gathered in this way would be attributed clearly in the published story, for instance to ‘sources interviewed over the telephone’.

While IWPR’s editors placed tight curbs on sub-contracting, they learnt from local journalists who came to them for training that the practice remained relatively widespread in the Iraqi media. After I returned to the UK, Arun told me an interviewee had complained that he had not been accurately quoted (Arun 2010). When questioned, the reporter said he had sub-contracted out the interview in question. Now the two reporters were arguing over who was responsible for the disputed point. Both were banned from working with IWPR.

There are other problems. It is difficult to get across the nuances of questions which are emailed to local reporters – let alone where third parties are involved. In other cases, it is difficult to go beyond the tribal and sectarian loyalties of the local reporters. In the ethnically divided city of Mosul, for example, Arun has used both Arab reporters and Kurdish ones. At times of high tension in the city, it was harder to get certain reporters to do a tough story on their own side.

Arun admits that his less-than-perfect solution in this case was essentially to blend together the accounts of the two or more reporters, giving them both a by-line. He hoped that the sum of the parts was more or less objective (ibid). Further interviews conducted with Iraqi journalists who have not worked with IWPR revealed more about how sub-contracting works in the local media.

Beyond danger, Iraqi journalists also give pressure of work and making extra money as reasons for sub-contracting. One Baghdad-based reporter, who wanted to remain anonymous, does produce work on behalf of other colleagues. He supplies pieces for news websites, newspapers and television and says sub-contracting is widespread (anonymous journalist 2011). This journalist said people were more likely to sub-contract out interviews with people in the street than official interviewees – who are more likely to sue.

This reporter described sub-contracting as a pact between colleagues, hidden from outsiders. He said colleagues often asked him for what he describes as ‘small favours’ such as talking to a soldier at a checkpoint or taking pictures for him while working on a security story with his cameraman (ibid). Another Baghdad reporter, Saeed Ahmed, says: ‘Some journalists outsource stories to immature journalists, although they know that these beginners might file bad copy’ (2011). He knew of one story, where a colleague was asked to interview families about damage to their property after violence in the city. His acquaintance sub-contracted the story out to two reporters, and it was eventually published under his byline. On the question of possibly tainted material Arun stressed:
There are times we didn’t run material because we suspected it was tainted. There was a case recently where I asked for some quotes on the American withdrawal. I asked a reporter in Baghdad to vox pop people about their memories of American soldiers on their streets. He turned up with a telling quote, of an American soldier hurling a water bottle at a car that had got too close to his convoy – as a slightly violent way of telling it to back off. That event, I found out later, takes place in The Hurt Locker, which is available as a bootleg DVD across the country.

I have no idea now whether the reporter saw The Hurt Locker and instead of doing his own research, decided to put that rather cinematic event into the mouth of a person whom he interviewed. Or perhaps the person whom he interviewed saw the Hurt Locker and made it up, based on the film. Perhaps it happened all the time, because American soldiers were constantly using water bottles, short of using their guns, to keep traffic back. I have no idea. But those are the things that keep you awake at night after you’ve filed a story. You suddenly sit bolt upright in bed as you’re drifting off to sleep and wonder whether you’ve been had.

The ‘circle of trust’
During the course of the research, I learnt that Uthman al-Mukhtar in Falluja sometimes relied on a network of trusted reporters to gather quotations. He calls it a ‘circle of trust’. Al-Mukhtar and his colleagues gather news for each other because of security concerns, or because of the large distances they must travel. Anbar province, where Falluja is located, covers a third of Iraq. ‘It would take me four hours with a speed of 140 km per hour to get to Rutba to report on a story,’ he says. ‘By that time, there would be nothing to report. So, I resort to the Circle of Trust’ (al-Mukhtar 2010).

‘It is a well known term among my journalist colleagues.’ He indicated that he could only use the sub-contracting method selectively, given that his clients at international agencies were more likely to object to it than those at local outlets. ‘Editors in Baghdad [that I work for] had serious reservations about us using this technique’ (ibid).

Al-Mukhtar trusts the people who report on his behalf. He also maintains that the system works because his colleagues know what kind of interviewees he is looking for and the kind of questions he likes to ask. ‘They know the style of my work. They know the kind of stuff I want’ (ibid). He recently had to outsource a story to a trusted colleague when he was investigating the killing of two al-Qaeda leaders in an area outside his normal patch. So he commissioned a reporter who was from the same town as the dead men.

Al-Mukhtar acknowledges that sub-contracting out this particular piece of work did affect the end result. ‘I have to admit the story wasn’t quite the same I would have filed if I had gone myself,’ he says. ‘If I had heard with my own ears the cries of the baby, or the moans...of the old man’ (ibid).

Conclusion
When reporting in Iraq became almost too dangerous to do at all, John Burns, of The New York Times, said he believed that the growing use of local journalists merely made a problematic situation even more so. ‘Reporting on any war at any time is difficult. These are new complications on top of old complications’ (cited by Shafer op cit). In fact, international journalists have always relied on fixers and other locally hired help. Sunday Times reporter Jon Swain describes fixers as indispensable (Swain 2009).

Allan Little, of the BBC, says: ‘Without fixers working alongside, I don’t think we’d be able to function at all’ (op cit). Little believes that the use of fixers and locally hired news gatherers actually ‘hugely strengthens’ the traditional model of the foreign correspondent (op cit). This may be true for the diminishing number of foreign correspondents. But locally-hired Iraqi journalists are increasingly autonomous (Murrell op cit). And this way of working is spreading.

‘[Fixers are] still doing the same stuff they always did but they are doing something additional now as well. They are going by themselves to places we as Westerners can’t secure access to. So they’re doing more than ever’ (Little op cit). Certainly Uthman al-Mukhtar in Falluja believes he fulfils an important role. International journalists are unable to walk down a street in Falluja without being escorted by body guards, he says. Reporting like this is superficial. ‘If they interview an individual, they won’t get the whole truth. But we can, because we are in direct contact with people’s daily life and we understand everything about what they do’ (al-Mukhtar op cit).
And when even local journalists cannot cover a story safely, sub-contracting may arguably be the best way to get information from dangerous areas – provided all the sources can be trusted (Arun 2010). At the time of writing, the situation in Iraq has eased somewhat for reporters. According to Salman Adil Turki, there is less need to outsource stories because there is less violence. Journalists know he now concentrating on stories about politics. ‘If you know a bunch of MPs you don’t have to sub-contract or outsource any story,’ he says (op cit).

The sub-contracting model offers unexpected benefits only where it overcomes the serious ethical challenges explored here. Arun and his team did recognise the benefits of sub-contracting out a story in exceptional cases. However, they also evolved ways of verifying that any material gathered in this way was accurate. ‘We would go back endlessly with questions if it wasn’t clear with quotes and context’ (op cit).

They made sure reporters were transparent about their methods – and they reflected the method of sourcing in the published story. All of my interviewees acknowledged that it would be better to ask people questions directly than to rely on phoning sources. ‘In an ideal world you would go on the street and do your interviews with people, your vox-pops and interviews with officials and you would write the story within five to six hours,’ says Turki (op cit). In reality, the reporting process takes much longer. Perhaps this is the future of war reporting.

As Arun says: ‘Just as warfare in Iraq has evolved rapidly, in the same way reporting has also evolved. We’re still learning what this beast is, when we come here from the West and look at it. There’s no existing genus that it fits into. It’s a strange animal’ (op cit).

Future research
It would be useful to conduct a similar exercise with other international journalists in areas of conflict to see how far this model has spread and how it works elsewhere. I am hoping to follow this work up with a trip to the North Caucasus to see how international news agency journalists based in Moscow work with local news gatherers.

Because of security concerns, there are no international journalists based in the North Caucasus. The work-around is for an international editor based in Moscow to run a network of freelances who operate under pseudonyms. Many of the local reporters have been threatened or attacked after their reporting displeased the Russian authorities.

It might also be revealing to investigate the weight given by news desks to local journalists as opposed to employees who are international journalists.

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