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2011

Conference report: The Role of Media in Arab Societies, June 14, 2011, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi

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Recommended Citation

Kadragic, Alma, Conference report: The Role of Media in Arab Societies, June 14, 2011, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, *Middle East Media Educator*, 1(1), 2011, 101-101.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/meme/vol1/iss1/17>

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Abstract

What's going on today in the Arab world is an evolution of media to match the revolutions in some countries and stirrings of civic society in others. That became very clear at the recent conference The Role of Media in Arab Societies held at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi and co sponsored by the German think tank Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

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What's going on today in the Arab world is an evolution of media to match the revolutions in some countries and stirrings of civic society in others. That became very clear at the recent conference The Role of Media in Arab Societies held at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi and co sponsored by the German think tank Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Most speakers talked about social media, discussed its role in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, and agreed that Facebook or Twitter alone cannot bring about a change of government. However, given the huge numbers of young people in these countries and the Arab world as a whole, it's hard to imagine political and social change happening today without social media playing a big part.

What's interesting is that speakers seemed to agree on the lesser role played by traditional media, both print and broadcast. Although Al Jazeera Arabic's extensive coverage helped focus attention on first Tunisia and then Egypt, it has been much less involved in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and is facing the same problems of coverage as western media in countries such as Syria where the government doesn't allow foreign media to enter the country or sharply restricts them as does Libya.

Almost everything we see from Syria today is coming from civilians, people using mobile phone cameras and uploading photos and video to YouTube and similar sites. Information too is coming from reports on social media, and that is the problem for traditional western journalism operating according to ethical standards and free of government control.

How to evaluate information from anonymous sources or sources whose identity is masked: That's the task today for BBC, CNN, and other international media organizations caught between their goal to report news and the difficulty of determining if the information and images from outside and sometimes unknown sources can be credible.

One way is not to use anything coming from people who don't work for the media organization, but that's impossible for those that pride themselves on being first or at least very fast with the key news events. Weekly news magazines and documentary TV programs don't have this problem - they don't need to be first with breaking news; they specialize in long form news analysis.

Providers of daily news know their key competition is online, so they provide news alerts on email which get picked up on Twitter and spread around the world long before the broadcast or print deadline. If something turns out to be wrong, the correction is made on Twitter and in the alerts.

I often find news from Libya or Syria or anywhere that anything unexpected happens on Twitter before it shows up as an alert from the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, or ABC News, all of which send me reports of breaking news. To keep up with the Arab Spring or news anywhere in the world, I have to be on Twitter, and you should too. [Follow me @almakad]