

Interview with Sergei Danilochkin

Director, RFE/RL's Iraq Service

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RFERL: What would you say RFI's primary mission is in 2009, compared to what it was in 2003 or 2004?

Sergei Danilochkin: Well in 2003 and 2004, Saddam was still there and very actively sought for. His [shadow] was everywhere in Iraq. Let's be frank – people were scared, even though he was someplace and nobody knew where he was hiding, still everyone was scared of him. [Back] then, the challenge was to keep delivering people the information that was previously denied to them by Saddam's regime. And it was an act of bravery [to listen to us] – some of our current listeners are telling us stories in which they survived being caught red-handed listening to Radio Free Iraq, because they thought it was the end of the universe for them. An army colonel was caught by one of his subordinates listening to Radio Free Iraq. So now this person is no longer in the army, and he called into one of our call-in programs and told us this story. This is actually why he is still with us, he is still checking how we are [reporting] against others. And I am really happy that he does it regularly, and he actually cares to pick up the phone and call us.

The thing now is that Iraq is going through [a cycle] of transition, from that society under Saddam into what will hopefully be a more free and more democratic society. It's not going to be easy. There are many obstacles, some of them are seen from outside, some of them are seen only from the inside – meaning outsiders do not understand them, while insiders do not really care to tell about how they feel.

The primary goal [is] to keep delivering objective, balanced, unbiased information. In Iraq, it is very important because there are so many factions, so many different shades of opinion, opinions are so intolerant of one another, and there are so many news organizations that belong to political groups and deliver predominantly these groups' political agenda. It is very rare to see something that is not involved in this, that is above it, that cares to bring to the listeners as much information as possible without trying to bend this listener to one side or the other.

Also we do not twist the facts because if you want to present the world in [a certain] way you end up somehow manipulating the facts. Either you do not deliver the full picture, or you try to make things better looking from your perspective. We don't do that. Besides, the [idea] is [that] since we want to deliver as much information as possible...we are trying to present as many points of view as [we can], and put them in a civilized debate, not [using] the gun and bullet and bomb kind of thing. If someone feels they have a point to tell the others, here is the platform for you to tell this point, and to defend this point against other similarly valid points related to the subject. It's not to propogandize your views, but its actually to try to prove that your point is valid and [maybe convince some of those that hold] other points of view. That's the whole idea. For us it is important that Iraqis actually talk to each other, express opinions, are not scared to do that, and are doing it in a civilized manner.

Over there, the Iraqi [officials] looks at us as journalists, as professionals, as foreign company that works there. Which is true, we are a foreign company. But the question there is whether it helps us or not. On many occasions it doesn't [help] but luckily on many more occasions it doesn't matter. It might change. There are instances, we know that people from the media in Iraq are mistreated massively and that spills over to us. Our guys know that our trademark, our image as an independent, balanced, unbiased news organization is our

best defense.

Let's put it this way: Iraqi politicians, they respect us – whether they agree or disagree with the way we operate, whether they like or dislike us personally – they do respect us, because we do not twist [the facts]. Some of them clearly are trying to avoid talking to us simply because they might not like us. They don't pick up the phone, they hang up on us, they find ways. On the ground, it's getting even more complicated, because you have a bunch of armed people there, and you are lucky if those guys are more or less disciplined government [security forces], or somehow organized, but if it is an armed individual who is after your wallet or whatever, you don't know.

Despite all of that, of course, we still have had two people who were killed. Unfortunately one of them was tortured before being killed. We had another person who was kidnapped, but luckily the person was recovered without harm. But that was a very heavy toll on the families and friends of those guys, on the colleagues who were living through the situation, because many were friendly with each other. Again, interestingly enough, we have people of different [religious] beliefs, different sects, different political views, [but] the issue here is our work and our team and our cooperation, it's not about 'I am this and you are that.' We don't care about it. We respect each others feelings, but the way that someone is different from you doesn't get into the way of cooperation.

RFE/RL: What are your thoughts on the recent reports of proposed censorship measures in Iraq? What effect might these have on your operations?

Danilochkin: Iraqi society has this tremendous memory of the past. It is so suppressing that you have to be very careful when you enact anything that is aimed at control on that level. So of course, trying to control the Internet is a very alarming indicator. You can say well, we're trying to root out un-Islamic pornography. Where is this limit to control? What is pornography, what is not pornography? Can you extend this blanket over some other 'shady' areas that someone finds 'immoral'? How far can you go with that? It's very delicate and very sensitive. So...there should definitely be mechanisms that are watching this situation if it is implemented, but it so far it is not implemented [yet] so we don't know how it's going to [affect us].

We were doing a program about [this censorship issue], and we brought together three people [for] a virtual panel discussion over the phone. Fifteen minutes into this discussion people started arguing to the point that they started screaming at each other, calling each other names. It turned pretty nasty. People ran out of civilized arguments. And actually it was the side that we expected initially to be the most tolerant and willing to keep conversation going, we were very surprised when this person [was the first] to hang up the phone. Interestingly enough, this person called us back a couple minutes later and said, 'Well, you know what, let's continue. Sorry for the outburst, I understand that this was a mistake.' I don't want to ridicule any of the participants of this debate, but it shows how difficult it is to work [in this environment]. For us, I think it's like a medal when we had this. It helped the guys who participated in this debate because they actually saw what happens when you do this. They imagined themselves being caricatured if they were [having this debate in another media outlet in Iraq] and they reconsidered. They didn't arrive at the [same] conclusion, everyone remained at his or her own views, but the idea was that people understood how important it is to keep this dialogue running.

The other thing is that they exchanged their ideas. They tried to understand the other side, the reasons for certain actions [and] for certain reactions. They tried to argue whether [a certain point is] reasonable, is not reasonable, whether people are oversensitive, intolerant, or something like that.

RFE/RL: What is Radio Free Iraq's greatest success in the recent past? What is your greatest challenge at the moment, and moving into the future?

Danilochkin: We have had many things that we could be proud of. Among them, I would select one episode when the issue was not that we were the first ones to cover a story, but the thing was that we got the story right. That was one of our quite recent successes. This was the story when a lot of media reported that there was a coup d'etat in Iraq, and it wasn't there. And we were under a lot of pressure, because a lot of agencies were coming out with stories related to that, and our colleagues on the ground were saying that angle on the story [was incorrect]. So it is very difficult for any editor to go against the stream when everyone is reporting. To break the story is easy. But to go against the stream [is harder]. For us, it was important to keep our integrity was in reporting things as they are, and although this evidence [seemed] to be piling up, it was based on information that was partially unchecked. But the intensity of this evidence was piling up so quickly that it was very difficult to say that we see something different. We made this decision as a group, and the group members stuck to this decision, despite this pressure, this adrenaline in the blood that 'this is a breaking story, why are we late.' But we trusted our sources, we trusted our colleagues on the ground who were indicating [something] different. So that was I think the biggest success.

Disappointing also is when we get some story and we can't report it. We get it either at a time when we are not on air live, or we get the story but we cannot transmit it from the bureau to the broadcast headquarters, and recently we had a couple of occasions when that happened [due to] inadequate equipment.

The overall largest challenge is to keep everyone safe and alive in Iraq. That's the biggest challenge. We can't protect the guys [easily because] we don't have the guns, we don't have the tanks, we don't have aircraft.

Resources is also the most painful thing that we can talk about. It's technical equipment. We are trying to be a 21st century, multiple media news organization, which means technology. If there is no electricity, the 21st century news organization doesn't produce anything, because everything runs on electricity. So we are at the level when electricity can paralyze us. Our lines are very slow, our phone communications are not dependable, we have only one land line in the office in Baghdad. So everything is dependent on mobile networks. It's better than nothing. People can actually do better with their mobile phones moving around.

We received a story, this [stringer] sends us an audio story [in the early afternoon], and then he sends us a picture. And he says 'You know what? Expect two more pictures by 2am tomorrow.' Why? 'Because the current speed of my internet will not allow me to upload it faster.' So I understand he is not sitting in some high-tech Dubai office. But we are a professional organization. We are competing with others.

We still have some equipment in Baghdad which bears the marks of the explosion which happened in November 2005. Which is good, it's running, and we are saving every dime. Because we could have said 'Look at this dent in this thing, we need to replace it.' Technicians recently sent a picture of one such kind of artifacts, saying, 'Well, this computer is very good, except that nothing but the screen and keyboard works.' So, there is no sound card, there is no...you can't listen to anything, you can't use [an external] mouse, you can't do this, you can't do that...but it is still able to record, so we are still using this computer to record just the feeds from [Iraqi] television. On one hand, it's funny, and it's good that the guys are trying to use every resource we have.

Whenever we are losing someone from our team, that is, [when] some person goes elsewhere, we can only [console ourselves] by thinking that actually, someone else is getting a pretty good journalist. I have to say that our journalists are quite precious [commodities] in Iraq. Lots of news organizations are eyeing our guys, so this is a challenge as well.

RFE/RL: Some people might find it odd that a Russian is the head of RFE/RL's Iraq Service. How did you manage to find yourself in this position?

Danilochkin: I would have never dreamed actually, frankly speaking, to even become a member of the Iraqi service. The Iraqi service needed a replacement for the management, and the reason was that the service was supposed to be closed in 2004, so they needed somebody to run the service temporarily until its final day on air. I think the reason that they finally selected me was not because I was Russian, but because I have some training and background in the Middle East, I do speak Arabic -- which is not the most important part here because I never go on air, and there is a reason for that -- and also at that point [in time] I was doing some reporting on Iraq, so I was kind of in the picture. So I guess that was a number of reasons why I was selected.

I was told during the brief course of crisis management that I received, the trainer looked at me and said, 'So you are the one who will run the Iraqi service to its closure?' And I said 'Well, yeah I was picked, and that was the decision.' And she said yeah 'Ah, well now I understand.' And I said 'What, what's the problem?' and she said, 'Oh, your look. It's completely foreign to the Iraqis who work in the service.' And that's true. I have pale complexion. Light eyes, light hair, completely different from what you'd expect from [an Iraqi]. And of course, this causes some psychological tension, so she said, 'You have to work on it, because whether you like it or not, people [might] feel uncomfortable talking to you.' I don't know how much that [was] true...but I'm glad we don't have any problems of that kind.

Sometime in the middle of that project, we found out that the service was not going to be closed. So that's how I found myself on a temporary assignment that turned out to be several years worth of work. I was really very happy [when] it became clear that the service was not going to be shut down by a certain date, because I thought that really it had a reason to exist, and it still has a reason to exist, I believe. The reason is changing as the situation in Iraq is evolving. The question here is that the service is also evolving, trying to adapt itself to the new tasks and challenges, and I think that is the reason for the vitality [of the service].

We managed to keep as many listeners who used to listen to us over the years...because from the beginning the service was very much Iraqi-oriented, and we [have maintained] this. The Iraqis clearly see that all we do is about Iraq, for the Iraqis, and by the Iraqis and that is the reason why I never go on air. I mean, I was on air a couple times just saying 'hello' or 'Happy New Year' when other people were doing it in a chorus. But that's basically how it is. My job here is not to deliver the news, but to create conditions [so] that the service can most effectively do this job of creating and delivering the news.

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