

Remarks of John Daniszewski, International Editor
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The case of Bilal Hussein, we believe, should be seen in the context of history, and the continual struggle of the Associated Press and of newspapers and other media and news organizations to carve out a right to carry on objective, accurate and fair coverage even in a time of war and controversy.

Freedom of the press, at its core, means that editors and reporters – and not government officials – determine what news is and what is not.

The arrest of Bilal Hussein, his continued detention without charges, and the failure of the U.S. military to say when – if ever – he will be allowed to face his accusers has had a damning effect on the flow of images reaching your newspapers and websites from the town of Ramadi where he lived.

Over time, as the various excuses for his detention have either mutated or vaporized, we at the AP have come more and more to believe that the real reason he was arrested is because of his pictures. They were not welcome. And by arresting him, the possibility of more unwelcome images from his native Fallujah and Ramadi have been blocked.

In other words, as AP President Tom Curley has said recently, we believe that this is not an issue of a threat to American security. It is an effort to stifle a free press.

Let us look back over history at the attempts to stifle and control war reporting. Here are just a few examples from a soon-to-be-published history of the Associated Press, “Breaking News, How the Associated Press has covered war, peace and everything else.”

At the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, northern editors who had opposed the election of Abraham Lincoln were pressured to declare allegiance to the Union. Editor-publisher Gerald Hallock of the Journal of Commerce in New York City was beset by mobs, compelling him to order a

Union flag draped from his building. Editors were threatened with grand jury indictments for disloyalty and Hallock was forced to retire.

Sid Demming, an early AP reporter with the Army of the Potomac, and his assistant Theodore Barnard, were arrested for writing what the War Department called “unsatisfactory” reports on Army morale. Notice that they did not say untrue, only “unsatisfactory.”

Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman said that reporters covering him were “spies” and “infamous dogs.” When three journalists went missing one day, he remarked that there would be “dispatches from hell before breakfast.” Other generals banned reporters, had them court martialed, or like Gen. George Meade, ridden out of camp backwards, on a mule.

On one occasion, President Lincoln had to overturn an order by his war secretary to have a New York Tribune reporter shot as a spy. The ever-wise Lincoln instead arranged for the correspondent to be able to file a dispatch, via the AP, to his newspaper.

At the Spanish American war, an AP correspondent was ordered not to report the Spanish surrender that effectively ended the war, but found a way to do so anyway, dressing up as a peasant to reach an unguarded cable office.

Later, when the U.S. army found itself suppressing a bloody uprising in the Philippines over the next four years, AP faced constant battles with U.S. military censors who wanted no information about the war to reach the U.S. that would embarrass the administration or alarm the public.

“Even the word ‘ambush’ was prohibited,” wrote AP correspondent Harold Martin in Manila at the time.

The story has continued. In Vietnam, it was President Lyndon Johnson, working through member editors, calling into question the “patriotism” of the AP staff in Saigon.

In the current conflict, it has settled on nebulous charges from some political leaders and government officials that the AP and other news organizations are for deliberately portraying the war in negative terms.

But in recent months, as the facts have spoken for themselves, those kinds of charges have been somewhat muted.

As you can imagine, the detention of AP reporters and photographers from time to time in conflict zones around the world is not unheard of for us. When we learned in April that Bilal Hussein was a prisoner, our first action was to reach out to the U.S. command in Baghdad. We believed that it would be a matter of days, or at most a week or two, after we confirmed that he was a photojournalist working for us, that the misunderstanding behind his arrest would be straightened out and that he soon would be let go.

It soon became clear that his case was to be more difficult.

We were informed at various times, and at various levels of the government, in ways formal and informal, that he was “dirty,” that he “knew people,” and that he was working outside of what the military believed was proper behavior for a journalist.

When we asked for some specifics, almost the only thing that we could get a handle on was that he was allegedly involved in the kidnapping of two journalists by insurgents in Ramadi.

We took our complaints up the military chain of command to the Pentagon. We also approached the State Department, asking it to get involved. At every turn, we felt the doors slamming in our face. The stance of officials seemed to be: we can hold this person because we have decided that he is a security threat, and there is no legal recourse that the AP or anyone else has to question that.

That is not how we see Iraqi law and the relevant U.N. resolutions. We believe that the U.S. is obliged to review his case in a reasonable period, and either release him if the evidence is lacking, or put him on trial.

We have often been asked why we waited so long before making Bilal Hussein’s plight public. It was a tactic on our part. We sincerely believed that if we presented the facts of his case quietly to the officials holding him, better judgment would prevail and he would be let go.

But, as I said, nothing like that happened.

What tipped the balance is when we were finally able to track down those two Arab journalists whose kidnapping in Ramadi was the most concrete allegation we had heard against Bilal Hussein.

What we learned from them is that they had never implicated our man in that crime. Instead, to the contrary, they regarded him as a hero. Because, unbeknownst to us, he had helped to get them to safety after they had been released after paying ransom and been left on the side of the road. The only evidence – apparently – that the U.S. military had to tie Bilal to the incident was the pictures he had had of them in his camera.

No one from the American side had ever contacted them about the case.

Today Bilal Hussein sits in Camp Cropper near the Baghdad airport. He is one of 13,000 men and a few women who are being held without trial in Iraq. In all, 14,000 prisoners are being held by U.S. forces around the world.

The U.S. government has imprisoned a young Iraqi man of humble origins, who was giving the world a window into a part of Iraq that the U.S. military has never fully controlled.

If he were a U.S. citizen, protected by the U.S. Constitution, he would not be there. But because he is Iraqi, he has no recourse left. He is stuck in this netherworld of U.S. custody.

It is an outrage. In past years, we have seen a very troubling pattern emerging in the relations between the press and the government.

Abroad, in Iraq, due process is denied to an imprisoned journalist. In this country, newspapers that have published stories embarrassing to the government have been once again accused of disloyalty. They have been threatened, shut out, and in some case, pursued in the courts.

We are angry, and we hope you are too. We do not think that what we are feeling should be controversial or partisan.

Freedom on the press is an American value, enshrined in the constitution. It is also a universal value. It needs to be appreciated and defended by all, especially by all of us people in this room.

In spite of this hostility and harassment, I should note that AP correspondents and scores of special correspondents for newspapers and broadcasters continue to do their jobs, as they have for generations. At our headquarters in New York, we have a wall of honor listing the 28 AP employees killed on assignment around the world, most of them covering wars.

Our reporters, photographers and videographers are out there today. Even as Bilal Hussein sits in his cell in Baghdad. We hope for the day that we can bring him some good news.