

Baghdad Burning: the blogosphere, literature and the art of war

By Wayne Hunt

January, 2008. In an age of embedded reporters and homogenized news reports, how can people dispense with the instant experts of the punditocracy and find out what is really happening? Quirky, edgy and raw, new media sources such as blogs have a freshness and an immediacy to them that does not come from standard-issue news reports. This is particularly apparent with bloggers covering the war in Iraq. In one sense, new media offer us “history from below,” before it hardens into the work of professional historians. Some serving in the U.S. armed forces are putting out their own blogs, the so-called “milblogs,” while their opponents in the insurgency are doing the same and turning cyberspace into a zone of “information wars.” As one commentator has noted, these activities have “repictured war as drastically as William Howard Russell’s telegraphed dispatches” from the front did in 1855.ⁱ It was this new media constellation of “milblogs,” intermilitary email rings, and mobile phones which brought the images of Abu Graib into general circulation. This military sub-culture, it is maintained, has now “fed into the mainstream of the nation’s reading matter, and its high impact, wham-bam style has become fashionable.”ⁱⁱ The most successful among these are cleaning up in book launches and moving in on the big literary prizes.ⁱⁱⁱ

This paper uses two case studies to illustrate this new wave of firsthand war blogging. The first is of Riverbend, an Iraqi woman who took up blogging in order to chronicle what life in Baghdad was like, on a daily basis, under American occupation. The second is a “milblog,” written by one of the pioneers of this genre, Colby Buzzell, while serving in the U.S. military in Iraq. Although they represent opposing sides in this war, they share certain qualities; the most important being an ennui with life, a sense of numbness and boredom that acts as cover, insulating both, and each in his or her own

way, from the physical and spiritual carnage around them. Allied to this is a world-weary cynicism, a sense that each is a pawn in a larger game – a game in which those at the top do not seem to know what they are doing. The two bloggers also share a total and unequivocal hatred of war, expressed in a way that only those who have direct experience with what war entails can understand.

Amid increased attention for Arab bloggers both at home and abroad, it is misleading to think of the Arab blogosphere as a monolithic whole. As Marc Lynch points out, it is more appropriate to think of a series of national blogospheres which are located in individual Arab countries and which are linked at key nodes.^{iv} The Western influence came in a direct form with the first wave of Arab bloggers. Described as young, writing in English and politically un-engaged^v, this wave of bloggers resembled nothing so much as their “Gen X” counterparts in North America and Europe. In time, however, a second wave appeared. This second wave wrote in Arabic and were “more organically embedded in the political realm,” and included well-known journalists, academics and famous dissidents.^{vi}

Several types of online activity have emerged from this second wave. Activists began using this new technology to organize fellow-activists in their own country to advocate for political change. “Bridge bloggers,” by contrast, target a Western audience and consequently receive “disproportionate attention from Western journalists.”^{vii} Wars can often spark individuals to become more politically engaged, thus move from the first category to the second. This is the case with both Riverbend and Colby Buzzell.

The democratic possibilities of the open source movement

Blogging’s effects are part of a wider tectonic shift in how information and knowledge is produced and consumed. They point toward a phenomenon which Yochai Benkler describes somewhat awkwardly as a “networked information society.” Benkler argues that a society in which information is freely shared is more efficient than one in which innovations are restricted through the widespread use of patents. Benkler was writing primarily about the United States, and his chief targets were large corporations who used the political process to protect their own interests by stalling ideas and

innovations that might lead to transformative changes. The Harvard Law professor used Wikipedia, the Creative Commons initiatives, and the “open source movement” to show that society could progress toward a more critical and reflective state of public affairs through something that he called “commons-based peer production.” In its ideal form, this society could be described as “a system of production, distribution and consumption of information goods characterized by decentralized individual action carried out through widely distributed, nonmarket means that do not depend upon market strategies.”^{viii} Simply put, it describes a network of collaborators who are motivated by something other than money.

Although Benkler was writing from a Western perspective, his description is appropriate for the second wave of Arab bloggers. These bloggers have provided a source of primary information to a hungry readership, who are now able to reflect in a critical and thoughtful manner on how the high-level strategizing behind war has disastrously affected real lives – something which the traditional sources of media have not been able to provide sufficiently.

How user-generated media can turn hierarchies on their heads

With technologies literally hard-wired to resist top-down control, new media have been at the forefront of change in the Middle East. This is not just a problem for governments in this region; it is a problem for occupying forces in Iraq, and the U.S. military is not winning what has been called the “info war.” Consider the case of Colby Buzzell. He could best be described as California Gen X. Pre-army, his circumstances, as he described them, were dismal: “I was living off Top Ramen (a.k.a. pot noodles) in a suburb of San Francisco and my life was going nowhere.”^{ix} In quiet desperation, he joined the military at age 26 and was sent to Iraq in November of 2003. He became a machine gunner and was sent to Mosul the next year, where he fought the boredom of the job by listening to Metallica on his iPod while watching his colleagues search for porn on the Internet during their downtime. After reading about blogging in a *Time* magazine article, he decided to start his own blog. He soon developed a style and voice of his

own, one which showed the influence of the rapid-fire gonzo journalism associated with one of his literary idols, the late Hunter S. Thompson.^x

Buzzell's portrait of life as it is actually lived, down in the dirt of the Iraq war, became an instant success because it filled a void left empty by print or broadcast media. His military superiors actively discouraged his online efforts and, in time, Buzzell left the services. Predictably, publishing offers came along and a book followed, entitled *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*. The book was critically acclaimed, beating over 110 entries from fifteen countries to win the Lulu Blooker prize. But ironically, this achievement came at precisely that moment when the Pentagon was clamping down on what was termed "milblogs" – the so-called soldier-publishers. The military put new rules in place which would require blog entries to be submitted to supervising officers before being posted. On 14 May 2007, authorities announced a "worldwide" block on thirteen communal websites, including YouTube and MySpace, which previously had been accessed by military computers. A team of Virginia National Guard personnel was given authority to monitor all online activities of U.S. service men and women, including video postings. In explaining the policy, General B.B. Bell said it was to protect against the drain in computer capacity that came from downloading videos. Immediately, a backlash took place. Almost no one took the words of U.S. officialdom at face value. When asked about the change, Buzzell said that without blogging, he would "be washing dishes in a restaurant somewhere, back to eating Top Ramen,"^{xi} and adding emphatically, that this was "a totally screwed up policy." He concluded that the commanders "are really just nervous because they can't keep control any more."^{xii}

From a strategic point of view, the developing trend of having soldiers act as "citizen journalists" was highly unsettling to the American military. This could lead to the disintegration of the chain of command. It meant that U.S. soldiers could potentially communicate directly with insurgents, without going through the intermediary steps of the military hierarchy. From this perspective, it would be like chess pawns talking to each other and then – potentially – going off on their own. It was not a surprising move, therefore, when the military tried to stifle the blogging activities of their own soldiers. This was not new. In 2004, National Public Radio in the United States carried a story on this topic. Michael O'Hanlon, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, opined that the

crackdown on these activities did not seem to serve a strategic purpose: “I really think [the policy] ... has much less to do with operational security and classified secrets and more to do with American politics and how the war is seen by a public that is getting increasingly shaky about the overall venture.”^{xiii} From his perspective, however, Buzzell thought the military interventions were futile and counterproductive. “They say Vietnam was the first televised war, brought into the homes of Americans,” he said. “Maybe Iraq is the first war that’s online, shown by the soldiers.”^{xiv}

An up close and personal take on war

At first glance Riverbend, who advertises herself as a “girl blogger from Iraq” might seem worlds away from Buzzell. They differ in gender, citizenship and combatant status. But below the surface there are some striking parallels in their reporting on the war: the same all-pervasive boredom is there, the same gritty and intrusive on-the-ground reality, the same visceral hatred of war, and above all, the same uneasy sense that those in charge of events are at best incompetent and, at worst, totally removed from the consequences of their actions. Beginning with the observation that “Sometimes there is nothing more gripping than the mundane,” Christian Caryl’s recent essay in the *New York Review of Books* argues that Riverbend’s personal war narrative “provides us with the most comprehensive view of the war to date.”^{xv} To support this claim, Caryl observes:

We have little impression of Iraqis as people trying to live lives that are larger and more complex than the war that engulfs them, and more often than not we end up viewing them as mere appendages of conflict.^{xvi}

As for the cause of this, Caryl knows where to place the blame, writing that “language of foreign policy abstraction (in tandem with) a misplaced sense of decorum on the part of press and television also conspire to sanitize the fantastically disgusting realities of everyday death.”^{xvii}

Reviewers said that the “girl blog,” as Riverbend calls her postings, made the “war and the occupation real in terms that no professional journalist could hope to achieve.”^{xviii} In writing the introduction to her books, James Ridgeway announces that:

Riverbend’s news has nothing to do with troop movements, casualty figures, or the latest from the Green Zone – the subjects of mainstream news reports. For Riverbend, war is something that is lived every day – and every night. She and her brother, “E,” sit on the roof to watch Baghdad burning and have learned to identify different types of automatic weapons by the sound of their volleys. Occupation is a way of life. It means rounding up enough friendly armed men to take the kids to the store to buy crayons. It means trying to bury an elderly aunt in a city where mosques are all overbooked for funerals and the cemeteries are full. It means jumping up in the middle of the night, when the electricity briefly comes on, in order to run the washing machine – or work on her blog. (And it means, finally, that once)... you are into Riverbend, her war becomes your war.^{xix}

Like a brilliant, but brief and fleeting comet, Riverbend’s blog first appeared in August of 2003 when she simply announced that she was “female, Iraqi and 24.” Riverbend had guest blogged on a famous site maintained by another blogger Salam Pax, who suggested Riverbend start her own site. In her initial posting Riverbend said that “I survived the war. That’s all you need to know. It’s all that matters these days anyway.”^{xx}

Subsequent postings revealed her middle to upper middle class background, a mixed Sunni and Shia ancestry, an education that took place, in part, outside of the country. They also reveal that she was a practicing Muslim who soon learned about the intolerance of the religious police. In the pre-invasion days, she held a job as a computer programmer (“yes, yes... a geek”) but the job went the way of much else after the invasion.^{xxi} Her real novelty flowed from the fact that, in company with other bloggers from Iraq, she was able to “fill an essential gap left by the media.”^{xxii} In an online interview with Al Jazeera in April of 2006, she explained this in more detail, saying that

While I began blogging as a way to vent frustrations and fears about instability and insecurity, I continue to blog because I feel that the media covers the situation in my country in a very general way. Many articles or reports don't even begin to touch the daily reality Iraqis face.... Real Iraqis, the people currently suffering under a lack of security and a shortage of the most basic necessities like electricity and water, seem to have faded to the background.^{xxiii}

Riverbend was aptly described as a “gifted writer as well as a natural storyteller” who developed a consummate appreciation of the “absurdities of war” from firsthand experience.^{xxiv} As her rising notoriety began to bring her negative attention in the blogosphere, she used a highly-developed sense of irony to shield herself from efforts of other bloggers to debunk her.^{xxv}

And although Riverbend is at times conscientiously analytical in her writings, she considers blogging to be separate from mainstream journalism in that blogging, first and foremost, originates in high emotion. On this distinction, she is emphatic, insisting that,

Bloggers are not exactly journalists, which is a mistake many people make. They expect us to be dispassionate and unemotional about topics such as occupation and war, etc. That objective lack of emotion is impossible because a blog in itself stems from passion – the need to sit hours at one's computer, slouched over the keyboard, trying to communicate ideas, thoughts, fears and frustrations to the world.^{xxvi}

If there are parallels to be drawn with other writers, they are more with what has been called “the truth of fiction” more than anything else. For instance, the exiled Iraqi novelist Najem Wali has published a work called “Iraq Stories” in the much-praised online magazine *Words Without Borders*.^{xxvii} Wali is writing with the same situation in mind as that outlined by Riverbend when he states:

Journalists who visit Iraq hear many stories, yet they are prevented from recording the majority of them because they must chase after the “hot” story, the quick journalistic piece...It is not strange therefore that people in the world today, especially in the United States, know only the “hot” stories in the daily news. And so today, when Iraqi people show up in the news, it is not as human beings who think and love and hate and experience joy and sadness like the rest of humanity.^{xxviii}

Riverbend is unique in the sheer number and variety of spin-offs the blog launched in various other media formats. Two books appeared in English under her name. These books, in turn, formed the basis for plays that were presented in Portland, Maine, in New York City and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Other awards followed. In the fall of 2005, the book *Baghdad Burning* received the third prize from the international Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage. Early in 2006, it was shortlisted for the Freedom of Expression Award from the Index on Censorship. It also made the longlist for the UK’s most prestigious and lucrative non-fiction award, the Samuel Johnson Prize. The BBC’s Radio Four dramatized Riverbend’s blog entries as part of a series presented during Woman’s Hour in December of 2006. Particularly compelling in that final series was an episode in which Riverbend described how she tried to maintain her dignity when she returned to her former workplace in order to ask for her job back. Like other women in her city, she only dared to travel in daylight with her brother and she spent hours trying to decide what to wear – before settling on a conservative, but fashionable, business suit. At the front desk she was met by a conservative enforcer of religious codes who noticed immediately that her hair was not covered. He called her a “slut” and tried to deny her entry. Eventually, she made it past this first “gatekeeper” but subsequent entreaties with former colleagues yielded no happier results. She was told that her job did not exist anymore. Only when she left did she allow herself the luxury of tears – tears not just for her own humiliation but for the bigger – and far greater – humiliation of her country.

It was this all-too-human candor which won Riverbend acclaim with an ardent group of followers and fellow-bloggers. But as her popularity rose, so too did the

criticisms. Accused of being unabashedly anti-American because her family had prospered under the previous regime, she responded with a full-throated rebuttal, asking:

Unabashedly biased toward what? Iraq? One thing that bothers me is that many people equate being anti-occupation with anti-American. I am not anti-American – I know many wonderful Americans and correspond and communicate with them regularly. I am, however, anti-occupation. I don't wish for the "days of Saddam," if that's what your asking. I am, however, completely against the presence of foreign troops in Iraq.^{xxix}

The Iraqi blogger's most vehement criticism was reserved for Iraqi politicians, who she likened to the French Vichy government, and accused of being puppets of the invading forces. In company with many other religious moderates, Riverbend faced a difficult political reality. About 60% of Iraq's population is Shia, many of whom are religious. It was argued that a Shia-dominated government would give undue influence to religious extremists.^{xxx} In the United States itself, pressure was mounting to have U.S. forces leave and some proposals called for dividing the country into federal units dominated by Sunni, Shia and Kurds. From her perspective, Riverbend saw this federalist plan as the worst possible outcome. The commingling of religion and politics had made democracy an untenable system of government, and a federal state would be more untenable still. In the meantime, many of the educated middle classes had no option other than to vote with their feet – and leave the country. A tone of bitterness came into her writing as she observed that:

The trouble with having a religious party in power in a country as diverse as Iraq is that you automatically alienate everyone not of that particular religion. Religion is personal – it is something that you are virtually born into...it belongs to the heart, the mind, the spirit – and while it is welcome in day to day dealings, it shouldn't be politicized.^{xxxi}

She further argued that:

Theocracies (and we seem to be standing on the verge of an Iranian-influenced one), grow stronger with time because you cannot argue religion. Politicians are no longer politicians – they are Ayatollahs – they become modern day envoys of God, to be worshipped, not simply respected. You cannot challenge them because, for their followers, that is a challenge to a belief – not a person or a political party. You can go from being a critic or “opposition” to simply being a heathen when you argue (with) religious parties.^{xxxii}

Riverbend’s options were limited. There simply was not a public space which would allow voices such as hers to be added to a debate about the future of her country. Thus she continued, “Americans write to me wondering, ‘But where are the educated Iraqis? Why didn’t they vote for secular parties?’” To which she answered: “The educated Iraqis have been systematically silenced since 2003. They’ve been assassinated, detained, tortured and abducted. Many of them have lost faith in the possibility of a secular Iraq.”^{xxxiii}

The blog allowed Riverbend to be part of a world-wide network of alternative media, but mainstream media are not on the front lines of change. Memories of the way in which the media were complicit in the Saddam Hussein years remain. There is a palpable anger directed toward these people. Mustafa Hussein traveled to Iraq in 2003 with a group from the Arab Organization for Press Freedoms to view firsthand the condition of the media in Iraq at that time. He recalled that “the biggest surprise for me was the extent of hostility from Iraqis toward us...Everybody said to us, where were you when Saddam Hussein was dealing with the Iraqi people by killing and torture.”^{xxxiv}

Like Colby Buzzell, Riverbend looked at the impact of top-down policies on actual people and actual institutions. And like women novelists from Iraq she has alerted a wider audience to the needs of women in transit from conflict to post-conflict situations. But she was not part of a new Arab public space that was a force for progressive change in Iraq. Riverbend’s journey is a case study in the transition from the first wave of determinedly apolitical blogs to a second wave of passionate engagement

with the politics of her country. The press of events left her no alternative but to oppose the invasion of her homeland and the descent into the chaos of sectarian violence. In a posting dated April 27, 2007, she quietly watched the *de facto* partitioning of her country. In an entry titled “The Great Wall of Segregation” she recorded, in telling detail, the way in which the largest Sunni area in Baghdad was undergoing its own variation of ethnic cleansing. With bitter irony, she ruefully declared that “I always hear the Iraqi pro-war crowd interviewed on television from foreign capitals (they can only appear on television from the safety of foreign capitals because I defy anyone to be publicly pro-war in Iraq).”^{xxxv} Her thoughts were given over to “the practical details for her departure plans:”

It is a matter of logistics. Plane or car. Jordan or Syria? Will we leave together as a family? Or will it only be my brother and I at first? After Jordan or Syria – where then?^{xxxvi}

Syria it was. Or at least for the moment. In a posting entitled Leaving Home she showed that her sense of the insanity of it all had to travel with her:

Two months ago, the suitcases were packed. My lone, large suitcase sat in my bedroom for nearly six weeks, so full of clothes and personal items, that it took me, E. and our six year old neighbor to zip it up.

Packing that suitcase was one of the more difficult things I’ve had to do. It was Mission Impossible: Your mission, R., should you choose to accept it is to go through the items you’ve accumulated over nearly three decades and decide which ones you cannot do without. The difficulty of your mission, R., is that you must contain these items in a space totaling 1 m by 0.7 by 0.4m. This, of course, includes the clothes you will be wearing for the next months, as well as personal memorabilia – photos, diaries, stuffed animals, CDs and the like.^{xxxvii}

Conclusion

The personal reflections and observations of both Riverbend and Buzzell have been celebrated by many as invaluable primary accounts of the war in Iraq that supplement or replace those of traditional media. But they also function as a wider critique of decision-makers who are isolated from the human suffering caused by their grand strategies, and of media who fail to bring a sense of empathy to their subject matter. In the longer view, Riverbend's postings will be appreciated as literature as much as reportage. Despite their temporary fame, the same cannot be said of the "milblogs" which have transformed themselves into the fashion-of-the-moment. Works like David Bellavia's *House to House* are brought to mass market courtesy of the services of a "professional co-author" (not to be confused with a ghostwriter, but not far removed from that craft either). It was said that Ernest Hemingway would have approved of Leatherneck Publishing and Co., which published David Bellavia's *House to House* and other books based on military bloggers.^{xxxviii} This is undoubtedly true. But Hemingway's books will still be read long after the current crop of "milblog" literature has passed its sell-by date. Riverbend's contribution, by contrast, will continue to be read by future generations.

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ⁱ Sutherland, J. (2007). "War of Words." *New Statesman*. (12 November).

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ In addition to Riverbend's two published books, David Bellavia's *House to House*, promises to deliver the real goods in a predictable house style. Staff Sergeant Bellavia was a highly decorated NCO who saw service in the bloody conflict around Fallujah in 2004. Marching in line, so to speak, are a number of other

books, such as Seargent Patrick Tracy's Iraq: the Private Journal of a US Marine Warrior, published by the (im)plausibly named Leatherneck Publishers.

^{iv} Lynch, M. (2007). "Blogging the New Arab Public: Arab Blogs' Political Influence Will Grow." World Politics Review. Retrieved 5 July, 2007, from <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=694>.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Benkler, Y. (2006). *The Wealth of Nations, How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press. p. 6.

^{ix} Pilkington, 2007.

^x Buzzell's other literary reference point was Kurt Vonnegut.

^{xi} Pilkington, E. (2007). "Iraq veteran wins blog prize as US military cuts web access". *The Guardian*. Retrieved 12 July, 2007 from <http://www.books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,20079899,00.html>.

^{xii} (*Ibid.*).

^{xiii} Interview on National Public Radio, 2004.

^{xiv} Blog, 2007.

^{xv} Caryl, C. (2007). "What About the Iraqis?" *New York Review of Books*. Retrieved 4 July, 2007 from <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19793>.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} Ridgeway, J. and Casella, J. (2006). "Introduction". In Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning 11, More Girl Blog From Iraq*. New York: Feminist Press of the City University of New York. p vii.

^{xix} Ibid.

^{xx} Ibid. p. vii.

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} Ibid: viii.

^{xxiii} Al-Atraqchi, quoted in Ridgeway and Cassela, 2006: viii-ix.

^{xxiv} *Ibid*: xi-xiii.

^{xxv} *Ibid*.

^{xxvi} Al-Atraqchi, *op. cit.*.

^{xxvii} Wali, N. (2006?). "Iraq Stories," translated from the Arabic by Jennifer Kaplan, Words Without Borders: The Online Magazine for International Literature:

[http://wordswithoutborders.org/article.php?lab=Iraq stories](http://wordswithoutborders.org/article.php?lab=Iraq%20stories). Quoted in Ridgeway and Casella, (2006).

^{xxviii} Wali, quoted in Ridgeway and Cassela, 2006: x.

^{xxix} Al-Atraqchi, F. (2006). "Iraqi Blogger Documents History," Al-Jazeera (online) 6 April:

<http://english.aljazeera.net/Nr/exeres/4C5B8EE6-F99c-4AB9-84B6-40F7F8F9B656.htm>. Quoted in Ridgeway and Cassela, (2006).

^{xxx} *Op.cit.* Ridgeway and Cassela, 2006. xx.

^{xxxi} Riverbend, (2006). *Baghdad Burning 11, More Girl Blog From Iraq*. New York: Feminist Press of the City University of New York. p. 169.

^{xxxii} Ibid.

^{xxxiii} Ibid.

^{xxxiv} *From Washington*, Al-Jazeera, 1 July 2004. Quoted in Lynch, 2006. p. 225.

^{xxxv} Riverbend. Blog. (2007). "The Great Wall of Segregation". Retrieved 14 July, 2007, from <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>.

^{xxxvi} Ibid.

^{xxxvii} Riverbend. Blog. (2007). "The Great Wall of Segregation." Retrieved 14 July, 2007, from <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>.

^{xxxviii} Sutherland: 56

I took this Literature and War class for this very reason. I am so blissfully ignorant as to what is going on in the world. I was pretty young when September 11, 2001 occurred, and I feel like I'm too far behind to ever be able to catch up with what has happened over the past twelve years. In 2005, the book, *Baghdad Burning*, won third place for the Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage and in 2006 it was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson prize.[3][4]. *Baghdad Burning* has also been made into several dramatic plays, mostly produced in New York City. BBC Radio 4 broadcast a five-episode dramatisation of her blog, "Baghdad Burning", on the "Woman's Hour" Serial, on each day from the 18th of December, 2006 until the 22nd of December, 2006. ...more. Literature and the Arts. Medicine. People. He burned the schools and the libraries, destroyed the mosques and the palaces, and ruined the elaborate system of canals that made it possible to support agricultural production for a large population. The fall of Baghdad at the hands of Hå¼legÅ¼, and the subsequent destruction of Baghdad by Timur Lenk (Tamarlane) in 1401, were turning points in the history of the city, and the city never recovered. The Iranâ€"Iraq War (1980â€"1982) and the Gulf War of 1991 contributed to Baghdad's population as thousands of people fled the war zone searching for safety. Many of the early southern immigrants lived in temporary sharaif (mud houses) on the northern edge of the city.