

The State of Arab Media: A Call for Freedom and Reform

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Your Excellencies, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen,

The degree of freedom of expression and the media have varied in different Arab countries over the years, with Lebanon considered probably the freest of the lot. It's all relative, of course.

Freedom of expression is not enshrined in the constitutions of Arab countries, like the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, but then again, even the First Amendment has had some dark days. Examples abound, but I won't dwell on them.

Most Arab countries have state-run media (print and broadcast) that must toe the official line. In some countries like Lebanon there are private commercial media, alongside the government-controlled press and broadcast outlets, but they are heavily influenced by politics — i.e. political parties or key politicians and their families have a major stake in the operations. As a result, their coverage is skewed to represent the party, the ideology or the politicians in the best possible light.

Despite relative freedom in Lebanon, many journalists exercise self-censorship to avoid harassment, which in turn can be manifested in a range of reprisals: from an influential politician muscling in on a publication's advertisers to stop dealing with the paper or magazine if he takes offense at a story, to threats by security forces, to shutting down a TV station, to actual jail terms if the "offending" journalist is charged with breaking the law — like establishing or maintaining contacts with Israel or insulting a "brotherly Arab state."

That last one can be open to a lot of interpretation. A local TV station that was scheduled to air a program criticizing Saudi Arabia, for example, was barred from doing so, much to the chagrin of journalists and civil society groups.

Saudi Arabia, for its part, recently loosened its stranglehold on some types of news, like crime reports. The desert kingdom long priding itself on very low crime rates has begun acknowledging, if only shyly, that all may not be well, that foreigners are being murdered in the country and that crime is on the rise. But there are no independently verifiable crime statistics. As for actual terrorist attacks, there is no escaping the fact that Saudi media have had to cover what the whole world knows and sees.

In Egypt, opposition parties operate print media critical of the regime. As a result, the editors of such publications have had their papers or magazines shut down or suspended and editors, publishers or reporters hauled off to jail or harassed. Human rights organizations often complain about the Egyptian government's mistreatment of independent journalists.

North Africa has its share of woes. Algeria has been undergoing civil strife that hasn't spared reporters and editors, many of whom have been targeted by all manner of

extremists. Every day I receive emails and other materials about how Tunisian authorities mistreat journalists and dissidents. We hear Morocco's King Mohammad VI wants to modernize his country but the media remain tightly reined in.

One has but to check the websites of Amnesty International, Reporters Sans Frontiers, the International Federation of Journalists, the International Press Institute, Article 19 and the Committee to Protect Journalists to verify such matters in the Maghreb region and entire Arab world.

In the Gulf states, as with much of the Arab World, personality cults come in different shades and hues — and dealing with them ranges from the overly deferential and kow-towing to the respectful and pseudo-critical. It isn't uncommon for the ruling/royal family to make the front pages of the daily paper (every day), to be on every newscast and to be treated with kid gloves — in short, to get positive coverage.

Iraq is a perfect example of personality cults gone to the ultimate extreme. While I've never visited North Korea to compare, I did visit Iraq under Saddam Hussein and felt really stifled as a foreign correspondent. Media were so strictly controlled by the regime that even officially organized events in the country wouldn't be broadcast live on TV. Journalists had to go through several layers of control before a news item was cleared for dissemination.

I remember at the Baghdad Arab Summit in 1990, before Iraq invaded Kuwait, I almost missed the story, when the conference began but several colleagues and I were glued to a TV set awaiting opening statements that never came to file back to our headquarters. Someone had failed to tell us that even such events weren't carried live.

Jordan has see-sawed between tight controls, some loosening up, and reversion to tight controls. One can name every Arab country and find any measure of restrictions on the media.

Insecure rulers tend to lash out at the opposition and stifle dissent. So opposition media, unless operating underground in any given country, feel more comfortable disseminating their anti-regime news and views from beyond their homelands' shores. London and Paris have been traditional safe havens for dissident media groups, supplanting Beirut, which served as such a center prior to the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. But other world capitals have also become sanctuaries for opposition Arab media, notably of the cyber variety, in recent years.

Interestingly, Arab countries boasting media cities, media free zones or controversial hard-hitting channels like Qatar's Al-Jazeera (which is noted for its unrelenting criticism of other Arab countries), rarely turn the cameras or pens inwards. They may poke into other people's affairs but are not allowed to investigate the home front. Al-

Jazeera, for example, doesn't dig deeply into Qatari affairs.

The media free zones in the Arab World are not so much venues for free media and free expression as they are tax shelters for media companies or interests in print, broadcast, film and cyberspace, by providing facilities and lower paid employees than what those companies may have had in expensive locations such as London, Paris or Rome.

One such highly touted media magnet exercises cyber censorship. A professor of journalism in that country told me that his institution had special dispensation enabling faculty members and students to browse the Internet without going through filters and barriers like a program called Websense.

But, he cautioned, if a casual browser at an Internet café wished to research the subject of breast cancer, for example, he/she would be barred from doing so, because the cyber police would find the word "breast" offensive in that conservative society.

In such an environment, is it any wonder that real investigative journalism is a rarity?

Three years ago the Institute for Professional Journalists at the Lebanese American University conducted a 10-week investigative journalism workshop for reporters, in cooperation with the Washington-based International Center for Journalists. We've tried to train journalists in Lebanon and the Arab World to look beyond the official handouts, communiqués, statements and pronouncements.

It isn't easy, given the mindset and political/economic interests at stake.

Even sourcing and statistics can be problematic. Obtaining accurate figures in some Arab countries may be considered subversive. Official statistics in most Arab countries are always taken with a grain of salt. That's why it's important to supplement such data with studies from U.N. bodies, NGOs and other independent sources.

The rule that I've always taught my students, or the professional journalists who come to train with us, is that every bit of information, unless in the public domain and easily verifiable, needs a minimum of two sources. Unfortunately, that is often overlooked in Arab media.

Identifying sources is also an obstacle.

When a source declines to be named as in a case of "on background" in the American journalistic lexicon, or "off-the-record" in the British system — meaning that you may report the news but only refer to the source as "a senior administration official," for example -- there's always a way to try to pinpoint what kind of source that is, without giving away the position.

But Arab journalists are used to, and encouraged to use, vague attributions and general references, such as “reliable sources,” or other non-committal terms like “political sources.”

I often joke to our course participants by saying my building’s doorman/concierge is a reliable source. He knows all the neighborhood’s news. Does that mean I’d necessarily use him as a source?

Trying to double-check information from closed Arab societies, or countries where the regime has a stranglehold on the media, is a tricky affair. Distasteful news may be denied outright, or not acknowledged at all. In worst-case scenarios, journalists reporting such news may be subjected to physical, psychological or other kinds of harm, depending on the country.

Since globalization has thrust the Internet upon the Arab World, it has also created a problem of access to the Web. In many Arab countries, sites considered offensive or potentially subversive are banned with a variety of software programs that weed through the endless cyberspace material. In fact, there are entire squads of employees who do nothing but that, under the guise of protecting public morals and safeguarding national security.

But that hasn’t dampened the resolve of opposition media that have taken to disseminating their news and views in cyberspace to circumvent restrictions on their print publications.

They, too, may face hindrances in verifying information, in checking for accuracy and in investigating leads, notably when the data they publish online have to do with ruling families or regimes in countries where accountability and transparency are anathema.

It’s often hard to separate political and economic interests, or affairs of state from private property. The concept of conflict of interest is a non-issue for most Arabs and isn’t viewed with abhorrence. For example, members of ruling families in the Gulf, or members of parliament in Lebanon, or heads of governments in other Arab countries quite often mix their political/state positions with their private bank accounts.

An influential person’s spouse or offspring may intimidate reporters or editors if he/she receives unfavorable coverage or comes under attack for alleged misdeeds. How misdeeds are interpreted is another matter.

For the media themselves, it’s taking a gargantuan effort to convince editors, publishers, TV station executives and reporters that **they** should not accept money, gifts, favors or junkets from people they cover. I know of many Lebanese reporters who are on the payroll of institutions or of high-ranking politicians they cover. Not

only is it acceptable, it's a necessity for those woefully underpaid journalists.

I conducted an international roundtable in March 2002, as Phase II of a conference in May 2001, on freedom of expression in Lebanon. The second event focused on a media code of ethics, which we renamed PROPOSED GUIDELINES FOR GOOD JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE. The guidelines can be seen at <http://ipj.lau.edu.lb/guidelines1.html>.

There's also a booklet of proceedings from the March 2002 roundtable available in downloadable PDF format. Feel free to browse our site at <http://ipj.lau.edu.lb>.

We're still trying to institutionalize this "code of ethics" and eventually export it to all Arab countries but there's natural resistance to a framework that may deprive individuals of many benefits for which they could be held accountable under strict professional rules.

Reforming media is not easy. Professional standards must be discussed in meetings, conferences, and gatherings, disseminated through various channels, and, reinforced with courses and workshops as well as with incentives. There must be implementation and accountability for reforms to succeed.

But there are other avenues that ought to be considered.

Iraq, our focus in this conference, is undergoing major change and will need all the help it can get. I've seen and heard various reports about American network news programs with Arabic subtitles being beamed down from overflying military aircraft and wonder how many Iraqis had electricity in their homes following the recent hostilities to watch those shows or how many could actually read the subtitles.

Media critics urged the U.S. to let the Iraqis produce their own newscasts and edit their own papers while others praised the White House for getting the American message across.

One AFP story in April focused on Iraqi journalists finally being able to report freely following years of fear and intimidation by Saddam's regime.

By May, I'd read a Reuters report saying Iraqi journalists were complaining about U.S. censorship of their programs and a ban on the broadcasting of Koranic verses (as is customary in most Arab countries) on the U.S.-sponsored Iraqi Media Network.

On a more positive note, former Iraqi expatriates are returning from their European and North American perches to set up free media following years of self-exile and journalistic Dark Ages in the country.

But they and their Arab brethren need to do some soul-searching if they are to be taken seriously on the global media market.

They should break the old molds and do away with the nightly parade of statues and stiff TV appearances on Arab screens. They should turn to live sound and occasional banter at official functions to liven up the two-dimensional approach of “received and bade farewell to...” (Istaqbal wa wadda’a), which is the normal fare on Arab broadcasts, for example.

Thanks to Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, LBCI and Abu Dhabi TV, Arab TV stations are becoming increasingly more attuned to deadlines and to abiding by schedules. But even these stations have slipups. We should wean them away from almost open-ended newscasts, long-winded rhetoric and too much concentration on looks and makeup.

Not enough attention is being paid to good writing skills, editing, and general knowledge. I suggest setting up a series of tests, combining the best entrance requirements of the region’s own media and the BBC, CNN, leading newspapers, etc., that can be updated and administered at regular intervals. Nothing is more distracting than reading sloppy style, poor grammar, or listening to mispronounced names and mangled syntax.

We should set up a mechanism to eliminate the practice of offering reporters gifts or bribes. They should be persuaded that such actions can’t buy credibility for their sources or enhance the stories.

I suggest creation of a proper Arab media database for journalists that includes biographies of top people in the region, professional pictures of them, general fact sheets about Arab countries, key policy decisions, excerpts from major speeches, etc., and put it all online where it can be updated on a regular basis.

Working in Arab media means reporters, editors, newscasters, publishers and Web managers have to produce content in several languages. While Arabic is the official working language, journalists also have to operate in English, French, Armenian, Kurdish, Berber.

So journalists have to be multi-lingual, multi-cultural and in possession of professional and technical skills to make it in print, broadcast and online.

Some Arab media prepare their reporters, anchors and editors to work according to high international standards, but most media still need to provide training on content, news judgment and technical know-how. In poorer countries, you may have poor performance and poor skills because facilities lack up-to-date equipment. A Yemeni female journalist I met in the fall told me her journalism textbooks dated back to the 1960s. There’s work to be done in those areas.

I would argue we should dissolve all information ministries in the Arab world. Qatar did that in March 1998 and is better off for it. Most Arab ministries of information are, in fact, ministries of “disinformation.”

Membership in regulatory bodies like national audio-visual and other media councils shouldn't be the product of cabinet appointments. These councils should be independent organs with representatives from the media as well.

State-run media are an anomaly in our day and age. For too long officials' political cronies and cheerleaders out for self-aggrandizement have staffed them. These media should be restructured and liberalized.

Press syndicates and unions could also use an overhaul. They, too, have often served as mouthpieces for various governments. Their roles ought to be redefined, to better reflect the needs of journalists nowadays.

Last, but not least, hard working and professional journalists are inadequately recognized for their efforts in the Arab World. I propose the institution of media awards on a footing with the Pulitzer Prize to promote, encourage and maintain high standards in all media.

In conclusion, criticism of shortcomings is one thing, but for us to see changes in media policies and operations, we need to have Arab governments loosen their controls, be more accountable and provide a freer environment in which journalists can operate.

Thank you.

Magda Abu-Fadil is Director of the Institute for Professional Journalists and of University Publications at the Lebanese American University (LAU) in Beirut. She brings 25 years of experience as a foreign correspondent and editor in Washington and the Middle East with international news agencies such as Agence France-Presse, United Press International; newspapers such as *Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Al Riyadh* and *Defense News*; and, magazines such as *The Middle East* and *Events*. She taught journalism at the American University in Washington, DC – from where she obtained a BA and MA in Communication and Multimedia – and was coordinator of the Journalism Program at LAU for six years. She has conducted seminars and workshops for professional journalists at the Washington-based International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and at LAU and has worked closely with the Vienna-based International Press Institute (IPI) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

