Second Arab Women's Media Conference
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Jordan

Online Journalism & Development of the Arab Media

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Your Highness, your excellencies, media colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Arab Women's Media Center, and particularly Mahasen Al Emam, for inviting me to this fascinating event and offering me the opportunity to discuss a very important topic, which has not been given adequate attention in the Arab World: online journalism.

There are a number of different interpretations of this term – online journalism – and I'd like to touch on all of them in the allotted time today.

One angle of OJ is creating news for Web sites, which most print and broadcast media seem to be doing, with varying degrees of success and credibility. You see and browse these sites of leading newspapers, magazines, TV stations, and radio stations with their Webcasts of programs and online publications available only on the Internet. It has also become part of the focus on convergence and pressures placed on journalists to produce for various media.

Another angle is the actual teaching of computer-assisted research and reporting with the Internet, which most schools of communication and colleges of journalism today do, primarily in the United States.

A third angle is the creation of blogs, or web logs, which means journalists and other writers posting their own news online on their own sites. This helps journalists who can't get published in mainstream media. But critics claim blogs lack credibility.

Finally, we're seeing self-generated news on sites like Google, where the latest trend is to let a computer using algorithms select from top stories of the day from 4,000 sources on the web and provide links to the content, hence bypassing human editors in that end-user process. We're also seeing computers that write the news.

But I'd like to reverse the order by discussing the last option first, because I find it intriguing and because it relies on an Arabic system of mathematics. We seem to forget that much of the knowledge we use today comes from our rich Arab roots. But we also dwell on the past and still haven't learned to make the best use of tools fashioned to help us master this knowledge to our best advantage.

All the weapons in the world cannot defeat what we have in our heads because, in the final analysis, knowledge is power. So let's rise to the occasion.

1. News by Algorithms; Headlines and Leads by Newsblaster:
Algorithms means the repetitive calculations used in finding the greatest common divisor of two numbers and it comes from the Arabic system of numerals or the act or skill of computing with any kind of numerals.

According to Editor & Publisher, the search engine Google introduced a new version of its Google News service that collects news from 4,000 sources on the web and updates it every 15 minutes – without the use of a human editor, but thanks to a computer.

The computer selects the top stories of the day and the best coverage and provides links to them, and it's entirely automated. It's what Steve Outing of E&P calls the "global digital newsstand."

"The service calculates what are the most significant stories being published at any given time, and ranks them according to time published, number of links to the story, and credibility of the publishing organization. It then presents them in a way that highlights news by its importance," Outing reported.

The Google News main page is considered a "front page" of a global online "newspaper" or "wire service," with stories placed in categories including top stories, US news, world news, sports, business, science-tech, health and entertainment, he added.

Its news database keeps articles for 30 days and it is said to contain more than two million stories.

But critics would say: Where are the human editors, whose judgment is needed to determine what's newsworthy? Won't there be errors in the process? Will human editors continue to produce if they can't compete with computer news robots?

Some say it fails to rank news reports on the basis of quality and according to a BBC report on the new service, Google News does not employ any journalists. Stories are listed according to how recently they have been published, the number of articles devoted to any given topic and the popularity of the news source.

Yes, admits Outing, there are bound to be errors but one must not forget that the stories selected by the algorithms were already chosen by editors at 4,000 news organizations whose human intelligence determined that they were worthy of publishing – whether online or in print.

"Google News makes its placement decisions on collective editing intelligence, so there's less likelihood of individual editors' biases influencing story placement," said Outing.

Chris Sherman, a search engine industry analyst said that this new development would change the way we get online news and urged publishers to take advantage of it. "It supports the news organizations with the best reputations because their content typically bubbles to the top of Google's story selections. It's also great news for small news sites, which can be exposed to a huge audience when their content occasionally bubbles up."

Google News is very useful for journalists wanting to know what other journalists have written about a given topic.

Another interesting development is the use of artificial intelligence to actually write the news. A lead (intro paragraph) to a story can be written by computer, thanks to researchers working at Columbia University's Department of Computer Science in the School of Engineering and Applied Science.

The experimental prototype called the Columbia Newsblaster looks at news reports from various sources. It's a tool for journalists and executives sifting through tons of information, according to a report in the Online Journalism Review.

Its artificial intelligence summarizes stories on given topics using natural language processing techniques to read what is written in published news reports, wrote John V. Pavlik.

He said Newsblaster interprets the importance of different facts, based on its own news judgment, reflecting factors such as where a fact is mentioned in the published reports, how often it is repeated across reports dealing with the same event or subject, and the news value of those individual facts such as how many were killed or injured or how much damage to property occurred.

The programmers have included other editorial judgment factors using spiders, or intelligent software agents, to search through each of the sources' web sites to track down the latest news reports and then sort and summarize them into categories or subjects.

Once it digests the information, the artificial intelligence writes the lead, Pavlik said, adding that Newsblaster also gathers photos and may eventually process multimedia as well.

"Human journalists make connections between facts and between events or stories that can add context to a current report. This kind of contextualization is something that Newsblaster cannot do," he cautioned.

Accuracy may also fall victim to this method of newsgathering and dissemination, especially if one report says a storm left ten victims in its wake while another says 25.

The author also points to the danger of a machine writing the lead since after days of culling news, the computer can offer stale reports, or can lack the edge journalists and editors put in their introductory paragraphs that grab readers' attention.

2. Blogs, or Web Logs:
Journalists who feel constrained by their news organizations now have an outlet: their own sites through which they can publish stories, open up discussions with others on certain topics and have a forum for discussions.

Some of these personal sites exist independently, are part of the news organizations for which the journalists work, or are part of sites for other organizations, such as journalism education institutes.

The New York Times reports that a journalist got fired after his bosses discovered he was writing nasty things in his personal web log about people he covered in the paper for which he worked.

It would have been even more catastrophic if he had been writing it for a web log operated by that paper because there would be issues of liability and lawsuits. Quoting a professor of journalism, the Times said that if a news media organization edits a web log it would damage spontaneity and would become responsible for content.

How did this new form of journalism come about?

It began in the late 1990s with software making it possible for anyone to publish and update in cyberspace.

"Do-it-yourself journalists are able to link to and dissect freshly published articles, adding many voices to the national debate. Blogs have been promoted by some commentators as a potential challenge to traditional news media companies," wrote David Gallagher in the New York Times.

He added that the format also appealed to professional journalists who publish web logs as a creative outlet, or as a way to raise their visibility, or as part of their jobs. And the best part is that they don't have to be as formal or to abide by strict writing style rules as they do for their traditional media. And, they can make some money on the side with blogs.

But there is some editing. It's not entirely free of all controls. Journalists realize that if they're completely offensive or antagonize their readers, they may be out of business. They must also decide on where their content will go – on the traditional site, in the traditional paper, or on the web log. In other words, which venue gets priority.

Unofficial estimates put the number of blogs at 200,000-500,000. On September 11, 2001, masses of people logged onto traditional news sites to get more information on the attacks against New York and Washington but many of those sites crashed from the sheer volume and others failed to provide timely updates, wrote Renee Tawa in the Los Angeles Times.

But bloggers got a lot of traffic on their sites and in emailed comments from the public which were posted instantly in a forum likened to an infinite and unedited letters-to-the editor page, she added.

"As a result, bloggers, who typically have day jobs, turned into 'do-it-yourself journalists'...seeking out sources and sometimes assembling these ideas for others," she quoted a study conducted about September 11 and the internet by the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

It's become so fashionable that the University of California at Berkeley is offering its first course on web logs and students in the class are scheduled to launch their own blog in November.

One of the aspects the students will examine is intellectual property and copyright since a critical part of the blog is a link to a traditional news site or other copyrighted source, said Paul Grabowicz, the university's director of the new media program at Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism in an interview with The Mercury News.

Although bloggers can't engage in long-term investigative journalism, web logs expand the media universe, noted Scott Rosenberg in the widely read Salon.com e-zine. "They are a media life-form that is native to the Web, and they add something new to our mix, something valuable, something that couldn't have existed before the web."

3. Computer-Assisted Research/Reporting, or CAR:
Teaching reporting and editing with the use of computers is part of every curriculum I know of in schools of journalism in America. Without it reporters perish. Web course tools, or Web CT, are often found on the pages of faculty members who teach these courses and students are expected to communicate with their teachers via the Internet and email where they find much of their course work posted, where curricula are listed, where reading lists are available, and, often, where even exams are taken.

In 1999, I presented a conference paper based on a semester-long study about internationalizing a journalism curriculum using distance education technology. It was a pilot project in which I was involved, between the Lebanese American University, where I work, and the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

I exchanged assignments of my students via email and the Internet with a colleague in Missouri and we corrected each other's students' papers and graded them in almost real time – given the eight-hour time difference. My one problem was that Israel had bombed the power plant down the hill from my house so I was without electricity quite often and had to work in the dark, or whenever I had enough power for my computer. Thank God the phones still worked so I could log onto the Internet and send email.

As the Internet has provided endless accessibility to information and newsrooms, that growth of data has meant that journalism in the old traditional sense has changed, as well. Which, in turn, has meant a need to teach new methods of collecting the information and using it in stories.

But as Nora Paul and Cary Perez Waulk of the Poynter Institute in Florida told participants in a seminar on online journalism, the genre needs grounding in good old journalistic ethical decision-making.

"Research takes time and patience. And while there's a lot of important information on the Internet, there's also a lot of junk and spoof and sound-alike sites," opined Chris Harvey, the online bureau director of the University of Maryland's College of Journalism, adding that journalists should approach their results with a critical eye.

He recommended the use of more than one search engine for an important search since no single search engine indexes more than about 20 percent of the Web.

In evaluating sites and pages, he advised journalists to check and see who is authoring web pages, if the publisher is a scholar on the topic, if the writer is unbiased, or someone with an agenda, if the writer lists a bibliography or source or web link list and if the information is updated in a timely fashion since currency is important.

Last, but not least, the author said a site should prominently list a contact phone number and/or email address.

Public records and databases fill up cyberspace but the trick is to find them quickly. The US government is probably the largest user of the Internet but since the September 11 attacks, it has removed much of the data it found out to be of national security importance and which it feared was being used by terrorists against the United States.

These records can be used to research people, check out telephone directories, find out about property transactions, professionals and their professions, read countless online specialized publications, connect to trade associations, learn about businesses, research political parties, investigate economic issues, and more.

Courses at universities can familiarize students with the basics of browsers, buttons, shortcuts, bookmarks, finding information, finding ideas, assessing data quality and reliability, and interviewing the sources of data. Other courses teach writing and editing content for the web.

We, at the Institute for Professional Journalists at the Lebanese American University, teach all the above to practicing reporters and editors.

"Journalism students and educators will need a change of mindset," wrote Dr. Stephen Quinn, a seasoned journalist, faculty member at Zayed University in the UAE, and author of *Newsgathering on the Net*. "We need to accept the need for ongoing or lifelong learning."

He advises his students to pick up new skills for the new century by running their own web sites, sending email CVs, learning hypertext markup language, understanding the other Internet languages, staying on top of industry trends, participating in online discussions, picking up design skills, looking outside traditional media organizations, and freelancing online.

"The Internet will prove to be the most significant human development since Guttenberg's invention of movable type in the middle of the 15th Century. Indeed, it may prove to be the most significant development since the discovery of fire. Its possibilities for journalism are only limited by the boundaries of the imagination of individual journalists," he wrote.

That's why The New York Times Foundation, among other organizations, launched an initiative in the United States to give high school students and teachers information and tools to publish online newspapers at schools.

But it's also worth remembering, as John Lenger wrote for the Columbia Journalism Review, that cyberspace isn't the answer to all our media problems. "Those of us who learned our journalism before the mid-1990s, when Internet use started to grow astronomically, understand that not all of the world's accumulated knowledge exists on web servers, and probably never will."

4. News for the Web & Convergence:
In February 2001, web expert Mike Wendland wrote about the first living example of journalism convergence, a trend that has spread to many news organizations in the United States, Europe and Asia, and is being looked at seriously in the Middle East.

He was referring to the Tampa Tribune newspaper in Florida which spent $34 million dollars on a building serving as headquarters for a newspaper, a local affiliate of a network television company and a website.

The three media outlets are owned by the same company. The TV reporters do their stand-ups in front of the cameras and then write newspaper stories. The newspaper reporters write their stories and then appear on TV to do talk-back debriefings or their own stand-ups. And everybody – reporters, editors, photographers – "repurpose" their work for the Web site, said Wendland.

This cross-platform experiment is being seen in many other media companies and means you can get news when, where and whichever way you want it. But it also means reporters and editors have less time to evaluate the news, and in some cases it puts too much pressure on smaller operations with fewer resources.

Another newspaper, for example, sends out its video journalists who are reporter-photographer one-man or one woman operations, who report, videotape and back in the station edit the stories for TV as well as the newspaper, using digital video cameras and computerized TV editing software and a computer.

Naturally, the people who are upset are members of specific journalists' or photographers' unions, who see their jobs being eroded by the jacks-of-all-trades.

The University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication has decided to capitalize on the trend by offering courses in convergence journalism – creating graduates who work cross-platform.

Asked whether students could excel working for three types of media at once, the director of the school's online journalism program said it aimed to provide enough knowledge so that journalists would be comfortable in multi-tasking, like a print or online reporter being asked to supply a video clip for a web presentation.

The trick is to learn to write differently for the web than for print or broadcast, but not to lose sight of the importance of accuracy, credibility, timeliness, interactivity, and that one should write horizontally, not vertically, with the idea that stories, segments, sources, etc., must have links to other bits of information.

"The challenge is to think of the web as a different medium, not merely an extension of the newspaper," said Carole Rich, a professor of journalism at the University of Alaska to a conference of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

Outlook & Recommendations:
Where does all that leave us in the Arab World? Can our journalism evolve, advance, serve us, and be credible?

We have to start with ourselves as individuals. With the will to change, improve and learn. We cannot treat journalism and professionalism in the 21st Century the same way we did media in the 20th. Technologies have changed and we're overwhelmed with volume, so our strategies must be modified as well to manage the flood.

We cannot afford being dinosaurs long after that species has become extinct. It's the rule of "adapt, or die." And I'm certainly not ready to die yet. Are you?

So, to newspaper and magazine editors and publishers, I would urge you to use your internet version to supplement the print edition. Don't just regurgitate what you print. It's often boring, cumbersome and lacks vitality. Expand your market by making both venues interesting to draw in the younger crowd, for example.

Our greatest asset is our young people, and yet we often dish out news to them that's fashioned for dinosaurs. A recent study revealed that young people don't believe newspapers satisfy their needs. What are we doing about that?

These new generations of children will one day become consumers of goods and services, so why not start providing them with good news service from now and keep them as loyal consumers for later?

We've seen how the Internet can be a double-edged sword. I would argue that we need to keep the sharp edges to cut through nonsense and vacuous content to benefit our news consumers.

It's up to us, the news providers, to maintain high standards of professionalism and ethics so that recipients will find us believable in this vast universe of information and break-neck technology.

Which also means we may need to redefine our roles. Who is a journalist? Is your teenage neighbor with a digital camera and laptop computer connected to a web server a journalist? Is your editor who still doesn't know how to use a computer but keeps one for decoration in his office and asks his secretary to retrieve his emails really a journalist in today's fast-changing world?

I believe there's a happy medium we should adopt in the Arab world. We need to catch up fast with technological advances and learn to capitalize on what they can offer us. But we should not lose sight of journalistic principles of accuracy, timeliness, ethics, solid research, good sources and fairness.

All these factors can contribute to the making of great Arab women journalists. We already have some. We need armies more to counter the vicious campaigns launched against our culture and beliefs. If the men can't do it, let the women lead the charge.

Thank you.

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