

Mass media, women and the Middle East

Nafissa Lahrech

‘Journalistic practice is both freedom and responsibility, and any imbalance between them would jeopardize the smooth running of media and political development of any country’, said German communications lecturer Barbara Thomas.¹ ‘Press freedom implies distancing from governments and never giving in to threat, blackmail or pressure from any party’ she added. If this is a rule in practicing freedom of the press, regarded as an index of democracy in all societies, we have to ask ourselves as Middle Eastern peoples, where do we stand with regard to such freedoms? What is the reality, in our countries of political freedom and democracy which reflects people’s sovereignty and right to control public affairs?

Middle East governments don’t deal with information as a social right and the bedrock of a democratic system or an effective mean of bringing about development. On the contrary, they step up repression and news blackouts to conceal the prevailing corruption as much as possible. To this end, they ‘endeavor to tie the press down to greater responsibility (under cover of national interest) and, eventually, chip away press freedom, already restricted by a penal code favoring prosecution against journalists’.²

Press freedom in the Arab world vanishes when exploited by governments who make use of legal constraints to punish anyone who dares to criticize them. Thus, bringing about a more professional and more credible press will never occur unless two conditions are fulfilled: independence of justice and free access for journalists to sources of information. Otherwise, talking about press freedom or violation of press laws will be a waste of time.

While some observers describe the Middle East independent press as aggressive and censorious, others explain this behaviour by the indifference governments show towards the serious information the press publishes about the hidden side of public affairs conduct.

In the light of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, securing citizens’ access to information, and given that the initial aim of media is to convey the information they collect to their citizens who then decide how to approach this information, the following questions arise insistently:

‘Have Middle East journalists contributed to shaping public opinion and, objectively, heightening its awareness of the importance of elections and positive change in society?’

‘How can citizens establish a democratic, modern and effective state securing their right to control the conduct of public affairs?’

In this respect, American legal expert Richard Winfield wondered: ‘Can a modern and democratic state do with citizens’ and press right to carry out this control? Should the state punish anyone who criticizes it to be a strong state?’³

Where are impartiality and respect for difference?

Western media used to tackle the reality of the Arab world objectively, but sometimes, blew it out of proportion. Taking the proverb ‘Might is Right’ as a starting point, these media tackle Arab world affairs from the viewpoint of western strategy-makers. For instance, how many western journalists denounced US support for Israeli aggressions against Palestinian and Lebanese? How many journalists demolished the motives for the Iraq invasion and denounced the news blackout? How can western media bear the ethical responsibility after the truth came out?

In 1995, I went to Montreal to take part in a conference⁴ and was asked about the acts of violence that shook Algeria. ‘Why don’t you visit Algeria to see, with your own eyes, what’s really happening over there, instead of repeating questions raised by biased western and national political opponents?’ ‘The reality is altogether different from what you think’, I answered. Years

after, what Algeria used to fight proved to be what the world is now fighting: terrorism.

A philosopher once said: "Keep telling lies until you believe these lies are the truth". International policy-makers have lied, believed in their lie and dragged the press into it. Before the invasion of Iraq, the New York Times conducted an opinion poll suggesting that 475 people were for the war and only 4 against it.⁵ How could that be true? Is this an example of an unbiased press? Is western society so warlike and thirsting for oppressing other peoples? It must have been wrong because the majority of western societies marched against the war on Iraq though they governments took part in it.

In 2004, I visited the United States at their government's invitation.⁶ I conversed with some media managers and found them unable to be professional in justifying their support for the war on Iraq. If some of them did it out of political convictions, others did it for money. On the other hand, I found the majority of people I met standing against their government's policy in the Middle East. Moreover, western media proved to be unfaithful in covering the daily massacres in Iraq and reported only 5% of the events that took place.

In this context, how could western media campaign against anti-Semitism (which I condemn too) and yet turn a blind eye to anti-Muslim campaigners? This is partiality. In addition, how could western media reject alternative point of view by banning some Arab TV channels, such as Al Jazeera in the United States, despite 50 million viewers worldwide, and El Manar in Europe and America?

Whether we are for or against these channels doesn't matter. What is important is such actions reject interaction with Arab media and violate citizens' right to information.

Media and Middle Eastern women

Women in the Middle East still bear the burden of traditions that bind their freedom to choose the way of her life and, even, their husbands. The researcher Mirvate Hatem said: "Studies pertaining to Middle East women focused only on modernizing the region, along with integrating a capitalist economic growth and developing state structure" but omitted that ideologies and strategies also influence sexes related relations."

If we consider the results of states efforts to modernize, notably to promote equality between the sexes, we note that tradition, paternalism and tribalism etc. are still heavily weighted against change, which explains the failure of years of modernizing and efforts to create equality.

There is no doubt that Arab countries have made progress in advancing women's causes, as shown by figures pertaining to development, education, employment and social advancement of women, but a lot remains to be done to achieve real equality in citizenship and professional promotion, as well as self-fulfillment.

The women's movement has greatly benefited from mass media, such as internet, chat rooms, television and radio debates which have enabled them to make a foray in to different fields they would not have accessed if they had relied only on the press. These means furthered heightening awareness of gender issues such as equality as an ideal alternative to discrimination and difference of sexes.

Women's employment in Arab countries' radio and television or press was the crowning achievement of their educational qualification (60 to 70% of information and communications Institutes' students are women).⁷ However, they have not been able to access high-level positions that allow them to influence media strategies in a way that changes tradition's negative views of women or how women's issues are presented" still considered a taboo on many TV channels, such as sexual abuse, citizenship, legal equality in marital rights, love, husband choosing, woman's right to seek divorce and to travel alone, as well as likening women to

poverty, as in the saying "Poverty is a woman's face". Consequently, women remain a procreating machines and a sex objects. Moreover, they shoulder responsibility for corruption, prostitution, unemployment, poverty, earthquakes and all tribulations.

Conclusion

I am a civil society and women's rights campaigner who believes that no society can advance with one hand tied behind its back. In other words, gender justice is [part of the development process. I am also a representative of a peace-loving and humanist people, that suffers from underdevelopment. Both western and Middle Eastern media need to give more fair and balanced representation to political, social and cultural issues on both sides in an attempt to improve relations. Let's work together in the struggle for peace, love and prosperity.

Notes

1. Researcher and communications lecturer at Hamburg University (Germany).
2. Conference on press freedom, led by chairman of El Khabar board of Directors (biggest circulation paper).
3. During a conference organized, in Algiers, by El Khabar newspaper on the freedom of the press.
4. Preparatory conference for Toronto conference on women and media.
5. Quoting an interview, on a Syrian channel, with Al Jazeera's Samir El Qassem.
6. A US program hosting Arab journalists to talk about Iraqi issues.
7. Arab Human Development Report (2005). Towards the advancement of Arab world women.

Nafissa Lahrech is a journalist who made her first foray in the press in 1975, while working towards a BA in History and International affairs. After qualifying, she joined the Algiers El Moudjahid National Museum, a centre devoted to research on the Algerian revolution. In 1980, she embarked on a journalist career on national radio. Eleven years after, she set up and undertook the editorship of Ounoutha (Femininity) women's magazine, a forum for Algerian and Arab women from various intellectual and political backgrounds. Founder member of many women's associations, in 1995 together with a group of women journalists, jurists and women rights campaigners, she set up "Women communicating", a national association. Founder member of the US-based "Islam and Democracy Network", and the Amman-based "Arab reformers Center", she is also member of the Conference of Athens on dialogue between East and West; an initiative of the University of California. As a former member of the Algerian parliament, in 2002 she wrote a book entitled "Story of a woman who lived through the crisis", as well as articles for many international papers.