



Obstacles & Prospects for Women & Youth in the MENA Media Landscape

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Introduction:

Who sets the agenda for free expression, what are the obstacles facing women and youth in the MENA region, how do these two segments of society interact with the media and what are their prospects?

Let's review what consumers face in terms of media content and constraints.

There's an abundance of satellite channels and zapping has become a national hobby. The choices are mostly music, sports, movies, game shows and an increasing number of news outlets but their content varies from professional to sub-standard.

Most newscasts in the Arab World are a testament to obfuscation and parades of who received whom and how they discussed “issues of mutual interest.” There's a great shortage of substance, proper handling of the facts (when they are available) and an aversion to investigative and hard-hitting reporting. Worst of all, media ethics take a back seat to other priorities.

Is it any wonder that women and youth are turned off by the available news fare?

We're faced with the chicken and the egg syndrome. Which came first: markets or viewers/readers/content consumers?

Freedom of expression's agenda is set by very few media in the Arab World, with Lebanon being the shining example, all things being relative and equal, as well as by some academic institutions, NGOs and civil society organizations. Freelancers and individuals don't seem to have as much of an impact as more organized groups.

These organizations can be local, or a combination of local and regional/international.

Obstacles:

Common obstacles facing Arab media and their women/youth constituents are:

1. Stifling media laws that bar the publishing (print and online) or broadcasting of content not in compliance with set government rules.
2. Unclear guidelines regarding the publishing or broadcasting of unsavory content.
3. Uneven implementation of what's on the books.
4. Penalties ranging from fines to harsh physical punishment for perceived wrongdoing.
5. Blocking of websites with perceived harmful content.
6. Censorship, delay in distribution or blacking out of foreign publications with perceived "harmful" content.
7. Lack of access to accurate information, notably reliable statistics.

Constraints:

There are multiple layers of censorship in the Arab World. There is self-censorship, which is practiced a lot in Lebanon. It preempts the official censors by second-guessing them. Other forms of censorship can be harsh, physically and mentally.

Additionally, the 24-hour news cycle, and competition from an explosion of Arab satellite channels offering all kinds of programming (with a heavy emphasis on entertainment) have also cramped journalists' style.

Slashed budgets and lower circulation figures for newspapers have hampered investigative and other kinds of reporting that require extended research and time spent on stories. It's even worse for the broadcast media, where production costs are astronomical.

Reporters may also have to cover more than one beat and are quite stretched in terms of facilities, equipment and resources. Economic realities mean publications often operate with skeletal staffs and journalists go without salary raises for years. The training courses we offer, for example, are free of charge to reporters (thanks to sponsorships) because our participants can't afford to pay for them.

So employers are more concerned with survival than improvement of quality. And, since the job market is limited with tough competition, journalists can't be too fussy with their demands.

Unlike developed countries, Arab media have not yet adopted knowledge management techniques or learned about cost-effective, time-critical applications. In short, there is a preponderance of functionally illiterate journalists who still don't know how to use computers, or use the Internet and databases for research.

What access journalists have to the Internet may be spent chatting, sending and receiving emails or doing very superficial browsing. If they don't have their

own computers, the journalists use what's available at the office – and quite often that's insufficient and inefficient, and they must share these resources with others. There are also slow Internet connections at work and at Internet cafes.

Impact of Regional Arab Media:

The impact of regional media on the local outlets has been a mixed bag. In some Arab countries it has had a positive effect, by raising standards and expanding the margins of news coverage. In others, the local content has remained poor, dull and below standard due to limited budgets or to centralized decision-making bureaucracies that feel the need to fully control output.

Since mostly state-controlled media are not market-oriented, vast amounts are spent, or misappropriated, on facilities, personnel and projects that yield poor results. For example, I recently visited a training center for journalists of a large Arab newspaper and found a huge building full of lecture rooms, fancy offices for directors, conference halls and some computer labs. But the computers were old, limited in memory and the software they had was several versions behind what is used in the 21st Century. There was an obvious disconnect between the needs of the journalists and the caprices of the officials running the operation.

As satellite TV has become so pervasive in the Arab World, it is hard to see how local TV can successfully compete with the abundance of offerings from all over the world, except when local news is essential for the well being of individual countries' citizens.

Media that criticize the state of affairs in other countries rarely turn the cameras or pens/keyboards inwards or examine their own shortcomings.

With the advent of the Internet, and despite censorship or banning of sites in some countries, there are ways of circumventing obstacles through mirror sites, SMS and coded text messages and more.

A participant at a media ethics conference I organized in Beirut last June disclosed how she hacked censored sites in her country to obtain much-needed information.

Fortunately, technology to break these barriers is moving so fast it's a race between obstructionists and seekers of knowledge.

According to newspaper reports, there are over 200 TV stations in the Arab media market, with advertising revenue accounting for only \$1.2 billion, since half these channels are state-owned.

Mobile phones are a growth industry that has contributed to communications and is expected to expand exponentially in the next five years in the MENA region, to become the fastest and most profitable market worldwide.

Are regional media, like news channels or music and entertainment stations or outlets promoting talent shows and star-making becoming instruments for violence, sex, sloth and distorted images? Are the backgrounds against which

some of the lavish entertainment shows being filmed in direct contrast to the harsh realities of many poor Arab countries where development is not making adequate inroads?

The surge in Reality TV, Star Academy, Super Star, Big Brother, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Survivor and similar shows has taken the region by storm. They have attracted unprecedented audiences and generated millions of dollars in advertising revenue.

According to Lebanon's "Executive" magazine, the industry is charging full steam ahead, developing new concepts, increasing production budgets and cashing in on multiple revenue streams. But can this phenomenon survive the pressure of constantly reinventing itself and maintaining audience interest, while keeping conservative critics at bay, the article asked?

Such programming's appeal is its interactivity with the audience, whereby viewers send comments by phone or through emails and Internet surveys, giving them a sense of empowerment – something they otherwise lack in their daily lives.

But how much real market research is being conducted to find out what readers, listeners, viewers and Web browsers want and seek in their quest for knowledge and fun? Are there any reliable figures on market share, viewer habits, or reader preferences? I fear such things are luxuries for the most part.

Ethics, Standards & Training:

On the matter of media ethics, issues of conflict of interest are non-issues. It is not uncommon for journalists covering events to get paid for their stories by the very people they cover in the form of cash, gifts and other benefits. It's something our institute continues to battle.

Another problem that plagues Arab media is the issue of accuracy. We complain about Western media getting names, places, titles and information wrong, but are guilty of the same charge. This amateurish and negligent way of handling information can be misleading, dangerous and outright insulting.

It's something I've encountered as a foreign correspondent and editor with international news organizations where it was obvious that managers had not invested adequately in the training and upgrading of their staffs' skills and capabilities.

As for the matter of digging for facts, notably the investigative journalism variety, the process is overlooked or neglected out of ignorance, complacency or political ill intent.

This is particularly true in the Arab World where access to information is often blocked by the state and its various branches.

The Institute for Professional Journalists organized an investigative journalism workshop in January 2005 for reporters in print, broadcast and online media

from Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. It is one of the many activities in which we engage to upgrade and update the skills of journalists in the region.

One aspect that is sadly neglected by media organizations is the need for professional training, codes of conduct or guidelines for good journalistic practice and ethics and self-regulation. So we've developed a set of guidelines that we hope media in the region will adopt. These guidelines can be found on our website <http://ipj.lau.edu.lb> in the book of proceedings from our last media ethics conference, which is a downloadable PDF file.

Women and Media in the MENA region:

Women in Arab media have fallen into several categories:

The ones who work hard, earn their stripes and make a name for themselves but don't quite reach the top of the corporate ladder. I would place my friend Tania Mehanna from Lebanon's LBCI TV among them. She's senior correspondent/war correspondent for the station.

Another go-getter is Sahar Baasiri from An-Nahar daily newspaper, who for many years was foreign editor and is probably the only Arab woman writing a lead column on a daily paper's front page.

May Kahale, yet another Lebanese journalist wrote for a daily newspaper, was a TV talk show host, was media adviser to a former Lebanese president and is today news director at a new TV station jointly owned by Iraqi and Lebanese investors.

Samia Nakhoul is the woman you probably remember from the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad who was seriously injured when an American tank fired a shell at the building in 2003. Samia, the Reuters bureau chief in the Gulf, was wounded in the head and had to undergo several operations to remove shrapnel from her skull. Her cameraman was killed that day.

Diana Moukalled of Future TV is another war veteran who has traveled extensively and would rather be a reporter correspondent/editor than a top executive. But it's a choice she has made.

There are similar cases throughout the Arab world. But not all women journalists fall into this category. Others have clawed their way to the top and managed to wrench a piece of the action, but at a very high price. I know the female head of an Arab satellite channel who has no fans because of her nasty approach and ruthless management style.

There is a definite glass ceiling that prevents women from ascending the media corporate ladder and relegates many a promising young journalist to the lower end of the totem pole.

A former student of mine, for example, began her career as a weather girl while still an undergraduate student at the university. Her bosses later promoted her to

a game show host because she is very attractive. But it was a waste of her capabilities and talents.

I insisted she go on to get her M.A. degree in international relations – she already had a B.A. in journalism – and that she keep asking her employers to let her get into the news division. It took many years and a lot of persuading but she's finally where I think she ought to be: pursuing a career in a more substantive line of TV.

There's this misconception that if a woman is pretty on Arab TV, she isn't necessarily smart or capable of doing hard and intellectually stimulating jobs. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The younger women often have a hard time because they pose a threat to the more established reporters, anchors and editors. Intissar Younis from Syria's satellite channel began as a reporter and editor for her country's official news agency but recounts in an interview how it was thanks to a mentor that she overcame her fear of live broadcasts and the whole idea of being on TV.

Rania Hashem of Nile TV is another promising person who began in broadcast media fully realizing that good looks alone were not enough to make her a successful program host or journalist.

Giselle Khoury of Al Arabiya TV overcame barriers when she first appeared as a serious talk show host tackling often controversial political issues. Her reputation initially at LBCI, then at Al Arabiya, was forged through diligence, professionalism and perseverance in a male-dominated area.

Newspapers and magazines are full of names of women reporters and correspondents or editors, but how many have reached the rank of editor-in-chief or publisher?

Akhbar El Yom in Egypt has a woman, Sonia Dabbous, in the number two position but her rise to fame has come at a high cost to herself, her health and her family.

How are other women faring in the MENA region?

Salima Tlemcani of Algeria's Al Watan newspaper was charged with libel and faced a jail term by her country's General Directorate for National Security because of an article she wrote reporting on complaints about the national police chief's abuse of power. While maligned in her country, she was honored by the International Women's Media Foundation and given the Courage in Journalism Award.

Although women in Tunisia have been more accepted in the work force for decades, thanks to pro-women legislation, they've also had to face serious restrictions in their search for truth and information because of the police state in which they operate, where press freedom is an alien concept and the Internet is tightly controlled.

The media women of Iraq, who for years were stifled by an oppressive regime but managed to rise through the ranks of their organizations, today face a new set of problems – rising fundamentalism and threats to their personal security.

As with their male counterparts, female journalists in Iraq take their lives into their own hands when they go out on assignment. It reminds me of the civil war in Lebanon.

A big problem on the Iraqi media landscape is that de-Baathification has netted a crop of ignorant journalists with no general knowledge or basic media skills. A friend training a young news anchor for a new TV station in Iraq said the poor girl couldn't answer when asked who John Negroponte was.

In Palestine, male and female journalists face the same risks in dealing with harsh occupation conditions and internal Palestinian discord. Coverage of events there focus primarily on the fighting but a friend who works as a journalist and trainer in Ramallah said he has been trying to introduce radio programming on issues such as culture, art, poetry and non-violence or war-related events to bring a sense of normalcy into an otherwise strife-ridden environment.

In nearby Jordan, women in the media have operated in a mostly patriarchal society but some have succeeded in breaking down barriers and helping their colleagues forge ahead in their careers. I'd like to cite the Arab Women Media Center as being in the vanguard of such efforts.

The flip side of the news scene is that of entertainment and sex appeal in print and broadcast media. Noted presenters turn astrologers, singers and dancers entice audiences to the rhythms of popular music in programs beamed to millions of fans and women become lures for advertising dollars.

The names Haifa, Nancy, Nawal, Alissa, Ruby and others seem to make a mockery of the struggle of countless women seeking job equality, fair pay and decent working conditions in the Arab media. Exploitation becomes the name of the game in the plethora of video clips that clutter local and regional TV channels as well as glossy magazine covers and special supplements of newspapers across the Arab World.

Youth and Media in the MENA Region:

There is much common ground between Arab and Western youth in their preferences thanks to the abundance of satellite channels and cyberspace.

Young people are turned off mainstream newscasts because of their boring content and official straightjacket of listing how many ministers the leader received or how many factories he visited, or listening to glowing reports about industrial output in the country, when that very country could be facing a severe recession.

Leaders' credibility, officially sanctioned corruption, nepotism, cronyism and inherited positions of power are doubtless the cause of young people's skepticism and cynicism.

So it's no wonder they turn to escapism and fantasy offerings in the Arab media or to chatrooms on the Internet and emails to seek a sense of belonging and communication with their peers.

More recently young people have turned to posting their own news on their personal websites and blogs, short for web logs, in an attempt to establish their identities and to set them apart from the mainstream.

Young media consumers follow the latest film releases from Hollywood, keep up with music trends and acquire recent DVDs, games and software. But given their high cost, young people often buy pirated materials at a fraction of the cost.

In recent years, Arab and pan-Arab newspapers started publishing youth-oriented supplements with Lebanon's An-Nahar setting a trend with what it called "Hyde Park," like London's famous venue for free speech, which was followed by "Youth Supplement."

Other Arab papers followed suit with content fashioned to attract readers to news of sports and show business celebrities, the latest electronic fads, cars, clothes, jewelry, cosmetics and hairstyles.

According to the editor of one such supplement, youth journalism is still in its infancy. Some supplements have young contributors and editors while others just report on young people but are run by adults.

In audio-visual media, there's a serious lack of programs directed at young people, except for canned versions of entertainment, sports events, game shows, music video clips and anything to distract the youth from matters of substance.

For example, we rarely see public affairs or talk shows, awareness campaigns and political forums just for young people.

Lebanon's Future TV launched something called Zen (Zein) TV for young people that had an avant-garde studio, really "cool" newscast prepared and presented by young people. But it eventually failed and was discontinued. Zein still exists but the format has changed to music video clips and light entertainment.

People who worked there told me the adult managers had failed to do proper market research into what young people really wanted and how to fashion programs for them, including the news shows. It was a shame because it could have been very successful if it were handled properly.

Other TV stations have dealt with youth-related issues in talk shows for adults, but it's been peripheral and haphazard.

On the other hand, there has been no shortage of programs like Reality TV, Survivor, Star Academy and clones of every popular game or competition show known to humanity.

Moreover, there seems to be fierce competition between the stations to air the most provocative video clips featuring scantily clad men and women gyrating to the pulsating tunes of Arabic disco and rap, heavy metal and ballads, to the dismay of vocal conservative parents and religious leaders and the delight of youth in search of freedom and empowerment.

Lost in the cacophony is a happy medium between the two extremes.

It's interesting to note that in Lebanon, for example, young people in search of pocket money rent themselves out as audiences in popular entertainment shows to shout, applaud and dance onstage, as reported by As-Safir daily last October. The financially strapped youth use this as an escape from their humdrum, poor and closed environments.

Overall, the copycat nature of the entertainment and news shows in Arab media is a reflection of minimal creativity. Content is shallow and producers rely heavily on visual effects to make up for substance, notably since production of documentaries or investigative reports require budgets that media officials would rather spend on what they see as more lucrative investments, with advertisers more willing to sponsor flashy programs.

As for the presence of younger faces in the Arab news sphere, there is a rising generation of anchors, presenters, reporters and correspondents, but given the limited job market in most countries, many seek greener pastures elsewhere. Lebanese journalists have been known to migrate to the Gulf, especially Dubai, in search of better job opportunities. The tragedy is that with the rising cost of living in the UAE, many of them would like to return to Lebanon but can't afford it because they face grimmer job prospects and lower pay.

Prospects:

So where do we head from here? What prospects do women and young people have in a region undergoing tremendous change and being pulled in different directions?

Pessimists may pack up and go home. Optimists see the world through rose colored glasses. Realists deal with what's available, try to improve on it and forge ahead.

Foremost among our positive prospects is the Internet. For all the negativism it has received, the Web is an invaluable resource, medium and tool for research and communication in this increasingly globalized world.

UNESCO held a conference on the challenges and opportunities for freedom of expression on the Internet February 3 and 4, 2005. It grouped 150 media professionals, academics, legal experts, freedom of expression campaigners and

policymakers from all over the world to ensure that cyberspace remains a free venue.

UNESCO, as do other organizations, advocates recognition of the right to universal access to information.

According to Omayya Abdel-Latif, a staff writer at Al Ahram Weekly, young people espousing moderate interpretations of religion are increasingly taking to cyberspace to promote their ideas, and thereby breaking the state's monopoly over articulation of the political and social agenda. Egypt has been a key location for their initiatives, she said in a comment published by the Arab Reform Bulletin in December 2004.

So circumventing the state online is a possibility, despite bans on sites and censorship.

Electronic democracy is taking the shape of SMS text messages, websites, and, increasingly, blogs. Young people and women, unable to make their voices heard through traditional and mainstream media, are turning to high-tech means to reach their diverse constituents. These alternatives are also less costly than traditional media.

Blogs have also come of age as a source of news. During the U.S. presidential elections, journalists working for blogs were accredited to the Democratic and Republican National Conventions just like their traditional media counterparts. Their reports were just as credible as, and sometimes even more interesting than, other journalists'.

Bloggers were also instrumental in providing emergency assistance and messages in the aftermath of the Tsunami disaster in Asia. Blogs can include photo, video and audio files, are updated frequently and presented in reverse chronological order. In many cases, blogs allow readers to add comments and review archived entries.

As for what technology offers us, every day there are new developments that add to our choices, making it easier to act and interact with our environment.

While Arabic is still developing as a language used in computer programs, given its variations and complicated structure, computer scientists are developing software to scan Arabic documents, including handwritten ones, for specific words and phrases, according to a report by the Associated Press.

Besides helping with intelligence gathering, the software will allow Arabic writings to be digitized and posted on the Web, the report said.

Solutions/Recommendations:

How can we overcome existing obstacles and help women and young people in media in the Arab World?

We could start by offering training in online journalism. While a great number of Arab media maintain websites and newer media exist only in cyberspace, their content, design and usability are often poor.

Some sites replicate print media, others offer meager information, a number suffer from user-unfriendly designs and graphics, etc.

So, I propose teaching journalists how to write, edit and design sites and blogs, and how to use the Web and other sources for accessing information for their work.

Given the ease with which well trained journalists can put together a story with the help of digital equipment, I recommend courses for various levels of knowledge and organizing a competition offering prizes like trips to major international media centers, for example, where winners can train with veteran reporters and editors, as well as gifts of digital cameras, recorders, and computers to help advance their careers.

Today's interactive multimedia, backpack journalism and convergence require reporters and editors to be up on the latest technologies. It's no longer a luxury, it's imperative.

I would also recommend teaching journalists how to produce their own websites or blogs to disseminate information they may not otherwise be able to publish or broadcast through conventional media.

Journalists equipped with creativity, persistence and high standards have always found ways to circumvent obstacles. It is our responsibility to provide them with the tools to achieve their professional goals.

Finally, I would like to refer to a presentation I made here at the Swedish Institute last May about the need for media literacy for young people. I think the concept applies to women and men as well. I said that media literacy would help young people, their parents, teachers and counselors understand the impact of the media and how their values and views are shaped by them.

It astonished and pained me that at a seminar on youth media education held in Seville, Spain, in February 2002, a survey showed no Arab countries had even an elective national curriculum in media education in schools. Educators did not see the merits of promoting critical thinking among younger media consumers. I haven't come across more recent studies and doubt there has been formal teacher training in that area.

We could all probably benefit from media literacy training and I would urge you to read the presentation, which is available online on our institute's site at <http://ipj.lau.edu.lb/outreach/20040525/alexandria> and download it as a PDF file.

Thank you.

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