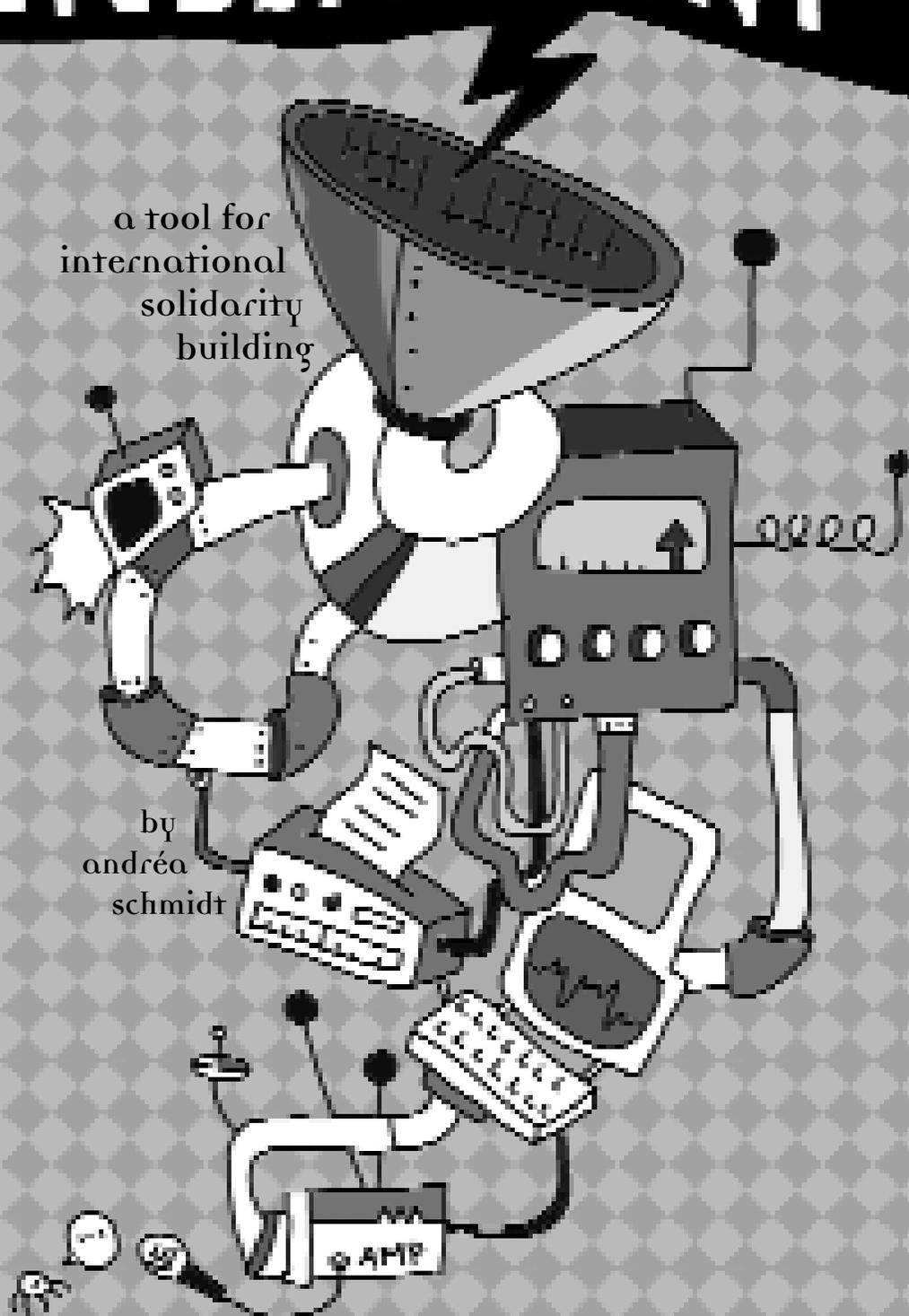


INDEPENDENT

a tool for
international
solidarity
building

by
andréa
schmidt



REPORTING

“Stupid people think this area is crazy or ali baba (full of thieves) or something but when people come to the area they see that this is life. This is human, this is also human, I think.” Khalid's voice is alternately musing and firm with conviction as he reflects on the world beyond the taxi we are in. Out of all the reports I did from Baghdad, this is my favourite. It is a radio interview with Khalid and Ahmed, two young men who live in Thawra, a slum on the east end of Baghdad that is home to approximately two and a half million predominantly Shiite Iraqis. The neighbourhood and the people who live there were largely isolated throughout the era of Saddam Hussein's Baath regime. During that time, Thawra's name, which is Arabic for revolution, was changed to Saddam City; the schools and hospitals were decimated; the political repression was brutal; and foreign journalists and other visitors from abroad were kept out by secret police.

During the first year of the occupation of Iraq in 2003, Thawra remained isolated by poverty and was more or less ignored by the international corporate media and by independent reporters because it was not a centre of overt military resistance to the occupation. And like poor urban areas all over the world, it was regarded with fear and disdain, even by the wealthier members of its own society. Later on in April of that year, Thawra, known by then as Sadr City, would grab the international media's attention as Moqtada Al-Sadr, a young Shiite cleric, led the Mahdi army—a militia recruited primarily from the ranks of unemployed young men from the area—in an uprising against U.S. occupation forces.

But the interview with Khalid and Ahmed was done before all that. It was really just a recording of our conversation in Ahmed's beat-up old taxi as they gave me a tour of the neighbourhood where they had grown up. They talked about the history of the area and pointed out how members of the community had organized against the chaos of ongoing poverty and occupation. Networks of mutual aid were being coordinated through the

mosques, and committees had been established to direct traffic, distribute food, and form militias to defend the neighbourhood. During our ride, they explained the names and histories of different ayatollahs (the highest-ranking and most learned Shiite religious authorities) and sayyeds (descendents of the Prophet Mohamed) honoured in ubiquitous posters. They speculated about why everyone said it was too dangerous to go to Sadr City. They spoke of their own longing for justice and for freedom and of their hopes and fears for their occupied and brutalized country.

I had left Montréal for occupied Iraq a month and a half earlier, arriving in February 2004, almost a year after the U.S./U.K. invasion. During the three months I spent living in Baghdad as a delegate of a Montréal-area solidarity project, I wrote a series of reports about daily life under occupation that were distributed through email networks and re-posted to various websites. I also produced an almost-weekly radio segment for CKUT 90.3 FM's Community News Collective. As darkness fell that evening in Thawra and we drove on to the sounds of Muharram music playing in the streets, I imagined Khalid and Ahmed's words transforming familiar Montréal apartments on the radio waves of CKUT 90.3 FM, calling the inhabitants of each room to mobilize and act for the justice these two young men wished to see.

Activists like myself land in places like Iraq, Palestine, Chiapas with big aspirations. We arrive wanting to stand in solidarity with peoples resisting occupation and struggling for self-determination. Often, we come from the very North American and European countries that are perpetrating and supporting their oppression and impoverishment. And frequently, we have only a limited knowledge of the history of the regions or the peoples we seek to support, a precarious grasp of the local language, and organizing skills developed in the streets (or universities) of cities like Montréal, New York, or London. We show up carrying digital cameras, mini-disc recorders, cell phones, video cameras, and laptops—the tools of independent reporters—and a conviction that these are also the tools of solidarity.

At best, different forms of activist media can be used to foster international solidarity with people and movements struggling to resist forms of occupation, genocide, and economic exploitation. Independent reporting, blogging, photography, radio reporting, and audio and video documentary-making can be ways of projecting the voices of those people who are on

the front-lines of the struggles and who live each day with the consequences. Their voices, efforts, and aspirations are rarely acknowledged, let alone amplified, by international media reports. Our goal as solidarity activists and independent reporters is to present a radical challenge to a global order that is fundamentally unjust. It is a global order shaped by the practices of Western states, whose elites deploy military invasions and establish asymmetrical trade relationships in countries and communities around the world to facilitate the siphoning of natural resources and the exploitation of people. To be truly subversive of this order, activist reporters must go beyond simply streaming these front-line voices back to North America and to Europe.

The twenty-minute radio piece that developed out of my conversation with Khalid and Ahmed is a good starting point for reflecting on the task of building international solidarity through independent reporting. I like to think that piece achieved some of the most important aims of independent reporting used for that purpose. To begin, it amplified the voices of two young Iraqi men who are not part of the political or economic elite and who therefore do not have access to international media or to an audience of activist and progressive radio listeners in North America. It offered those listeners a glimpse of Thawra and occupied Iraq as the much-loved home of two young men with hopes and aspirations for themselves, for their neighbourhood, and for their country. In so doing, it undermined the portrayal of Thawra by international media, the occupation authorities, and the former Iraqi elite as a no-go place characterized by brutality and criminality. The report also destabilized the international media's silent claim that the only parts of Iraq that are important enough to report on are those where there are battles between occupation forces and armed Iraqi resistance fighters.

Activist reporting as an autonomous media practice does not simply offer the possibility of subverting the dominant narratives and portrayals established by the corporate media about what is going on in places of struggle around the world. In projecting the words and voices from those who are seldom heard, explaining the significance, the costs, and the hopes of their struggles, media activists seek to catalyze active and effective solidarity movements in their countries of origin. Given the ways in which global power and privilege operate, these are frequently the very countries which are directly perpetrating or indirectly supporting the occupations, genocides, and economic pillage in the places to which we travel and

from which we report. This makes the prospect of contributing to the development of solidarity movements that are effective inside the belly of the beast—within the well-defended borders of Western nation-states, and close to their centres of political and economic power—vital to this form of activist media.

This contribution can take many forms, depending on the characteristics of the movements it is meant to support, their locations, and their activities. For example, in Palestine, another occupied land, members of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) routinely send out email reports describing the day-to-day forms of humiliation and violence survived by Palestinians in prisons, at checkpoints, on the street after curfew, and in their homes. The emails of ISMers also give accounts of demonstrations, direct actions, and other acts of resistance to the occupation in which they have participated alongside Palestinians. These email reports are easy to mass distribute and to copy and reproduce in flyers, 'zines, and newspapers. By writing and disseminating these email reports, ISMers seek to contribute to the awareness-raising efforts of Palestine solidarity organizations in Western countries, as they campaign to persuade financial institutions to divest from Israel or demand that their governments take a stand at the United Nations against Israel's violations of international law and apartheid policies.

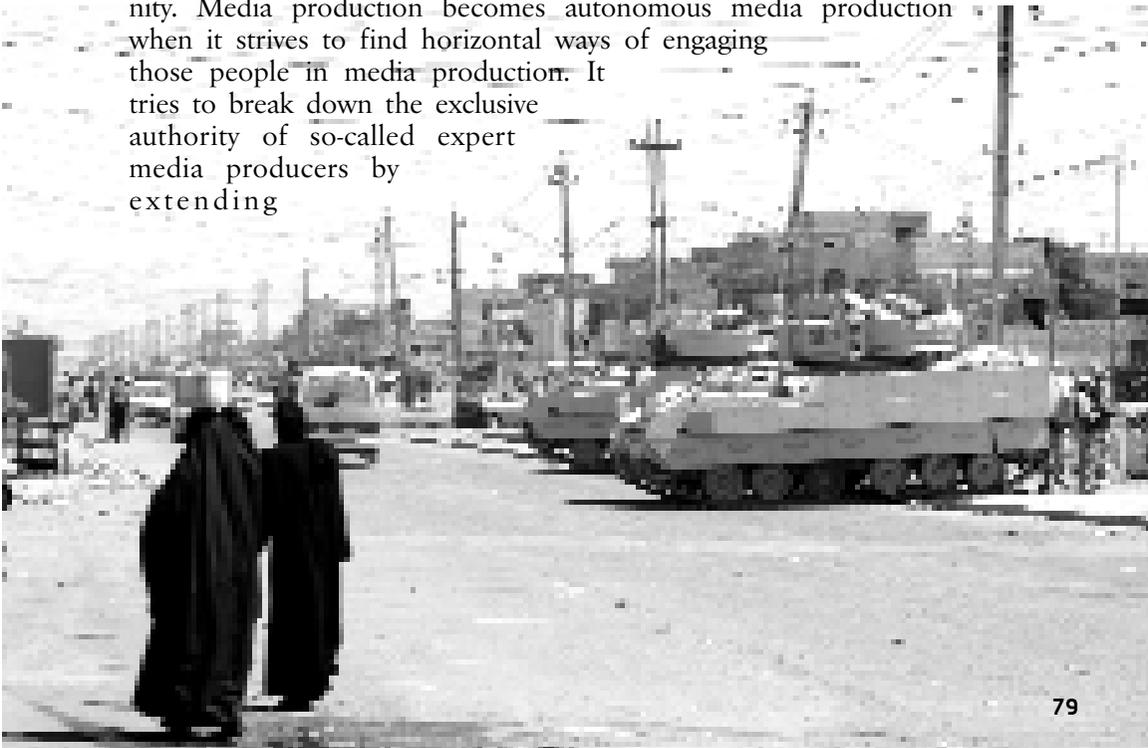
Reports written by media activists in Iraq have focused on the destruction of Iraqi neighbourhoods by occupation forces' tanks and rockets, or on families' experiences of house raids and detention by the military. Like the ISM reports from Palestine, they have been a key component of North American and European anti-occupation groups' campaigning efforts to demand that state governments and corporations collaborating and profiting from the occupation withdraw their support. Anti-war and anti-occupation groups have reproduced and circulated interviews with Iraqis who are living the reality of military violence and economic theft by U.S./U.K. military forces and corporations on websites, blogs, and email lists. They have tried to use the reports of media activists to re-focus public attention on those who are most affected by the occupation but most frequently eliminated from media reports and occupiers' calculated statements. The way in which North American media keep careful track of U.S. military casualties in Iraq, but are quite lax in their reporting of Iraqi deaths at the hands of occupation forces, is a basic example.

Activist reporting, as a tool of international solidarity, attempts to link local and global struggles, trying to build a bridge between two localities that compels people in one struggle to take action that supports the desire for justice and the right to self-determination of people in another. As it forges this connection, activist reporting calls on its audience not only to be active participants in its reproduction and dissemination but also in the actions and activities of solidarity movements themselves.

the failures of activist reporting: repeating colonial patterns

The activist reporting that I observed in Iraq lived up to neither its own potential as a practice of international solidarity, nor to the principles of openness and participation promoted in the concept of autonomous media. It is worth being critical of activist reporting practices in Iraq—and in all the other places around the globe that have become international solidarity hotspots—because that critique is a way of articulating what independent reporting as an international solidarity building tool could be.

In theory, autonomous media aims to amplify the voices that are drowned-out by dominant discourses in order to critique, challenge, and ultimately transform the oppressive economic, political, and social institutions that mute those voices or make them incomprehensible. Autonomous media producers recognize that these voices are not their objects but that they belong to people with agency and with dignity. Media production becomes autonomous media production when it strives to find horizontal ways of engaging those people in media production. It tries to break down the exclusive authority of so-called expert media producers by extending





the tools and skills of media production to as many people as possible, and by drastically re-conceiving the conventional relationship between a media producer and his or her subject as a collaborative relationship of complicity between a multiplicity of potential media producers.

Far from drastically re-conceiving anything, activist and independent reporters in Iraq operated much like the corporate media teams stationed in Baghdad. True, we were not embedded within the U.S. military; we adamantly refused to be co-opted so blatantly into the occupation authority's propaganda machine. Furthermore, most of us did not stay in hotels protected by occupation forces or mercenary militias, shielded by blast walls and razor wire. We usually shunned the militarized exterior and the internal decadence of marble lobbies and turquoise pools as absurd and offensive manifestations of expatriate wealth, and stayed instead in homes, apartments, or, if necessary, in cheaper hotels. At a time when the non-Arab staff at CNN was not allowed to leave their hotel after 5 p.m., we functioned autonomously in that we told ourselves we could go wherever we needed to go, whenever we needed to go there.

And when we went, we took battered taxis, not giant SUVs manned by private security.

But although our living arrangements may not have been luxurious, our solidarity reporting repeated a structure of information extraction and flow that is very much characteristic of a traditional colonialist relationship between the metropolis and the colonies. Nineteenth-century Belgian explorers travelled to the Congo to extract precious minerals they would send back to enrich their countries' coffers. English anthropologists journeyed to India to extract knowledge of the natives' behaviour to send

back to British centres of scientific learning. In the same way, independent reporters arrived in Iraq with a pre-formulated agenda—to denounce the U.S./U.K. invasion and occupation—and went about extracting the experiences, encounters, and quotes that would allow us to send convincing dispatches home.

One of the problems with this model of activist reporting, if it strives to realize the anti-authoritarian promises of autonomous media, is that the information flows only one way—from Iraq (the colonized country) to the West (the colonizing states). Autonomous media aspires to be open, horizontal, and to promote the participation of both its intended audiences and those whose voices it amplifies. It flows in many directions at once. Activist reporting from Iraq and Palestine deliberately calls its European and North American audiences to action. But seldom, if ever, did the activists sending reports from the North American and European anti-war and anti-occupation movements engage their Iraqi interlocutors in the process of media production. Seldom did we make it a priority to ask Iraqis to frame the questions to which they would respond, nor did we approach the people interviewed for their reactions to and critiques of the reports we had produced.

To the extent that it can be considered a genuine part of autonomous media, independent reporting usually draws its political vitality, creativity, and subversiveness from its accountability to social movements. For an example close to home, what makes activist reporting special, as produced by CKUT Montréal’s Community News Collective, is not that CKUT’s reporters and producers have perfectly honed political frameworks or direct access to some pure truth regarding the issues they cover. What makes it exceptional is the fact that the people who produce the reports are often in close relation to the movements they broadcast. CKUT listeners hear advocates of migration justice interviewing members of non-status movements, members of anti-poverty groups doing documentaries on gentrification and homelessness in the city, or survivors of the child removals system collectively creating a series on various aspects of that system.

These media producers have intimate knowledge of the politics they address, and have long-term relationships and commitments to individuals and groups within these movements. This makes both interesting and accountable reporting possible. Indeed, the people who constitute those movements are bound to hear, read, or watch the final reports. They can

and do respond to them, calling the claims of the activist reporters into question or adding to them. In the process of autonomous media production, engaged audiences are also the engaged political agents who can use the reports as a jumping-off point for ongoing reflection and debate about movement principles, strategies, and/or activities.

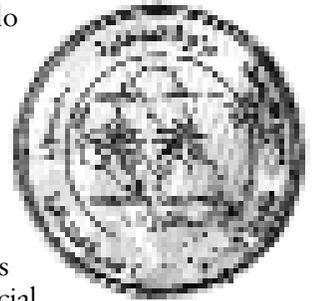
In contrast, activist reporters from North America and from Europe tended to have poor connections to Iraqi communities, particularly those that were the most repressed, impoverished, and isolated by Saddam Hussein's regime. This is not surprising, given the history of dictatorship within the country, and of Western intervention and aggression against both the country and the region—a context into which, like it or not, activist reporters arrive as foreigners from invading nations. However, there were remarkably few concerted attempts by independent journalists to develop longer-term, sustainable relationships with those communities or neighbourhoods, let alone with emerging social movements, that would have allowed for collaborative media production or multi-directional flow of information and debate.

Building longer-term relationships, whether in Iraq or elsewhere, confronts activist journalists with a number of challenges. The first set of issues is most pressing for, and maybe even specific, to activist reporters. The other two sets of challenges are of concern to all international solidarity activists.

First, there are the issues of time and productivity. As activist journalists, we take pride in our ability to work quickly to meet deadlines and to move unflinchingly to secure the interviews, meetings, and stories that we want to produce. Those are the trademark skills and qualities that define us. Both journalists and activists feel pressure to hit the ground running, to get organized, and to produce reports as soon as we arrive in a given place. Waiting two or three days for good contacts is frustrating; the notion of living in and getting to know the people and social terrain of one neighbourhood for a year before producing a single report is almost unimaginable. The pressure to produce reports rapidly is compounded by the fact that activist reporters are frequently funded by movement organizations expecting to see the immediate results of their financial support. For independent reporters witnessing the daily violence and profound injustice of occupation, corporate colonialism, and genocide in regions

around the world, the pressure to produce is also heightened by a legitimate sense of moral urgency to do something.

Secondly, to build relationships, particularly relationships that lead to greater solidarity, activist reporters, and solidarity activists in general, need to know what groups they want to build those relationships with. And those groups must be organized enough to be able to determine their relationship with foreign solidarity activists—organized enough to invite us to work alongside them or produce media with them, and ready to ask us to leave when we are no longer useful. If indigenous groups and organizations of this sort are not inviting us to be there as activist journalists, or if we cannot hear or identify those groups, then our journalistic skills cannot be used to build truly horizontal forms of international solidarity. In these circumstances, our journalism can't really fulfill the transformative goals of autonomous media. This is not to argue, however, that we cannot do perfectly respectable conventional journalism, but activist journalism in the service of international solidarity building and conventional journalism are two distinct projects.¹



Finally, the process of building long-term political relationships in conflict zones is an inherently complicated one. It may well involve negotiating relationships with a range of political parties, organizations, or social movements that make competing claims to be speaking for the people. This is a particularly fraught question in places like Iraq, in which the American occupiers—like Saddam's Baathist dictatorship and the British colonizers before them—exploit the religious, ethnic, and political differences to mitigate popular resistance to their oppression using divide and conquer strategies. Moreover, it is slow work to build political or personal trust in places crawling with informants and secret service and in which communities facing brutal state and military repression have developed a justified skepticism of people arriving from outside.

These dilemmas and challenges are significant. While the uneasy relationship between the desire to produce reports, on the one hand, and the need to do the slow work necessary to build accountable and long-term relationships, on the other, might never be perfectly resolved, it is clear



that the failure to prioritize the development of long-term relationships undermines the potential of autonomous media for solidarity building.

In the context of occupied Iraq, the consequences of that failure were particularly glaring. While I was there I observed that it effectively limited independent reporters to making interventions that followed the same schedule and pattern as the international corporate media. We chased the same bombs and explosions, and reported on current events as they were announced from the Coalition Provisional Authority's press theatre in the Green Zone—though it is possible that our vantage point in the Red Zone lent a different flavour to our reports. We relied on the same translators and fixers to set up meetings and to interpret for us during interviews.

Consequently, we tended to frame our reports with the same stifling and impossible-to-answer question as the corporate media. The question that was surreptitiously posed to any Iraqi who met a Western reporter during the first year of occupation: “Was life worse before the invasion, or after—under Saddam, or under the Americans?” The result was relatively superficial, one-tone reporting, in and of itself worthy of condemnation. But all the more deserving of criticism is the method of media production that gave rise to the question—or failed to give rise to better ones. Activist journalists seeking to build the sort of solidarity that can undermine and transform global systems of domination that powerful transnational elites are committed to maintaining should never be content to ask people living and struggling under a brutal military occupation whether one brand of fascism is better or worse than another. The fact that we couldn't come up with better questions to ask suggests that we hadn't built the sort of trusting and respectful relationships that would have allowed us to frame questions able to give expression to Iraqi aspirations—their aspirations for so much more than what exists under

occupation or what had existed under Saddam's regime. I don't think it is a stretch to believe that the same collaborative relationships that could have provoked us to ask anti-fascist questions would prove to be a strong basis for international solidarity and to be sustainable even when the violence and devastation of the occupation stops headlining the news.

harnessing the transformative potential of autonomous media

It is not impossible to imagine a different practice of independent reporting that would genuinely live up to the anti-authoritarian promises of the autonomous media movement that has engaged activists around the world. Such a practice would both rely on and help to foster relationships, discussions, and debates between individual solidarity media activists, as well as the broader movements that support them and rely on them for information.

Independent reporting within an autonomous media context would involve a willingness on the part of activist reporters to put aside the deadlines imposed by our daily blog entries and international mass-mobilizations. It would require that we slowly build long-term relationships with individuals, communities, and movements—relationships that privilege a multi-directional flow of information and voices and that require independent reporters to be accountable to the communities featured in their reports.

In this model, each report could be used as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship. A report would be viewed as an opportunity for collaboration with people, not just as an opportunity to ask questions. Completed, it could and should be shared with the people who were interviewed or an even broader group from the community or movements to which they belong. Our



collaborators could then evaluate it, tell us if we have misinterpreted or misused their words and ideas, and engage in debates with us, and with each other, on the political perspective we have brought to our reporting. A report might then be able to function as a catalyst for coordinated international actions within the framework of a solidarity campaign. Or, it might instead illuminate points of political divergence and proximity between our political positions as individuals, between the movements to which we belong, and between the positions internal to those movements.

This practice of activist reporting in the service of international solidarity presupposes that we are wanted and welcomed by a given community or social movement, whether in Iraq or elsewhere. It is very possible that there are times and places in which international solidarity building through activist reporting is not possible because no movement has called on activist journalists to collaborate with them and so no long-term and accountable political relationships can genuinely be developed. I would argue, in retrospect, that such was the case in Iraq. This conclusion points less to the limitations of activist journalism as a tool of international solidarity than to the need for serious reflection about the necessary preconditions for any sort of meaningful solidarity work at all.

Being transparent about our reporting practices and using reporting as an opportunity for collaboration and dialogue could strengthen the capacity of this tool for building international solidarity movements. The strength of relationships built through such a model of independent reporting will be matched by the capacity of activist journalists to bear witness to the dynamics of resistance to occupation, neoliberal exploitation, and genocide carried out across the globe. In a parallel sense, those who practice this type of activist journalism will be more accountable to the communities for which they seek to mobilize solidarity abroad. This practice of collaborative and accountable activist reporting will harness more of the subversive and transformative potential of autonomous media in the interest of building strong, dynamic, and honest international solidarity movements.

عام
على
الإستقلال

“a year of occupation”

notes

¹ While it may seem obvious, it is important to articulate the caveat that activist media projects and independent reporting undertaken as a tool for international solidarity are not the same as indigenous, locally-driven media projects. They do not perform the same functions, serve the same audiences, or open up the same spaces for dialogue, action, or resistance. In Iraq, for example, after the invasion and in the first weeks of occupation, dozens of new newspapers sprang up in Baghdad. Radio Dijla (Tigris Radio)—an Iraqi version of AM talk radio—was launched in the spring of 2004 and provides a forum for Iraqis to speak out about the issues that affect them on a day-to-day basis: lack of security, electricity failure, and the occupiers' empty promises of reconstruction. These Iraqi-driven media initiatives project the voices of Iraqis to other Iraqis, and to the Arab world more broadly, allowing for a range of exchange, political debate and rhetorical and active forms of resistance within Iraq that independent reporting, no matter how collaborative and accountable, never can.

web resources

Andréa's reports from Occupied Iraq: www.en-camino.org/iraqreports

CKUT 90.3 FM: www.ckut.ca

International Solidarity Movement: www.palsolidarity.org

Iraq Solidarity Project (Montréal): psi@riseup.net

Radio Dijla: www.radiodijla.com

