

Beyond Media ‘Dialogues’: Time to put away the champagne flutes

By Lawrence Pintak

October, 2007. “It’s the condescending attitude that I get tired of,” a top editor at one of the leading Arab satellite news channels recently told me. “I know they mean well; but it’s the whole tone.”

We were on our way to the airport after the latest in the seemingly endless parade of media “dialogues” between Western and Arab journalists. As was so often the case, this gathering was more a monologue than dialogue. Yet again, Arab journalists were put on the defensive, challenged to provide evidence that they were not biased; yet again, the conversation was predicated on the notion that Western journalism was more objective than Arab journalism.

During a break in the sessions the day before, the head of news at a European-based Arabic satellite channel had mimicked a question asked by one of the well-meaning Western participants: “So what can we do for you?” He then verbalized the unspoken implication he had nonetheless heard, “You *poor* little Arab.” At the next session, a top European journalist badgered executives from two Arab news organizations to prove they weren’t biased and a leading publisher arrogantly asked why he never heard Arabs criticizing themselves outside the walls of a closed conference (the answer may

have something to do with the way in which his news organizations cover the Arab world). “Davos rules” – the antiquated notion that anything can be off-the-record in this wired world – were in effect, or I would happily name names.

The disconnect between the stereotypes many Western journalists hold about their Arab colleagues and the reality of Arab journalism on the ground was vividly apparent as I flew back to Cairo, where four editors had just been sentenced to prison for “insulting the president” by questioning his health. Meanwhile, three other editors of an opposition paper were sentenced to two years each for having the temerity to report that the Minister of Justice had criticized some outspoken judges (a fact the government did not deny), and five more journalists discovered *after the fact* that they had been sentenced to jail terms in a case *they didn’t even know had been filed*, while in the UAE, two journalists and a pair of bloggers were given prison sentences for alleged – and minor – offenses. Journalists from Morocco to Yemen are being jailed, beaten up and murdered for their profession and some small-minded – but, sadly, often influential – Western journalists challenge the journalistic chops of Arab news organizations.

In many ways, it’s the Arab journalists who have outgrown these dialogues. At the elite level, journalism in the Arab world has matured rapidly in the last few years. The main satellite news channels and emerging independent papers like Egypt’s *Al-Masri Al-Youm* and *Al-Ghad* in Jordan are tackling head-on the excesses and weaknesses that made the Arab media such a target for the Bush White House immediately after 9/11. The same cannot necessarily be said for their Western counterparts. At gatherings in places as far flung as Wisconsin and Dubai over the past few years, top American journalists agreed that their coverage of the Arab world in the lead-up to the Iraq war was superficial and

stereotyped, then their news organizations went right back to superficiality and stereotype when last summer's Lebanon war broke out.

Among the many problems of these "dialogues" is the fact that it's largely the same group of elite Arab journalists who gamely march off to each of these gatherings, hoping against hope that *this* one will be different. Instead, they usually encounter a new flock of Western journalists who know little about Arab journalism and sometimes even less about the Middle East. The Arabs would often be better off just shipping them a book. (Talking with a leading British columnist after a discussion at a recent dialogue about the differences in Western and Arab coverage of the same story, I mentioned the fact that Arab media had shown the US armored vehicle that pulled down Saddam's statue, but most U.S. media did not. His reply: "I didn't know it was the Americans who pulled it down.").

It's certainly not a bad thing that Arab and Western journalists are meeting, talking and learning more about each other; the question is, "To what end?" With few exceptions, there is no follow-up; no product. Just more talk; just another group of American and/or European journalists who the Arabs must educate.

Dialogues have outlived their usefulness. It's time to stop talking and start doing. The amount of money that has been spent on media gatherings in the last few years at exclusive retreat centers in the U.S., palaces in Europe and posh resorts in the Middle East could have trained an army of Arab journalists, helped ensure at least some of them earned a living wage, and maybe even financed an independent media outlet or two. The Saudis reportedly spent \$5 million dollars on one conference alone.

Don't get me wrong. Having the decision-makers of Western and Arab journalism meet to discuss the challenges of post-9/11 coverage was a good thing. But it's time to move on; time to put away the champagne flutes, hang up the evening wear and roll up our sleeves. Foundations now setting their sights on the Middle East can benefit from the dialogues that have come before and fast-forward to action. Some areas to be mined:

- **Lessons Learned Networks:** Forget the Western media. Journalists in places like Poland, South Africa and Indonesia who have successfully navigated political upheaval and media reform have experiences far more relevant to Arab journalists than colleagues in New York and Bonn. Bring them together to learn from one another, whether in conferences, on briefing tours or journalist exchanges. Leave the Westerners at home.
- **Long-term Training:** Far too many journalistic training programs in the Arab world are 'slam, bam thank you ma'am' approaches that suck up donor dollars but leave their partners with little to remember the next morning. Ongoing, mentored projects carried out by people on the ground have proven to be the most effective – but least common – approach. Cooperation is closely tied to this. There are plenty of Arab journalists to go around. It sometimes seems like there's a virtual war going on between government funding agencies, foundations, media development NGOs and assorted government contractors to get a piece of the Arab journalistic training pie. One hand doesn't know – or care – what the other is doing. Even the EU and individual European governments can't seem to coordinate. Back off, guys. Cooperation among those carrying out short-term training could produce a coordinated, long-term effort that yields real results. The Global Fund for Media

Development is a step in the right direction, but it may be too ambitious for its own good.

- **Journalistic education reform:** Journalism programs – as opposed to theoretical mass communications departments – are few and far between in the Arab world. There is a growing recognition on the part of Arab universities that they must adapt to the new media landscape. Curriculum development assistance can help make a difference.

There is some good work being done out there. The Media Development Loan Fund is seeding independent media startups across the developing world, the Knight International Journalism Fellows are doing yeoman's work in the Arab world and beyond, Search for Common Ground is fostering media operations that facilitate dialogue rather than confrontation, the Aspen Institute's media dialogue series spawned a U.S. study tour for Arab journalists and various government agencies are sinking substantial amounts of money into media development (while most Arab governments are putting their money into trying to stem – or control – the tide of media change). But far more *coordinated* work must be done – and it must be done in an atmosphere of partnership and mutual respect.

“What can we do for you?” must be replaced by, “How can we work together?” And if they listen closely, Western journalists might even learn a thing or two about their own profession.

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