

Nancy Youseff tape 1

Interview

A (0:2)

I am a Pentagon, chief Pentagon correspondent for McClatchy Newspapers. I was a Baghdad bureau chief from August 2005 to January 2007.

Q: (0:18)

Okay, tell us about that.

A: (0:19)

Well, my job is basically (to) manage the staff and to build the staff, teach them journalism and really guide our coverage in Iraq. And so, we train them at the same time; work with them to come up with story ideas and how to approach the Iraq story. And so it was, of course, doing that all while keeping that staff safe and keeping ourselves safe and really thinking progressively about how the story was moving.

Q: (0:47)

Okay, the title of your topic today is how covering Baghdad has changed journalism. How has it?

A: (0:55)

Well, in a lot of ways, the relationship that's developed between the Iraqi fixers and the reporters, really, there's nothing like it, because we depend on them so heavily since we can't go out of the streets ourselves. There used to be fixers that we worked with side by side. But you did the interviews, you had more direct contact with people on the street and now it's getting harder and harder. (1:16) They're really our eyes and ears, and so we are training them. And at the same time, preparing for the day when they're the ones who have to tell the story, when we can't, for whatever reason, go there anymore. And so I think it changes the dynamic in terms of what we do, what they do and what our responsibility is to them.

Q: (1:33)

You mentioned the fixers?

A: (1:35)

They are like translators. And they're sort of a conduit between the community you're covering and ah, and yourself. And so, they'll do translation, they'll sort of keep their eyes and ears open for anything suspicious, they help you generate story ideas. But generally, you really, you took the lead, and then they were sort of the bridge, whereas now they're the keystone of our coverage. And so, they have a much more important role in what we do, and much more direct contact with our readers in a sense. Some of them are carrying bylines now and things of that sort, which didn't, wouldn't, have happened. I don't know if it's ever really happened with such regularity as it is now.

Q: (2:15)

How many fixers did you have?

A: (2:16)

We had 20. Well, we had... let me think, seven around the country and six in the bureau in Baghdad. And there were purposely diverse, half Sunni, and half Shiite from different economic

backgrounds, different stories, and different parts of Baghdad. Because we depended on them so heavily, they were really, they told us everything that was going on in their communities.

Q: (2:37)

A critique of war coverage, in general, has been that the media tends to self censor themselves. Did you feel that's true, (In what way) and in terms of images and, and information in content, in order to you safeguard the military, military plans and things like that.

A: (2:59)

Well, I mean there was, there was times where maybe people didn't give away operational things while in embedded things that sort, but by and large people really committed to telling the story they were risking their lives to be there. And I think they wanted to tell as, as much detail as possible. I think there are some of that, but I don't think it really, fundamentally shifted the coverage in any way.

Q: (3:26)

A brand new journalist comes over to Baghdad? What're some of the main challenges she faces?

A: (3:32)

Well, now, it is almost impossible because of the security situation, because it's so dangerous, because it's so costly to be in Baghdad, given the cost of security. I mean you have to have an armored car now. You have to have guards. You have to have a second car. You have to sort of be around enough people to get intelligence about what's happening in different communities, so that's been sort of cost prohibitive, for new journalists to come in. At the time, when they could, it was really, there was that factor, but it was just finding a company to work with it, and coming up with ways to get the stories on the budget. Because so many organizations were pouring thousands and thousands of dollars into their operations; where if you're a freelancer, it's not an option.

Q: (4:18)

What can one do to prepare themselves to cover Iraq, Baghdad?

A: (4:24)

Well, I think if someone's going to do it, they have to sort of be mentally prepared that it's going to be dangerous and there are a lot of risks involved. And they have to be cautious and that there is a possibility of getting hurt, because you can't be living in fear or you can't do your job. I think that is a huge preparation. I think reading other people's coverage, reading what's happening, knowing the names of the people who were there, knowing what's happening, and talking to other journalists, because it's such a dynamic story, that if you talk to a journalist that's been a year, a year ago, Baghdad or this coverage of it could be fundamentally different. So, I think it takes some talking to a lot of people who have done it, because it's such a unique experience I think only those who have done it, know what it means to be a Baghdad correspondent.

Q: (5:05)

So, let's go examine them. There have been changes in coverage. What kinds of changes in the last several years?

A: (5:12)

Well, the fundamental changes that we are not able to go out nearly as much as we could, when we first got to Baghdad, the whole, err, the whole country was open to us. You could go anywhere at any given time, and explore. And slowly the country's sort of closing and where now parts of Baghdad are sort of off limits. And that's really hard because you can't go to family's houses now. You can't sort of live spontaneously, and you can't go out and get to know people in the way that you could. And so it forces you to re-examine how you report the story, constantly, because that situation is always changing.

Q: (5:47)

Now I want to go back to your time at the Detroit Free Press. (Sure.) What did you do?

A: (5:52)

I covered cops and courts for sort of covering Macomb county and then Detroit.

Q: (5:56)

How did you characterize the relationship between the media, the news media, and the Arab-American community while you were there?

A: (6:03)

You know, it was really interesting, I think, I think that's another relationship that is very nuanced. I think in the sort of post 9/11 world that was changing and evolving and I saw a real evolution and a real effort, and by the Detroit Free Press had balanced that, to cover these events, and cover what the government was saying, and at the same time listen to the Arab-American community as they sort of saw what was happening to them. You know, people were being at the time, brought in and charged, and it was not clear what they were guilty. Their charges were sort of shaky. And so it fell on the Free Press to really expose that, and that was an important story. So that was, that was a changing dynamic. It was no longer about the Arab-American experience. But it was the Arab-American experience vis-à-vis the most important story of our time, in this war on terror. So it really changed that relationship and how we looked at the Arab-American community and what our responsibility was to them. While, at the same time balancing what the administration or what prosecutors said that members of community had done.

Q: (7:07)

Sounds like there that, it improved, coverage improved of the community post 9/11. Do you have any critique at all?

A: (7:16)

Yeah, I just think it got more important in a sense. You know, because of the issues at stake. And I think anyone who, if you were an Arab-American and you are watching the coverage, you want to see more, you want to see more in depth, you want to make sure that Arab-Americans aren't sort of boxed into this category of always being terrorists or suspicious of being terrorists and things of that sort, that the complexity of the community is reflected in the coverage, so that's probably a personal bias I bring to it. But I would always like to see more, because it's such important community not only to the Detroit, but to the nation, and to the world. You go to Iraq, people know about Dearborn, they know about Detroit, so I think, I think capturing all that nuance is really important.

Q: (7:57)

Now, the words, taken several years now, how do you, how do you report on that story when it has been such a big story for a long time.

A: (8:8)

Well, you're creative, you have to think outside of the box, you have to come up with new ways to get at these same issues, the violence, the sectarianism, the inability of government or ability of government, the role of U.S. forces. You really just have to think outside the box, and think of ways readers can relate to the Iraqi experience, I think. So, you, you might do a story, you know, we did a story, for example, on people changing their names. To, Sunnis changing their names so they sound less Sunni, so they won't get to stop at check points. And I did that story because it was the way to deal with the sectarianism without sort telling people the same way. Because one could relate to going to the Secretary of State and changing their name, because their given name was too dangerous, that's something that people, I think, could wrap their minds around. So, I was teach—showing what was happening in Iraq, without force feeding the issues and news in the same terms and the same phrases over and over again.

Q: (8:58)

How about the rest of the Middle East? Do you face the same constraints in coverage than covering the other countries?

A: (9:05)

You know, I was, when you're in Iraq, you're just focused on Iraq all the time, you know, that's all you know, and so I don—I'm not as aware of it, I mean, I imagine, there were constraints, probably not those kinds, because the region is so dynamic, and you can get to those stories in a way, and I don't think the same issues are coming up in exactly the same way. You might experience that in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and I am sure my counterparts there would tell you that they do the same thing, that you're really trying to be new and innovative. And for them, they're all competing with the Iraq story.