PANEL OF EXPERTS DISCUSSION ON: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION&TRANSPARENCY IN ARAB MEDIA

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Introduction

Despite a few variances [http://www.skeyesmedia.org/en/Reports] among Arab countries in terms of censorship and violence against journalists, Arab journalists and media institutions are usually confronted with similar challenges.

According to Reporters Without Borders 2015 index [http://index.rsf.org/#!/], all Arab countries – except for Lebanon and Kuwait – were very poorly ranked. The reasons pertaining to the low ranking of media in the Arab world in terms of freedom of expression and transparency can be attributed to many reasons, but generally to the states' control of the broadcasting sector, political pressure - governments, the military or political parties –in addition to the unprofessionalism of media organizations and schools.

The Arab Spring opened the public space to the people, mainly to social media and citizen journalists, who used the transformations in the Arab streets to boost freedom of expression and set a new ceiling. However, state or political control ensued right after new governments took place and the crackdown on bloggers and journalists increased. Egypt is a perfect example of how media freedoms evolved briefly before it dropped down to its worst levels.

But a Free media is not necessarily a credible media. Freedom of expression is not enough if not accompanied by professional standards, credibility and accountability, in addition to a modern media law that guarantees its freedom and efficiency. Without a free and credible media, and without access to information, true transition to democracy and reform will always be hindered.

Based on this approach, MDF "Maison du Futur" and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung organized a one-day roundtable discussion among journalists and media professionals. The discussion took place on the 6th of February, 2015, and the

panels addressed the topic of freedom of expression and transparency in the Arab world's media institutions.

Mr. Sam Menassa, from MDF, opened the discussion with a note on the significance of media for the evolution and development of the Arab world "after the storm." MDF plans to kick-off a comprehensive Marshal plan for the region, which would address political, social, cultural and economic advancement. All this will be based on good-governance initiatives, in addition to educational and economic development plans. Freedom of expression is significant for this kind of reform and development, especially when it comes to the role media can play in terms of boosting transparency across the board. To play this role, media institutions need to be transparent as well.

Session I: Transparency and its challenges

All attendees agreed that without transparency, media is not independent. But what is transparency in media? Transparency is the transparency of the news, but it also means that administration and management of media institutions should also be transparent about their resources, funding and sources, in addition to how day-to-day news gathering is managed. These are usually absent from Arab institutions for the following reasons:

- Sources of funding and sponsorship of governments and political parties challenge institutions' credibility and therefore its independence.
- Media laws do not give journalists access to information.
- Media schools and curriculums are outdated and graduates usually lack the minimal level of professionalism.

In the session on Challenges and opportunities of transparency in Arab media, Giselle Khoury – BBC Arabic host – stressed that the Lebanese media law is too outdated and backwards to guarantee journalists' right to access information.

She introduced Pascale Monin, professor and director of the department of media and communications at USJ. Monin said that it is difficult to have transparency in media which functions in a country where transparency is absent on all levels. Media in Lebanon is owned by or affiliated with political powers or personalities, making both journalists and the audience mere tools that repeat the rhetoric of the party or political group. Lebanese media law made sure to distribute media institutions among political parties and sects, leaving no room for independent media that could actually hold political parties and figures accountable.

According to Monin, the Lebanese government and public institutions are not allowed to share information with journalists. The absence of open sources on this level makes it almost impossible for journalists to get information and eventually inform the public. Journalists eventually abandon their role and duties to fact-check information and deliver credible information.

Monin gave three recommendations to foster professionalism and transparency in media:

1.   Reconsider and moderate the media law in Lebanon, in terms of allowing the establishment of newspapers. Otherwise, publications will be owned by the same sects   and   parties.
2.   Establish necessary laws that would allow journalists to access information.
3.   Modernize and revamp media schools and departments – and curriculums – in order to produce a new generation of professional journalists.

On the same issue, Abdel Wahab Badrakhan blamed both media institutions and state authorities for the lack of transparency. According to Badrakhan, without access to information, media institutions and journalists cannot be transparent, and without freedom, transparency cannot be confirmed. Access to information and freedom are two signs of a healthy democracy. However, Badrakhan said that this is still farfetched in our societies, even after the Arab Spring attempts to call for freedom.

An example of the lack of transparency and freedom in Arab media is the simple failure to answer the question of ISIS in our media. Our take on this issue usually leaves the audience with more questions than answers regarding ISIS' resources, funding and strategies.

Session II: Security and self-censorship

Another issue brought up during the discussion is the issue of self-censorship. Nada Abdel Samad from BBC Arabic brought up the issue of personal safety - away from laws and regulations. In the midst of wars, conflicts and the absence of protection, journalists tend to censor their own work because of the fear factor.

The fear of assassination or arbitrary arrests is based on a number of precedencies all over the Arab world. Even if one complies with every law and regulation, it

does not mean that he/she is safe. Threatening journalists has become a very common practice in our region, but the absence of protection measure for journalists – especially independent journalists – has amplified self-censorship.

She also stressed that in times of conflict, objectivity in media becomes meaningless. Although everyone agreed that the objectivity of news means to report everything, with no regard to political agendas or affiliations, Abdel Samad raised the issue of ISIS in the media. According to her, broadcasting all ISIS' videos and statements could be indirectly assisting ISIS' media strategy. This is what ISIS wants and by giving them a platform in our media, we are incidentally helping them. She also called for a new definition of transparency, taking into consideration the impact of giving ISIS a platform in the name of objectivity and transparency.

During the same panel, AnNahar Deputy Editor in Chief Nabil Bou Monsef stressed the significance of professional standards in journalism. However, Bou Monsef assured the discussants that objectivity does not contradict opinion. A professional journalist does not have to be neutral. Reporting news requires the utmost of objectivity; but media is not only about news. Analysis should involve opinion and that's essential, especially during critical times and conflicts. Bou Monsef concluded that a journalist should carry a message.

Session III: Social Media and Traditional Media

Right after Bou Monsef emphasized classical professional standards, a new panel discussed the relation between social and traditional media. According Eli Khoury – CEO of Quantum – channels of expression differ, but at the end of the day, content is based on the same tools: the picture and the word. Today, these tools have become digital, but social media is more often operating outside a professional framework.

Therefore, Khoury stressed, the issue is to focus on the professional rhetoric instead of the channels of this rhetoric.

Lebanese blogger Gino Raidy spoke about the high reach of social media in comparison to traditional media. For example, while there are 1.2 or 1.4 million Lebanese who watch Lebanese TV channels, there are 1.5 million Lebanese on Facebook, 1.1 million of which visit FB every day. On YouTube, there are 300 videos every minute. According to Raidy, social media and traditional media

should work together and try to complement each other's work, instead of competing against each other.

Raidy also discussed how Social Media helps him and other journalists understand how people think and what topics they're interested in. But social media – despite its reach – really requires credibility and the trust of the audience. It is a free-of-charge channel, but its currency is trust.

At the end of the day, the reader decides what to read and he/she has the authority, concluded Khoury.

Session IV: Arab conflicts and Arab TV Channels

Head of the Al-Hayat office in Baghdad, Mushreq Abbas, raised two points. First, he stressed the issue of internal sensitivities within each countries and why media institutions fail to address them. He emphasized the importance of taking these sensitivities and specifics into consideration while covering different countries in the region.
Second, Abbas brought up the role of the reader/receiver of news and how he/she gained more responsibility due to the increase of sources of news and their affiliations. The audience is now expected to double-check the information he/she receives and try to validate it through various sources.

May Chidiac, MSF president, put the same emphasis on the role of the audience. When transparency and objectivity are absent in our media, the viewer should make extra effort and go out of their comfort zone to try to watch more than one channel – with different agendas and views – in order to understand the story.

Chidiac said that the audience is part of the problem, because they do not hold media institutions accountable. On the contrary, they support their agendas and promote them. There is always a relation between the ignorance of the audience and the lack of transparency in media. The more viewers act as blind followers instead of observers with critical approach, the more media tends to hide information and avoid transparency. Eventually, media becomes part of the hatred and sectarian rhetoric which ignites conflict.

The role of the journalist here becomes crucial. If media institutions do not require transparency and objectivity, it all becomes the job of the journalist – as an individual – to act professionally and determine his/her priorities. But Chidiac – despite her stress on the significance of objectivity in media – went back to the

earlier debate on objectivity and neutrality through a different angle. Chidiac discussed the importance of "positive subjectivity" during times of conflict and on issues related to sovereignty, independence, freedoms, and human rights. According to Chidiac, a journalist cannot be neutral or a mere observer when injustice is being practiced against people.

Conclusion:

It was obvious throughout the conference that the security situation and conflict in the Middle East have a big impact on any discussion on media and transparency. The safety of the journalist often weighs on his/her decision to be professional, objective or transparent. Therefore, the question that still needs a more thorough discussion is how to protect the journalist from threats on his/her personal safety. The mechanisms are not easy to implement during war times, but there are channels or measures that media professionals could resort to in case of risk.

When a journalist feels secure, he/she could be able to focus more on the professional standards of writing or producing news. In the notes attached to its 2015 Index, RSF "REPORTERS SANS FRONTIERES" noted that many of the armed conflicts of the past year were partly conducted as information wars. "The opposing sides attempted to shut down independent news sources or use them to broadcast their own propaganda," RSF reported, implying that truth is the first casualty of war. National security has always been used to justify restrictions on press freedom and basic civil and human rights. In the Arab world, especially after the Arab Spring, people are presented with a choice; freedom or stability, but never both. If you chose freedom at the risk of insecurity – as people or journalists – it means that you are responsible for your own safety.

However, conflicts also present non-government groups who do not even give the journalist this choice. For example, in Syria, Iraq and Libya, militias have killed journalists in the name of religion or national security, and no one was held responsible. RSF reported that 66 journalists were killed in 2014. The deadliest countries for journalists' lives were Syria, where 15 died, followed by Iran, Eritrea, eastern Ukraine, Iraq and Libya.

The Arab world is currently a turbulent place for journalists, but it doesn't mean that media institutions or journalists should give up to the status co and surrender their integrity and professionalism. That's why this discussion should continue.