



Globalization of the Media: A Bicultural Woman's View

By Magda Abu-Fadil

**Fourth Forum of the Arab Women's Summit
"Arab Women & The Media"
February 1-3, 2002
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Your Excellencies, honored guests, it gives me great pleasure to be here to address this distinguished gathering about a subject close to my heart.

Does globalization mean we're being conditioned into thinking only of CNN or Al Jazeera when disaster strikes and we need detailed news of an event? Yes, very likely, because many media in the Arab world fall short of the task of providing good, accurate, news that's to the point.

Can we face globalization? Should we be part of it? What tools can we manipulate to our advantage? What role can women play in globalization of the media? Do they face obstacles?

Doesn't it hurt us when foreign journalists report wrong information about us? Shouldn't we help them by making it easy to get the right information and not fall into the same trap of doing to them what they do to us?

1. NEED FOR UNDERSTANDING & BALANCED INFORMATION ON BOTH SIDES:
 We need more media that can understand our cultural backgrounds and societal needs on both sides of the cultural divide - i.e. those that strike a balance between accurate information and understanding of the story's background.

All too often reporters are parachuted into a country to cover a hot story without having solid grounding in the subject. This applies to Arabs as well as Americans and Europeans. I've seen it happen in many countries and we need to rectify that.

U.S. and European correspondents often arrive on Arab shores with no notion of what's happening in the country or the region, little or no knowledge of Arabic (or French) and expecting everyone to understand them in English, for example.

Some don't do their homework and don't read about the background that led to recent conflicts, as if they exist in a vacuum. It's a major failure on their part.

An American reporter I know was too scared to enter Tripoli (Lebanon) during one of the major firefights of the Lebanese civil war, took a taxi to the edge of the city, saw some exchanges from a distance, ran back to Beirut, filed the story with a Tripoli dateline and proceeded to detail the raging battle which he never really saw. There are many such stories from all over the world.

That's a great disservice to the readers, viewers, listeners and browsers.

2. THE GENDER PROBLEM:

On the gender front, an Arab woman journalist may be lucky to cover the same news as a man, but she can't expect the same pay. Why?

"There's a ceiling women can't penetrate in media and government," says May Kahale, a veteran journalist and media adviser to former Lebanese president Elias Hrawi.

Mona Ziade, news editor at The Daily Star in Lebanon, notes that women's coverage of politics and other "serious issues" is fairly recent and continues to raise male suspicions.

Which is why women have to strive harder to prove themselves and abide by very professional standards to be taken seriously, and be respected.

According to Dr. Mohammad Ibrahim Ayesh of Sharjah University, the chances of Arab women in the media are still limited compared to men and the lack of opportunities for professional growth is a major depressant they face in media organizations.

He attributed this to traditional stereotyping of women in the media as consumers only concerned with beauty and fashion and lacking the ability to think and make decisions.

Another obstacle is that media work requires flexible hours and mobility, which often conflicts with the responsibilities of married women, who have children and homes, he added.

Why don't we have stories of women who have succeeded in this field highlighted in our own media? Why don't we make them available to foreign media in their own languages? It doesn't take genius, just a bit of effort.

I spent many years covering the Pentagon (in addition to the White House, State Department and Congress) and enjoyed writing on defense and security issues, focusing on weapons, rapid deployment forces, low intensity warfare, terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

Mastery of languages is very important. It's helped me in many situations. Reading Farsi (with my command of Arabic) helped me cover stories in Tehran; knowing Greek enabled me to decipher the Cyrillic alphabet while on assignment in Moscow and while living in Cyprus; and being fluent in French has served me in many locations, like North Africa and elsewhere. Thinking and speaking in English's many variations is my strength.

If women are to prove themselves in the field - and many have excelled over the years - they should do their homework, and more. They should keep pushing that executive glass ceiling by being experts in areas not considered "women's issues."

3. HOW ARAB MEDIA SHOULD COUNTERATTACK:

On November 26, the Arab League opened a two-day conference to discuss how to deal with the world's eagerness to equate Islam with terrorism and started a fund with an initial \$1 million donation to finance research and publications to promote dialogue among civilizations.

That's great, but we need to ensure the availability of satellite broadcasts (mostly in English), good use of the Internet, and an army of articulate communicators who can convey the ideas of peace, common humanity and fairness to all in non-rhetorical language, short sound bites and cyber kilobits.

Arab media need to counter-attack, but I would argue that to do so, they must act decisively, promptly and credibly.

The Detroit Free Press, published in the city with the United States' most concentrated Arab-American population, is trying to better understand and explain issues concerning Arab-Americans and Muslims.

It has a list called "100 Questions & Answers About Arab-Americans: A Journalist's Guide" to help with more accurate journalistic portrayals of Arab-Americans, their backgrounds, culture, religions.

The Florida-based Poynter Institute, which specializes in media matters, ran an online article called "Understanding Ramadan" with links to various sites journalists could use as resources.

Equally good were two features in the Seattle Times Online called "Understanding Turbans" and "Interpreting Veils" with illustrations and descriptions of headdresses worn by men and covers for women. We should have such information handy to provide our media contacts.

Speaking on Arab-American perspectives on the anti-terrorism war, the president of the Arab-American Institute in Washington, James Zogby, delivered the Secretary of State's Open Forum address in December, noting that his community can play a bridging role in the Middle East.

"We understand the reality of the region," he said. "We also want to have input in the discussions about how we approach the Middle East."

So what do readers in America, for example, really want? Pam Johnson writes on the Poynter Institute site that international news needs relevance.

"For many Americans, what happens in the Middle East, Western Europe, Great Britain, Afghanistan, the Indian sub-continent, and the rest of North America now is a subject of great interest," she said. "Similarly, events in the United States that are related to the U.S.-led 'War on Terrorism' take on greater importance."

The Columbia Journalism Review of November/December 1997 ran a story entitled "Reporting Foreign News: Who Gives a Damn?"

Author James F. Hoge, Jr. wrote that except for the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-90, the coverage of international news in American media had steadily declined since the late seventies, when the cold war lost its sense of imminent danger. The reason: A world less threatening to America is less newsy, he reported. Or as one TV executive said, "sunshine is a weather report, a raging storm is news."

Journalists have also ignored historians, wrote Charles Bowen in *Editor & Publisher*. He pointed to a new history-rich website called History News Network (www.historynewsnetwork.org) as a potentially powerful resource, providing linked headlines to its latest analyses.

Shouldn't the Arab World have something similar to serve its purposes?

George Krinsky, a veteran foreign correspondent and editor with the Associated Press, who now has a consulting firm, co-authored a very useful book called "Bringing the World Home: Showing Readers Their Global Connections." It's an invaluable resource for Americans who don't see a link between their own back yards and the universe at large.

Arabs can help by finding links between what interests Americans and their own region. It just requires homework, research, and perseverance.

Several organizations award journalists for the work they do and risks they take to inform us about what's happening in the world, or even in our own neighborhoods. We should support these awards and create worthy prizes.

I was heartened to learn that the conference of Arab news agencies' federation which met in Doha in December recommended the establishment of the federation's own internet site in English and Arabic and another site to counter the negative image portrayed in the perceived campaign against Arabs and Muslims.

I would still like to see more references made to women's participation in that effort and mention of how the image of women in the Arab world can be presented in a positive light, not via stereotypes.

"Empowering Arab & Muslim women is the key to eradicating terrorism at its source" was the headline of an article by Lebanese journalist Saad Mehio in *The Daily Star* Dec. 12, 2001.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS:

With all that in mind, here are my recommendations for positive change:

Women journalists should have facts ready at their fingertips, ask intelligent questions, be persistent without being obnoxious, show inconsistencies in what's being said and done, document everything, and be thorough.

Arab women journalists need to learn American English fast and tune in to the nuances of official Washington before presuming to know how to cover the White House, State Department, Pentagon, Capitol Hill, etc. They also need to understand the intricacies of international finance and lending institutions if they're to cover the World Bank and IMF.

They should be well versed in the language of international relations, treaties, history, geography, etc., before tackling the U.N. and its agencies. There's a lot of legwork involved.

Have female economists available to speak on western business shows about their economic concerns and the common ground that exists between people from the Arab world and other parts of the world. It would strike a responsive chord.

Have female engineers or physicists or doctors or lawyers available to appear on TV shows, radio programs, in print, etc., to explain how things work in Arab or Muslim countries. They would probably find more in common with their sisters in the west than differences.

Above all, have articulate journalists and media experts available to answer questions about the media and other issues of concern across the cultural divide.

Hollywood has enlisted former heavyweight boxing champ Muhammad Ali to help America's campaign abroad to show that the war it's launched isn't against Islam or the Arabs, but against terrorism.

Why can't the Arabs enlist Omar Sharif and women stars who speak English well to do the same and address the western world to talk about the riches of the Arab world and Islam, and even Christianity in Arab countries?

One thing we've failed to do well is addressing the hinterlands in America and Western Europe. It's never too late to do that but definitely requires time, money and effort.

How about mobilizing our women politicians to go out to De Moines, Iowa; Chicago, Illinois; Dallas, Texas; Athens, Ohio; Columbia, Missouri? Set them up to talk to women's clubs, get on women's talk shows and programs, even religious programs and talk about how their beliefs are similar to those of the women in the small towns and cities.

We need to have a handbook of Arab-American legislators, Arabs who've made it in business and science, the media, etc. Have biographies of them and summaries on how the political system in the US works at the city, state and federal levels. Some of these things are already available through Arab-American organizations, but need to be made available to us in simplified form.

It's not just a matter of buying our way into the media and politics. It's more a matter of working our way through the system, by first understanding it. We can't claim expertise in the field. There's still much to learn.

We should have media directories and handbooks of Arab experts available for correspondents who visit us or live in our countries. Make them clear, concise and user friendly. Update them regularly, make sure they're properly edited and printed on good paper and are attractive online. It's the details that count and lend to one's credibility.

No matter how powerful or rich a mass medium, it cannot succeed if it does not offer accurate and unbiased information. We may present glossy pictures but if the text is bad, the whole story goes out the window.

How do we contact the media? How do we write a letter to the editor or an op-ed column?

Here are a few suggestions from the Arab American Institute in Washington, which also provides links to media sources. We can follow the guidelines and create our own local/regional version:

1. Be timely. Respond while the issue is still fresh in the minds of journalists and their audiences. Send your letter no later than a week after the article appears in print or is broadcast.

2. Be direct. The opening paragraph should contain your main point. You want the reader to be able to quickly identify your message.
3. Be concise. Your letter's length will affect its chances of being published. Most publications will not print more than three short paragraphs.
4. Use words that convey a firm and resolute stance. If you're writing a letter critical of news coverage, use adjectives such as distorted, inaccurate, out-of-context, one-sided, skewed. If you are complementing an article or editorial, make sure you note its fairness, balance and/or thoroughness.
5. Stay cool. Hostile or overly emotional language in your letter will hurt your chances rather than help them. Stating your case in a convincing fashion is the most important criterion for getting published.
6. Spread the word. Don't just send your letter to the editor. You can maximize its impact if you send a copy to other people responsible for the article, such as the reporter, foreign editor or syndicated columnist, as well as those mentioned in the article, such as a congress member or public official.
7. Claim credit. Before publishing a letter, most papers will call to verify that you wrote it. Make sure you include your full name, title, address and daytime phone number in the letter.
8. Follow up. Inquire about the status of your letter with a phone call or letter. If you submit a letter in the future, the editor may remember you and give you more immediate consideration.

In December, CNN and MTV - two cable networks launched in the 1980s with different ownerships and audiences - teamed up to offer viewers of both networks a series of reports on young people in Afghanistan. What an interesting experiment!

Why can't we have something similar with young women from a youth-oriented Arab station reporting on the plight of Palestinian women under siege, young people in Iraq, students in Sudan, or women farmers in southern Lebanon?

In fact, I would propose creating an online news service for children, run by children - let's say ages 8-18 - under the guidance of adults. Its young reporters can reach out to others around the world and share their concerns and fears about the planet they all share.

Another place I've loved to visit in the past few years has been something called the Newseum (or news museum) outside Washington. It's a magnet for anyone interested in news.

We could easily have something like that in Lebanon, for example, dedicated to the news business, with exhibits in at least three languages and user-friendly, computer-generated, interactive displays.

We must learn to network more effectively and develop media literacy programs for children and adults. A specialized media group defines media literacy as a four-step "inquiry" process of Awareness...Analysis...Reflection...Action.

There's a lot that can be done online to reach a far greater audience than traditional media. One woman in New York called Amira Quraishi with a group of friends launched a non-profit organization called Muslims Against Terrorism and started a website.

According to Wired News Online, they began with a spare website that tracked hate crimes and cited key passages from the Koran that call for peace, justice and tolerance. Within three weeks, the site had slick Flash graphics, a press kit, links to other good resources, links to the group's listserv and contact information for members.

One of our shortcomings has been that we're always reactive, not proactive. We need to change that. We should provide speakers, information, access, courtesy, and much more, in real time.

We should learn to make friends with reporters and editors - not with the idea of buying them, but with being good sources of reliable information to them. It's an easy task that should be taken seriously. We should learn to respect time and deadlines. We need to have long-term vision.

Our editorials should be rational discourses, not irrational outbursts.

If we're going to set up more satellite stations to address western public opinion, let them not be carbon copies of what we already have. We need original content to face today's challenges.

We need in-depth coverage of issues that concern our people and that have common threads with others worldwide. Let's be creative about it.

We're catching up in the use of technology, but shouldn't bar access to its various manifestations. Blocking websites won't do it. It'll only make people want to try harder to reach the unreachable.

We have too many armchair analysts. In Beirut, dozens of famous writers sit in cafés and expound on matters about Lebanon and the world. They don't travel extensively, they don't mix with all manner of people, and they don't even read English well enough to decipher American or British media. And yet they get paid for that. It's a disgrace. They should be dethroned.

Analysis and good writing aren't done by remote control. They require involvement, getting down to the grassroots, digging for facts, and constantly communicating with people from all walks of life.

We in the Arab world should also learn to handle bad news. In the West they create crisis centers to handle the flow of information in an emergency. We tend to cover up things. Why? We'd be more credible if we shared what we knew in a sober and rational way to help all those concerned, including ourselves.

People will continue to stereotype Arabs and Muslims so long as Arabs and Muslims don't present their case in an effective way, away from stuffy official statements that most people don't believe anyway. We need substance.

It's our job to change the negative image we have abroad. We have to bridge the cultural and media divide. Provocation won't get us anywhere. Communication will.

To improve our image we need to clean up our own act, reform our methods, abide by media ethics, follow guidelines of good journalistic practice, promote transparency in our work, capitalize on our human assets, promote more women in the media to fill higher positions and provide balanced leadership.

We need to coordinate better and should learn to share information among each other in a cooperative spirit.

"Keep it simple and don't assume anything" are two basic rules I used to teach my journalism students. They're universal.

Finally, always keep children in mind when creating a message. They're the most impressionable and valuable audience we have and they'll grow up to become tomorrow's leaders.

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