Picture perfect:

How the story of Dubai's other side can never be told

By Dana El-Baltaji

May, 2007. I hesitate to call myself a journalist. Technically, I am one, but I haven't broken 'news' since the day I took up my position on *Time Out* in Dubai. Still, I take comfort in knowing that most journalists in the emirate are equally frustrated working in a media industry that 'makes nice, not news'.[1]

On a recent visit to Dubai, a freelance journalist whom I met in Beirut a year earlier asked, 'where's the scoop?' If you flip through Dubai's newspapers and magazines, you won't find it there. Instead, you'll read about what the rulers ate and whom they greeted, and what record-breaking new venture the emirate has just embarked on.

It's a well-known fact that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and emirates like to keep their news to themselves, leaving their dirty laundry to dry in their private gardens rather than the public sphere. And while other emirates and GCC states can get away with censoring the media, Dubai, by virtue of planting itself

[1] Dan Rather, an American journalist, famously criticized the media for steering clear of controversial subjects when he addressed the Radio and Television News Directors Association in September 1993: "Do powder puff, not probing interviews. Stay away from controversial subjects. Kiss ass, move with the mass, and for heaven and ratings' sake, don't make anybody mad—certainly not anybody you're covering, and especially not the Mayor, the Governor, the Senator, the Vice President, or the President, or anybody in a position of power. Make nice, not news."

firmly in the world's limelight and differentiating itself as a cosmopolitan haven in midst of its traditional neighbors, consequently lends itself to criticism.

Unlike its Emirati brothers and GCC neighbors, Dubai has emphasized and capitalized on its modernity, no matter how contrived it may be. This is why when a journalist is punished for breaking a political story or insinuating the emirate condones the consumption of alcohol within the legal confines of a licensed hotel, the media is taken aback.

While the local government refuses to admit that censorship is practiced, journalists and readers are well aware that the media follows a simple, but infuriating guideline: keep it clean and pretty, or else. The repercussions vary with the crime and who takes offence, so you never know whether you'll simply be reprimanded and asked not to repeat your 'mistake', or whether you'll know first hand if Dubai's jails are like people say they are: a three-star hotel.

But there are several fundamental contradictions at play here. As an Arab journalist, I'm aware that there are subjects I can't explore; namely sex, drugs, alcohol and local politics. However, Arab journalists working on English publications are rare breeds, leaving most magazines in the hands of foreign, usually British reporters who are accustomed to breaking news, getting scoops, exposing wounds. They transfer their journalistic practices from their home countries to Dubai, and are very quickly catapulted into a media wasteland. They realize soon after they arrive that they cannot pursue the grit and grime inherent in any cosmopolitan city, not because it doesn't exist in Dubai, but because the government is keen on keeping its glossy image as

perfect as it appears in the multitude of advertising campaigns it pays so much to produce.

And it's this image that journalists in Dubai are so wary of tarnishing; plastic fantastic Dubai, where anything is possible and opportunities abound for Arabs and Europeans alike. In many ways, the emirate shoulders its success on this construct, using it to lure more and more professionals from across the world with promises of a better life, a higher standard of living, and more job opportunities. While the reality for many expatriates isn't far from this glowing image, as journalists, we're trained to analyze the basis of all this success, and sadly, it's seldom clean or pretty.

But for those professionals who hover over the working class, Dubai really is the modern day gold mountain, complete with sandy beaches and a multi-cultured society. It seems as though someone cultured this city in a laboratory and created a Frankensteinian emirate, and they love it to bits. Which is why we journalists here tread on brittle glass when we choose and pursue our stories, always searching out novel ways of getting our messages across without putting the spotlight on the emirate's flaws—at least not outwardly anyway.

Because of the nature of *Time Out*, I don't have to contend with the drawbacks of censorship too often. My work, in fact, is based loosely on the idea of journalism. Unlike journalists who work on newspapers and business magazines, who struggle everyday to find or feign news stories, I write about what the emirate does best: service.

My work requires that I visit the emirate's best spas and restaurants, go to lavish parties and gallery openings, and I get presents from public relations executives hoping I'll give their clients a little coverage in the magazine. Through my capacity as assistant editor of *Time Out Visitor*, I bagged a night at the Burj Al Arab, where I was treated to a stunning aromatherapy bath and a seven-course meal created and cooked just for me. And when I shifted to *Time Out Guides*, I found myself in the middle of Bahrain, lounging in my own Jacuzzi and looking around a villa worth a little over 2,500 GBP per night at the Banyan Tree Desert Spa and Resort, Al Areen. Even if I had all the funds in the world, you wouldn't get me to spend that kind of money for a bed and pillow. But I was ecstatic to be there, even more so when the PR manager booked me in for an hour-long Balinese massage, my third spa treatment during my four-day Bahrain trip.

In short, there is no place in the Middle East, and possibly on earth, that can make you feel more like a pampered princess (or prince) than Dubai, and I get to experience it all for free.

In fact, I'm convinced that new spa openings, a fashion show, or even the recent Gulf Art Fair is as close to news as I'm going to get. For a place like Dubai, which banks on its commercial pull and provides a wealth of consumer outlets, these cotton candy additions to an already superficial emirate really are news. For Dubai, it means it has even more to offer those looking for a spot of affordable luxury; if the emirate didn't offer visitors and residents the opportunity to feel like jetsetters, it would be just another sand pit with unbearable summer heat. Instead, it's a luxury

godsend, with more five-star hotels and restaurants than most people would care to visit in a year.

For a journalist based in Dubai, I couldn't have it any better. But even as I sip champagne served in crystal glasses and nibble on handpicked caviar (with my pinky raised delicately in the air), I have to ask: 'where are all the Emiratis?' Throughout my four years here, I have yet to go to a PR event and meet an Emirati man or woman.

They're neither present at most media functions, nor are they at the forefront of my mind when I sit down to write my articles and reviews. Which brings me to another basic contradiction: the English media rarely, if ever, considers the local population as its target audience. In fact, the dichotomy between Emiratis and the rest of society is so severe that one wonders whether locals get to enjoy the freedoms and luxuries the emirate is so keen on producing and promoting.

But no one's to blame; it's how this city was built. Dubai's rapid growth means that while the city itself is mushrooming, breaking world records and attracting global companies and Western professionals to its sandy shores, the local population is struggling to reconcile itself with an alien reality. And what makes that reconciliation so difficult is the extreme openness Westerners are accustomed to enjoying back home, verses the conservative nature of Emirati culture and tradition.

It's inevitable, then, that I sometimes forget Emiratis may even read my articles. I resort to using British idioms and words I know they wouldn't understand,

but it isn't something I'm conscious of; the sad reality is that I'm simply not conscious of them at all. Except, of course, when the government steps in to demand that we remove a chapter or an article from a guide or a magazine.

I am tempted to provide an example of this sort of censorship, but I have been asked not to. While the incident between the government and *Time Out* is common knowledge amongst journalists in both my company and in other publishing houses, Dubai isn't ready to admit that it breaches the media's right to freedom of speech. But I'll allow myself this: the piece that offended the government was a guide to alcoholic beverages sold legally in Dubai; it is neither news nor a surprise that the emirate has licensed liquor outlets within its borders.

It isn't just topics like alcohol, prostitution and drugs that could get journalists in hot water. Exposing business practices and malpractices can also get you in serious trouble. Back in 2005, when I was working as a freelance journalist for a marketing magazine, I wrote a comparative analysis of Nakheel and Emaar, Dubai's biggest, richest and most influential property developers. More importantly, however, the government owns 100 percent of Nakheel and 30 percent of Emaar, making them, to a certain degree, untouchable.

While both property developers had had their fair share of criticism, their PR strategies hadn't been analyzed thoroughly, and no publication had pitted the two against each other yet. When my article was published, one of the two property developers attempted to bully me into providing all my source materials to substantiate the accusations I had made. I would have gladly submitted everything,

but I felt my statement—that their PR strategy was nonexistent—didn't warrant the liveliness of their reaction. They eventually let the incident go, but a year later, when I met the people I had interviewed at the Arabian Travel Market in 2006, I was seen as the journalist who wrote *that* article. While the feature itself wasn't censored, the magazine exercised self-censorship and decided not to mention either company in its upcoming issues, at least until their bruised corporate egos healed.

You can blame it on companies being unaccustomed and overly sensitive to criticism, or you can look at the reality of being an expatriate journalist in Dubai. One of the problems we face is that we rarely hear an Emirati voice. They haven't had a chance to develop one that foreigners can understand or relate to just yet. They will in time, but until then, the expatriate community will have to continue guessing which subjects we can tackle without having to deal with censorship or corporate bullies.

Such incidents of sporadic censorship have made me, as well as other journalists hesitant to tackle the real stories. As mentioned, it isn't that the stories aren't there, but you'll be hard pressed to find a journalist who's willing to have their career shredded for a 300-word article.

The result is that Dubai's stories are rarely told. The truth about the conditions within labor camps throughout the city, where the men who toil for hours in the region's unforgiving sun live, isn't exposed. And the women who suffer the injustices of a so-called traditional society, while their men indulge in the freedoms of a modern world, rarely have their say.

But like most journalists, I make mental notes of the laborers forced to defecate on street corners for lack of toilets, and the Emirati woman who calls me once every four or five months to remind me she's willing to talk, but not today; I hoard these stories, knowing full well that if I pursue them I'll get barred from the emirate. But I'm waiting for the day I leave and have the freedom to write with the sort of brutal honesty these stories deserve.

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