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Journalism Curricula in the Arab Region: A Dilemma of Content, Context and Contest

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The rapid strides in different mass media industries in the Arab region have opened up new opportunities for the field of journalism education and profession as never before. This transformation of societies have urged global standards in educational components and curricula that address specialized skills and knowledge, and opened up new possibilities of launching education programmes in journalism at new universities located at various geographic locations of the region. As a result, both local regional and international agencies have come up with offers for undergraduate and post graduate/Masters programmes in Journalism or communication studies.

One can never talk about the case of twenty-two countries as a homogeneous landscape, but there are a number of factors and restrained that made the proposed curricula on journalism education a story of false starts with certain wrong ends. A holistic view of journalism education in the region has created a free-for-all situation bound to suffer parameter of journalism education standards and curricula standards as a result of the

unplanned and disoriented endeavours that have generally jeopardised the very dignity of the profession and the social service mission of journalism. The question remains concerning the monitoring of these pit-falls or lapses in the interest of journalism students and educators?

This happens at a time when the entire gamut of education in the Arab region is itself in a mess as regards to the observance of ethics and standards, and journalism education is a neglected domain left at the mercy of market forces or governments. In the backdrop of these disturbing trends, the paper seeks to examine the relevance of journalism education curricula model that is suggested by UNESCO.

This research attempts to address and evaluate the 2007 UNESCO Model Curricula after a regional consultation meeting on the possibilities of adaptation of the model in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of the Arab region at the University of Bahrain. That was supposed to be a generic model that can be localised and adapted to match each country's specific needs.

The impossibility of one Arab model

It is impossible to develop an Arab curricula model, because that would simplify a whole region into one bundle that includes twenty-two countries stretching from Mauritania in the west to Oman in the east with the lowest average literacy rates in the world (66 per cent). The situation is not even in these countries; for example in Mauritania, Morocco, and Yemen it is as low as (50 per cent), while in Kuwait and the Palestinian Autonomous Territories the rate is over (90 per cent). In addition, gender disparity is very high in this region, though women account for two-thirds. And within this geographical area, there reside several populations with different ethnic or linguistic diversities (Saleh, 2009b).

The wonderful idea of a common Arab model has a paradox in its own prospects for a number of reasons. Firstly, the curricula were assessed in petrol countries that have a very limited population in ratio to the rest of the whole Arab region's population. Second, the current financial situation of the Gulf States even during the recession period can never be compared to the other populated middle and low income countries like Egypt, Sudan, Morocco and Algeria and others with their long list of problems both socially, economically and politically. Third, many of the non-national universities in the Gulf States are taught and managed by foreigners who live in a ghetto even with all of their good intentions (Saleh, 2010a).

I am reluctant to what some of the Arab scholars or visiting foreigners mention in some of the UNESCO events because it ignores a key issue that is embedded in the Arab mind of the "otherness" as a true 'false starts.' Journalism in any country reflects its historical memory and current settings, and all the Arab pride that has experienced the introduction of journalism and its education in an imposed mechanism by colonial and semi colonial rule at the end of the 19th century. And many of the non-Arabs forget that the imperial powers transplanted their institutional models from France, Great Britain and later the United States to their new hosts in the region with their political traditions, cultural linguistic diversities, which lacked organic connections (Saleh, 2010 a).

Many Arab societies lack proper journalism education, and of most of the media and journalism educators are incompetent with the sufficient skills that have made the field of education having scare skilled personnel, drastic erosion of civil services, decline in salaries, and increasing in mass poverty have all gathered to instigate struggle over the limited human and material resources needed for the educational process.

Therefore, the current expansion of journalism education and training opportunities in the Arab world is unbalanced and suffers from confusion and false starts. One could describe the major problems to be related to social inequalities, where most of the real learning opportunities directed towards the elite or the governments' entourage, especially when it comes to job opportunities and training. There are no curricula that journalism schools and departments that follow but rather translating the western curricula with actually domesticating its approach and content as a result of the lack of investment in research and resources within the absence of clear national policy and resource allocation plans. In contrast to the official claims that the UNESCO is present and implemented in many of the Arab regions, most of the journalism schools and department still lean heavily on theoretical study due to lack of adequate funds, over-crowding of classes, inadequate supervision and management. Besides, there are no specific criteria adopted for the selection of journalism educators causing a lack of uniformity and adoption by other campus also.

Hence, despite the great boom in the media industry and education when it comes to volume, we must admit in all frankness that journalism training and education do not figure anywhere in national development planning and resource allocation. This regional phenomenon has transformed journalism in many cases into public relations curricula, and making it a space for losers and educators struggling to acquire skills to maintain the craft and subject to states' threats if they cross the lines and dare to ask to be critical about anything (Saleh, 2010a).

In contrast to this boom is the low ranking of Arab universities. As the Arab world is not present in two of the world ranking such as the Quality and Success Ranking in UK, and Shanghai Ranking, but the top ten Arab universities can be found in the Spanish ranking.⁵

University	Arab Ranking	World Ranking
King Saud University	1	164
King Abdulaziz University	2	291
Umm Al-Qura University	3	681
An-Najah National University	4	1160
American University of Beirut	5	1181
United Arab Emirates University	6	1512
Cairo University	7	1604
American University in Cairo	8	1657
Kuwait University	9	1863
Qatar University	10	1910

⁵ http://www.webometrics.info/top100_continent.asp?cont=aw

The skeptical approach towards the UNESCO model is explained in the light of the practical dent in the domain of journalism education on a sustained basis, which partly explains the sordid conditions in almost all of the twenty two countries that have made its status quo a true discouraging environment outside the offices of the government officials or away from the official press conferences.

Simply socio-political and economic realities about the region make many Arabs in a state of denial to these facts on one hand and many of the foreigners who great intentions yet lack rational understanding make their work completely wasted on the other hand. These realities include the fact that the majority of the public are impoverished, marginalized and overwhelmed with the historical memory of colonization on one hand, and the harsh living conditions on the other hand. Hence, they neither consider the model or even know about it, unless we refer to those (elite) of Arab nationals or foreigners who speak about the 'fantasy world' or those who are on the pay-roll of agencies and governments and are willing to say anything out of cosmetic PR-ization.

My concern here is not the UNESCO Curricula per se, but rather the impossibility to localize in the current settings and its unsuitability to the environment that is full of different kinds and levels of limitations. As such, many of the Arab countries, especially the Gulf States experience two separate worlds of the national and the expatriates living in the countries, who have different rights and visions to the same lands.

We cannot think of allowing and empowering the model within the current limited parameters due to the vulnerable public sphere with all its sensible circles, fiscal squeeze and the many legislative and legal impediments that block any real chance to adopt it within the regional social unrest, political agitations and poor civil liberties that are still plaguing. Besides, the public opinion has very low esteem of journalism as a profession and its education as a refuge for the low caliber students who find no other thing to do so they chose this field.

Such a collective view of journalism education in many parts of the region is a direct result of the weak economic base, heavy political patronage, cultural fragmentation, centralized geographic concentration, decreasing credibility and low prestige of journalism. Besides, laws and regulations are not clearly stated with regard to safeguard the journalism education and other professional values (Saleh, 2010b). Hence, it is very rational to link in a reciprocating manner the internal socio-political and economic problems with the external cut-off from the world that resulted with hybrid curricula in the Arab region (Saleh, 2009b).

Many of the journalism educators and education advocates echoed four types of criticism. The first is the marginal endorsement of freedom of expression and the press, while also ignoring other basic human needs. The second is the superficial approach to democracy, which results in the marginalization of the interests of the majority to preserve the ruling minority's interests (Saleh, 2003). The third problem is the governments' subjugation to major regional issues such as the invasion of Iraq, Islamophobia and the "resentment and tyranny" motivated by hatred for the Arab-Israeli Conflict. And the fourth problem deals with the official simplistic analysis of multifaceted complexities of the current endemic

problems in the region that varies from xenophobia to religious fundamentalism and social disintegration (Saleh, 2006).

This situation repeats what many of the international news agencies and broadcasters call 'Parachute journalism' -- 'Parachute education,' where a number of foreigners just come for a short time into a country with all of their predispositions and claim to the world that they are experts in the Arab region. The argument here does not suggest that the reality in these countries is perfect; we only point out the opaque vision that does not clearly understand the contextualization in the best scenarios, while completely rejecting the notion of conspiracy theory. Another pertinent issue in that regard is the clash of interest between locals involved in assessing its suitability to the region for political or economical reasons.

In such a context, journalism education and literacy come at the end of the priority list; because media are used as a platform for fabricated reality, for rationalizing the government's own iron hand. To reinforce their politicizing solidarity, Arab governments in almost all cases have never allowed journalism to investigate and evaluate critically national domestic policies, or those of friendly governments. Besides, journalism education nearly never delve into national or local issues, even in the cases of Pan-Arab satellite channels such as *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabya* channels because these are the issues that most threaten their governments' authority and legitimacy.

It might be logical due to the fact that the overall illiteracy in the region is 66 per cent, which is relatively low, though the absolute number of adult illiterates fell from 64 million to around 58 million between 1990 and 2000-2004 (Hammoud, 2005). The gender disparity is very high in this region, and women account for two-thirds of the illiteracy rate while the literacy rate is higher among young people than adults.

During the second half of the 20th Century, the Arab region aimed at unifying the general framework of its respective legislative processes, particularly through multilateral cooperation within the League of Arab States. In 1981, at the Second Conference of Arab Ministers of Justice in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, the "Sana'a Strategy" unified the domestic legislation through a series of integrated codes, including civil law, civil law procedures (Saleh, 2009b).

The League of Arab States also formed a committee to unify legal and judicial terms, structures, and processes that includes the penal law, penal procedures, combating information technology crime, and other related matters. To that goal, the League of Arab States also established the Arab Center for Legal and Judicial Studies in Beirut, Lebanon.

Irrespective of whichever option may prevail in future, it is high time to undertake a high-level review of both the suggested curricula model by UNESCO in the light of the current journalism education in the region which has remained static for decades. Let it be understood that there is already a widening gap between the market requirements and the modest quality of training and education to cope with this demand.

Another point to make here is the disconnection of journalism education between its curricula, and its governance that made journalism students lag behind the required skills and capabilities, which in turn need a valid curricula model that could provide a strong shift in the current pedagogical paradigms. The paper is thus attempting to examine the current needs in industry and society to argue for this shift, and provide some pointers to possible solutions, while considering the role of curricula can play in realizing this goal. However, this goal was never realized due to the absence of a real independent free media and difficulties in securing an appropriate political culture context that could be a refuge for elevating conversations that could address the current challenges of journalism education and provide practical solutions.

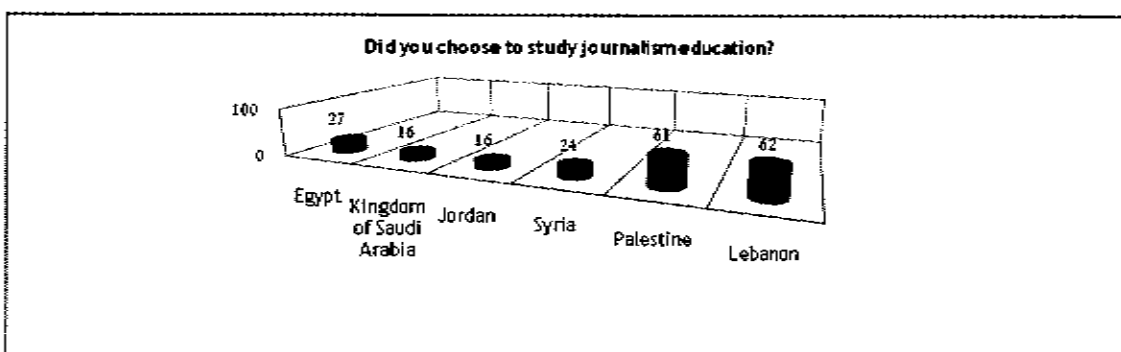
Empirical evidence from a survey

In a Pan-Arab study in six countries sponsored by the British Council in Cairo as part of the 'Media and Society Project' that conducted over (1210) intensive face-to-face interviews (200 interviews per country). The samples were drawn from residents in major cities in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan or Palestine , which is purposive non-probability sample that can't be generalized but it is still providing clear indications of why 'False Starts' lead to 'End Results'.

The general response to the question "Do you approve the current curricula?" concerning the level of assessment of the current curricula, the students and the journalists had a high rate of accepting the current curricula with (30 per cent) agreeing and (12 per cent) strongly agreeing on the suitability of the curricula. However, the general view favors the disagreement or neutrality because (24 per cent) disagree that the curricula in the Arab region is suitable, and (16 per cent) strongly disagree with a (16 per cent) of the sample took a neutral stance or it might be disengagement from the educational setting and being apathetic about it.

The key question that was asked during the interviews was related to the level of liking and preference of students to the field of journalism.

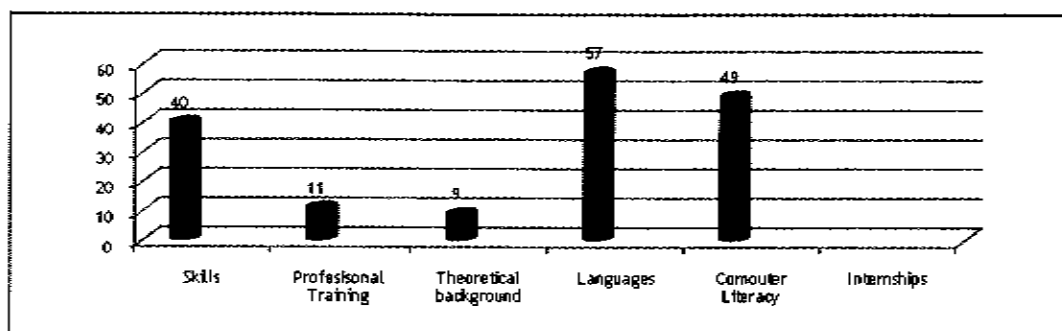
Chart 1: The Choice of Journalism Education



In chart (1) the results suggest that it is a priority choice for students in either much opened society that allows press freedom as in the case of Lebanon (62 per cent) or in a very desperate society that has a common cause and goal as in the case of Palestinian to

serve the mind set of "Jihad". It is also much preferred in transitional societies like Egypt (27 per cent) and Syria (24 per cent) in which the picture and freedom is not clearly defined and established. In societies with serious political and social oppression it is least preferred as in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and in Jordan (16 per cent).

Chart 2: What are the required competencies in the journalism education curricula



In chart (2), the sample selected the languages (57 per cent), the computer literacy (49 per cent) and the journalistic skills (47 per cent) as the most desired competencies in the journalism curricula. Not surprisingly, the training, theoretical background and knowledge as well as internships did not score high in the selection of necessary competencies.

From realities to reforms/challenges

Many of the academics and professionals deal with journalism education through a polarized prism of either focusing on the theoretical part or its hands on experience part, but I see that both sides ignore the sad reality in the region in which department and schools of journalism represent the air for any proposed models. And in reality most of these departments and schools are run by 'patrimonial mechanisms' that color them with factional maneuvering, clientalistic relations, and the exclusion of real experienced educators at the expense of (Wasta) nepotism, which is a common practice in the region that involve educators, students and journalists, by either selecting students to be enrolled in a journalism school not based on the students' skills and potentials or any transparent criteria but rather connections and unfair selectivity motives, or recruitment of educators based on bribe and mutual synergy giving no fair change of election, or providing journalists with information based on their government or business loyalty.

It is not thus enough to have a UNESCO curricula model or other means of reform in the Arab region. Hence, there is an urgent need to investigate the correlation between journalism education, on the one hand, and the possibilities of stipulating a culture of reporting reality, on the other.

This needs accelerating a coherent social progress that maintains harmony, through the cross-examining of three key domestic conditions: the degree of democracy, the degree of social divisions, and the level of economic prosperity. There is space in this paper only

to touch on some of the specific challenges that make the current curricula that was suggested by UNESCO with limited benefit or outcome on the journalism education field. This is no disadvantage: beyond individual case studies, which are environment- and technology-specific and likely to date quickly as new advances in technology, pedagogy, and knowledge arise, it is far more important at present to work towards developing an overall pedagogy for finding a domestication of curricula that really works in classrooms and in the news rooms Curro & McTaggart (2003).

In addition, the ministers of information throughout the years execute the agenda of the state to control journalism curricula and shape their content, by enforcing harsh laws with imprisonment and physical violence. Though there is new means of expression that have proliferated between the Internet and other mobile communications, yet the 'Patron State' through the ministries of information in many of the Arab states and its orchestrating role and influence over the ministries of higher education have regulated the freedom of press, and expression, blocked the emerging activism of the expanding population of a predominately poor, illiterate youth; and offered a hybrid journalism curricula through a prism of individual and collective humiliation and resentment.

This current curriculum emphasize a sort of 'casual collapse' of the established hierarchies and institutions in the journalism education that is a typical outcome of the failure to attain a paradigm shift that could level the quality of learning and practice. It is thus trivial to consider any curricula without stipulating good governance through governments' effective assistance. The journalists and many of the journalism students are very frustrated with the results of poor governance. Besides, the economic growth and poverty reduction remain major challenges. But beyond remuneration, there are problems with management structure, human resources, staffing and career paths.

Changing the wrong ends of journalism curricula

As ivory towers crumble, the current journalism education curricula narrative-based or apprenticeship-style education is increasingly irrelevant and appropriate so proposing a new valid curriculum is primarily based on its ability to provide a strong combination of systematic overviews and deep engagement, and in its ability to provide a targeted course of study aimed at developing those journalistic capacities which are crucial to successful participation in journalism. Any successful curriculum could make an important contribution to the levelling of journalism education MENA in order to avoid continuing in the current process of casual collapse (Hamilton, 1998).

Fundamental to their propositions are the tremendous motivational advantage and efficiencies which could be gained by creating effective learning environments. Journalism education in the Arab region could only be leveled through the emphasis on three competencies (Saleh, 2008). First, the focus should be directed towards the students, stimulate their interests and help them to optimize their skills and capacity building, while enhancing their mindset toward investigative journalism. Second, the curricula can never be successful without providing at least an academic environment that is both safe and secured, while indoctrinating professional codes of ethics that can help the students hold accountable yet free to learn. Third, the curricula can never be a valid

one without breaking down the artificial academic barriers separating various fields is a mandatory action to deal with the "contentious politics," social movements, revolutions, ethnic conflict.

The research paper suggests that not only is there a surge in student demand for university-based journalism studies in the Arab region, but also there is a growing concern about the quality of journalism studies. In the light of what has been discussed in the paper, it is important to state that no curriculum can function on its own, but rather it is contingent on local conditions that vary widely from each country to the other in the Arab region.

The research paper has projected two main concerns: the first relates to the trend of merging journalism with public relations, the lack of educational grounding in the ethics of independent journalism, and the failure of universities to underscore the journalists' mission as independent watchdogs holding the powerful accountable. And the second observes that the current UNESCO curricula does not really consider the local settings that do not leave room for interdisciplinary studies which are now sought in certain job markets. The implementation of this curriculum if it is done at the first place does not consider the moving of university journalism studies out of the field of literature.

Unfortunately, many Arab educators and others involved in the process of developing the UNESCO curricula model are typically monolingual and often get very sharp in responding to the criticism that is ingrained in western ways and is usually designed to be implemented in a western context. Thus, the collective cultural knowledge, local context and English language, which are the foundations of a western curriculum created an epistemological exclusion as a result of the commonly ignored current socio-political setting that is colours the journalism education with fear and uncertainties, where complex issues are discussed and various answers are sought, where no answer is right or wrong, the current format of the UNESCO model might lack the appropriate level of content and context that understand the nuances of academic discourse in the Arab region.

At the end, the research acknowledges the continuous disagreements on how to best provide a curriculum that teaches journalism in the Arab region, and the much skepticism related to its current format, yet it remains imperative to at least open up the dialogue on the topic and evaluate its parameters and validity. Only then, the false starts could be changed into valid ends.

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