

Iraq - Bridging the Gap between Education and the Working Realities of Journalists

MICT - Media in Cooperation and Transition is a non-profit agency that specializes in the training of journalists and media producers, program and content development, as well as media monitoring in conflict zones. Since its founding in early 2004, MICT has been undertaking media-related projects together with Iraqi activists, journalists, artists, and media producers on political and cultural topics in Iraq. Training of journalists was and still is essentially part of these activities.

Educational programs for journalists in Iraqi universities and vocational schools are hopelessly outdated and still strongly tied to the journalistic methods employed during the reign of Saddam Hussein. University teachers and curricula have changed very little in recent years despite the drastic transformations the country is otherwise going through.

More than in universities and schools, education in journalism is most often achieved through programs offered by media outlets themselves, or by international institutions such as Deutsche Welle, BBC World Service Trust, IWPR, Reuters, International Media Support, and IFJ – to name just a few of the organizations active in the field of media development in Iraq. Qualification programs offered by foreign institutions are greatly needed and highly appreciated by the journalists and the media outlets which benefit from them. The combined efforts of foreign institutions and media outlets in the country, have led to remarkable improvements to the quality of journalism in Iraq over the last few years.

The primary problem with working in Iraq, however, is that foreign professionals are not realistically able to enter the country and stay for any extended amount of time. It is all but impossible to run offices in Baghdad, or for Western organizations to run training courses on location. Instead, training is usually conducted outside of Iraq in neighbouring countries or even in Europe, depending upon the sources of financial support. Training programs thus tend to be highly expensive and, as a consequence, rather condensed in terms of time and content. This problem is aggravated by the fact that good journalists are hard to find within the country, and that managers of media outlets cannot afford to allow their best team members to take any time off of work for more than a few days. Under these circumstances, a patchwork of short, specialized and intensive training programs conducted outside the country has emerged in Iraq.

Although Iraqi journalists have clearly taken advantage of this diversity of educational input, education remains detached from the realities on the ground: training is factually detached from the working conditions of journalists in Iraq and the specific problems these journalists have to deal with. Among these problems is the extraordinary lack of security, the daily risk of life, the absence of a rule of law but also the political affiliation of media with parties and other interest groups that have a strong impact on the work of journalists. Under these circumstances a substantial share of newly acquired skills fades away in the transition from training to actual work. One result is that, though journalists tend to know a lot about good journalism *in theory*, the actual level of writing – when compared to the theoretical knowledge gained – often remains rather low.

A number of strategies have been implemented to help bridge the gap between learning and working. One of these strategies is involving Iraqi or Arab experts as teachers in the training process rather than relying simply on foreign experts. Another is designing qualification programs not as single units but as series of learning units, in which the same group of journalist takes part from beginning to end. Another strategy has been moving training sessions to Erbil, in the North of Iraq, which has become a relatively safe area over the past years.

MICT's strategy for overcoming the gap is a systematic combination of both productive and educational elements in our projects. Work-related and learning components are systematically intertwined.

How is that strategy implemented?

Over the past two years, MICT has created a number of radio productions in Iraq which deal with cultural and political issues such as that of federalism in Iraq, women's issues, freedom of speech and the elections in 2005. These projects were each designed as a series of radio shows, produced and broadcasted in cooperation with a network of six to ten Iraqi radio stations and in cooperation with a

network of Iraqi journalists. Embedded in the workflow were the following learning components:

- (1) *Training*: the production starts and ends with a training session. Experiences from the joint production can be reflected on and used as material in the training. The latter is focussed on the demands of the joint production.
- (2) *Coaching*: While working in the project, the participating journalists submit their contributions to an external expert (in most cases identical with the trainer) who provides feedback and advice on how to improve the given piece. Participants in the project receive constant feedback regarding the quality of their work.

When learning components such as these are merged with the working process, a high level of learning deeply anchored in the working environment itself can be achieved.

Another example of how to increase sustainability through the integration of work-related and training elements is the project NIQASH. www.niqash.org is a website in three languages covering the political transformation taking place in Iraq. The website has been managed by MICT for the past three years. Contributions to the site are delivered by a network of about twenty journalists from all parts of Iraq. Coverage of Iraqi politics thus comes from within and throughout the country. The embedded learning components are:

- (1) Articles are submitted to the editor in chief of the website. That person in turn provides the authors with systematic feedback regarding quality aspects of their work.
- (2) The journalists writing for the website are invited to training sessions on a regular basis. The content of the training programs is designed in close correlation to demands articulated by the journalists involved.

The continuity of cooperation, in combination with the integration of on-the-job training components, has led to a significant increase in journalistic competence among NIQASH journalists over the past three years.

There are other European NGOs in Iraq that are actively supporting Iraqi journalists and that have managed to overcome the gap between training and professional work. IWPR has established an office in Sulimaniya and is offering ongoing journalist training programs for Kurdish and Arab journalists. The courses are visited by a growing community of journalists – both men and women – from all parts of the country. Another example: BBC World Service Trusts founded the radio station Al-Mirbad in the southern city of Basra in 2004 and continuously provides training opportunities for the staff in Iraq as well as in the UK. These are examples of successful qualification programs that will help to improve the spread of high quality information throughout the country.

In a Training Needs Assessment, IREX and the BBC World Service Trust recently recommended that the “demand for basic journalism training should be integrated into more complex projects, rather than conducted on a short-term, ad-hoc basis” and that “media development projects in Iraq need to include a built-in incentive to Iraqi media organisations to implement the acquired skills and develop a training tradition internally.” I would like to express my complete agreement with these findings and add that journalist training programs offered by Western NGOs in Iraq should seek to strengthen any possible links to the actual working processes involved and the working conditions experienced by media producers on the ground.