



The Arab Broadcast Forum 2007:

Self-criticism surfaces despite some sidestepping

By Abigail Hauslohner

JUNE, 2007. Who is more objective?—the Western Media or the Arab media? Has the Arab media covered the Darfur crisis as well as the Western media? Is the Arab media promoting democracy? Should it? These were all questions addressed at the second annual Arab Broadcast Forum in Abu Dhabi this past April—a conference which at certain moments resembled a competitive showdown between Arabs and the West. “Who is doing it better?” often seemed to be the underlying question.

Hosted by the Abu Dhabi tourism authority, and collectively sponsored by an impressive list of Western and Arab news outlets, the conference was attended by a diverse group of public media and political figures ranging from Amy Kellogg of Fox news to Mohammed Ali Abtahi, the former Vice President of Iran.

Reuters, Al Jazeera, the BBC, Al Arabiya, LBC, Abu Dhabi TV, and several others led the show, cooperating together to set up heated debates and alternating their broadcast live over BBC Arabic radio, Al Jazeera TV, and Abu Dhabi TV, as well as

various Internet feeds, including the blog site of an attending student delegation from the American University in Sharjah.

The conference opened on April 29, 2007 with *The Year In Pictures*, produced by Reuters. Then, as dramatic music pulsed from the speakers, the spotlights turned and widened to illuminate a circular setup which was to be the site of each debate.

First in the hot seat, was Dr. Mohammed Reza Khomeini, the former deputy speaker of the Iranian parliament, who coolly deflected piercing questions on the state of Iran's reform movement. Khomeini, a self-proclaimed reformist who rejects the government's position, confessed that the reform movement has become dominated in some ways by the ongoing standoff between Iran and the U.S. over the nuclear issue, however "generally speaking, reform is alive . . . The most supporters of this [current] government in Iran are radicals."

Reformists believe that the Iranian government is making a mistake with the nuclear issue, he said, but international pressure on Iran is not the right answer. Nuclear energy is the right of any nation, he declared; Iran has simply taken the wrong path in the matter.

Khomeini also addressed rumors of Iranian activity in Iraq. "The intelligence of Iran is active [in Iraq]," he said. It is there to serve Iranian security. He also admitted

that Iran wields some “spiritual influence” over sections of the population, but declined to substantiate suggestions of further, more tangible support of the Iraqi resistance.

The first group debate to hit the inner circle of the auditorium was titled *Competing Realities: News and Views in Conflict Coverage*. Emad El Din Adeeb, Chairman and CEO of the Good News Group in Egypt, posed questions to participants on the effectiveness and objectivity of the Arab news media versus the Western news media in covering Middle East conflict zones like Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. In doing so, he suggested that there may actually be some significant differences between the two.

Amy Kellogg, the Middle East Correspondent for Fox News, came under repeated fire from both Adeeb and other participants for the channel’s alleged pro-Israel bias, particularly in reporting the Israel-Hizbullah war of 2006. Kellogg responded that Fox’s failure to engage Hizbullah in interviews during the war was due to “logistics.” Fox reporters and other journalists were “targets,” she added, a factor which strongly inhibited their movement.

Iason Athanasiadis, a freelance writer with significant experience in Lebanon, added that coverage put out by Al Manar (Hizbullah’s TV station) was no less biased. It portrayed the war in a romantic light, with Hizbullah involved in a noble, religious struggle against the evil Israeli oppressor.

Most of the debaters seemed to agree that a lack of journalistic access in any of these conflicts can easily produce a bias in reporting. Ali Al-Jabri of Abu Dhabi TV said that this is certainly true in Iraq where both Arab and Western journalists have trouble with mobility. As a result, different journalists are confined to certain, very different regions of the country, and each one reports on what he or she sees. In this way, he said, journalists are reporting “more than 17 different sides” in Iraq.

In light of these obstacles, Riad Kahwaji, a military and media analyst for INEGMA talked about the importance of plurality in sourcing and getting air coverage for various opinions and reactions.

Arab media and Arab youth

Shada Omar of LBC asked debate participants whether or not Arab broadcasters are effectively reaching “the Arab street.” Is the Arab media addressing the issues and concerns of the Arab youth in a region where young people not only represent the leaders and developers of tomorrow but also make up the majority of the population? Some suggested that the media has barely skimmed the surface.

Riad Kahwaji observed that there is very little communication between networks and viewers about what they want.

“So what is it that Arab youth viewers want?” asked Shada Omar. Mohamed Yehia, the interactivity editor of the BBC Arabic website, answered that young people want news on issues that directly affect their lives and futures; issues like education, employment, and marriage.

The Senior Editor for Arab Affairs at CNN, Octavia Nasr, said that Arab viewers have the same basic demands from the media as Western viewers: they want the media to represent them. But, she said the Arab media has trouble tackling certain taboos for fear of criticism or social backlash.

Others did not see a miscommunication between youth and the media. Saudi journalist, Buthaina Al-Nasr commented benignly that Arab youth are attracted to different cultures. Several other participants chose to focus on youth interest in sports and entertainment, brushing aside the taboo topics that Octavia Nasr and Mohammed Yehia had alluded to.

The Arab media has a responsibility, the Saudi journalist and several others said, to dish up morally acceptable and inspiring programs to Arab youth. However it would be inappropriate—even wrong—for them to incite questioning, debate, or controversy about Arab cultural values.

Sulaiman Al-Hattlan, the editor-in-chief of Forbes Arabia, said that “media should reflect the reality,” without specifying a means to ascertain what that reality is.

Jaber Obeid, director of Abu Dhabi Radio said it is important to utilize statistics because polls will show what youth want from the media.

But there are limits to what the media can do from these surveys. Buthaina Al-Nasr, for example, opined that the Arab media is not responsible for reform and therefore does not need to raise community awareness.

Amr Khaled, the immensely popular Egyptian Muslim televangelist said we [the media] need to ask the Arab youth what their dreams are and then we need to listen. However, Khaled did not mention how the media should respond if Arab youth dreamt of something more serious than sports, like democracy and freedom of speech—or more scandalously—atheism or pre-marital sex. Rather, Khaled's image of what young people dreamed about seemed pre-established and much more innocent.

Unfortunately, attempting to uncover what today's youth want but failing to understand the deeper political and social issues involved, may have caused these debaters to miss the point.

The crisis of funding

The third debate threw Arab satellite funding under the spotlight, focusing in particular on the fact that the amount of advertising that goes on in the Arab world is no

where near enough to fund the 465 channels that operate within it. Of these 465 channels, 220 of them are directly government owned.

Ali Al-Ahmed of Abu Dhabi TV said that the government needs to sponsor TV channels because they would not be able to survive otherwise. He also claimed that government-sponsored channels carry the same credibility as privately-owned channels.

Mahmoud Shamam, on the board of directors at Al Jazeera, said that Al Jazeera has a wide margin of freedom and that all advertising is done locally. However, he also admitted that a large proportion of funding comes from the network's Qatari host government.

Mazen Hayek of MBC Group bragged of MBC's complete financial independence, stating that it relies entirely on its advertising revenues.

Overall debaters seemed to agree—with the exception of Ali Al-Ahmed—that complete financial independence would be a difficult but viable option to strive for over the next few years. With financial independence, independence from bias follows more easily.

After debates over coverage, Arab youth needs, and funding, the first day of the conference closed solemnly with the announcement of the Atwar Bahjat Prize for Courageous Journalism, to honor missing and fallen journalists across the Middle East.

The Arab Broadcast Forum created the award in the memory of Al Arabiya reporter Atwar Bahjat who was murdered in Iraq in February 2006. Samia Nakhoul, Gulf bureau chief for Reuters, was given the award for the outstanding journalistic standards—as well as bravery—that she too has exhibited in Iraq, even after being seriously injured.

The reporters who risk their lives to cover conflict zones do an invaluable service in the field of journalism, she said, “without these journalists we are blind.”

Darfur and depth

The second day of the conference opened with a debate that revealed both a scathing critique of the Sudanese government, and also of Arab media shortcomings. *Darfur: The Forgotten Crisis* was moderated by Siddhartha Dubey, Anchor of Reuters World Report for Times Now of India.

“[Darfur] coverage is not enough...coverage of Iraq is much more” pointed out a visiting leader from the Save Darfur Coalition.

A number of journalists in the audience lamented the difficulties they have experienced in dealing with the Sudanese government: It is nearly impossible to obtain a travel permit to Darfur, and even if one is obtained, the wait may take up to a year.

Martin Broughton, programme editor for Reuters AlertNet, said that Western journalists and aid workers in Darfur are frequently accused of being spies. Brief footage was aired to illustrate one such incident when members of a rebel faction tried to attack an aid worker who they had accused of being spy. The aid worker escaped in the vehicle of one of the news agencies.

Nadim Hasbani, Arabic Media Officer for the International Crisis Group, said that the Arab media's coverage of Darfur has deteriorated dramatically as of late. Arab media representatives in turn pointed out that the Western media often fails to produce significant coverage as well.

A number of journalists present, including audience members from BBC World, argued that a lack of coverage can often, again, be attributed to access. The Sudanese government, they said, creates serious obstacles for all journalists who attempt to cover the war-torn region.

Andrew Simmons, the Africa Bureau Chief for Al Jazeera English, said that the network has strived to illustrate both the humanitarian and political sides of the conflict, with considerable coverage of refugee camps. Mid-debate, Al Jazeera (the Arabic network) also aired a segment of its recently produced TV documentary about Darfur *Al-Hareeq*, or *The Fire*, (also used to mean "holocaust"), to provide an example.

Alfred Taban, editor-in-chief and managing editor of the Khartoum Monitor, defended his government's bureaucratic processes (as far as creating obstacles for journalists) and insisted that the Western media has delivered biased and exaggerated reports of the conflict. He demanded a heavier reliance on "statistics," while simultaneously rejecting the statistics published by Western networks.

Branching from the discussion of depth in Darfur to depth of coverage in general, Al Jazeera anchor Leila Sheikhali asked: Is there enough time, money, and public interest to cover the international news in depth?

Tony Burman, the editor-in-Chief of CBC, said that news today is dominated by short clips, but that there is room, need, and even demand for a deeper exploration of news stories.

"They [the public] rely on the media to help them negotiate through this complicated world," he said. They want the story, but they also want background and interpretation. Timing and financial constraints, however, often have the effect of reducing TV news to "the lowest common denominator," he said, where only the most basic reports are broadcast. To illustrate CBC's successful coverage of news in depth despite these odds, the audience was quickly shown a segment on Israeli prisons from a CBC news show called *The Big Picture*.

Head of BBC Arabic, Hosam El Sokkari, offered a different perspective, noting that headlines and tickers are extremely important aspects of the news broadcast. After picking up on stories this way, he said, interested viewers can then choose to visit the news website to find more details.

A space to press democracy?

As leader of the next debate which was broadcast live on BBC Arabic Radio, Hosam El-Sokkari focused on the question of whether or not the Arab media has actively encouraged—or more importantly—*should* encourage the development of democracy in the Middle East.

Bahraini blogger and activist, Mahmood Al-Youssef pointed to unconventional media outlets, such as private blogs, as the best sources of democracy promotion, as well as depth.

Lawrence Pintak, director of the Center for Electronic Journalism at the American University in Cairo, pointed out the difficulties that the mainstream Arab media often face in confronting issues like democracy, when they operate under the censorship of oppressive governments.

Egyptian blogs, he said, have provided “a way to get around” severe legal restrictions and media censorship. Often, he remarked, professional journalists set up

their own blogs or leak news to other bloggers in order to get around the restrictions that obstruct their career reporting. Pintak pointed to the sexual harassment scandal of Ramadan 2006, as a story leaked to bloggers by journalists.

Some suggested that a free press and democracy are intrinsically linked, therefore making the mainstream media responsible for championing important issues. Others were not so certain. One reporter in the audience commented, “It’s not my job to push for one thing or another,” and warned that the Arab media should stay away from political agendas.

James Zogby of Zogby International led the closing session of the conference which returned the focus to Darfur. Presenting the results of an international study conducted by Zogby International, Zogby informed the audience that contrary to popular belief in the West, Arabs and Muslims are in fact deeply interested in the Darfur issue; they want to see greater news coverage, and they want their governments to play a more active role in resolving the conflict.

Playing it safe

While at times the Arab Broadcast Forum touched on sensitive or controversial issues—such as Darfur coverage, or the question of who is more biased—the debates rarely became heated.

The journalists representing Western media outlets were relatively quiet during some sessions—perhaps trying to be “respectful” of their Arab media hosts. But as a result the confrontational nature of the first debate was lost on the rest; both Arab and Western journalists spent much of the conference sidestepping the relevant issues and focusing on the benign instead, as we saw in particular during the session, *Reaching the Arab Street*.

Some accused the Arab media of not doing enough to cover the Darfur crisis. A few even quietly ventured to say that the Arab media has not done enough to publicly acknowledge or draw attention to the fact that other Arabs have carried out the Darfur genocide. But the debate was carried no further than that, and even James Zogby’s research failed to confront the difficult question of how Arabs worldwide viewed a genocide carried out by Arabs.

Additionally fascinating was the lack of reflection upon the media situation in the United Arab Emirates—the host country of the conference—where almost all media is state-run and journalists exercise very little freedom in their reporting of internal affairs. And no one dared to make country-specific references to the media-sponsored spread of democracy.

Nevertheless the participating journalists in the conference succeeded in an area where the Western media has fallen drastically short in recent years: introspection and self-criticism. The Arab Broadcast Forum both intentionally and inadvertently exposed

some of the obstacles that continue to plague Arab World television media, as well as the conference's own shortcomings. But its ability to critically examine these things—despite some flaws—demonstrates that the Arab media is at least on the right track.

Abigail Hauslohner is currently interning as a reporter for Reuters in Cairo. She recently completed a one-year Fulbright grant in Egypt to study advanced Arabic through the CASA program at AUC. She graduated from the University of Michigan in 2005 with a BA in Anthropology and Arabic Studies and has previously published in the online magazines Guernica and Yegoo.