

# Pedagogic Challenges Facing Development of Media Studies in Arab Universities

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**ABSTRACT**— *In this paper, we trace the history of the media studies field and its development within the Arab region. The paper questions whether the available educational institutions have enough resources and expertise that enables them to encompass the increasing number of applicants to media studies programs, without negatively affecting the core requirements of a proper media studies curricula.*

**Keywords**— Arab universities, media studies, media curriculum, communication.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Little is known about the beginnings of media studies in Arab universities. Scattered references to the subject in the small amount of published material on Arab university education suggest that the teaching of communication in the Arab states as an academic subject began towards the end of the first half of the past century. Cairo University established a “Higher Journalism Institute” at its School of Arts in 1939. This unit became a “department of editing, translation and journalism” in 1954, then in 1969, an independent Communication Institute within Cairo University, and a College of Communication in 1974.<sup>1</sup> Kandil (1972) reports that journalism was being taught at the American University in Cairo in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> The Institute of Press and Information Sciences (IPSI) at Manouba University in Tunis began offering a series of journalism training sessions as early as 1956.<sup>3</sup>

Journalism courses were also taught at the American University of Beirut in the latter part of the first half of the past century. This author enrolled in journalism courses as well as communication related courses offered by the AUB sociology department in the late 1950s. And a 1950 book by a James Batal, “Assignment: Near East”,<sup>4</sup> identifies the writer as a journalism instructor at the American University of Beirut. In 1970 AUB set up an undergraduate “Mass Communication Program.” The Lebanese University established in 1967 a “Journalism Institute” which became in 1975 a “School of Communication and Documentation”.<sup>5</sup>

Such is the material one can get from researching the available information on media studies in Arab universities. Media studies are relatively young in the Arab region and are in a maturing state. The content and structure of this field is rapidly evolving. There is no precise count of academic institutions for journalism and media studies in the Arab states. A reasonable estimate would place the figure at close to forty. These institutions vary in size of faculty and students, as well as in programs and operations.

Upon a Unesco initiative Riyadh University funded a 1978 symposium of Arab mass communication experts to plan for the cooperation between Arab mass communication institutions. This initiative surfaced from a recommendation by a 1976 seminar sponsored by the Arab Centre for Mass Communication Studies on Population, Development and Reconstruction. To organize the symposium Riyadh University formed a survey team to prepare the working document for the meeting. The team was headed by Ahmad Al-Sawi, professor of mass communication at the American University in Cairo, and Hamdy Kandil, Unesco regional consultant for mass communication in the Arab States. The Al-Sawi-Kandil document<sup>6</sup> is perhaps the first systematic attempt to survey Arab academic institutions involved in media studies. In 1991 a second systematic analytical survey of the state of media studies in the Arab states was completed by Awatef Abd El Rahman, of Cairo University, as part of an international project sponsored by Unesco’s International Programme for Development of Communication (IPDC) and executed by the International Association for Mass Communication Research (IAMCR) with Kaarle Nordenstreng and Michael Traber as the principal investigators.<sup>7</sup>

Another systematic examination of Arab media studies and research is the unpublished investigation by Jad Melki, of Maryland University’s International Center for Media and the Public Agenda.<sup>8</sup> This study provides a survey of media studies and research in Lebanese universities. It presents a description of the media studies situation with a view to

examine the “understanding of the philosophy of the media and dedication to the public service “by media educators in Lebanon. Melki surveys Lebanese media studies programs to review the opportunity to develop in the student “critical-thinking skills as well as practical skills”.

The Arab Human Development Report 2003 includes a discussion of the state of research and inquiry on the media and the production of knowledge in Arabic countries.<sup>9</sup> It notes recent improvements in the Arab information environment but calls for Arab cooperation to raise the performance of the media.

## **2. ANALYSIS OF ARAB MEDIA STUDIES SITUATION**

The Al-Sawi and Kandil working paper represents the first broad methodical assessment of the state of affairs of media studies in Arab institutions. The report describes the various problems encountered by Arab academic institutions. Among the problems underlined by the report are the shortage of qualified faculty members, insufficiency of practical training centers and shortage of Arabic textbooks and references in the various fields of specialization, as well as the shortage of funding.

Most of the teaching staff is judged not to be specialized in media studies but rather has practical experience. The report points out that teaching staff that media programs have to hire are often lacking in the theoretical background knowledge that is essential for university education.

Accordingly, most media studies programs have more part time than full time faculty. They also include many faculty members who have not yet completed their post-graduate studies. Some programs even have on their faculty instructors with only BA degrees. And several of the holders of PhDs have their specialization in subjects not directly related to the media, or hold doctorate degrees from institutions that are not recognized. Most do not have serious publication or research records that are essential for a good academician. The report also points out to the poor standard of published material (including translations) in the field of media studies.

The problem of some universities having to resort to seconding a number of their faculty to other newly established universities in the region is also indicated. This results in a drop in the standard of education and overburdening the few faculty members who are left on board to carry on with the academic program.

Al-Sawi and Kandil also point to the lack of proper academic mentoring of young faculty members, and lack of suitable advising and guidance of graduate students. This problem, they say, have serious consequences on building a corps of good media scholars.

The Al-Sawi-Kandil survey reports that the curricula of the Arab institutions of media studies lack explicit objectives or philosophy and thus lack proper planning and clear thought. Consequently, the curricula of several institutions are crowded with courses that fit more into Islamic or cultural studies than media studies. An Algerian institute, for example, combines mass communication study and political study with a view to “realizing an integral formation of the cultivated mass communicator to work in a responsible political position”<sup>10</sup>

A most serious gap in Arab media studies, according to Al Sawi and Kandil is the lack of proper Arabic textbooks or even adequate translations of original foreign seminal work and references. This is compounded by the paucity of good research and publications in Arabic as well as the lack of coordination among the different Arab centers involved in media studies.

Interestingly Al Sawi and Kandil’s 1978 assessment of the Arab media teaching situation does not differ from the appraisal made some 13 years later, in 1991, by Awatif Abdul Rahman. This reflects that little is being done to address the challenges and problems facing media teaching and research in Arab higher educational institutions. Both reports indicate that there is a serious shortage of qualified and specialized faculty as well as insufficiency of Arabic textbooks and references.

Abddul Rahman highlights the lack of media research as well as the absence of an academic strategy for researchers in the Arab world. She observes that masters and doctorate dissertations are mostly superficial and lack depth. They “stress shape rather content and quantity rather than quality.” She supports the establishment of media research centers that can generate more field studies and more theoretical, comparative and historical studies.

Lack of co-ordination and co-operation between Arab academic institutions on both the national and regional levels is underlined by Abdul Rahman. This obstacle resulted in the absence of a common terminology and the absence of group efforts to produce critically needed Arabic textbooks and audio-visual instructional material. She notes that not only does one observe lack of communication between Arab institutions but that there is “some kind of cultural disassociation” between institutions of the Arab East and the Arab West regions.

The most significant feature of Arab media studies institutions, according to Abdul Rahman is “academic dependence” on Western institutions and faculties of mass communication. This dependence takes the form of adopting western forms of media studies and adopting western textbooks that are more often than not poorly translated into

Arabic. According to her this is probably the main reason for the conceptual shortcomings of mass media studies in the Arab world. Nordenstreng and Traber<sup>11</sup> point out that “the question of textbooks in communication education can be seen as an issue of cultural emancipation as understood in the debate around the new international information and communication order.”

### **3. ATTEMPTS FOR “TRANSFORMATION”**

The problems laid down above are commonly acknowledged by Arab media scholars. Shy attempts by official institutions and private individuals have so far failed to produce a joint Arab effort to address these problems.

This lack of cooperative Arab effort may be due to political divisiveness among Arab officials and institutions, shortage in educational strategic planning, scarcity of material and human resources allocated to educational planning, unqualified leadership of Arab educational institutions, or a combination of all these.

Failure of common action, however, did not inhibit private initiatives for educational innovation and transformation. Bashshur<sup>12</sup> suggests that private initiative in Arab education goes back to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the rule of Mohammad Ali Pasha in Egypt when he created “a duality in the system of education” by “superimposing” new western type schools “on a layer of deeply rooted traditional schools that were left untouched.” But such initiatives were infrequent and did not produce serious educational reform.

However, as a consequence of the overflow of Arab oil funds and the globalization “frenzy” the Arab world is witnessing what Bashshur labels as an educational “deluge.”

Instead of endeavoring to develop cooperative native corrective action by Arab planners many Arab academic institutions attempt to “modernize” their programs by copying or replicating programs of reputable academic institutions. Some borrow parts from different programs and patch them together while others make an effort to adjust these programs to their needs. The most recent new trend is to “invite the best brains and the best organizations that...could [be found] in the west, to advise on the vision and how to bring it about, and also to transplant themselves and their organizations in the soil of the land.”<sup>13</sup> This trend is in rapid increase in the Arab World, particularly in Arab Gulf states. It is described by some as “parachuting down”<sup>14</sup> schools and colleges, and depicted by others as “trans-national education” or “brain circulation”.<sup>15</sup> The result is what the Egyptian historian Izzat Abdel Karim describes as modern education “coming” to us rather than “budding from” within us.<sup>16</sup>

### **4. WHAT IS NEEDED?**

For the most part the soundness of present Arab academic programs in media studies is questionable because they most often are not linked to the societies they operate within. Arab programs of media studies usually lack proper integration with other academic programs within their own universities as well as with Arab private and public academic and media institutions. Consequently, they don’t serve the needs of the present thus they fail to be relevant or to generate new and continuous learning.

In addition, Arab communication institutions generally fail to identify the vision and mission of their programs and educational strategic planning decisions are mostly absent. They usually lack perspectives to faculty rehabilitation and academic standards.

For a university and its programs to be effective it needs to be academically sound and also be linked to the society it operates within. It is essential that a direct link exists between the university and its society. Curricula of academic programs need to be relevant and useful to society. Any sound program in media studies should, therefore, be integrated with other academic programs within the university and with communications and media institutions with the objective of contributing to national development. It should serve the needs of the present but also look to the future.

A sound curriculum should be capable of generating new and continuous learning as well as bring meaning to what is learnt. It should be relevant to everyday life as well as vigorous and should include useful subjects.

An essential step in setting up a sound program in media studies would be to put forward a vision and mission of this program. The vision would set out the reasons for the continuation of the program and the “ideal” state that it aims to achieve. The mission would identify major goals and performance objectives. Once these are clearly defined the course that the program should acquire to achieve its desired expectations becomes evident. Priorities can be readily established and the program’s role within the media environment reinforced. Decisions about specializations that need to be stressed and designing the curricula can then follow.

An effective program for media studies requires a definition of its expected learning output and the role it ought to play in its community. It needs to be challenged to provide access and ensure quality through maximum attention to the teaching and learning process.

Finally, educational planning requires making a number of strategic decisions. Among these is whether the program should stress quality in its programs or focus on quantity. It is obvious that quantity burdens quality of education and consequently if the program is to maintain a large enrolment it will have to sacrifice its quality of curriculum. Other strategic decisions deal with faculty rehabilitation and academic standards, laboratory facilities, access to computers and the internet, library facilities and space per student.

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