

**Two years in Abu Dhabi:
Adventures teaching journalism in the UAE during the Arab Spring**

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In the fall of 2010, before the uprisings swept across the region that winter, the topic of freedom of speech was broached in my classroom at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates.

I had just started my position in Abu Dhabi as an assistant professor with the College of Communication and Media Sciences, teaching journalism mainly to female Emirati citizens in the oil-rich nation.

Launched in 1998 to provide college education for the female population, Zayed University was founded on U.S. standards of education. Many of the faculty are from the United States, and the institution received U.S. accreditation from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in 2008.

I was teaching “media and culture,” the typical survey course that offers an overview of the different types of media as well as a primer on public relations, advertising, and media law and ethics. The students read the same textbook, *Mass Media in a Changing World* (by George Rodman) as their counterparts on U.S. campuses.

Chapter 14 is titled “Media Law: Understanding Freedom of Expression.”

Some of the students were eager to discuss this subject. Many, to be sure, couldn’t have cared less. Since every student in the UAE is guaranteed a college education, ZU suffers from a high proportion of students who are attending but not really interested in an education.

I explained that in the United States and many other countries a premium was placed on the ability to engage in critical political speech. I noted that anyone could stand on a street corner in America and say that President Barack Obama was a terrible president who made stupid decisions.

One of my students challenged me.

“Maybe for one day, but if you kept coming to that place and saying those things, surely they’d arrest you,” she said.

Interestingly, another student jumped in and answered for me.

“Of course they wouldn’t,” she said. “That’s the point of freedom of speech.”

I confirmed that the student was correct and offered a few more examples in which freedom of political expression is protected in the United States. Many of the students appeared stunned—they’d never been exposed to this concept before.

I, of course, was worried about having classroom discussions like this. The UAE is an authoritarian country ruled by unelected sheiks. While progressive in many respects, the country doesn’t have a culture of public discussion and features a marginalized parliament limited to an advisory role. Political parties are officially banned and the government tightly controls its public and private media outlets, earning the country dismal press freedom rankings.¹

However, I saw many encouraging signs that frank discussions about freedom of expression and journalism in the UAE would be—if not welcomed—at least tolerated.

When interviewing for the job, I noted that the First Amendment lectures from my U.S. communication law class wouldn’t be useful in the UAE. However, the chair of the department corrected me and said that the department was seeking accreditation that required international approaches to media law to be taught.

Indeed, the CCMS department at Zayed University is seeking accreditation from the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC). The council insists that students at accredited institutions receive “instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances.”²

The directive to attain ACEJMC accreditation came directly from Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, a son of the founder of the country, minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, and president of the university.³

Officially the university appeared to welcome a reasonably free classroom environment where ideas could be taught openly. However, many of my colleagues from around the university hinted that I should self-censor in the classroom.

“Be careful” was a common phrase among the faculty. They told stories of professors who had been suddenly terminated after they crossed some “red line” in the classroom. Apparently, I was told, some well-connected students had the power to report professors and have them fired.

A common joke among faculty when discussing the boundary of one of these “red lines” would be to end the discussion with a reference to the professor’s imminent departure.

“Would you like a window or an aisle seat?”

The joke was grounded in an element of truth.

I could find only one documented case where a professor had been dispatched quickly. It seemed extreme. A professor had been abruptly fired from ZU in 2006 after she showed a picture of the infamous Danish Mohammed cartoon in class.⁴ The other somewhat apocryphal stories I heard involved professors disparaging the ruling sheikh or advocating student protests.

The exact boundaries of what I could or couldn’t teach were nebulous. I was never told officially to avoid any subject.

But when a colleague handed me the media law books owned by a former professor, the faculty member said: “Of course, you can’t teach everything that’s in there.” Another professor told me that it was best to let the students research the restrictive media laws of the UAE on their own rather than addressing them in a lecture.

I decided to ignore this off-the-cuff guidance since no one had directly ordered me to teach in such a way. My syllabuses were approved by my administrators and included topic headings such as “comparison of UAE and international legal systems.”

I decided to proceed with caution but to teach my classes with a little more restraint than I would in the United States. The only areas in which I would really tread more carefully would be any mention of Islam and any discussion of sexuality with the conservative female audience. For instance, I ignored obscenity and indecency in my media law class. This approach complied with the faculty manual that compared teaching at ZU with the “situation facing faith-based institutions in the United States” where local customs and sensibilities may need to be respected more than at a public university.⁵

Specifically, I did address the differences between the approaches of the UAE and other countries toward regulating the media. I noted that the UAE’s media law contained layers of prohibitions (e.g., don’t publish material that could “damage the national economy”) that could lead journalists to self-censor. I also told my classes that unlike many other countries, the UAE makes defamation a criminal offense, so that charges of libel are automatically a police matter.

My first semester went quite smoothly. The situation became far more complicated when the Arab Spring erupted in early 2011.

In April 2011, the UAE government arrested five online activists who were pushing for a move toward democracy in the country. They were charged with “insulting the president” for their speech in an online forum that had been blocked by the government. I had been active in the then-vibrant UAE Twitter community and had written a few columns for a Mideast version of the Huffington Post.

After discussing the potential implications with my wife, I decided to address the arrests academically from a news-media angle. I wrote a column that pointed out how the different media outlets in the UAE reported on the arrests. Some had covered them fully while others ignored the arrests until the government issued an official statement.⁶ My column circulated widely via social media, and I appeared to suffer no consequences.

That fall, I presented research at a conference in Beirut in which an Arab colleague and I examined the difference in coverage of English and Arabic papers in the UAE.⁷ In addition, I began writing for the Dubai newspaper *Gulf News* on issues related to media regulation, social media, and the Arab Spring. I followed the example of a handful of other local university professors who offered constructive observations in the local press from an academic perspective.

I knew I was operating close to the edge of acceptable boundaries. But I felt what I taught in the classroom and said publicly fit within acceptable discourse and the duty of a communications academic—certainly an academic at an institution applying for ACEJMC accreditation.

At the same time, the issue of exactly what we were teaching in classes at ZU was becoming more of a concern as the first pre-accreditation visit approached in May 2012. The faculty member leading the accreditation effort asked pointedly whether students were truly being taught about the “range of systems of freedom of expression around the world” including the “right to dissent.” The faculty response was muted.

When I talked about what I taught in my classes, some of the longer-tenured faculty expressed reluctance to adopt such an approach. They pointed to past experiences with faculty who had been quickly and quietly dismissed for over-stepping boundaries considered acceptable.

In the end, it looks like they were right.

After two years on the job and having just received an exemplary [performance review](#), I was terminated in the summer of 2012. My wife had been fired from her government job six weeks earlier. I'm told the delay between our terminations resulted from Sheikh Nahyan's attempt to appeal the order to have me fired.

The university provost delivered the news in a phone call over the summer. He said that the orders had come from "outside the university." It appears that my wife was targeted as well so that neither of us would have a work visa, forcing us to completely leave the country.

My departure appears to have been part of a wider movement in the wake of the Arab Spring. Starting in May 2011, the UAE security apparatus reacted with an alarming crackdown on anything resembling dissent. In addition to arresting the five activists, the government dissolved two professional organizations that had backed calls for reform.⁸ They eventually arrested 94 people (mostly Emiratis) over the course of 2012 and accused them of sedition.⁹ The arrests were reported in international news outlets but ignored locally unless the state news agency issued a statement. Most observers said the detentions stemmed from dissenting comments made on Twitter. In November 2012, the UAE updated its cybercrime law to specifically prohibit electronic speech (e.g., on Twitter or Facebook) critical of the ruling family or damaging to the prestige of the country.¹⁰ The government also expelled the policy center RAND Corp., the Abu Dhabi Gallup center and two civil society organizations.¹¹

To the shock of all my colleagues, another professor in my department was dismissed a few weeks before me. No one could understand why this longtime, respected faculty member was mysteriously forced to resign. Suspected reasons included his Tunisian heritage and a project that involved teaching journalism skills in local high schools.

Hiring communications faculty was also becoming far more difficult. By spring 2012, ZU administrators accepted that the security forces would not approve any applicants with ties to Arab Spring countries.¹² The prohibition made it exceptionally hard for a communications department in an Arab country to hire the best faculty.

In the middle of all this, the students—at least some of them—were eager for an education that avoided self-censorship and addressed these "sensitive subjects." Many students were naturally curious about the open rebellion of their Arab brethren seen daily on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. Classroom conversations would sometimes turn toward issues surrounding the lack of free speech in the UAE or the assumed ubiquitous presence of the UAE security forces. (Many students and some faculty seemed convinced that

agents of the security forces could eavesdrop on conversations through any Blackberry phone.)

Other instructors would tell me that they'd simply respond by saying they didn't feel comfortable delving into certain topics. However, I often would oblige requests to steer into these sensitive areas.

In my last media writing class in the spring of 2012, I pulled up a New York Times article about the recent arrests of Islamists in the UAE. I had been interviewed for the article and had offered a carefully worded quote: "Security can trump free speech in the U.A.E. This is a huge debate everywhere. What is the appropriate balance between individualism and society?"¹³

We read the article together and discussed why the local media wasn't covering the arrests. They understood that the local press practiced self-censorship and that many people turned to social media and the Internet to get the news not covered by UAE media outlets.

After class, one of my students told me that her uncle was a former judge who had been mysteriously detained. She couldn't thank me enough for speaking about it in class. My heart broke for her and her family.

"It's like he's been kidnapped," she told me. "Nobody knows where he is."

Another student told me she discussed my class with her father who said that I was definitely walking a fine line but that I should be lauded for raising such subjects.

My favorite class was advanced journalism. Many of the students in the small class wanted to go into journalism to try to improve it. They knew that most journalists in the UAE were expatriates who would never push any boundaries with their coverage. We even read and discussed Kovach and Rosenthal's *Elements of Journalism*. The book stressed the principles of good journalism that include monitoring the powerful, providing a voice for the voiceless, and being loyal to citizens.¹⁴ Upon reflection, it's easy to understand why good journalism instruction could be perceived as subversive.

Our classroom discussion provided a frank assessment of the failures of journalism in the United Arab Emirates. In perhaps my most memorable classroom moment, a student expressed her frustration with the status quo in the UAE regarding free speech.

"Maybe, we should protest," she suggested. "I mean, what are they going to do, arrest us?"

Another student answered: "Yes, they would." Everyone laughed.

I quickly moved the conversation onto another topic.

Three members of the class are now working at *The National* newspaper in Abu Dhabi. Filled with Western journalists, *The National* launched in 2007 aiming to bring a different type of journalism to the Middle East.¹⁵ While most observers see *The National* as hewing to the same “red lines” in coverage as the local press (particularly regarding actions of the security forces), the newspaper does push boundaries with coverage of certain social topics such as gender discrimination and treatment of foreign workers. One of my former students is even covering the sedition trial of the 94 detainees. Her work is important since the international media and other observers have been barred from the trial.

Perhaps my proudest accomplishment at ZU was the formation of a chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists in Abu Dhabi. The student club launched in fall 2011 and provided an opportunity for students with an interest in journalism to gather. About 20 students regularly participated in meetings.

In May 2012, a fantastic colleague and I guided a celebration of World Press Freedom Day on the Abu Dhabi campus. The event worried some in the administration, but we pushed ahead since the student leaders of the SPJ were the ones leading the event. They even secured three Emirati speakers (including a member of the national parliament) to address students and discuss the press freedom situation in the UAE.

The student in charge of ordering the banner apparently saw an opportunity to release some of her pent-up freedom to express herself. When we walked into the venue the day before the event, we were shocked to see an enormous, 50-foot-wide banner hanging from the second floor. It was hard to miss.

The site visit from an ACEJMC official coincided with our World Press Freedom Day celebrations. He was impressed with the event and the apparent level of academic freedom the faculty enjoyed. Two months later, I was no longer a member of the faculty. I contacted ACEJMC after my dismissal and was told that Zayed University had no further official visits scheduled.

I certainly enjoyed my experience in the United Arab Emirates. I made wonderful friends, experienced a welcoming culture, established a useful research niche, and hopefully made a positive impact on some of my students.

I'm still not sure what led to my dismissal. The security forces may have orchestrated the departure or it could have been a well-connected student upset with my grading. Perhaps it was a mixture of both. Expats in the UAE are well versed in stories about someone who said that one wrong thing to the wrong person and suddenly found his or her visa revoked. In the end, I'll never know the exact reason.

My experience at ZU brings up some interesting issues—most notably, the tension between Arab governments eager to educate their citizens about international standards and the real-world application of that education. Government leaders in the UAE and other Gulf countries speak about creating an “information economy” and teaching critical thinking skills as part of an education reform package.¹⁶ But, these goals clash with reality when professors who give students information and teach critical thinking are subject to enigmatic dismissals.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the UAE is moving away from international norms related to education and press freedom—along with most of the Gulf states and much of the Arab world. It's hard to find an Arab country that hasn't arrested one or more of its citizens for something he or she tweeted, or that hasn't penalized a professor for something he or she taught.

One message of the Arab Spring appears to be clear—residents are unhappy with the censorship status quo and eager to receive information from unbridled channels. New media platforms have made the shift toward more information and more free speech inevitable. However, few Arab governments appear to be responding to that message with acceptance. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan have all taken steps to curb public speech and press freedom rather than expanding protections.

Until the Arab powers embrace this shift in communication and thinking, the goals of an educated citizenry of critical thinkers ready to embrace a “knowledge economy” will likely remain out of reach.

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¹ *Freedom of the Press: United Arab Emirates* (Washington, D.C: Freedom House, 2011), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/united-arab-emirates>.

² “ACEJMC Values,” *The Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication*, accessed April 29, 2013, <http://cronkite.asu.edu/node/2568>.

³ Sheikh Nahyan was removed from his position as both head of the university and minister of higher education in early 2013. His replacement had previously overseen the Ministry of Public Works. There was no speculation in the local press about the reasons for his departure but some have suggested that he may have resisted the encroachment of security forces into education too much. For more details, see reports in www.al-fanar.org, a new publication that covers Arab universities.

⁴ Katherine Zoepf, “U.S. Professor Is Fired Over Cartoons by University in United Arab Emirates,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 24, 2006, sec. Global, <http://chronicle.com/article/US-Professor-Is-Fired-Ove/34275/>.

⁵ “Zayed University Faculty Handbook 2009-2010” (Zayed University, 2009), 13, http://www.zu.ac.ae/main/files/contents/edu/docs/accr/faculty_handbook.pdf.

⁶ Matt Duffy, “Newspapers Inconsistent over Activist Arrests,” *Mideastposts.com*, April 12, 2011, <http://mideastposts.com/2011/04/12/uae-press-inconsistent-over-handling-of-blogger-arrests/>.

⁷ The research will be published in the fall 2013 issue of the *Journal of Middle East Media*.

⁸ The National Staff, “Ministry Dissolves Teachers’ Association Board,” *The National*, May 3, 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/ministry-dissolves-teachers-association-board>.

⁹ Ayesha Al Khoori and Haneen Dajani, “Trial Begins for 94 Accused of Sedition in UAE,” March 5, 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/politics/trial-begins-for-94-accused-of-sedition-in-uae>.

¹⁰ “UAE President Issues Decree on Combating Cyber Crimes,” accessed March 20, 2013, <http://gulfnnews.com/news/gulf/uae/government/uae-president-issues-decree-on-combating-cyber-crimes-1.1103978>.

¹¹ Raissa Kasolowsky, “UAE Shuts down Office of U.S. Research Institute RAND,” *Reuters*, December 20, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/20/us-emirates-rand-idUSBRE8BJ0K320121220>.

¹² The security forces were involved in other academic affairs. For instance, professors had to fill out a security clearance form before bringing a guest to speak to a class.

¹³ Angela Shah, “Emirates Keeps Tight Rein on Islamist Activists,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/22/world/middleeast/22iht-m22-uae-islamists.html>.

¹⁴ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and The Public Should Expect* (Three Rivers Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Editor, “The National, the UAE’s New Quality English Newspaper, Launches in Abu Dhabi,” *Media Middle East*, April 20, 2008, http://mediame.com/news/announcement/the_national_the_uaes_new_quality_english_newspaper_launches_in_abu_dhabi.

¹⁶ “His Excellency Sheikh Nahayan Opens ‘UAE Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum 2013’,” *AME Info*, April 30, 2013, <http://www.ameinfo.com/excellency-sheikh-nahayan-uae-innovation-entrepreneurship-339601>.