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Unembedded, an American Journalist Keeps Focus on Iraqis

by Jon Letman

The U.S. corporate media have been widely criticized for their refusal to question the Bush administration's motives and assertions during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Armed with one-sided experts and pundits, the media fanned the passions of the American public, acting as a kind of perverse cheerleader for war with slick TV graphics and interactive maps more reminiscent of a military arms trade fair than a news report.

One American who was repulsed by what he calls "the corruption of mainstream media" was Texas-born **Dahr Jamail** who was working as a mountaineering guide and rescue ranger in Alaska when the invasion commenced. So incensed was he that Jamail went to Iraq himself on four separate occasions between November 2003 and February 2005, during which time he reported for eight months as an unembedded journalist.

Jamail's reporting was based on firsthand interviews, for which he traveled alone with Iraqi interpreters unaccompanied by military or security. He focused on those who bore the brunt of the U.S. invasion - the Iraqis themselves. In June 2005, Jamail presented his exhaustive report "**Iraqi Hospitals Ailing Under Occupation**" as evidence at the World Tribunal on Iraq in Istanbul. Since reporting in Iraq, Jamail's work has been featured in *The Nation*, the *Independent*, the **BBC**, *Democracy Now!*, and countless other news outlets from Europe and Asia to the Middle East and Australia.

Today the bulk of his reporting is for **Inter Press Service** (IPS), an international news cooperative which focuses on global events from the perspective of the developing world.

As the situation in Iraq has deteriorated for journalists (according to the **2007 Reporters Without Borders Annual Freedom of the Press Report**, 2006 was the deadliest for media workers since the start of the war), it became clear to Jamail that to continue reporting independently from Iraq was to risk not only his own life, but those who he worked



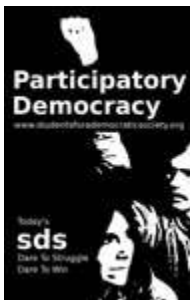
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with, and so he returned to the U.S.

Jamail's coverage of the American occupation of Iraq continues today and has been cited as vital by prominent names in independent media like **Jeremy Scahill** and historian **Howard Zinn**. Speaking recently at the Socialism 2007 conference in Chicago, independent Australian film maker **John Pilger** called Jamail's reporting "courageous journalism."

But Jamail will be the first to tell you he doesn't work alone. In fact, his story bylines don't even list him, but rather two Iraqi freelance journalists with whom he collaborates. "Ali Al-Fadhily" and "Ahmed Ali" (aliases to protect themselves) were befriended by Jamail during his time in Iraq.

Today, Jamail works out of his Berkeley, California office but is in daily contact with Al-Fadhily and Ali, serving as their editor and fact-checker for stories they file by e-mail and phone.

"If you look at a *New York Times* article on Iraq, their journalist is named at the top of the story. This is someone sitting in a very heavily guarded compound which most journalists don't leave except to embed or go to the Green Zone. At the bottom, there are anywhere from one to three Iraqi names. Those are the actual journalists, the ones who risk their lives to get the story back to the *Times* journalist in the bunker," Jamail says.

Jamail and IPS editors agreed it was clear the Iraqis should be getting top credits for their work.

"At Inter Press Agency, we have flipped that model. The Iraqis who risk their lives are the ones getting the credit and majority of the pay. My name is at the bottom of the article as a contributor."

Jamail asserts that the only essential difference between the IPS model and the mainstream outlets is that one journalist is in a fortified compound in Baghdad and the other is on the U.S. West Coast. Both are communicating with Iraqis bringing them information.

In the case of IPS, however, Jamail says it is not parroting the Bush administration's lines.

"You have to be in a coma not to ask what position the U.S. is in to accuse Iran or any other country of interfering in Iraq when America has more than 160,000 troops and supports almost the same number of private contractors." --
Dahr Jamail

Jamail's job, he explains, is to support, facilitate, and amplify the work

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of Al-Fadhily and Ali. Al-Fadhily has also written for Al-Jazeera and other Arabic media outlets.

Iraqi stories for IPS are shaped in two ways. Al-Fadhily and Ali, based in Baghdad and Baquba respectively, follow current stories and file them by e-mail to Jamail or else he writes to the Iraqis and suggests stories based on his own research.



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Jamail trusts Al-Fadhily and Ali to judge which stories are most timely. Thanks to the 11-hour time difference between the U.S. West Coast and Iraq, he is often able to file breaking stories on the morning they occur.

Since Jamail's last stint in Iraq (February 2005), he has returned to the Middle East to report on the plight of Iraqi refugees in Syria and the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in Lebanon. Jamail also attended and reported from the **3rd Annual Al Jazeera Media Forum** in Doha, Qatar last April.



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In the forum's keynote address, veteran investigative journalist **Seymour Hersh** called Jamail's work "very prescient."

Peter Phillips, director of **Project Censored**, a media research group out of Sonoma State University which examines overlooked and under-reported stories, called Jamail "one of those rare reporters who dedicates his life to truth telling."



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"Jamail writes Iraq war news that the corporate media systematically censors or covers up. His Middle East reporting has become necessary reading for those seeking a fuller understanding of this horrendous tragedy," Phillips said.

Jamail has been recognized by Project Censored with four awards for his Iraq reporting.

In the face of the seemingly endless crush of horror and desperation that comes from covering war and occupation, Jamail says that seeing fellow journalists continue their own work motivates him to press on.

When asked if it would be more advantageous for him to continue reporting from a stable area in the Middle East like Amman or Dubai, Jamail says he is considering returning to Damascus for an extended period.

Any return to the Middle East will follow the release of Jamail's forthcoming book ***Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied***

"INTERNATIONAL JOURNALISM AT ITS BEST"
BY SEYMOUR HERSH
BEYOND THE GREEN ZONE
DISPATCHES FROM AN
UNEMBEDDED JOURNALIST

Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq (Haymarket Books) in mid-October.

Jamail says he never intended to write a book but decided he had witnessed enough events firsthand that, for the sake of history, to provide an antidote to how these events have been recorded by the corporate media, he needed to do so.

Beyond the Green Zone is a personal account of what Jamail saw in Iraq, examining the lives of Iraqis under occupation and highlighting the discrepancies between events as he experienced them and how they were reported in the media.

Jamail's unembedded reporting from Iraq was praised by producer, director and executive editor of **MediaChannel.org** Danny Schechter as model reporting.

"When journalism failed to inform us, Dahr Jamail decided to become a journalist. He went to Iraq and sought out the experience of ordinary Iraqis when others relied on 'official sources.'"

Calling Jamail "gutsy but never flamboyant, careful but courageous," Schechter said Jamail reported what he saw, respected his sources, and told the truth.

"When the history of media complicity in this war is finally written, Dahr Jamail will stand out as a conscience and caretaker of journalistic principles," Schechter said.

With support from a virtual pantheon of independent media figures (**Norman Solomon, Naomi Klein, Chalmers Johnson**), and a forward written by journalist Amy Goodman, *Beyond the Green Zone's* release will be followed by a national book tour.

As for returning to Iraq, Jamail is eager to do so, but not at the expense of those with whom he works.

"It is exponentially safer for an Iraqi journalist to work without a Westerner at their side. So until the security risk is acceptable, I won't go back, especially when I've found a way to help my colleagues here," Jamail says.

IN OCCUPIED IRAQ
DAHR JAMAIL
FOREWORD BY AMY GOODMAN



BEYOND THE GREEN ZONE: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq
by Dahr Jamail
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Looking ahead to the end of the Bush presidency, Jamail does not expect any drastic changes in U.S. Mideast Policy, even with a Democratic president in the White House.

"There may be a reduction of forces, but U.S. bases aren't going anywhere. It is simple. There will be no end to occupation; therefore things will continue to worsen for everyone there -- the Iraqis and U.S. soldiers and contractors. Period. Hundreds more troops and tens of thousands of Iraqis will die," Jamail says bluntly.

"The Iraqi resistance to the occupation has done nothing but grow in numbers, organization and lethality, and that trend will only continue no matter how many soldiers are left in Iraq." -- Dahr Jamail

"Until the primary goal of U.S. foreign policy -- to secure resources in the interest of the United States -- changes, there will be no plan for total withdrawal from Iraq."

Jamail adds, with a hint of optimism, "I think we are in an amazing period where the darker things get, the more horrible they become, right along with that, never before have more people been waking up to the reality of the U.S. Empire Project and what it costs, not just Americans, but the world. It is a failed policy and it has to change."

Jon Letman is a freelance writer and photographer based on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. His articles on travel and current events have appeared in numerous publications including the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Seattle Times*, and publications in Finland, Russia, Japan, Canada and the United States.

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