Western Reporting in the Middle East: The Dilemma of Local Arab Reporters

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Ever since Mark Twain's sojourn to the Holy Land and Egypt in 1867, much has been said about Western journalists and writers who report on the Middle East—a great deal of which has been met with suspicion and sometimes resentment in the Arab world. Far less has been said, however, about an issue that is central and consequential to Middle East reporting: the role of local Arab reporters who work at mainstream Western media organizations and who cover the region alongside their Western colleagues. After a career of nearly thirty years at international news organizations in my home country, Iraq, and across the Middle East, I have lived and witnessed firsthand the contribution of local reporters in adding to the West's understanding of the region, despite the enormous constraints and challenges they face.

The participation of local reporters in international media operations dates back to the period following the First World War when most of the Levant was colonized by the two European victors, Britain and France. In this period, major Western media organizations set up permanent or long-term operations in the Middle East, ushering in, I argue, a new form of Orientalism in the post-colonialist world. In this article, I will look at the attitudes and practices of these organizations toward locally hired reporters, revealing a system that, at its most fundamental, favors Western narratives about the Middle East as described in the writings of Edward Said and Michael Foucault on the correlation between knowledge and power.

These early media operations had to resort to local journalists, mainly English- and French-speaking helpers, who were recruited for their expertise in needed specializations such as translation, guidance and connections with local, non-English-speaking officials and communities. With the passage of time these "helpers" increased in number and became a new breed of professional reporter. Many of them, having graduated from Western journalism schools, returned to the region bringing with them a liberal education and up-to-date journalistic and writing techniques. Today, there are hundreds of native journalists employed at various Western media organizations across the Middle East, covering one of the most complex stories in the world of news and politics and working under some of the most difficult circumstances in one of the most unfriendly and dangerous regions in the world.

Yet, after nearly 100 years of active participation, the contributions of these reporters has not received sufficient critical attention or academic research.[1] Indeed, no serious and sustained public discussion has been held by the stakeholders on the integral role of local journalists in supporting Western media coverage of the Middle East, their work conditions, or the unique challenges and risks they face. Although these men and women have been instrumental to the West's coverage of this important region, they have remained largely unrecognized, unappreciated, and their courage and sacrifices go unnoticed by news consumers. Arab local reporters can be called "forgotten heroes" in the ongoing battle for truth and accuracy in Middle East reporting, in a blatant manifestation of Orientalist power, denial and prejudice.

This article is an attempt to draw attention to some of the unfair practices and attitudes that pervade Western media organizations—especially print—operating in the Middle East today. I will focus here not on Western journalists of Arab descent (such as the late *New York Times* reporter Anthony Shadid), but on native Arab journalists who are hired locally by Western news organizations. The distinction between the two is an important one, for while the former operate with the benefits and protections of US and other Western citizenships, the latter are typically denied such advantages, which literally means they are stripped of any immunity or political cover in the authoritarian states in which they work.

Foreign media need native reporters because they rely heavily on local sources for news and information gathering. They hire them because of their contacts, their connections, mobility, knowledge of local languages and culture, and most important, for their ability to convey a sense of place and add perspective and background to a story. These native reporters posses the natural "meta skills" which make them best suited to provide insight, context and analysis, unfiltered by foreign perspectives, agendas or political strategies. While Western journalists can, and often do, possess the editorial, writing and language skills to shape the story, there is no replacement for the kind of granular knowledge that local Arab journalists bring to news production.

In this capacity, native Arab journalists are actually working as a cultural bridge to connect the West and Arab world, two worlds that have been traditionally separated by a geopolitical gap, historical and cultural distortion, misunderstanding and stereotypes. They are best suited to be the link that facilitates better understanding of their region by Western audiences.

[1] For a study on Palestinian journalists working for international media organizations, see Amahl Bishara, "Local hands, international news: Palestinian journalists and the international media," *Ethnography* 7, No. 1 (2006): 19-46.

Fortunately, this argument is increasingly becoming acceptable in media and academic circles worldwide. At a recent forum of foreign reporters working in China, participants urged the Chinese government to lift a ban on foreign media organizations hiring local reporters, arguing that these local reporters would "help promote better understanding of their nation." Under current Chinese law, permanent offices of foreign media organizations may hire Chinese citizens only to do "auxiliary work" and this "through organizations providing services to foreign nationals."[2]

While the practice of hiring local Arab journalists to support Western news production is standard, the problems faced by these journalists remain largely unrecognized, and are mounting along with the pressures of digital media and the 24-hour news cycle. For example, while hundreds of these journalists struggle to provide reporting under stressful conditions and in dangerous zones, sometimes even risking their lives in perilous situations, they themselves have little or no legal protection. The issue of the safety and well-being of local Arab journalists is rarely and inadequately addressed by the organizations that hire them. For example, many of these reporters are working as "stringers" with no contracts and are not provided any kind of insurance, even when they work in war zones.

Local journalists are generally not represented in international journalist unions or even in their own organization's guilds. The News Media Guild, which represents Associated Press workers (as well as UPI, and employees of the Spanish EFE News Service), for example, does not take complaints or support requests from non-American journalists working at AP's offices worldwide. This is in spite of the fact that its website states that it is "a labor union dedicated to quality journalism through fair working conditions for the men and women who provide the news."[3]

Based on personal experience, even the International Federation of Journalists fails to address grievances or complaints from local reporters working for international media. This is in contradiction to its self-definition as a confederation "created to deal with matters related to trade unionism and the practice of the profession of journalism" among whose "aims and objectives are …to protect and strengthen the rights and freedoms of journalists [and] to improve and defend the social and working conditions of all

[2] For China's laws regulating the activities of foreign media operating in China, see http://www.fccchina.org/reporters-guide/chinas-reporting-rules/. See also http://www.hrw.org/news/2009/03/18/china-new-restrictions-target-media and http://humberjournalism.com/convergence/2012/05/01/foreign-medias-challenges-in-china/.

[3] See http://www.newsmediaguild.org/.

journalists."[4] Furthermore, groups like IFJ tend to focus mainly on problems in state-owned media, largely ignoring problems occurring in private media organizations. Finally, national press syndicates in home countries who accept the membership of local reporters working for international agencies do not have adequate programs to assist them, and they rarely advocate on their behalf in work-related and other disputes.

Some international media groups, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters without Borders, maintain programs to help journalists through a combination of financial and non-financial assistance, but they too have no programs specifically dedicated to local journalists working with international media. The Institute for War & Peace Reporting, a U.K.-registered charity, runs skills building programs in several countries, including the Middle East, to help local reporters seeking careers with international media.

The absence of formal protection and advocacy support from international, regional and national unions comes at a high price and makes these journalists uniquely vulnerable. For example, it is customary for local reporters who work for international media to be hindered by authorities or local protocol from doing their work properly and safely. They are often intimidated and even threatened by authoritarian regimes for various reasons but mostly to pressure them to collaborate with the government security apparatus. The lack of legal and other kinds of protections makes them easy targets for police brutality, terrorists or radical groups, especially during episodes of street violence and conflicts.

Another dilemma these journalists face is the suspicion that they are working as spies, either for foreign countries or for their own governments. The notion that journalism is a cover for spying is as old as the profession itself and the two fields "have historically played off each other," as noted by Murray Seeger, the late veteran Los Angeles Times foreign correspondent who was based in Moscow in the 1970s.[5] This suspicion is one of the most persistent conspiracy theories in the Arab world, found not only in popular culture but among the political elite and even academic circles. During a discussion of a dissertation for a PhD degree on American reporters in the Middle East at Ain Shams University in Cairo on November 27, 2007, the head of the academic panel, Mustafa El-Fiqi, then chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in Egypt's Parliament, argued

[4] See Section II and Section III of IFJ's Constitution: http://www.google.com.eg/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CFgQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ifj.org%2Fassets%2Fdocs%2F093%2F090%2Fc401d5d-63fd75a.doc&ei=8kkaULGPJpTB0gWXioDQBw&usg=AFQjCNGpzvuu1Nctuu5Z6bPg2kwDVMLh5Q&sig2=jqIb3MlhVwYBJDp8qQKgtg.

[5] Murray Seeger, "Spies and Journalists: Taking a Look at Their Intersections," Nieman Reports, Fall 2009, http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=101913.

that the thesis should have made it clear that some Western reporters are working as spies. "They do something at day time and something else at nights," he told a large audience, some of them foreign reporters. The fact that there is a long history of American, British and Soviet journalists working for intelligence agencies naturally reinforces such suspicions.

Although there have been no "known" cases of native Arab journalists employed by international media who have been officially charged for intelligence work, the suspicion and mistrust associated with their employment haunts these journalists throughout their careers, sometimes leaving psychic wounds. These suspicions stem from the fact that working with foreign companies often requires holding a security clearance which makes them exploitable by the home country's secret services or information ministries. Among the consequences of these suspicions is that journalists are particularly vulnerable during wars and in conflict zones where the roles of reporting and spying are most likely to be blurred. Another serious consequence is that local reporters live under constant surveillance by their own countries' intelligence and security services, and are sometimes even spied upon by foreign clandestine agencies. They are followed, their phones are tapped, their emails are intercepted and their houses and work places are wired. Attempts to recruit them or enlist their cooperation are not unusual. Ironically, native journalists working for international media are sometimes seen by their employers as intelligence agents for their own countries' security and intelligence apparatus or government officials.

Another kind of prejudice faced by native journalists is that officials usually prefer to talk to foreign reporters rather than local reporters working for the same media outlet, especially when there is major breaking news. They are often treated by local newsmakers and news sources as second-class reporters or mere apprentices working under the direction of their foreign bosses. This behavior can be attributed to the inferiority complex known as the "foreigner complex," or simply to the lure of making friends with the foreign media. While it is demoralizing to local journalists it is also humiliating for the local officials who, upon publication of articles, often complain of misrepresentation or misquoting due to language or other differences.

Yet another problem that local Arab journalists face comes largely from within their own newsrooms where Western colleagues often doubt their professional ability to fact-check, make good editorial judgments and to be independent, fair and balanced. This lack of trust can lead to frustrating, phobia-like caution and nagging on the part of the Western

reporters or editors, which in turn, poisons the work environment and creates unnecessary contention.[6]

One of the worst effects on newsroom operations of this excessive skepticism is that it reduces the ability of local journalists to compete and work independently. Some local journalists even feel inhibited from pursuing their own beats in this atmosphere of mistrust. All this amounts to the suppression of local reporters, preventing them from providing critical alternative views and diverse voices to the Western audience. This, subsequently, keeps Middle East reporting from being a pluralistic system in which Arab journalists can act as a bridge to the West.

The contentious atmosphere in the newsroom is also exacerbated by the fact that Western news media often assign to Middle East bureaus editorial staff who lack basic skills in local languages and understanding of local culture, not to mention the intrigues and complexities of national and regional politics. Major dilemmas can arise if self-assured editors with minimal knowledge fail to interact with their local colleagues in a collaborative fashion and choose instead to dictate from a position of power and isolation. Middle East newsrooms in particular—where staff are increasingly diverse and bring a variety of cultural and political backgrounds to work—can ill afford to prioritize seniority over collaboration and information sharing because of the sensitivity of the issues and a dire need for balance. Failure to truly and actively involve locally hired reporters in editorial processes causes resentment and suspicion of hidden agendas.

People working in newsrooms in the era of the 24-hour news cycle know that one of the daily challenges for journalists is generating new story ideas. And while it is true that the Middle East is one of the most eventful and active regions for news, it is still the case that good story ideas remain a precious commodity. This leads to another problem found in Middle East reporting—the stealing of ideas from native reporters, either for the purpose of writing a full story or to give depth and detail to someone else's story.

Stealing ideas is common in workplaces worldwide and generally involves those who are in a position of authority exploiting the ideas of others. In some Western media offices in the Middle East, the practice takes the form of a supposedly collegial "picking the brains" of native reporters, often done so in a way that makes them feel that this exchange of ideas is a compliment. Indeed, some of these organizations hire natives simply because

[6] Interestingly, the rigid system of multiple checking of native reporters' work became obsolete during the Middle East uprisings of 2011 and 2012 when newsrooms at international media organizations rushed to publish unverified information coming from anonymous citizens via phones and Internet connections. Suddenly, editors under pressure to pursue news leads had new faith in the "remote" and unidentified sourcing and stopped nagging native reporters about their fact-checking.

they need them as "ideas" people—on hand to provide their bosses and foreign colleagues with story ideas. This is often done without even informing the local hires in advance that they were hired specifically for that purpose. Needless to say, this kind of bizarre brainstorming relationship does not promote creative thinking, and it narrows and subordinates the professional experience of native journalists.

Instead of minimizing these practices through clear internal policies, Western editors and correspondents institutionalize them under seemingly benign pretexts. For example, local reporters are encouraged to share ideas with their Western colleagues under the pretext that they are "working collaboratively" and as a team. Under the pretext of market demand for "Western" names on a story, local reporters are made to share bylines with their Western colleagues, a practice that effectively turns them into ghost writers.[7] The message implicit in these newsroom behaviors is that while local journalists may have ideas, they cannot objectively analyze them, let alone execute them in printable stories, and therefore, it is better to give these ideas to people who can.

Recruiting and career development are other areas in which local reporters working with foreign media are at a disadvantage. There are no established criteria, procedures or clear policies for the selection, recruitment and training of native journalists. It is a process that is largely based on the personal judgments and needs of those doing the hiring. Locals are frequently hired without proper contracts and without compliance with relevant employment requirements such as health and risk insurance, or with anti-discrimination laws, especially with regard to salary levels and promotions.

At times of conflict and war, the rush to recruit and the lack of a system for proper background checking has led organizations to hire people who lack basic qualifications. In some cases, media organizations hire non-professional or untrained persons, such office boys or drivers, to work as reporters or photographers because they are deemed to be well connected or simply because they perform errands for office managers. It is not unusual for these minimally skilled personnel to be rewarded with special treatment such as higher salaries or benefits typically reserved for news reporters for the simple reason that they make themselves indispensable to their foreign bosses either by providing information or services. For qualified native journalists to watch as mere assistants or informers are treated like skilled professionals is demoralizing and further adds to tensions.

[7] One might compare the operations of Western media in Middle East to Hollywood, whereby an Arab reporter can only hope to get the "role" of a character like Khaled El Nabawy in Ridley Scott's "Kingdom of Heaven" or Amr Waked in Lasse Hallström's "Salmon Fishing in the Yemen." They cannot even dream of being Omar Sherif in "Lawrence of Arabia."

Among bad recruitment practices, mostly by international news agencies, is hiring personnel who work for state-owned media or high government offices. They resort to this practice for different reasons—to improve access to news and information, to facilitate the issuing of visas and work permits, and even as a means to avoid government pressure. Yet the practice has always been controversial and in many cases ends up in embarrassing situations. One recent case is that of a Reuters correspondent in Yemen, Mohamed Sudam, who was simultaneously employed by the government as a personal translator to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Reuters only stopped Sudam from filing reports in the months after the 2011 uprising and following protesters' outrage at Sudam's dual role. Reuters said Sudam would continue to provide reports from elsewhere in the Middle East.

In spite of the work conditions outlined above, it is generally thought that local reporters who win positions at foreign media organizations are very lucky in their careers. They are widely envied for the prestige, the good salaries and for being on the front lines of history unfolding. I hope that with this article I have exposed a more complex reality behind these superficial perceptions, as well as the routine prejudices and restrictions that inhibit the work experience of local journalists. And while I have focused on the day-to-day ways native journalists at foreign media are denied opportunities to work and develop professionally, it is important to emphasize the wider context which enables and permits these practices, namely persistent structures of post-colonial power relations and subordination that permeate Western media operations in the Middle East. These are deep rooted and multi-faceted problems with cultural, psychological and political ramifications and for which there are no easy or ready-made solutions. However, awareness and public discussion are important first steps.

Finally, with online journalism growing and economic conditions worsening, conventional international media business models are collapsing. And as mainstream Western media increasingly rely on digital news portals and social networking for news sources, the function and role of local reporters is drastically changing, partially for the better. The opportunities today for native reporters and writers to make their independent voices heard on a global platform have never been greater. There are hundreds of news websites that originate from the Middle East, many of them in foreign languages, and it is my hope that local reporters and writers take advantage of them in order to connect to other journalists and to create a new kind of Middle East news network.

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