

## THE CHANGING FACE OF MEDIA

The IAA conference has attracted some of the most influential minds from the media world. None more so than the veteran financial journalist Norman Pearlstine until recently Editor-in-Chief of Time Inc.

In an interview with Khaleej Times he spoke of the rapid emergence of new media and the challenge it is posing to traditional media particularly print media.

"If you look at the development of the Internet it is clear that the best of times for newspapers have gone – business models are changing fast, and individual voices through channels such as blogs are rising and this is effecting advertising revenues" he said. Pearlstine is also critical of the role of some journalists in expressing 'opinion' rather than reporting hard news.

"There are too many journalists using their positions as a platform for their own views instead of reporting." Similarly he is critical of news channels such as Fox TV for their style of coverage, "CNN had the opportunity to report hard news in its prime time slot in the US in contrast to Fox TV but did not do so".

Pearlstine reserves his most stinging criticism for the Bush Administration and its decision to invade Iraq in 2003. "I agreed with the invasion of Afghanistan however the invasion of Iraq was about getting even, Colin Powell presented the UN with evidence that we now know to be inaccurate – I think he was badly tarnished by this." Similarly he is dismissive about the remaining evidence used by the administration to prosecute its case on Iraq. "The claims that Iraq was harbouring weapons of mass destruction and also that it was buying yellow cake from Niger are now completely disproved – if you are going to use intelligence to support your case, you had better try and get it right."

Pearlstine feels that following the deaths of a number of journalists in Iraq has changed the basis of reporting, "You are reporting in a different way, you no longer question the man on the street and you become more reliant on briefings."

Pearlstine feels that relations between the media and the White House have suffered during the current administration, "The Bush administration has been particularly unfriendly towards the media and the profession has suffered as a consequence".

Pearlstine accepts that the US may have lost damaged its reputation by blocking the DP World deal, "its sends a bad signal and on this point I actually agree with President Bush and the decision was contrary to the US position on globalisation

Source: Khaleejtimes

## CORRECTING US MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT ARAB MEDIA

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the US have demonstrated that there is more in common between America and the Arab world than what sets them apart. Despite the mammoth discrepancy in the communication and media means at the disposal of each side, the Americans and the Arabs score miserably low in their cross-communication.

The Arabs are in the mindset that the American media is impenetrable since Jewish vigilantes are ready to brandish their sharpened swords not only on the necks of Arabs wanting to communicate with the Americans, but also on Americans sympathetic to Arabs.

The Americans are still entrenched in the Cold War mentality where failure to communicate with the Arabs is blamed on the Arab media perceived to be tightly controlled by the Arab governments — friends and foes of the US alike.

The shared perception is that the lack of cross-reach is due to the constricted access to the other media. Reality, however, shows that the increasing access Americans enjoy to Arab media is unmatched by Arab access to US media.

However, if America's ineffective communication with the Arabs illustrates anything, it demonstrates that while access is a necessary condition for communication, it falls short of being sufficient for effective communication.

Holding constant the centrality of US politics as a prime factor in shaping Arabs attitudes towards the America, Americans are utterly uninformed (or misinformed) about how accessible the Arab media is to American political perspectives.

Evidence on how accessible the Arab media is to US perspectives is stark. Unprecedented levels of media access are visible in the visual media, Internet, print media, and radio.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that the Arab states apply heavy-handed media censorship policies, the Arab governments have adopted the world's most liberal access to satellite TV channels policies.

Free-to-air access to satellite policies means that any Arab household can access over 500 TV channels that broadcast on satellites with a footprint in the Arab world.

Taking the Arab world as a whole, close to two-thirds of Arab homes have access to satellite TV channels, which include the US Congress financed-Al Hurra TV, BBC World, Euronews, and many US and European news and entertainment TV channels.

Especially since Sept. 11, virtually all of President George W. Bush's major speeches and press conferences are carried live on pan-Arab news TV channels — with instantaneous Arabic transla-

tion. The same applies for US congressional hearings on the region as well as speeches and press conferences by the US secretaries of defense and state.

American commentators and Middle East experts feature regularly on Arab TV channels. All major pan-Arab TV channels have news bureaus in major US cities, and both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyah have weekly talk shows from Washington.

Furthermore, region-wide, between 15 to 20 percent of adult Arabs have access to the Internet. Access varies between 33 and over 50 percent in the Arab Gulf states. Apart from blocking sex sites and some political opposition sites, all US and European sites are accessible.

Similarly, the US Congress-financed news and entertainment Radio Sawa broadcasts on the FM frequency in a number of Arab cities and can be accessed on the Internet.

With such abundant access to the Arab media the US must stop blaming Arab states' constrictions on media as an excuse for failed communication policies. Again, holding the US policies factor constant, the US — especially its public diplomacy apparatus — must take stock in what causes the failure of its communication policies.

Prior to Sept. 11, none of the previous US administrations realized the need for direct communication with the Arab public. The focus then was on the behavior of Arab states, not on what the Arab public was thinking.

The Sept. 11 attacks compelled a change in focus, but the US found itself speechless with hardly any Arabic-speaking Americans who are articulate enough to communicate directly with Arabs.

The current rush in the US to learn Arabic is welcome, but for the wrong purpose. It stems from an increasing demand for Arabic-speaking staff in the intelligence services and other government agencies.

Based on news reports, the motives for learning Arabic have more to do with improving the proficiency of monitoring the activities of Arab extremists, and much less to do with improving communication skills with Arabs in general.

This is certainly in contrast with what motivates millions of Arabs to learn English. They do so out of admiration of English-speaking cultures and out of aspiration for improving their lives and communication skills with the West.

No wonder why Arabs can master the English language at a faster pace than an American struggling to learn Arabic, especially if his or her only motivation is to get an intelligence translation position. It is primarily a motivation issue, which certainly does not emanate from admiration of Arab culture — irrespective of how difficult the Arabic language is.

Presumably, the financial resources and time needed to tutor less than a handful of Americans basic Arabic could be equivalent to those required to teach about 1,000 Arabs advanced English. The math here may not be altogether correct, but it is wise to weigh the costs and benefits of learning Arabic in the context of the motives of such endeavors.

In the final analysis, knowing the language is the only factor that determines how successful communication is. It is the attitudes most Americans have towards their audiences when they appear on Arab TV channels, which is most telling. Such attitudes can be easily detected from their basic body gestures.

It may be worth for the US public diplomacy team operating in the region to sample Arab reaction to such communication stunts of Arab TV channels. Such a research exercise ought to produce a concise guide for communicating with Arab TV audiences.

Interestingly, the current US public diplomacy director in the Arab world, Michael Pelletier, presents a promising breed of US public diplomacy communicators. For a change, Arabs watch an American public speaker who shows genuine concern and respect when responding to questions from TV hosts, fellow talk show guests, and audiences.

For once Arab audiences see an American official who nods his head up and down signaling appreciation to posed questions, as opposed to heads that swivel left and right hinting at displeasure at questions.

For the US, difficulty in communicating with Arab audiences is in part because many US officials have a bad attitude which is evident in their lack of knowledge of Arabic and low interest in Arab culture. More concern and respect to the audience would go a long way in rectifying this.

**Source: arabnews**

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### **Middle East Publishers' Association (MEPA).**

Dubai Media City, Office No. 6, Media Business Center, 2nd floor, Building No. 2,  
P O Box: 502038, Dubai, UAE. Email: [mepa@mepa.cc](mailto:mepa@mepa.cc), website: [www.mepa.cc](http://www.mepa.cc)