

Aidan WHITE

Secretary-General, International Federation of Journalists

The world of Arab journalism is changing fast. A new and vigorous generation of independent-minded media professionals, equipped with modern information tools and inspired by independent professional values, are turning the traditionally passive and controlled media scene upside down.

As the war in Iraq has shown, people are hungry for news and information, and they are no longer satisfied with the one-size fits all media coverage of the global media companies. Arab communities across the globe, both within the Middle East and beyond, have flocked to set their satellite dishes to catch news and opinion about world events from a uniquely Arab perspective – a perspective that may cause unease, even irritate, some people, but one that is absolutely essential to ensure that all sides of the debate about solutions to the crisis in the Middle East are heard and understood.

This should be good news for the friends of democracy. But there are mixed signals. Over the past two years the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has monitored a steady increase in the volume of criticism about the Arab media – particularly the new generation of television channels – from western governmental sources, and notably from the current administration in United States.

Arab media are being criticised and punished for doing what comes naturally to journalists – revealing information and comment from all sides, including those, such as Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, who are reviled and being hunted down. Recently, anxiety over media coverage inside Iraq has reached new levels of concern with action taken by the Governing Council to exclude two leading broadcasters – Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabbya from official briefings and press conferences. A few weeks ago, the Al Arabbya office in Baghdad was closed down. In addition, there is talk of more punitive official action against media and journalists accused of “incitement” in their reporting.

All journalists view this sort of action as worrying. It smacks not of liberation and democracy, but of selective censorship. Many of the controversial broadcasts by media like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabbya are replayed by mainstream media throughout the world, who recognise the news value of the information. While this process of regulation and sanction develops, little is being done to engage Iraqi journalists at large in a dialogue over the need for professionalism that highlights the positive contribution media can make towards the establishment of democratic pluralism.

Governments, both within the Middle East and in the settled democracies of the developed world, are uniquely placed to encourage support for independent media, to build confidence among journalists in ethical standards and to discourage impulsive political actions against media, which are counter productive given the volatile atmosphere currently prevailing in much of the region.

The IFJ is engaged with colleagues in the Arab world in a professional coalition that is designing practical actions to defend professionalism and support independent media both in Iraq and elsewhere in the region.

Earlier this year the IFJ and the Federation of Arab Journalists (FAJ) – representing all national groups in the Middle East and North Africa – concluded an important agreement in Rabat which commits the international community of journalists and Arab journalists to support the creation of a new, unified and independent professional association of journalists in Iraq while strengthening professional development throughout the region. We are also working together to defend professional journalists’ interests in the occupied Palestinian territories and throughout the region.

It is my strong belief that there is a new mood within Arab journalism, which has generated momentum for change – partly reinforced by the uncompromising independence of independent Arab television - that has

provoked some less democratic governments in the Arab world. Confidence-building measures are needed now to assist Arab media professionals in the flashpoints of the region, supported by their Arab and international colleagues, to respond to the crisis in Baghdad and the West Bank, and to reinforce the momentum for change in the wider Arab world.

Urgent programmes of work are needed to assist Arab journalists to work together to confront problems of quality, to develop selfregulating mechanisms, to organise themselves into a coherent community able to voice collective concerns, and to help them to engage with colleagues in the wider international community of journalists.

We have no illusions about the difficulties here. What we have to do is to build a new professional solidarity among journalists, both within the Arab world among those pressing for change in different parts of the region as well as between other regional networks, to take advantage of the scope for free expression that comes with satellite technology, the Internet and responsible use of new communications technologies.