

Baghdad to Swarthmore
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A group of enterprising students at Swarthmore College, in Pennsylvania, has some advice for the politically disaffected: If you find the media's Iraq coverage unsatisfactory, pick up the phone. Don't call the Times, or CNN, or Rupert Murdoch; call Baghdad. There are a couple of Iraqi phone books available on the Internet, and plenty of interesting people willing to share their stories directly, from six thousand miles away, many of them speaking decent English. When your phone bill starts to get out of hand, try downloading Skype, software that allows two people to talk free, from anywhere in the world, using computer microphones and a headset.

Amelia Templeton, a senior history major, estimates that she has spoken with twenty-five Iraqis over the past year, and now, as she said the other day, "it's a bad idea to ask me about Iraq unless you plan on listening for a while." One of the Iraqis she spoke with, a painter named Esam Pasha, who is a grandson of the former Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, has even invited her to visit Baghdad. "I was told that if I came he'd pick me up at the airport," she said. "Given what that road is like, how dangerous it is going to and from the airport, that's quite an offer."

Templeton is one of the editors at War News Radio, a weekly half-hour show broadcast on the Swarthmore campus station, and podcast over the Web, where it draws as many as three thousand listeners a day. The show's stated aim is to "rediscover the voices of real people" in Iraq. It is supervised by Marty Goldensohn, a thirty-year veteran of public radio, who offered the students this essential kernel of advice: "Mumble with authority." He also said, "When you call the Pentagon, you just say, as if you were the New York Times, 'I'm calling from War News Radio.' You say it as if it were their failing if they haven't heard of us."

The students began, two semesters ago, by creating a homemade sound studio, using bulletin boards and egg cartons hung from ceiling pipes. Now, thanks to the college, they've got proper acoustic tiling, although space heaters are still required to supplement the building's old radiator, and the reporters sometimes wear ski jackets and hats while manning the phones. They have secured interviews, in recent weeks, with the C.E.O. of the new Iraqi Stock Exchange, an aspiring filmmaker in Baghdad, and the Sunni politician Adnan Pachachi. In one broadcast, an Iraqi doctor, referring to the mood at the checkpoints, said, "Everybody feels terrified; everything around is horrible, and you expect that you may be killed at any minute." (His daughter had been shot, he said, by U.S. soldiers.)

Last month, an American expat who runs an FM station in Canberra, Australia, e-mailed the studio and asked for permission to rebroadcast the show. Carleton College has picked up War News Radio as well. And last week Goldensohn was preparing to send out a

mailing to more than a thousand other schools, soliciting further interest.

“We thought we were at a disadvantage not being on the ground in Iraq,” Eva Barboni, a junior poli-sci major, said. “But when you hear from reporters there that they can’t even leave their hotels you start to think.” The sound quality afforded by Skype, it turns out, is often better than what can be achieved over the weak landlines in the Green Zone.

“If you’re working for a big American network, with a film crew following you, you’re not going to get out on the streets in Baghdad,” Wren Elhai, a sophomore, said. “We can do a lot from here that the networks can’t do.”

Elhai is the group’s designated pronouncer of Iraqi names and words. “I’m just the one who can do the Iraqi accent best,” he said. “My favorite word, and it’s unfortunate how often you hear it, is ‘corruption.’ Iraqis have that wonderful rolled ‘r.’ ” Elhai was in the process of editing a story about an Iraqi contractor, a frequent victim of government corruption, before heading off to a rehearsal for his a-cappella singing group.

One drawback of the long-distance approach, of course, is that you can’t be sure whom you’re talking to. Templeton, while working on a segment about a typical Iraqi teen-ager, ended up speaking with a father she later came to suspect of being a Baath Party official. She killed the story. “I thought maybe they weren’t the average,” she said.

Esam Pasha’s offer to pick Templeton up at the airport, meanwhile, remains unfulfilled. “I don’t want to be another American who’s potentially putting the people working with him in danger,” she said.

When not telephoning Iraq, the War News team occupy themselves with critiquing the President’s speeches (Kurt Vonnegut has appeared on the show as a commentator), assessing the ongoing media coverage (“Where are the pictures of shrapnel wounds and weeping mothers that etched the Vietnam War in American minds?”), and interviewing soldiers’ parents. Recently, a reporter, Tevye Kelman, went undercover and visited an Army recruiting station in Philadelphia. Midway through the interview, the recruiter asked Kelman, a senior, when he’d last smoked pot. “Last weekend,” he replied.