AmmanNet founder Daoud Kuttab:

"Huge need for independent media" in Middle East

By Lawrence Pintak

There are few media professionals in the Middle East who juggle as many commitments as Daoud Kuttab. Director of the Institute of Modern Media at Al Quds University, and founder and chief of the Arab World's first online community radio station AmmanNet, he is also a regular columnist for the Jordan Times and Jerusalem Post. So what has online radio achieved in Jordan? And where can it go from here? Co-Editor and Publisher of Arab Media & Society *finds out.*

Pintak: Daoud this station evolved from a purely Internet operation. Tell me about the origins.

Kuttab: Well it actually started as an experiment. I was attending a conference in 2000 in Jordan with the International Press Institute and the Jordanian Minister of Information who was boasting that in Jordan the Internet is not censored, there are no proxies, anybody can do anything on the Internet. And I knew that in Jordan private radio was not allowed so I said I'm going to start a radio station on the Internet. And I did and it was a big success.

Jordan is very close to Palestine, and there are FM radio stations in Palestine, so we asked stations there to download some of our radio programs and re-broadcast them

back on the FM frequency so people in Jordan could hear things about themselves. So we were kind of doing something illegal but in a legal way.

Pintak: So a bit of a pirate radio station?

Kuttab: No in the West Bank there are proper private FM radio stations that exist and so we used the geographical proximity of the West Bank to Jordan, and the fact that in the West Bank there are FM radio stations. So basically the Internet became a conduit for broadcasting or maybe for publishing radio programs online to send some of the programs we would re-broadcast back into the community.

Pintak: What kind of reaction did they get?

Kuttab: Well it was quite interesting. I mean I don't want to claim that the private stations or the audio-visual media law happened because of us, but certainly two years later, anybody who wanted to could apply for and get an FM licence in Jordan. Because basically what we were doing was we were exposing the monopoly that existed on FM stations while the Internet was free. And, so you know, there is talk in Jordan about members of the cabinet who are digital members and members who are analogue members referring to the more kind of open-minded ones and so our experiment was used as a reason to liberalize the media laws.

Pintak: What kind of programs were you broadcasting?

Kuttab: Well we began with news programming and we started community-based programming about society—we applied a theory that is kind of strange in the Middle East, we decided that even though our reach is global with the Internet our content had to be local. So we insisted that everything on our station had to be original, had to be authentic, had to be obviously honest and true and objective. But we also wanted to concentrate on AmmanNet on issues of Amman. Enough media is escaping local issues by covering regional and international news, but we didn't want to do that. So we insisted on local programming, local news, addressing local problems in the capital of Jordan.

Pintak: The criticism of the Al Jazeeras and the Al Arabiyas and the other satellite channels is that they are aggressively regional, that they are ignoring domestic issues in given countries. So you are essentially the antidote to that.

Kuttab: I would say not only the Al Jazeeras and the Al Arabiyas but I would also say that the local, national stations are also quite regional. I mean you can put on Jordan television or probably Egypt television and actually have the protocols of the president or the king. The majority of the news is often about Iraq or Palestine or about Lebanon. Because that's an easy issue, it's an issue there is consensus on and local issues are much more controversial and much more sensitive and so state-run media also does that. And certainly the Al Jazeeras and the Al Arabiyas do that—they don't focus in on what's happening in Doha or in Dubai. There's not that much going on there, but they don't really give a local perspective because I would say they are escaping to the regional issues.

Pintak: But yet the government-owned television channels, in response to the rise of satellite, are all talking about public-service broadcasting. What does that mean and are they achieving anything like the community reporting you're doing?

Kuttab: Look there's certainly slow but sure understanding that local and national media can only compete with the transnational media by concentrating on local and national news. How much they're doing this I question. How courageous they are in dealing with local issues, I question. They do understand that theoretically they have to do that. My problem is that they haven't really become public service broadcasting. They are giving lip-service to public service, they are still controlled by the prime minister's office or by the palace or the President, and therefore the news still tends to be protocol news, or they become the media of the government in power rather than the community or the nation.

Pintak: So give me an example of the kind of story you're doing.

Kuttab: Well the economic situation is a huge story for us. They have been in Jordan two rises in the fuel price and therefore the fuel cost has doubled or tripled in about a year. I would guess that in a year more than 50 percent of our programming in one way or another dealt with the pocket books of everyday Jordanians. How they are dealing with the rise in fuel, how they are using alternative fuel, they're going back to using wood and so on, how there are constant complaints that salaries are going less and less far in each month. So we are doing a lot on economic issues. We are doing a lot on municipal issues. We have just taken on for example the local public transportation. We have a special program called *Siyara FM* or *Car FM* where we do

almost town-hall meetings where we go out to different communities and talk to different people using the transportation and they are quite angry because, a) the prices of fuel went up and b) there isn't enough response by the government to the needs of the community. And so these are the issues that touch people's lives. They are affecting them everyday—the price of fuel, the salaries, how things are going.

We have also recently taken up two campaigns I would call them in that we shed light on issues that have not been covered. The thirty-some Jordanians who are still in Israeli jails after the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel. It's a very sensitive issue the public media has shied from dealing with and we've taken it upon ourselves to humanize this case, spending time with families and making portraits of the thirty prisoners or so who are still held in Israel after fifteen to twenty years of a peace treaty, basically saying these people have a right to go home now that they're safe. And I think that has already produced results in that for the first time in sixty years the Jordanian government and the Red Cross organized visits for the families to them, and there's now talk they might be released. This is one campaign.

We also did a campaign this week, or this month, because the media law—the press and publications law that is being discussed in the Jordanian Parliament—still doesn't include a very clear clause against arresting journalists. And so, together with the Center for the Defence of Journalists, we have created a campaign with interviews and quotations from everyone from the King to former prime ministers, journalists and human rights activists, saying we want the freedom to write without worrying about being put in jail and that freedom of expression should be allowed without interference or the threat of jailing journalists for what they write.

Pintak: Everywhere in the Arab World these days there are red lines journalists can't cross which vary by country. How close do you get to the red lines in Jordan and are you crossing them, and are you worried about them?

Kuttab: Well there's constitutional red lines and there's practical red lines. The constitutional red lines mean that you cannot write anything in any way against the Royal Family. That's part of the constitution. But in reality the intelligence services—the *mukhabarat*—is indeed a red line. We have a few times crossed that red line. The Human Rights Watch recent survey of twenty cases of people who were tortured in Jordanian intelligence surveys was one which we highly publicized and they were quite angry with us. They put a lot of pressure on us not to keep it on the website. They seem to be quite worried when you use the actual word '*mukhabarat*' or 'intelligence'—there's some kind of an alarm system that rings in their offices when you use that word. When we use the 'security forces' or a general term, they don't seem to be as upset as when you actually refer specifically to the word '*mukhabarat*' or 'intelligence'.

Pintak: You made the jump from the Internet to a real radio station, if I will, in Jordan. How did that happen?

Kuttab: Once the Jordanian Audio-Visual Law came into effect in 2004, we applied like anybody else for a licence. There was a financial problem because the licence fee is quite steep for Amman—about 40 thousand dollars—but there's this extra fee which is established for anybody wishing to broadcast politics and news. And the fee

is 50 percent more than the regular fee. So we had to pay another 20 thousand dollars

to get the licence to include news and politics. So once we were able to raise the

money and find the sources to be able to pay the fee we applied for a licence and

began doing local news and local programming and we added a few more additions.

We did a lot more live programming meaning that we would cover events live,

whether it was a demonstration or a public event, or as we did in the last year,

broadcast live sessions of the Jordanian Parliament. And this was an interesting issue

because in the Arab World the executive power is not very keen on people giving

attention to the legislative powers, so what we tried to do is to put on air for people in

their taxis driving around in the day time live parliamentary sessions so people can

hear what's going on in their parliament and hear their parliamentarians, if they're

speaking, if they're not speaking, if they're saying stupid things, if they're saying

good things. And it's been quite a big hit. People are amused sometimes, they're

educated. But they're certainly learning a lot more about their MPs and what they're

saying under the roof of the parliament.

Pintak: What kind of audiences are you picking up?

Kuttab: In Amman the capital, it's basically two sides. There's West Amman which is

about 25 percent of the population, quite affluent and well-to-be, and there's East

Amman which is much more popular and much more populated. Most of our

audience is from East Amman. The West Amman public is not a huge target for us.

We're really going after people who are in need of the community services we're

trying to provide and who don't have access to ways to address their problems and

they actually have many more problems. And so we're getting a huge audience in the more populated and less-developed areas of the city.

Pintak: We should explain for those not sitting in the Middle East or who don't know the Arab media, how is it that you, a journalism professor at a journalism school in the West Bank, how is that you're running a radio station in Jordan?

Kuttab: It has nothing to do with my work—I had a tragedy in family and I remarried. And so I commute between Ramallah and Amman. The radio station was an experiment. It was a hobby for a while and then it became a real project. I still run the Institute of Modern Media in Ramallah, part of Al Quds University, and we have also done interesting things there, especially on areas of the parliament. Because in 1996 when we were broadcasting sessions of the Palestinian Parliament dealing with corruption, I also got in trouble there with the Palestinian Authority putting me in jail for seven days. I'm interested in the role of media as an alternative source of public service, and I'm trying to find ways to effect a genuine change in the paradigm. And the paradigm of the media in the Arab World is quite bad. We have a huge influx of foreign media that's filling up the airwaves, we have a monopoly on radio and television almost in every country and we have a strange alliance between media business people and government. So the real kind of media, you have to search quite hard to find genuine independent media. There's a huge need for independent media. Blogging is now proving that there are lots people who have local areas of concern who are not finding an airing for this in traditional media and they're looking for ways to express themselves. So because I'm moving between two countries in a way

I'm able to do programs, and I'm blessed with good staff, so I can start projects and let people continue with them.

Pintak: And you're looking at expanding the concept around the region aren't you?

Kuttab: I am. Last year in November we had the very first ever conference for global community radios called AMARC (World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters), and AMARC agreed our request to have their once-every-three-years global meeting in Amman. And we introduced the community media and community radio through the conference and since then we have established a network of activists in community radio and hopefully we will have another conference in Morocco this year, 2007, all aimed at trying to introduce the concept of community radio and the need for governments who are interested in development and who support the idea of community radio so yes, I am involved there.

I have also started a project last year setting up nine Internet radio stations in the Gulf countries and Yemen. The project is called KhaleejNet.net. It's a project where we're training active journalists in how to do Internet radio, helping set up a website for them, and giving them simple tools—software and hardware—and basically allowing them to broadcast their radio or audio programs on Internet sites that have names, from Kuwait or from Yemen and Dubai and so on. So we have quite an interesting group of authentic local young journalists who are interested in explaining what they think is happening in their countries or cities using the Internet radio medium. Again we're hoping that our experiment in AmmanNet would be replicated in the sense that if in some of these countries Internet radio succeeds enough, there will be enough

local support to convince government to actually allow people to have FM radio, not just Internet radio.

Pintak: You've been around for a while, I can say that because we're about the same age, you've seen a lot of changes in Arab media. How optimistic are you about the direction of Arab media today?

Kuttab: If I was optimistic it's not because the powers that be are really changing, it's because technology has provided a platform for people to break through and break out of the systems that exist in their countries. So I think the more successful we are in using technology to break up monopolies, I think governments will give up on their attempts to deny people their inherent right to know and to let know. I'm optimistic because of that. The Arab World has a majority of young people, people under 21, and these people have grown up with technology literacy that is quite high, they can now use their computers, their laptops, their cellphones, and governments are not able to stop people communicating with all this technology.

Pintak: Daoud Kuttab, founder and chief of AmmanNet, thank you very much.