

## **JOURNALISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

I scrambled into the back of the pickup as Gen. Rabar Said of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan settled in next to me. He dropped his Kalashnikov between us with the muzzle pointing at my right ear and gazed at it sadly. “I wish I was carrying a pen instead of this gun,” he said. “You are a journalist. How can I be one, too?”

It was Summer 2002 and I was in northern Iraq to see the Kurds’ 11-year-old experiment in self-rule. Said was leading a battalion of *peshmargas* into battle. But he wanted to be a reporter.

His question stuck with me over the years that followed, and grew as I charted a new path in my career. In an era of new media, citizen reporters, and instant global communication, what does it mean to be a journalist?

As a child, I liked the idea that journalists learn something every day, so that’s what I decided to be. In college, my grizzled professors drilled us on the rules that guided Breslin and Bernstein.

“Never play it safe,” they would growl, “follow your hunches.”

I took their worn words of wisdom to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, then to Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism and the Associated Press in New York, where I was the National Cyberspace Writer.

I was thrown into the swirl of online charlatans, idealists, hucksters and visionaries in 1997. I wanted to cover the new media revolution; my editors wanted what I dubbed “gadget porn.” It was frustrating; but covering the online world was reshaping my ideas about journalism.

September 11, 2001. When the first plane slammed into the World Trade Center I ran to

the roof of my East Village apartment to snap pictures of the smoke-blackened scene. Then I ran down and emailed them to my friends and business contacts. For hours I live-blogged a terrorist strike, but without a blog, and before the concept was commonplace.

I was determined to cover the war I knew would grow out of that day. But I was too impatient to go the traditional route. I scraped together my own funds for my first Kurdistan trip in 2002, with an eye toward freelancing. But when I returned, I decided that, also, was too traditional.

On October 2, 2002, I stepped back into the swirl of cyber-life, posting the following on blogspot.com:

“So here's my spiel. I'm looking to go back to Iraq. If people donate to me ... I'll go and report back with pictures and Web reports.

“You'll be supporting independent journalism and an adventure. Plus, you'll be getting something more than a warm and fuzzy feeling out of it: you-are-there reports and pictures that will be emailed to you first before being published anywhere.”

By late March 2003, after Back-To-Iraq.com appeared in *Wired*, I had raised more than \$10,000. On April 4, I crossed back into Iraq with more than 50,000 daily readers following online.

“Call him mad, call him brave, call him an adrenaline-junkie,” one wrote in April 2003, as I posted via satellite from 10 miles outside Iraq. “He's probably all three.”

“I appreciate you putting your life on the line to report to us,” another posted. “Safe travels to you Chris; I'll keep you in my prayers.”

For someone who had always believed in keeping an objective distance from the story, I felt it a little strange about my shared bond with my readers, who now felt invested in

“their” reporter. But it caused me to rethink how I did journalism.

I had no advertisers, no editors and no safety net. What I had were readers who cared about what I was doing, and proved it in words and donations. And it was working. “How can I be a journalist?” The answer, I discovered, was up in the air.

At the time, I was too busy surviving to worry too much about how this new medium might affect my industry — and the business of foreign correspondence. But some believed I had stumbled onto something big.

“Is this the future of journalism?” Business Week mused. “The New York Times may have nothing to worry about, but Allbritton's story hints at a new business model that could remake the lesser tiers of the media world.”

“While some reporters were embedded with the American military, Allbritton sent himself on assignment, never even asking permission to be in the country,” former New York University’s Department of Journalism chairman Jay Rosen wrote. “The Internet did the rest.”

Flattering, but it wasn’t enough for me to be a blogger-on-the-ground. I still valued the professional skills and standards I learned at Columbia and honed as a freelance reporter for magazines and newspapers across the United States and beyond. I had a foot in two worlds and a front-row seat as those worlds collided.

After years of reporting in the Middle East, Said’s query – how can I be a reporter? – remains at the forefront of my mind. Today, in Beirut, I blog, produce Web documentaries, freelance for several newspapers and magazines, and appear on television. I have learned to swap hats quickly, writing an edgy blog entry one moment, a carefully balanced magazine piece the next. But I have realized that answering journalism’s existential query requires

more time and more thought than the life of a foreign correspondent allows.

I realize now that shaping this new media landscape—again—requires intellectual breathing space. The John S. Knight Fellowship offers an opportunity to tackle these issues in a scholarly manner, to synthesize previous lessons and turn them around, examine them and come up with something new—again. For myself and, perhaps, for journalism at large.

I still think about Gen. Said's question in the back of that truck in Kurdistan. I didn't know what to tell him then. Maybe, now, I can help figure out what it means to *be* a journalist in this brave, new media world. Maybe, finally, I can answer the General's question.

*(998 words)*

## **FELLOWSHIP STUDY PLAN**

### **Summary: Foreign news and new media: Bringing the outside world online.**

In August 2004, the Mahdi Army took over the Imam Ali Shrine in the Iraqi city of Najaf and pledged to make a final stand against the U.S. Marines. I was there, dodging sniper bullets, being arrested by Najaf cops and interviewing Mahdi fighters while under fire from American leathernecks. That night, in the relative safety of my hotel, I wrote what I had seen:

... As we began to cross, I looked down to see a wire snaking across the alleyway we were preparing to dart from. It led into a pile of debris, and the casing of an unexploded shell was clearly visible. Great. We were standing on an IED. ...

A touch of the “send” button launched those words to TIME magazine, my contract employer at the time, but also to Back-to-Iraq.com, the Website I launched in 2002 on the strength of reader donations and hope.

Only the year before, TIME’s editors had shut down a reporter’s blog. Now, in a startling reversal they had sanctioned my dual identity and welcomed a journalist/blogger covering the biggest story of the moment.

I relished my hybrid identity, crafting a detailed narrative for America’s biggest news magazine while simultaneously using every multimedia trick in the book—pictures, videos, rapid-fire postings—to bring the siege home to readers. I felt the pieces were comparable;

the online work was, perhaps, even better. Readers agreed.

“The TIME story was fine...but I believe your blog entries were superior,” one reader wrote. “Wow, is all I can say,” wrote another. “CNN and the BBC show me the pictures but you tell the story.”

At the time, I wondered: Were these quick postings, personal dispatches and multimedia presentations the future of foreign correspondence? And if so, could it balance online immediacy and personality with journalistic standards—my standards—of objectivity, accuracy and depth?

Today, the entire industry is struggling with those questions, plus a new one: Can a new form of foreign correspondence emerge that meets readers’ demands for immediate, accurate and informed news in an era of shrinking budgets?

I have a four-year head start in answering those questions. A Knight Fellowship will bring me leagues closer to the answers.

My time at Stanford will come at a unique moment in my career and the industry’s evolution. During my years as a staffer at the AP, the New York Daily News and as a freelance journalist for national newspapers and magazines, I watched the number of American newspapers maintaining foreign bureaus shrink to a handful. Front-page foreign coverage declined 13 percent between 1977 and 2004, according to the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Space in newsweeklies like TIME dwindled by up to 10 percent.

The decline was not for lack of interest: in April 2006, 39 percent of people polled by the Pew Research Center said they followed overseas news closely most of the time. That’s more than twice the level of interest shown for news from Washington.

The real problem was money. It’s costly to maintain foreign bureaus and staffers. New

communication technologies have helped papers find and hire inexpensive stringers, but they can't match the depth and breadth of knowledge offered by an experienced—and expensive—foreign correspondent.

Some media experts saw in Back-to-Iraq a possible alternative—a new breed of experienced foreign correspondent funded directly by readers, not publications. But what worked for me won't work for an established media company; the industry needs something new.

Newspapers today must cut costs, keep readers engaged and adapt to the news habits of the next generation of media consumers weaned on YouTube, MySpace and personal blogs. They will have to deliver reportage that is intimate and immediate, such as my electronic dispatches from Najaf, but as accurate and objective as that of John Hersey and Anthony Shadid.

I believe my experience as a journalistic pioneer, coupled with the academic resources of Stanford University, will help me move this debate forward and help define a cheaper-faster-better method of producing and distributing foreign news.

I know the online medium; I have covered it as a technology reporter for the AP and broken ground in it as a reader-supported journalist. Back-to-Iraq.com predated and inspired journalists such as Michael Yon in Iraq and Jay Rosen's NewAssignment.net. But while they celebrate the blogosphere, with its partisan screeching and speed-over-substance postings, I've never lost my emphasis on reporting. In short, I am not a "blogger;" I am a journalist who blogs.

The real question for me, now, is how best to shape this transition toward a more intimate, sustainable multimedia style of journalism while emphasizing high-quality

reporting. A Knight Fellowship would allow me to explore this challenge. It would allow the discovery of new ways of presenting complicated ideas online, and address the questions: How does the new medium change the narrative? What's the best way to balance objective reporting with a compelling, personal voice? And, of course, how do you pay for it?

As a Knight Fellow, I plan to research at least two multimedia projects combining my past in-depth reporting with academic research: The political divisions within Shi'ism and the increased American military presence in Africa leading to AFRICOM. Not only will those projects stand as experimental forms of new journalism, my experience in producing them will allow me to also produce a report to help other journalists.

Stanford University's resources and proximity to Silicon Valley make it an ideal institution for this research. The Center for International Security and Cooperation would support my specific interest in better covering the Middle East and Africa, while programs and people such as Media X, Lawrence Lessig and Ward Hanson will help me explore ways to effectively bring those stories to the world.

I am eager to combine my years of experience with the knowledge gained as a Knight Fellow to test my ideas. There must be a bigger place for foreign news coverage in America, for if we turn away from the world, the world will turn on us. Again.