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Commentary

Media in the UAE: The Abu Dhabi powerhouse



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On April 17, 2008 the first issue of *The National* was published in Abu Dhabi, which was possibly the last startup of a major daily newspaper in the world. Top journalists were recruited from the UK, US and Canada. Founding editor-in-chief Martin Newland had previously edited the UK's *Daily Telegraph* and was deputy editor for the startup of Canada's *National Post*. Hassan Fattah, former Middle East correspondent for the *New York Times*, became deputy editor under Newland and replaced him 14 months after the launch. High salaries were paid to attract stars, including GBP320,000 (about USD512,000) annually to Newland, discovered when salaries were leaked en masse to an internet site. A state of the art convergence newsroom was created complete with news management software and a wheel and spoke layout for editors and sections. From the beginning the paper's website included video and additional digital content.

Since then, nothing else of similar size and ambition has appeared in the region or anywhere else. *The National (TN)*, owned by the government, has had an impact on the English language press in the United Arab Emirates especially *Gulf News*, the privately-owned paper that is biggest by circulation and number of pages, founded in 1978 when the UAE was just seven years old.

However, contrary to expectations that the quality of coverage and writing style set at the launch would be maintained and enhanced, two years later that is not the case at *TN*. The departure of a veteran newsman who was the writing guru has been felt. *TN* has not become the paper of record in the UAE, and it is not possible to learn the most important domestic news and international news in a single publication. At minimum one must read *TN* and *Gulf News (GN)* to get a reasonable sense of what is going on in the UAE.

As a result of the competition, *GN* has upgraded its design, layout, photos, and coverage. It used to rely heavily on releases from Emirates News Agency (WAM), the government's news service, and feature photos of the ruler of Dubai and other top sheikhs on the front page almost daily. When *TN* began using photos that told stories and raised the quality of its photos, *GN* followed suit.

Arab media company leads expansion of UAE media

The launch of *TN* represented a major step forward by the Abu Dhabi Media Company, a media conglomerate founded by the Abu Dhabi government in 2007 to take over the former Emirates Media's radio and TV properties. ADMC owns the *Al Ittihad* Arabic language daily newspaper, two Arabic magazines, six TV channels and five radio stations.

Because the Abu Dhabi government owns ADMC, not much background information is available to the public. However, according to its website (www.admedia.ae), ADMC now has some 2100 employees in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Cairo, and Washington DC. Figures on the geographical distribution of employees and their jobs aren't available. Some experienced reporters and editors – all expatriates – who were hired earlier by ADMC to work for *TN* have left. The paper now seems to rely more on freelancers and thus has abandoned some coverage areas.

While *TN* has reporters and photographers based in Dubai – about 90 minutes north of the capital – it does not seem to be on top of some important stories from there. A recent story in *GN* revealed that driving licenses and vehicle registrations could be obtained at the Roads and Transports Authority in Dubai. Up to now, drivers can only get licenses and registrations in the emirate where they live. This is a national story that wasn't covered by *TN* perhaps because the Dubai office does not have the contacts or the staffing.

ADMC is part of Abu Dhabi emirate's plans to become the center for production of Arabic language content, displacing Beirut and Cairo, which played that role in the past. Another part is twofour54, set up in 2008 as a free zone to compete with Dubai's Media City, which has been operating since 2001. The name reminds the world of Abu Dhabi's map coordinates.

Locally and regionally, advertisements guarantee that the message is getting out: "twofour54 is building the Arab world's media industry one idea, one person, and one business at a time right here in Abu Dhabi." By the end of 2010, twofour54 will be home to 100 media partners led by heavyweights CNN, BBC, *Financial Times*, and Thomson Reuters.

ADMC also launched Imagination Abu Dhabi in September 2008 to develop, finance, and create feature films and digital content for Arabic language and international audiences. The Digital Group also operates *Getmo Arabia* – a music and movie download site; *goalarabia.com* – a fantasy soccer site; and *super.ae* – a sports site in Arabic.

In 2009 ADMC partnered with Universal Music Group and Sony Music in VEVO, an online music platform and Gazillion Entertainment, the first regional joint venture in massively multiplayer online games (MMOG). ADMC also owns LIVE, which has a fleet of HD broadcast vans and United Printing Press where its publications are produced.

Beyond Abu Dhabi, the Middle East has many media companies including 450 television stations. However, only a few television companies are big enough and produce enough quality content to make money. Most are government controlled or what has been called "vanity" operations owned by rich media wannabes. The credible ones are Arab Media Corporation (AMC) from Amman, Jordan; Lebanese

Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) from Beirut, Lebanon; Middle East Broadcasting Corp (MBC) which broadcasts *Al-Arabiya* news from Dubai and Rotana Media, both from Saudi Arabia; *Al Jazeera* from Qatar.

English language media by and for the expatriates

The UAE is unusual in that at most only 20 percent of its residents are citizens. The majority are non-Arab expatriates, with more than 50 percent of the total population coming from South Asia - India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Iranians and Arabs from other countries make up the second largest group. Much smaller numbers are from North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. English language newspapers are important because Arabic isn't the language of the majority of UAE residents. In addition to *GN* and *TN*, broadsheets *Khaleej Times* and *Gulf Today* are widely read as is the free tabloid *7 Days*.

In general, in the UAE as in most developing countries with a high literacy rate, newspapers are read avidly and attract a good deal of advertising. While *TN* has no special advertisement section, no classifieds, and only a few full or quarter page advertisement in each issue, *GN* is an advertiser's bonanza with at least three all advertisement sections daily, one or more broadsheet size like the paper, the rest tabloid size. For someone who isn't looking to buy or rent a home, buy or sell a car, or find a job or an employee, these advertisement sections are throwaways - and an environmental nightmare - but revenues for *GN* are substantial.

Press developing but not yet free

English language papers such as *TN*, *GN* and *Khaleej Times* are leading the way toward fair and independent journalism, but a free press has not arrived yet. On the 2009 press freedom ranking by Reporters Without Borders, the UAE is number 86, behind Kuwait at 60, Lebanon 61, and ahead of Oman 106 and Saudi Arabia 163.

Although papers are not censored prior to publication, everyone working from the editor-in-chief on down has a clear idea of what stories cannot be printed. There is scarce investigative journalism pointed at the government, which not only governs but also owns many of the leading companies of the region, which leaves them out as well from media scrutiny.

In the five years that I have been living in the UAE, reading *GN* every day and since *TN*'s establishment reading both papers daily, I have witnessed changes. A court case involving alleged criminal violence by a member of the Abu Dhabi Al Nahyan ruling family was made public and reported by *TN*. Around the same time, an Associated Press report about an allegation of serious misbehavior by another member of the same royal family in a European capital surfaced. That story never appeared in the UAE although newspapers have access to AP. The difference is that the first story was released by the ruling family; the second was not.

Changes are evident in the coverage of health problems and civil rights issues. Breast cancer and HIV are discussed; walks and other activities to raise money to fight these and other diseases are reported. We learn now in the papers about altercations or crimes in labor camps. Journalists have been given tours of new labor camps

supposedly better than the ones that were criticized by international NGOs for human rights violations. These are improvements, but we are a long way from journalists looking into financial malfeasance in government-owned companies. An investigation into government at emirate or federal level is inconceivable. There are several reasons for this.

Journalists can be subjected to various kinds of harassment, and since almost all journalists are expatriates – from English speaking countries for the English language press or from Arab countries for Arabic language press – that means deportation after whatever punishment is meted out by a court. Since most expatriates are in the UAE for economic reasons, the threat of being deported added to the punishment guarantees self-censorship and docile journalism.

Legal regime evolving

The press in the UAE is still governed by the severe 1980 Press and Publications Law, which is publicly known to be out of date. The government presented a new draft media law in 2008 that was discussed in the Federal National Council and is awaiting the signature of President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan. However, the draft law has been criticised by journalists in the country and outside. Human Rights Watch has said "it unduly restricts free expression and will unduly interfere with the media's ability to report on sensitive subjects".

A problem in the past year has been the coverage of the financial crisis in Dubai. The draft law contains a section that mentions "misleading" stories that "harm the national economy." This is the kind of reminder that, although unspecified, clearly intimidates journalists and contributes to self-censorship.

The media laws – existing and potential – are overseen by the National Media Council, which also runs the WAM. One result of that is the publishing of WAM reports verbatim by many newspapers; such reports aren't questioned or followed up. They are simply reproduced.

Arabic journalism style

As I cannot read Arabic, I am not an authority on what goes on in the Arabic language press. However, from what I have observed at news conferences, I know that journalism is bound by social rules of behavior including elaborate rituals of introduction and reluctance to ask tough questions. It is also much more wordy than is acceptable in English language journalism. This isn't equally true in all Arab countries, but it's safe to say that education is widely needed for journalists and their audiences in terms of what should reasonably be expected of a journalist.

When I listen to simultaneous translation of what Arab journalists ask at news conferences, I am always annoyed by the obligatory thanking of the organisers and/or sponsors of whatever event we are covering. After that, a statement follows only distantly related to the topic of the news conference. Finally, comes the question, perhaps in several parts. Often after such a question, the responder doesn't answer but asks for additional questions, promising the questions will be answered together.

By that point, I'm tuning out, knowing that nothing like an answer to any question is likely to emerge.

This isn't journalism according to the informal guidelines of journalistic behavior across the globe wherever there is a free or reasonably free press. In most Middle East countries, the press is restricted, and journalists may face jail time for publishing stories that annoy the government. There are 104 newspapers in the six Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE) and people read the papers because that's what they're used to doing. They also know the indoor sport of reading between the lines, trying to figure out what may be going on from the sparse information provided.

Journalism isn't valued as a profession and is known for not paying well. However, salary levels are not revealed in official figures. An attempt last year by the International Women's Media Fund to include the UAE and Lebanon in a worldwide survey of women in journalism failed because none of the major media organizations was willing to provide numbers of women employees, their positions, and salaries.

TN employs several young Emiratis who arrived after salaries were raised only for Emiratis to bring salaries closer to what is normal for an Emirati in a government job. Until many more citizens of the UAE are trained in journalism and take up journalism jobs, there is little chance that journalists will feel safe enough to look beyond the official statements and develop potentially controversial stories.

Journalism education and training challenges in UAE

Academic programs in media education are being started or growing, but almost all are omnibus communications degrees that offer only a specialisation in journalism or public relations, media management, advertising, and so on. The Mohammed bin Rashid School of Communication at the American University of Dubai offers an undergraduate degree in journalism in either English or Arabic. It is the closest to an international undergraduate degree in journalism although it includes courses that wouldn't be found in a typical American journalism program. The SAE Institute, established as The School of Audio Engineering in October 1976, is starting a one-year certificate program in digital journalism in November 2010 and plans to expand it into a degree program later.

Because university graduates in communications are in demand, many are turning to graduate programs to strengthen their qualifications. Currently, there is no way to earn a postgraduate degree in journalism in the UAE. The University of Wollongong in Dubai is starting a master's program in 2011 in communications, which offers four specializations, among them journalism. That may evolve eventually into a journalism graduate degree, but that won't be the case for some time.

The gap between what is learned in school and what is needed on the job is considerable. As in other developing markets, many young people enter the work force at a level higher than their education and experience warrant because there aren't enough people around with the kind of qualifications that would make them eligible for the same position in a developed market. In the UAE an additional factor is that the government is working hard to emiratise the work force, which means putting

Emiratis into management jobs, often before they are ready for them. To manage these jobs, they need more training and higher level degrees. Postgraduate journalism training programs at universities, institutes, and media centers have access to a ready pool of aspiring students.

Many graduates entering media jobs in the UAE are insufficiently trained. That's the opinion of Najla Al Awadi, deputy CEO of Dubai Media Inc, member of the Federal National Council and head of Dubai One TV. During a recent talk in Dubai, Al Awadi called for "a stronger media curriculum to be developed at universities in the UAE and the region". She declared that "the challenge is graduates don't have enough skills to meet our direct needs" (*Gulf News*, 31 Jan 2010, p.6). Al Awadi has frequently written on this same point and, as an employer, knows what she requires from the young people she hires.

I recently encountered an Emirati woman who is an acclaimed award winning young filmmaker. She has just completed a master's degree in human resources and now wants to study for a doctorate in business since terminal degrees in any area relating to media are not available in the UAE. She is eager to earn a doctorate, not to get a job since she is already working full time at a good government job unrelated to film or HR. However, she feels the need for additional academic qualifications. It's hard to imagine her counterpart in the US or any developed country having the same kind of need, which reflects the media situation in the UAE today.

Recent news reports and conferences about media-related work in the UAE highlight significant employment opportunities for graduate students with specialisations in journalism, media studies, public relations, professional writing or general communications. Thus, the growth prospects of media training and education programs in the UAE look promising. For instance, *twofour54* was founded to train employees for local and international media organizations and to increase the amount of local content in regional media. But there is an issue when it comes to teaching the principles of a free press. *GN's* Abu Dhabi editor recently asked, "Do our local media enjoy a minimum degree of freedom? However, not many people have the courage to answer it and acknowledge that the ceiling of press freedom is low." (*Gulf News*, 2 March 2010, p.7).

Companies and government organizations need employees who understand the legal and ethical issues associated with writing and publishing in print, broadcast and online. They need employees who have learned what can be done ethically and legally in the UAE and the region. In the global media environment, highly trained young graduates cannot afford to be without this kind of information, and their organisations will expect them to have it.

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