Environmental Journalism in the UAE
By Lisa Reinisch

Introduction

This paper explores the evolving field of environmental journalism in the UAE's English-language press as well as the national and international context that underpins it. The development of a more independent press and more eco-friendly policies in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a top-down process which is both driven and contained by the ruling families of this absolute monarchy. Environmental journalism forms part of these prestige projects and occupies a privileged, though confined space, something of a golden cage, within the country's young media landscape.

First, a note on terminology. "Environmental journalism" in this paper encompasses the broad spectrum of environment-related news coverage related to sustainability, climate change, conservation and protection. By "Arab countries", this paper refers to the Arab states of the Arabian peninsula. "Western countries" are those of North America and Europe.

Section 1 looks at relevant aspects of environmental journalism in the United States,on the one hand, and in Arab countries on the other. This international context is essential, given that the UAE's relatively young media culture is heavily influenced by the journalistic cultures imported by its predominantly expatriate media workforce. Furthermore, the way in which the UAE's rulers are steering the development of journalism in general, and environmental journalism in particular, is tightly connected not only to their domestic interests, but also to foreign policy and the economic
strategies of the ruling families.

Section 2 examines the specific conditions of environmental journalism in the UAE by considering the country's current state of press freedom, its media laws and subject-specific challenges.

This is followed by a comparative case study in Section 3, in which the coverage of two specific events published by the *Khaleej Times* and *The National* is compared.

Finally, the conclusion draws together key insights from all sections.

Research methodology & challenges

This paper is based on a series of 18 interviews, site visits and a comprehensive review of relevant academic literature, government documents and media reports. Twelve of the interviews were undertaken face-to-face in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in July and August 2009 and four interviews were made by telephone in September 2009. One interview was undertaken by a research partner because the author could not attend the interview personally. One interview was undertaken by email, after numerous unsuccessful attempts to establish face-to-face or telephone contact with an extremely busy reporter.

The publicly accessible library of the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) in Abu Dhabi and the environmental education department of the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (EAD) also proved immensely useful for secondary research.

A number of recent studies proved especially insightful. The surveys by Lawrence Pintak and Jeremy Ginges (2008 and 2009) and David B. Sachsman (2006) provide extensive information about journalism in Arab countries and environmental journalism in the United States today. Dr Christopher Davidson's books about Abu Dhabi and Dubai (Davidson 2008 and 2009), are detailed and candid studies, which were invaluable for this paper. Peyman Pejman's recent article about the UAE's English-language press provided not only a number of useful insights, but also staff and circulation figures (Pejman 2009). Considering that not much has been written about the English-language press and environmental journalism in the UAE, it is hoped that this paper will be able to make a valuable contribution to the research in this field.

Another helpful factor was the emergence of e-government in the UAE, which has made a wide range of official documents and statistics available online[1]. This research was complemented by site visits to an organic farm, an afforestation area, the Masdar construction site and informal conversations with a variety of UAE residents, including a number of journalists.

Since neither *The National* nor The *Khaleej Times* can be found on Nexis or other archives and the author was not given access to the papers' in-house archives, the case study in Section 3 is based on material found through the papers' websites. According to the City University School of Arts librarian, this was the best available method of accessing the materials. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that the material found online is not the entire output that the papers produced on the sample subjects.

While in the UAE, much time was spent arranging interviews and site visits since attempts to secure permissions and interview appointments prior to arrival had failed. Once the author had arrived in the UAE, however, repeated phone calls and personal office visits finally led to results. The necessary permission for a site visit at Al Dhafra landfill proved impossible to obtain, as did meetings with a number of relevant interviewees. A general wariness of talking to researchers/journalists might have been exacerbated by the timing of the visit, which took place during the hottest time of the year, just before Ramadan, when many people take their holiday. The meetings that did take place were insightful, with interviewees taking time for detailed, frank conversations2.

In comparison, it turned out to be much easier to get access to employees of *The National* than to those at the *Khaleej Times*. Whether this was due to the holiday season or a different degree of openness was unclear.

When interviewing government officials, many of whom are Emiratis and do not speak English fluently, language was sometimes a problem. This was usually overcome by the presence of a deputy, usually an expatriate, who translated the official's answers or directly

1 A wealth of relatively topical environmental information was available on the website of the Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative (AGEDI), which publishes highly useful sector papers and "state of the environment reports".

replied to questions. This could cause problems in attributing direct quotes, which were solved by carefully revisiting interview details on record. Dr Christopher Davidson's books about Abu Dhabi and Dubai (Davidson 2008 and 2009) are detailed and candid studies, which were invaluable for this paper. Peyman Pejman's recent article about the UAE's English-language press provided not only a number of useful insights, but also staff and circulation figures (Pejman 2009). Considering that not much has been written about the English-language press and environmental journalism in the UAE, it is hoped that this paper will be able to make a valuable contribution to the research in this field.

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Section 1 The international context of environmental journalism in the UAE

The following is an attempt to provide some insights into the international media framework that underpins the work of environmental journalists at the UAE's English-language press, which operates in a field of tension between the journalistic practices associated with "the Western World", discussed in Section 1.1, and those of the "Arab World", discussed in Section 1.2.

Note, however, that this section should not be seen as an attempt to outline the wide and

2 Only one interviewee, an EAD official, appeared extremely guarded and preferred the conversation not to be recorded.

varied fields of environmental journalism in the West and the Arab world as a whole, which are defined by vastly different realities that would be impossible to discuss within the confines of this paper.

Environmental journalism in the US today

A recent survey in the United States (Sachsman 2006) reveals a dislike of campaign journalism among environmental journalists, who prefer objectivity over advocacy (Sachsman 2006: 112). Most of the reporters surveyed agreed with the statement that "environmental journalists generally concentrate too much on problems and pollution rather than writing stories to help the public to understand research or complex issues" and were working for "modest salaries". Time constraints, financial concerns and "the size of the news hole" emerged as the main barriers to environmental reporting (Sachsman 2006:109).

US news media had reported on environmental issues since the 1930s, though in a very different style and with much less urgency.[3] It is only since the fourth report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2007), Al Gore's blockbuster documentary *An Inconvenient Truth,* and the so-called Stern Report (Stern 2007), that critical coverage of environmental affairs has become one of the hallmarks of quality news agendas in the United States.

After years of controversy, the IPCC report established a global scientific consensus that climate change was man-made, global and highly dangerous. While the film did much to attract public attention to this emerging scientific consensus, the IPCC report convinced policy-makers and journalists with its analysis of "dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system" (IPCC 2007:18). The Stern report, on the other hand, made the economic case for action on climate change by asserting that "the costs of stabilizing the climate are significant, but manageable; delay would be dangerous and much more costly". (Stern 2007:7).

Some key challenges

Climate change is the biggest story of our time, according to the BBC's environment correspondent David Shukman (2008). But covering the environment as a journalist brings a number of challenges.

Firstly, as a story, the environment simply does not fit neatly into journalistic conventions. Climate change, for example, is a process, not an event, making it harder to integrate it in the news cycle. Not only that, it is also a highly complex process that requires the reader to invest time in absorbing the necessary explanations of relevant, sometimes contradictory, scientific principles.[4] Such time-honored journalistic principles of objectivity and balance might even have prolonged the period of uncertainty and confusion about the actual existence of man-made climate change. Nick Davies (2008:131,171-186) provides a detailed analysis of this phenomenon and notes: "Scientists spent two decades warning that the planet was heating up while journalists simply balanced what they were saying with

3 For details on the history of environmental journalism in the US, see Appendix 5

4 As noted by Stern (2009:16) climate change "involves substantial risk and uncertainty, which, cumulatively, are very large, not only because our knowledge is incomplete, but also because solar, planetary and other processes have an inherent randomness."

denials from experts and oil companies." In this view, balance can be a dangerous thing. Objectivity, often misunderstood as neutrality, has been criticised by eminent journalists such as George Orwell, James Cameron, and Martha Gellhorn (Davies 2008:112).

Being of global relevance, the environment presents journalists with the problem of "bringing home" the story. What is more, if that story happens to be of a depressing nature, it might have a negative impact on sales figures. As a result, environmental journalists have become adapt at framing stories in a certain fashion, often resorting to sensationalization, humanization (Sachsman,
2006:96), oversimplification and the coverage of the charitable activity of celebrities.

Environmental reporting also proved difficult to integrate in the operational structure of news organizations. Environmental issues can play a role in all sections[5] and, as a result, many editors relied on staff writers, often with no specific environmental expertise, to write environmental stories for various sections as needed. Considering the level of scientific know-how and contacts required to locate and tell such stories, the quality of the coverage usually suffered. It also led to the establishment of what Tanner (2004:360) referred to as a "passive news discovery process", which saw journalists relying on leads being provided by activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and press offices.

Sources are another area in which the environment has journalistic caveats. While environmental journalists in the United States have developed non-adversarial - or at least working - relationships with a majority of academic, civil society and government[6] sources (Sachsman 2006: 94), the same cannot be said for corporations.[7]

This comes as no surprise, since corporations are, by and large, portrayed as the culprits of global environmental damage. At the same time, they are the main source of income for most commercial media – a problematic relationship that has been of great concern since the very beginning of journalism in the United States. Wasley (2003:13): "There is a disturbing trend among reputable news providers of failing to report accurately on difficult issues such as climate change because of an inherent partnership with big business and economy."

1.2 Environmental journalism in Arab countries

A number of recent studies about journalism in this region provide a useful context here. After all, apart from Western expatriates, a large number of the journalists employed at the UAE's English-language press come from other Arab countries. Certain journalistic practices are therefore based on shared historical, socio-political, religious and economic experiences that are common across the region.

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5 After all, stories can range from the presentation of an eco-friendly car (which might fall into the lifestyle section) to the coverage of a new carbon trading scheme (which would be covered by the current affairs or business desks).

6 According to Sachsman's survey (2006:105), US environmental reporters rely heavily on government sources, who have the democratic duty to provide data to the public. It is worth considering that Sachsman's survey was undertaken during the presidency of George W. Bush, whose government did not see the environment as a priority. This indicates that democratic systems can ensure a functioning relationship between environmental journalists and government, even when environmental issues are a low priority for government.

7 Corporate associations, on the other hand, were ranked towards the bottom a list of 29 sources, indicating that the relationship between corporations and environmental journalists is tenuous.

Relevant aspects of journalism in Arab countries

Generally speaking, in most Arab countries press freedom is curtailed and journalists face serious consequences for disobeying legal and societal mores. So-called “red lines“ around taboo subjects are the norm and governments across the region can rely on indirect control through patronage and an ingrained culture of self-censorship among media practitioners. In most Arab countries, newspaper-publishing and broadcasting licenses must be obtained from the government. Such licenses constitute another effective, quasi-legitimate tool of media control (Pintak 2007; Pintak and Ginges 2008 and 2009; Rugh 2004; Pejman 2009; David 2009; Davidson 2009 - to name but a few).

Something that journalists in the Arab region have in common with their Western colleagues is extremely low pay: “The official salary for top editors is often measured in the hundreds, rather than thousands, of dollars.”(Pintak, L. and Ginges, J. 2009:162-163)

An important factor to keep in mind is the difference between Arab and English-speaking newspapers in the region. Rugh notes that “there are a few Arab newspapers printed in English but they are intended for non-Arabs living in the Middle East so their news and editorial content are quite different from the media in Arabic”. (Rugh 2004:95)

Most Arab news organizations are owned by the state or by parastatal organizations. Favorable coverage of government-sponsored businesses and advertising clients is common, as is so-called protocol news, which reports on the state visits and social functions of the elite. “Most Arab media are satisfied with conveying addresses [...] of government officials during the opening of conferences and meetings,” observe Tolba and Saab (2008:188). Protocol news and name checking local companies is a widespread method of maintaining relationships with current or potential advertisers.

Due to the authoritarian nature of socio-political discourse, Arab officials often do not see it as their task to make themselves routinely available to journalists and “there is less of a tradition in the Arab world of sharing information for the public good”. (Pejman 2009:6) As a result, journalists struggle to get access to officials and to reliable official data.

The number of free-to-air satellite channels has rocketed to more than 260 in recent years (Pintak 2007), a development which has had a profound effect on pan-Arab media practice. In journalism, it was the launch of Qatar-based satellite news channel *Al Jazeera* in 1996 that triggered a chain reaction in the region and also sent a tremor through regional English-language press newsrooms. “The largely unfettered approach it champions has changed how many Arab newspaper journalists view their own role. And while not a single Arab head of state has been forced from office by satellite television, it has clearly impacted the way Arab leaders deal with their populations and how governments interact,” notes Pintak (2007:3). However, it should be noted that so far, the majority of this much-discussed change in newspapers appears to be taking place inside the heads of journalists, rather than on the page. “Red lines” remain firmly in place, though some papers now dare to step closer to them than ever before.

An extensive recent survey of Arab journalists (Pintak and Ginges, 2008 and 2009) studied the motivations, values and self-perceptions of journalists in the region. What emerged is a

useful snapshot of Arab journalism including indications that some of the preconceptions common among Western observers should be reconsidered.

For example, it seems that Arab journalists "see their mission as that of driving political and social reform in the Middle East and North Africa" (Pintak, L. and Ginges, J. 2009:193). This contradicts the widely held assumption that the main function of Arab news media is to maintain the status quo and pander to the authorities. Another key finding is that "Arab journalists are frank about the lack of independence, fairness and professionalism among Arab news organizations" but also reject the
notion that Western media (especially those in the United States) are as independent as they claim (ibid). They "have a mixed view of some of the traditional norms of Western journalism; they believe reporting should be infused with respect and that journalists may also be political activists, but they ultimately aspire to objectivity" (ibid).

In this view, journalists in the Arab world are torn between the principles of Western journalism and the necessities of their cultural, political, religious and economic surroundings. Objectivity, accuracy and balance, the cornerstones of Western journalism, are to some extent incompatible with the authoritarian socio-political structures of the Arab region.

Unlike those in the United States, journalists in Arab countries are faced with numerous, often contradictory, personal and official identities and loyalties and are struggling to define their roles. But it appears that, amid the turmoil, Arab journalists are beginning to define new, region-specific methods of operation.

According to Pintak and Ginges (2008:208-212), three region-specific roles are emerging. "The Change Agent" is characterized by an "overtly activist approach to journalism aimed at political or societal change", while the role of "the Guardian" has "a significant defensive aspect" and "involves a set of roles associated with the defense of Arab and/or Islamic causes". The third type of journalist is that of "the Loyalist", widely adopted by journalists in the Gulf region (ibid), which can overlap with both the Change Agent and the Guardian role, depending on the attitudes of the corresponding royal families.

The field of tension between these three groups of journalists is large and changeable, not to forget perilous. Expressions such as freedom and control take on a different meaning in the Arab context; they cannot be applied in the same way as in the Western media environment because Arab journalists have to consider "more fundamental threats" than their Western colleagues (Pintak and Ginges 2008:219). It is therefore questionable whether it is appropriate, let alone useful, to apply
Western standards of objectivity and balance to journalism in the Arab world.

The environment beat

Apart from the issues outlined above, environmental journalists in the Arab world face a number of subject-specific challenges. Generally speaking, environmental and science reporting do not rank high among the editorial priorities and newsroom hierarchies across the Arab world. Especially in the OPEC countries, most of which do not proactively engage in international efforts to mitigate climate change, there is little interest in environmental

issues.[8] Understandably, in countries such as Iraq, Yemen and Palestine, social and political turmoil do not allow for much consideration of environmental issues.

Apart from questionable editorial integrity, tensions between governments, corporations and newsrooms can also result in serious health and safety threats for environmental journalists. Especially in developing countries and remote areas, where corporations and governments are free to act against international human rights legislation, environmental journalists often face great personal danger. “Environmental reporting has become one of journalism’s most dangerous beats”, asserts Wasley (2003:8).

As pointed out by Tolba and Saab (2009:188) “it is difficult to talk about a special identity of Arab environmental media” because of a lack of “professional patterns of news collection, presentation and analysis based on a particular analytical framework”.

As described in Section 1.1, covering the environment in its geopolitical, social and scientific contexts requires expert knowledge and the capacity to frame environmental stories in an attractive way. In the Arab region such general narrative challenges are exacerbated by the lack of journalism professionals (Pintak and Ginges 2008:214). According to Tolba and Saab (2008:18) less than 10 per cent of newspapers in the Arab world have dedicated environmental writers: “the subject is seldom dealt with in depth, and critical analysis and expert insights are rarely provided”.

A further challenge facing environmental journalists in the Arab region is the lack of reliable environmental data (Tolba and Saab 2008, personal interviews). In tune with the general journalistic practices outlined above, environmental journalism in Arab media lacks follow-ups and “is characterized by immediate descriptive content rather than analysis and even accurate information” (Tolba and Saab 2008:188).

Unlike their counterparts in the West, Arab environmental journalists tend to focus on success stories, for example, reporting the launch of government and corporate initiatives (1).

Passive news acquisition habits (as discussed in Section 1.1) are also commonly adopted by environmental journalists in Arab countries. According to Tolba and Saab (2008:197), “the Arab media often attend to such momentous environmental issues [as the negative impact of industry] only when they receive ready-made materials from international organizations or news agencies”.

Section 2 Environmental journalism in the UAE

This section examines the historical, political and economic context of environmental journalism and the current level of press freedom in the UAE. Again, due to the limited scope of this paper, the following is a far from exhaustive analysis.

National context

Founded in 1971, the UAE is a union of seven emirates, each ruled by its own royal family.

8 Unless they pertain to flora and fauna that is in some way connected to national, regional or secular pride.

Federally, power is in the hands of the ruling families of the two wealthiest emirates, namely Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Though the UAE is an absolute monarchy with no formal citizen input in political processes, there is "no real domestic opposition (Islamist or otherwise) and little international criticism of the UAE's political system or human rights record" (Kalathil and Boas 2003). This is widely explained by the fact that the government collects no taxes, provides a generous social system (including a plethora of subsidies and endowments for Emirati citizens) and is generally perceived as a competent manager of the country's affairs. This is certainly true in terms of affluence, seeing as the UAE now have one of the world's highest GDPs per capita (more than USD 53,000) and is the home of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds (estimated to be worth more than USD 1 trillion).

As in many Gulf countries, oil revenues have transformed the Emirates from a cluster of agricultural and fishing communities into multicultural consumer societies within just a few decades. Unlike those of some Arab countries, however, the UAE's rulers recognized early on that fossil fuels were a finite resource and began to pursue economic diversification into non-oil industries such as finance, manufacturing, tourism and real estate (Davidson 2008 and 2009).

To develop these industries, the UAE had to attract both foreign labour and expertise. Today, more than 80 per cent of the population are foreigners and international business partnerships dominate the political and economic agenda. This reliance on international labor and expertise has required the UAE to develop relatively liberal social standards compared to other Arab countries. Since the succession of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan as president of the UAE in 2004, this strategy has also incorporated the development of freer civil society institutions such as NGOs and the press, which were previously little more than mouthpieces for the government. Especially Sheikh Mohammed bin Sultan al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, has been personally committed to the establishment of an independent fourth estate.

The development of newspapers in the UAE

Pejman (2009) provides useful insights into the history of newspapers in the UAE. From the very beginnings, the UAE press was characterized by economic interests and reverence for the ruling families.[9] Coverage of the activities and whereabouts of ruling families and eminent tribesmen was an important part of early "news agendas". With growing popularity, the papers were soon discovered as useful propaganda tools by the authorities. Pejman (2009:2): "If trade and commerce were the preeminent factors in introducing foreign press to the UAE, its solidification and consolidation was owed to nationalism and the need for social development." In that context, the launch of *The National* newspaper, with its relatively irreverent tone, is a direct result of the government strategy to gain respect from the international community (2,3,4).

It is noteworthy that the signs of increasing press freedom in the UAE are not the result of the government giving in to domestic pressures, but the early stages of a top-down process of reputation building that has its roots in the highest echelons of the UAE monarchy,

9 *Al-Nakhy*, the first newspaper ever published in what is now UAE territory, was written on cardboard and stuck in a shop window by a merchant in the 1920s to attract more customers. The first English-language newspaper, *The Recorder*, was published by an Indian businessman in 1967 and was dominated by advertisements and trade news.

namely the ruling families of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. As observed by Davidson (2008: 137-167 and 2009:122-138) the monarchies of the UAE are constantly developing new "sources of legitimacy", which include both press freedom and environmental concern.

English-language newspapers today

Today, there are six English-language dailies in the UAE: *Khaleej Times* (launched in 1978), *Gulf News* (1979), *Gulf Today* (1996), *Emirates Business 24/7* (2004, fka *Emirates Today*), *7Days* (2004), and *The National* (2008) (Pejman 2009). In total, these papers sell around 320,000 copies a day, which is eight per cent of the UAE's population of around 4.5 million (ibid). There are few reliable circulation figures for the UAE (Smalley 2009) and those cited are estimates.

Mostly, these papers practice non-adversarial forms of journalism common in Gulf states, relying heavily on protocol news and content supplied by government and corporations. However, the launch of *The National,* with its outspoken political and business reports, has introduced a new tone to the UAE's newsrooms. Considering the way it has affected print newsrooms, it could be described as the *Al Jazeera* of newspapers. As observed by Pejman (2009:1): "English daily newspapers are realizing that the old system of uncritically reporting news in deference to political and business elites is no longer adequate if the papers want to be considered a player in the media market [...] and that good reporting is becoming more and more essential for earning respectability."

Press freedom in the UAE today

In a recent report on press freedom around the world, the UAE fell into the "not free" category (Freedom House 2009). Nevertheless, health and safety standards for journalists are high in comparison to other developing countries and, according to the charity Committee to Protect Journalists, no journalists have been killed or imprisoned in the UAE since 2000.[10] The UAE has been on the NGO Reporters Without Borders' list of "countries under surveillance" since last year because of threats to free expression on the internet.

Media control through censorship and legal measures does occur, but to a large extent the government can rely on self-censorship and there are only few recent incidences of active censorship.

Surveillance is a widespread concern and some UAE-based reporters covering political and financial news in the region say that they have suspicions that their phones and email accounts are being surveilled.[11] In July 2009, such suspicions appeared to be confirmed, when the state-run monopoly telecommunications provider Etisalat became embroiled in a scandal about a piece of software it issued to 145,000 Blackberry users in the UAE.

Media corporations with offices in Dubai Media City, including the *Financial Times, CNN* and *Reuters*, received guarantees that they would be exempt from national legal restrictions. However, the fragile nature of such promises came into stark relief in 2007, when the

10 The only reported arrest in recent years was that of V. M. Sathish in 2005, who was briefly held by Dubai police for alleged libel.

11 Various personal interviews summer 2009

government closed down two Pakistani satellite channels.

"While not an attack on the English print press per se, these restrictions on satellite channels send an unmistakable signal to all media outlets operating in the country about where boundaries lie," according to Pejman (2009:8).

Where *exactly* these boundaries lie is the subject of endless debate among UAE journalists.[12] According to Tamsin Carlisle of *The National* (5), there are "great sensitivities that we have to dance around and sometimes they change from day to day".

Controversial new media laws

In force since early 2009, the new laws abolished prison sentences for journalists, but introduced a number of new punishable offenses and penalties for violations such as publishing content that could damage the country's reputation or economy. These include the suspension of publications, permanent revocation of publishing licenses, and fines as high as one million dirhams (USD 272,250).

In the view of Dr Christopher Davidson (6), the abolition of prison sentences was a tactical move to divert attention away from the less obvious points of the legislation: "What they were trying to do was actually drastically increase the number of offenses that journalists can commit and drastically increase the fines that could be imposed on offending journalists. [...] This has had a chilling effect on the media in the last six months."

Scott Smith of the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) (7) also points out that the press in the UAE is far from free, but takes a more optimistic view of the current state of press freedom: "Things that would not even have been mentioned are now on the front page, things that have seen senior people investigated for corruption. They probably would have done something about it previously as well, but nobody would have heard about it."

Another interesting perspective is that of Ahmed Al Oustaz, also of the ECSSR (8), who asserts that not only the government, but also "senior people in media who want to protect their business" played a role in the formulation of the new laws.

All of the journalists interviewed for this paper voiced concerns about the proposed new laws. Senior editors at *The National* have publicly spoken out against them and the reporters interviewed for this paper echoed their concerns. Tamsin Carlisle (9) considers the new press laws dangerous and "to some extent naive" because they are open to too many interpretations: "As a journalist you may not write anything that is bad for the economy. What does that mean? Does that mean you can't say that the banks are doing a bad job here? It could be anything, it is too broad. [...] So much is going to ride on particular people and how they are going to interpret this in the court."

Editors at the *Khaleej Times* have so far refrained from making public statements about the new media laws and Amira Agarib (10), one of the paper's environment reporters, also adopted a more cautious tone: "The new press laws are good, but still we need more

12 Various personal interviews summer 2009.

protection for journalists. [...] They abolished the imprisonment of journalists, but still you can be fined and the paper can be closed."

Environmental journalism in the UAE

Environmental journalists in the UAE work within a framework similar to that of their colleagues across the Arab region. Nevertheless, they have one crucial advantage: the government of the UAE has a unique history of environmentalism among Arab states and has recently started to invest heavily in sustainable development initiatives.

As early as the 1960s, the UAE's founding father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, began championing environmental protection, making it an integral part of national identity.[13] Sheikh Zayed's environmental legacy is being carried on by his sons Sheikh Khalifa, the current president of the UAE, and Sheikh Mohammed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. Though the UAE continues to follow the lead of Saudi Arabia in voting against climate change mitigation initiatives at OPEC, domestically they have begun to actively engage in renewable energy research and sustainable development. Especially the emirate of Abu Dhabi is working hard to establish itself as a world center of sustainability.[14]

Considering the strong influence of government policy on editorial priorities, this creates a unique context for environmental journalism in an Arab country. The downside of this scenario is that, because environmentalism is seen as an essentially royal project, any negative headlines could be interpreted as direct criticism of the royal families.

Another key challenge is the demographic make-up of the UAE. Davidson (11) points out that "much of the population are expatriates, who are there not because they love the country but because of financial gain. [...] for such economic mercenaries, for want of a better expression, environmental concerns will not be high on their agenda, [...] [They] will never become citizens, so what is the incentive for them to look after this place?"

Interestingly, UAE environmental journalists appear to have vastly different perceptions of the extent of their freedoms. Amira Agarib of *The Khaleej Times* (12) feels her work is not inhibited by red lines: "Yes, of course we have freedom, we can be honest. Even when I'm not writing about the environment, we write everything we want to write about. Today we wrote about the collapse of a building. We can write about everything."

While Tamsin Carlisle of *The National* (13) also stresses that she enjoys many freedoms, she does mention editorial boundaries and pressures: "There are a lot of pressures to say things, to put a certain spin on things, which most of us try to resist, but it is not always possible. [...] I generally push as hard as I can and sometimes an editor comes and says: 'No, you can't say that,' and then I argue. […] It is not like I was reporting in some place where you could easily end up in big trouble, jail or worse."

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13 The UAE's first national budget, for example, included generous funding for environmental initiatives, which saw a comparable amount being spent on the establishment of a zoo for endangered species as on national healthcare (Davidson 2009:137).

14 In 2007 it launched the ambitious Masdar City project (a 'zero-waste, zero-carbon emissions' ecocity near Abu Dhabi) and in June 2009 it won the bid to house the new headquarters of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA).

Vesela Todorova (14), the *The National*'s environmental correspondent, asserts that environmental journalism has fewer red lines than other subjects, and that those that exists are "a function of a general lack of a culture of transparency", not of self-censorship. "Royal projects" such as greening the desert and agriculture are not beyond criticism, in her view: "The consequences of these projects have been well explained to our readers."

Though there has been more critical coverage of government policies and industrial pollution in recent years than ever before, such reports are relatively rare and usually refrain from directly attributing blame. Nevertheless, these instances of critical coverage have to be seen as progress within the UAE's national and regional context.

As pointed out by Ahmed al Oustaz of the ECSSR (15): "They now touch the issues. Maybe they find an agency of the government is not working or somebody does something. At least they talk about it now."

Section 3 Comparative case study: environmental journalism at *The Khaleej Times* and *The National*

This section compares the coverage of two environmental stories by two of the UAE's six English-language newspapers: the *Khaleej Times*, the oldest English title and its youngest contender, *The National*. Two recent environmental stories have been selected as a sample: World Environment Day on 5 June 2009 and the publication of a critical study of environmental degradation in Arab countries by the Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED) on 7 May 2009.

The stories were chosen as samples because they were both on-diary events that had probably been promoted weeks, if not months, ahead. Both offer a wide range of angles and were certain to be covered by both papers. Being on-diary, an analysis of these stories is unlikely to lead to insights about the investigative journalism culture of the papers, but rather their routine coverage habits.

While not reliably exhaustive, examining the publicly available coverage of these two stories will allow some insights into the operating methods of the two newspapers. Each section will begin with a short profile of the newspaper including some notes on the papers' "About us" page on their websites, before an analysis of the timing, angle and sources of each story.

The *Khaleej Times*

Profile

The *Khaleej Times* is currently in a tumultuous phase of transition. First published in 1978, the paper was majority-owned by the private publishing house Galadari Printing and Publishing until the summer of 2008, when the government of Dubai took over control (Pejman 2009:3, Hope 2008). After a complete redesign, the installation of a new management team and some managerial upheaval[15], the paper appears to be moving away

15 The reshuffle appears to have caused managerial upheaval, leading to the resignations of several high-ranking editors and culminating in the dissolution of the paper's board of directors in April 2009 and the appointment of Bikram Vohra, a former editor of the paper, as the new CEO (Hope 2008).

from the widespread notion among editors in the UAE that the main job of newspapers is to transmit information, not to find, analyze or comment upon it (Pejman 2009:5).

On the "About us" page of its website, the *Khaleej Times* describes itself in simple, operational terms: "*Khaleej Times* is the highest circulated of the English language newspapers throughout the Gulf. It reaches out to all parts of the UAE. Additionally, it covers Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia."

It should be noted that the *Khaleej Times'* claimed circulation dominance of the Gulf newspaper market is the subject of heated debate in the UAE press industry and has led to a public feud between the *Khaleej Times* and *Gulf News* (Pejman 2009 and Gulf News 2009).[16]

The "About us" page limits references to the paper's socio-political function to the following: "*Khaleej Times* Special Reports and Supplements are regarded as part of a valuable service to the community."

This is followed by a direct reference to the advertising potential of the paper: "[The *Khaleej Times* titles] offer advertisers an opportunity to promote their products and services over an extended time period, in a uniquely relevant editorial context catering to their own precise target audience."

The *Khaleej Times* currently employs around 180 staff, only one of whom is Emirati (Pejman 2009:3) and a majority of its readership are Asian expatriates (Gulf News, 2009).

Coverage analysis

1.) World Environment Day 2009

On 5 and 6 June 2009, the *Khaleej Times* published three stories about World Environment Day. Online research revealed that all three were based on corporate press releases. Two of them were used almost verbatim and published under the byline "staff writer". One of the stories had a named byline and, though clearly based on the corresponding press release, was edited and rewritten as an event preview.

One story, which appeared the day after World Environment Day, was a clear example of protocol news. It name-checked the activities of a variety of groups and government departments, before leading into an almost exact copy of a press release distributed by a tourism company. Interestingly, the coverage began on the day of the event itself, not, as is often the case, the day before, in order to give readers time to plan ahead accordingly.

2.) AFED report on environmental degradation in Arab countries

On 8 May, a day after the presentation of the report, the *Khaleej Times* ran a story summarizing both the report and the official presentation ceremony. The article was written by a general reporter who also covers cultural reviews and home news. The journalist chose

16 According to the paper's former CEO Didier Brun, the circulation was 75,000 last year (Hope 2008). Seeing as Gulf News has an independently verified circulation of more than 118,000 (Smalley 2009), this would be far from enough to warrant the *Khaleej Times'* disputed claim.

to write about the general environmental degradation in the Arab region outlined by the report, praise for the UAE's environmental efforts and information about the formal setting in which the report was presented. The article ends with a direct, optimistic quote from a UAE government official.

The National

Profile

The National, launched in 2008, caused a stir in the UAE's media landscape. Though it may seem counter-intuitive from a Western perspective, the fact that *The National* is largely funded by the Abu Dhabi government is the key factor in allowing the paper to address issues that have never been reported on before. Under the patronage of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, the paper enjoys both the protection of the state and generous funding. It employs around 300 staff, mostly Western journalists and is read by more Western expatriates than the *Khaleej Times*. According to Pejman (2009:4), *The National* generates only around 30 per cent of its revenue from advertising, unlike most UAE papers who depend "on ads for up to 60 per cent of revenue, thus making them much more susceptible to pressure from advertisers". However, Davidson (11) comments that *The National* "has not been going as far as it should on certain topics".

In a staff memo just before the paper's launch, former editor-in-chief Martin Newland wrote that the mission of the paper was not to fight for press freedom: "We cannot adopt the stance of the exasperated Westerner. We go at the country's cultural pace. Do not pick small fights if there is a bigger one to be won down the road. If in doubt, ask." (quoted in Mills 2009).

The "About us" page of The National does not mention circulation or advertising, but focuses on the socio-political mission of the paper and is headed by a direct quote by founding editor-in-chief Martin Newland (ibid): "The role of *The National* is to reflect society, help that society evolve and, perhaps most importantly, promote the bedrock traditions and virtues that must be preserved even in times of change."

Coverage analysis

1.) World Environment Day

The National ran two stories about World Environment Day, both on 4 June 2009, a day before the event. One story is an AFP bulletin about a worldwide film release to mark the event, however without information about how and where UAE residents might be able to watch the film, indicating that this may be a verbatim reproduction of the original AFP bulletin, without additional research by *The National* staff. The other story is a magazine-style double spread in the paper's "life & arts" section. The pages show a macro-lens colour image of a seedling held between two mud-covered fingers. A short article is placed in the lower right-hand corner of the image, listing events held around the world to commemorate World Environment Day and calling on readers to get involved. The image is sourced from a picture agency, while the list of worldwide initiatives appears to be original research by *The National* staff.

AFED report on environmental degradation in Arab countries

The National published one story about the report, which appeared on the same day the report was released. The article was written by the paper's environmental correspondent, who chose to focus on the report's criticism of the UAE's environmental policies. The article highlights the wasteful nature of golf courses and cites the report's warning against "grand plans" that "ignore environmental concerns". The article cites the same optimistic quote used in the *Khaleej Times* story on the report, indicating that the journalist did not contact additional sources but may have relied on a speech held at the event and/or an official press release. At the end of the article, the URL where readers can access the full report is provided.

Case study conclusion

While this analysis should not be seen as representative of the papers' entire coverage, the reviewed material confirms expectations, clearly reflecting the news values and business models outlined above, as well as some of the points described in Sections 1 and 2.

The National's coverage of the two events mirrored Western journalistic practices as discussed in Section 1.1 of this paper by raising criticism of UAE environmental policies and focusing on the worldwide scope of WED, rather than its local celebrations, which were mostly sponsored by government and corporations.

The *Khaleej Times's* coverage adhered to many of the national and regional journalistic practices outlined in Section 1.2 of this paper by refraining from criticism of national government policies, relying on corporate sources and publishing protocol news. Referring back to the region-specific roles outlined by Pintak and Ginges (2008), *The National* appears to have adopted the role of the "Change Agent", while the *Khaleej Times* would fall into the "Loyalist" and/or "Guardian" category.

Both papers relied on verbatim use of ready-made content provided by third parties, which has become a common practice in daily newspapers across the world (Davies 2008). The *Khaleej Times* used corporate press releases under the byline "staff reporter" as the basis for three out of four articles analyzed, while *The National* used a bulletin provided by an international press agency, namely AFP, for one out of three stories.

Another interesting insight emerges from the comparison of the timing of these articles. In both cases, *The National* is quicker to publish its stories and does not mention information about the formal context of the events (e.g. hosts of official functions, attendance by government officials, corporate sponsors, etc).

Both papers also appear to have developed "passive news acquisition processes" as observed by Tanner in US environmental journalists (2004:360). Writing a story about an extensive scientific study such as the AFED report requires a certain level of environmental expertise. While *The National* had the story covered by its specialist correspondent, *The Khaleej Times* assigned it to a reporter that also routinely covers other issues. In this context, the operational set-up of the papers indicates that the environment beat is a higher priority and/or better funded at *The National* than at the *Khaleej Times*.

Conclusions

Environmental journalism in the UAE, when considered in its national and international context, is in the early stages of a fast development process that is aligned with changes in media legislation and freedom of the press. Ultimately, the rulers of the UAE aim these processes at improving the country's economic outlook and strengthening the legitimacy of their absolute monarchies (Davidson 2008 and 2009).

It is important to understand that press freedom and independent environmental journalism in the UAE are government projects, not the results of political activism. The country's demographic make-up means that there is little demand for the improvement of freedom of speech and environmental issues, since a vast majority of residents are transient and have little incentive to "stick their necks out" for civil rights or environmental protection.

But this should not detract from the fact that, compared to other developing countries and to its neighbors, the UAE has made substantial progress towards a freer media environment. The standards of environmental journalism in the UAE will continue to improve as long as the government continues to pursue the establishment of an independent fourth estate as an additional source of legitimacy.

The UAE government, split between progressive and conservative camps, is simultaneously the greatest force behind and against press freedom, creating a capricious, unpredictable environment for journalists. Knowing that there are red lines does not automatically entail an awareness of where *exactly* they lie. As pointed out by Tamsin Carlisle (15), much depends on "the flavour of the month".

It is doubtful whether journalism in the UAE will ever be free from "red lines". The controversial proposed new press laws prove that old habits die hard. Time and again, the government and parastatal corporations have displayed behavior that contradicts the much-repeated pledge that the UAE wants to nurture credible, independent, home-grown journalism.

But these are the early days of a long process, which took many generations in the West. It is therefore neither fair nor feasible to focus solely on red lines and commercial pressures when looking at the country's English-language press, which is just over thirty years old.

After all, as pointed out in Section 1, objectivity and balance are not always a virtue. In the case of environmental journalism, the tendency towards advocacy among news media in Arab countries could be turned into a strength, provided that the global scientific consensus on complex environmental issues such as climate change is respected. If the government stays true to its claims about press freedom, this will eventually lead to the rise of well-trained, local journalists and the slow death of the conservative "old guard" in government, corporations and newsrooms.

Managed wisely, press freedom in the UAE could take the shape of a new, local type of journalism, which builds on the strengths of the journalistic cultures of the Arab and the Western worlds and continues to test the boundaries of its golden enclosure.

Whatever direction the development of environmental journalism in the UAE takes, it will be the result of the interplay of interconnected social, demographic, economic and political processes. In order to fully understand these developments, further candid research into the country's evolving media culture will be needed.

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