

Sheyma Buali, after attending the annual Arab Media Forum in Bahrain, comments on the elephant in the room that many participants were reluctant to talk about

The Cultural Limitations of Censorship:

The fifth annual Arab Media Forum took place in Bahrain in December and the three main themes under discussion were: how the Arab media are dealing with global changes, how Arab media are managing in the financial crisis, and where the Arab world should go from here. Amidst all that there were protocol events, networking and, for some, frustration over some of the year-to-year repetitiveness. To me, there was also an issue which in some ways stayed in the background: censorship.

Beyond the political considerations, there is a cultural dimension to censorship too. Politically a free press and free expression should be pillars of any society, even more so among those working towards developing 'democracy', but more broadly, when people are not allowed to speak for themselves, others will speak for them. This, as we have seen throughout time, whether in cases as simple as the caricatured portrayal of Arabs in popular and specialized media or as dramatic as foreign intercepted processes that result in social and political changes in the region, can be very dangerous.

On the censorship front the Arab world has been quite active in the past year. The 2009 censorship index compiled by Reporters Without Borders was filled with the names of Arab countries. Whether for politically sensitive journalism, politicized blogging or other alleged infractions, websites, newspapers, and journalists have been blocked, shut down and fined. So when the Arab Media Forum does not include censorship on the agenda, along with the three main topics, skepticism arises.

In the debate on finances, there seemed to be a consensus that funding in general was not a problem. With more than 500 satellite channels on air in the Arab world today, it seems on the contrary that TV channels are seen as lucrative businesses, thus indicating that the problem is actually the lack of agenda. Many of the channels have little communicative value (a common formula is to broadcast music videos with SMS messages from viewers ticking across the bottom of the screen, at minimal production costs). But if the theoretical basis or mission of media is, among other things, to communicate information, promote public policy, and generally create a space for a public sphere, it is hard to determine what many Arab media are working to achieve. With the possibility of censorship hanging over the heads of producers and editors, the limitations are tighter. This leads to a lack of integrity that should otherwise come with the profession.

Journalists, editors, media academics and Ministry of Information personnel from all around the Arab world made many interesting points at the forum. I heard a variety of proposals, such as more exchange between journalists in the Arab world, a push for more education, specialized colleges and training facilities, and more production of case studies and research. As a first-time participant in a conference of this type, I was very encouraged by the multiplicity of voices.

But over all the ideas, concerns, encouragements and so on lay a thick layer of what looked like censorship in action: censorship of the topic of censorship. It wasn't that 'press freedom' didn't come up at all: it did, but it then got stuck in that web of layers that separate ideas from practice, and ended up unmentioned in the final communiqué.

At one point, for example, Magdi El Gallad, editor of the Egyptian newspaper Al Masry Al Yom, made remarks to the effect that Arab media were born and grew up in the lap of governments, and so we cannot look at the development of media without looking at political and governmental developments.

Al Hayat journalist Baria Alamuddin posed the question of whether or not Arabs have "editorial fright" and are stunted, unable to express their opinions honestly. She ended her statement with a proposal that before addressing the changes happening world wide, we should first of all define what media mean to Arabs and where we are going with media, and then make our own changes to our media practices. Only then would we be in a position to attend to changes happening internationally.

A recurrent theme was that new media have not been embraced in the Arab world. Websites are few and far between, websites that deal in Arabic are even fewer, and the websites that correspond to media outlets, even the major ones, are quite weak. At times, these ideas on new media and freedom of expression merged. Ossama Al Shaikh, head of Egyptian TV & Radio, said we must acknowledge new media as a form of free expression, and people's intellects must be given space and protected or else they would be tied down by old ways. At this point one might ask if that lack of intellectual freedom is behind why the Arab world has not embraced e-media at the official level. Blogs and other new forms of media that are unregulateable (unless blocked) have largely been the work of dissidents expressing themselves and sharing information. Perhaps the various bodies that develop and promote media believe that encouraging websites, blogs and other civil-run information outlets may in fact encourage protest, empowering a public voice that would not otherwise be tolerated within the existing political and social systems.

In the final session of the Forum, referring to the future of media in the Arab world, Jim Boumelha of the International Federation of Journalists (the only non-Arab at the Forum) made a point about the overbearing taboo-based media culture. The boundaries of discourse, he explained, are punitive to the development of media in the region. His statements were very necessary to bring up, stating that although we can appreciate the differences culture to culture, there is a universal principal to journalism that must be upheld: integrity and accountability to society.

As mentioned by the journalists above, it is important to look at how the Arab region wants to use media, which can no longer be directed solely to the local audience. The Arab media must also keep in mind the global dimension: more and more people from a variety of disciplines are in search of translated pieces, exploring what Arabs are saying among the regional and diasporic media.

Even in the wake of post-colonialism, the days when Arabs had to be 'thought for' or 'spoken for' have not yet passed. The region must protect itself from leaving holes that will otherwise be filled by outside intellect and debate. It is human nature to criticize one's own, whether it be country, people or even family, while not

accepting criticism of those groups by outsiders. But ironically, the Arab world sometimes seem to systematically allow, in fact at times invite, outside minds to come in and discuss what needs to be changed in the region. The door is, on many levels, open for others to come in and fill that which the Arab national cannot.

‘Limiting discourses’, to use the words of Jim Boumelha, keep the people confined under the censorship laws in a dark place, unable to move with the times *on their own terms* towards interactive debate and even policy making. The fact that the journalists and editors were having this discussion with ministers of information at the forum suggests that there is no intention of separating governments from practitioners within the media industry. For progress to occur, the Arab media must keep pressing both of those parties to free expression and boundless debate. Those elements are a major part of the constructive answer to the question ‘Where should the Arab world go from here?’.

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