

Dubai: an emerging Arab media hub

By Dana El-Baltaji

October, 2007. It's incredible what money can buy. While it took centuries of strife, clashes and debates to create the media hubs abroad, Dubai built its own in just six years. All it did was create a media park for big media houses to play in, and there you have it: a media hub.

The plan was simple: to offer media companies the opportunity to set up their headquarters in Dubai, and to give them reasons to stay. It's no wonder, then, that when *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* announced plans to publish an international edition in the Middle East, there was no doubt that it was going to be printed in Dubai, even though SAB Media, a Saudi Arabian company had bought the license.

With Dubai Studio City (DSC), Dubai Media City (DMC), and Dubai Internet City (DIC), the emirate has the infrastructure to back its bullish drive to attract media houses from around the world (when Dubai Holding's International Media Production Zone is built, the region's first freezone for all forms of publishing 'activities', the emirate's infrastructure will be even more comprehensive). More importantly, Dubai's visibility in established markets, whether its reputation is built on false pretenses or measured successes, has lured talents from around the world, thus keeping the quality of

the writing for both its Arabic and English media higher than that found in newspapers and magazines in neighboring countries.

A stroll through DMC, which boasts the largest concentration of media companies in the region, is like walking through a media-lover's dream sequence. CNN, Reuters, Associated Press and MBC (another Saudi company that chose Dubai over Saudi Arabia for its headquarters) to name a few, are some of the networks that have set up regional offices in Dubai.

This gated park of media's biggest names is a prime example of Dubai's successful model for faux-communities, which are legally removed from the constraints that choke the rest of the emirate but play an integral part in Dubai's development. Internet access here isn't restricted to the websites the government deems morally, politically, and socially acceptable, and the control over the press's freedom is less regulated than the rest of Dubai.

Essentially, DMC, like the rest of Dubai Holding's business parks, are legal loopholes. In these freezones, companies may own their businesses fully, as opposed to the rest of Dubai. The emirate's law stipulates that outside of the freezones, foreigners are only allowed to own 49 percent of their company, a law common throughout the Gulf. Such loopholes attract media companies to these business parks.

Aside from the freedom to bypass local sponsorship, media companies who choose to open offices in DMC give their employees the opportunity to make key business contacts and to mingle with other media professionals. For journalists, contacts are crucial.

But even outside of Dubai Holding's business communities, the emirate is home to the Middle East's largest publishing house, Information Technology Publishing (ITP), which publishes over fifty magazines every month, including high-profile titles such as *Harper's BAZAAR*, *Time Out* and *Grazia*.

For many journalists in companies such as ITP, Dubai's attraction is the opportunity to work in journalism. The cut-throat, highly competitive industries abroad have made careers in publishing near impossible for many talented writers, thus forcing them to consider options abroad. And what better place than Dubai, where foreigners are the majority, where the turnover of expatriates is exceptionally high and job vacancies are announced regularly, and for six months of the year the weather is absolutely stunning?

But what brought the companies to Dubai in the first place, aside from the freezones, is the political stability of a Middle Eastern nation. Dubai has spared itself the political headaches that other emirates and nations suffer. Emiratis from different tribes do not openly quarrel in Dubai, nor do Arabs take their political, religious and social differences to the streets. With regards to political strife and the possibility of war, Dubai is a safe haven in the region. And for media agencies keen on maintaining a presence in

the Middle East, without having to cope with the possibility of losing their investments to suicide bombers, months' long demonstrations and war, Dubai and its plush offices are big attractions.

Using Dubai as a base for operations has allowed greater and more efficient coverage of the Middle East. Instead of relying mostly on stringers stationed in dangerous parts of the region, full-time journalists can fly out and cover conflicts within a matter of hours.

And while the journalists who move to Dubai are mostly English-speaking professionals, there are greater opportunities to hire English educated, Arabic-speaking journalists, whose knowledge of the Arab world make for more in-depth analysis of stories in the Middle East.

Finally, as far as publishers and media moguls are concerned, opening and maintaining a business in Dubai is far less bureaucratic and strenuous than attempting to break the chaotic, highly volatile media industries in the Middle East and well-established markets in the West. In Dubai, publishers and media business owners get a break, especially in Dubai Holding's business parks, which is more than many other countries can offer. And what company wouldn't want to see more profits streaming in?

There are many reasons to suggest that for media companies, Dubai's status as an up-and-coming global media hub is undeniable. However, it's an altogether different

matter for writers: there's an onerous reality that journalists endure that disturbs the harmony of a booming media industry, forcing them to question whether Dubai can truly be a global media hub.

Najla Al Awadhi, a respected member of the UAE parliament and the Deputy CEO of Dubai Media Incorporated, a stupendously large government media company in the emirate, explains this best. On 14 August, 2007, *Gulf News*, a Dubai based newspaper, published an opinion piece by Al Awadhi where she articulates what some believe could be Dubai's media-related Achilles' heel: "Lets talk about freedom of press [...] I was being interviewed to attend a US-based fellowship program. The woman who was interviewing me was asking me about my professional experiences, and I was telling her about my role in the media and how we are working hard to develop this field, and immediately she said, 'So you are trying to ensure there is less government involvement in media.' [...] Why would I want [the Emirati] government to be less involved, when I know that my government and its progressive policies have fostered prosperity and growth in the UAE?"

Indeed, the government's involvement in the regulation of the media has driven a number of journalists to exercise self censorship, which, in the region's and possibly the world's media hub, degrades the journalistic integrity of those writing and publishing articles in Dubai.

Unlike Qatar, which has etched a permanent home in the media world by unofficially agreeing to host Al Jazeera in exchange for immunity from criticism, Dubai is already on the global radar. In many ways, Dubai, including its unprecedented growth and the numerous people who're part of its growth, is the story, and it can't all be positive. And it isn't surprising that over the years, a countless unflattering detail of its overall success has made headlines in the world media.

One detail that keeps Dubai on edge is the plight of over a million construction workers who toil endlessly under the desert sun to build the world's largest hotels and malls. In an article for the *New York Times* ('Fearful of Restive Foreign Labor, Dubai Eyes Reforms', August 6, 2007), Jason DeParle briefly describes the conditions the workers (mostly from the Subcontinent) suffer and their daily struggles with basic issues such as payment, lack of proper accommodation, and the long, long wait many endure before they can afford the plane ticket to visit their families back home.

For many it's an old story that continues to reemerge, sometimes with the help of the Human Rights Watch, but more commonly with new articles written by journalists keen on highlighting an obvious paradox: a city for the outrageously rich is being built by the ridiculously poor. It's a great story, and it's the sort of dirt foreign newspapers salivate over, mostly because the government is openly advocating a modern form of slavery, but partly because it has unofficially barred the local media from covering such tainted issues; the issue is rarely, if ever, raised in local newspapers, and on the rare occasion it is, the writer treads softly on the emirate's open wounds.

If pressing issues within the UAE aren't explored thoroughly by the local media, how, then, can Dubai become a legitimate global media hub? There is no question Dubai has the means to support the business of media, but its ability to handle the social impact of media is debatable.

In the same article published in *Gulf News*, Najla Al Awadhi makes the following comment on Dubai Media City's, and ultimately, the government's policy on freedom of speech, which has been termed as 'responsible journalism': 'I know that some people might immediately respond and say that this means restricting opinion. But if we are to speak logically and objectively, what is being said is that if you are going to put anything out there, it should be based on factual information. I personally do believe that one should also always consider the social impact of the information that is being projected to the public. If something is going to harm and the social harmony that we have created, then that piece of information cannot be justified as freedom being practiced with responsibility towards the greater good.'

Yet journalism was never utilitarian. However, the function of journalism in different parts of the world differs, and there's an obvious dichotomy between the purposes of journalism for Emiratis as opposed to foreign, mostly Western journalists. But like most things in Dubai, the speed with which the media industry has grown here has not allowed enough time for these conflicts to be either addressed or resolved. However, as far as many foreign journalists based in Dubai are concerned, a media

industry that requires reporters to consider whether a story will “harm [...] the social harmony” Dubai has created is one that advocates censorship.

Perhaps, then, Dubai’s status as a media hub shouldn’t be an issue of whether the work produced for the local market has journalistic integrity, but rather a measure of how well the emirate accommodates foreign agencies in their quest to report on local issues for print and television media abroad. In fact, it’s possible the emirate may have embraced what most Hollywood starlets have begrudgingly learnt: any publicity is good publicity.

Either way, there’s no denying Dubai’s capacity to attract the world’s biggest and best media agencies to what Thomas Friedman famously described as a “decent modernizing model.” And with the recent political focus on the Middle East, it is no wonder the world media is looking for a safe haven to set up tent and observe the east in action from the emirate.

But ultimately, media corporations, like other corporations, are businesses. If there is no profit to be made, they cannot sustain themselves. The most obvious example is the UK’s *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, which saw an opportunity in Dubai and the Middle East even if it was driven by the promise of more money. The paper began publishing its international editions in Dubai on May 21, 2007; if it proves to be a financial success, other established newspapers are sure to follow suit.

Since most companies strive to increase their profits, and Dubai is a business haven, there's no surprise the two have merged to create a media hub both within and outside of freezones. It truly is a marvel what money can buy. However, Dubai's challenge is to take the leap from being merely the host that provides foreign news agencies space to work to producing world renowned publications that tackle not only the world's but also Dubai's real issues, without compromise; to become, in practice, a full-fledged media hub.

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