

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

New City, New Looks ^[1]

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

On my first visit to Dubai, nearly 15 years ago, the most remarkable thing about the city's two English-language newspapers, *Gulf News* and *Khaleej Times*, was the fact that they were almost indistinguishable from one another. Layout, graphics, stories, even the ads were the same. The international coverage, though comprehensive, was pulled entirely from the major western news agencies. What passed for local news were items on sales and contests at shopping malls and the opening of new businesses. Most of these looked suspiciously like press releases that had been copied word for word into the newspaper.

Today *Gulf News*, at least, is a vastly different paper, but its editor, Abdul Hamid Ahmad, is far from satisfied.

"When we take Arab media in general and compare developments in print versus satellite media, there is no comparison," he told me today at the paper's offices. "Our print media are still weak and need to revolutionize themselves."

His point was that Al-Jazeera and other Arabic-language satellite TV stations have revolutionized what the Arab world sees, but that change has come more slowly to the newspaper world. Ahmed speaks from experience, before taking over *Gulf News* he was managing editor of *Al-Bayan*, the Emirates' leading Arabic-language paper. He has also held senior positions at the semi-official *Al-Ittihad*.

Fifteen months ago *Gulf News* rolled out a completely new look, the result of a year of work with a newspaper design specialist brought in from the United States. But the sharper look and layout, he says, only highlighted the work that needed to be done on the staff's editorial skills. Ahmad has hired journalism trainers from the Reuter news agency to work with the staff, but he also recently made what he regards as another crucial decision: purchasing complete access to the *New York Times* News Service.

Along with material the paper buys from the *Los Angeles Times* / *Washington Post* syndicate and from the *Christian Science Monitor* this has allowed him to launch his own 'Week in Review' section. The contents are currently culled from the books, arts and news analysis coverage of the western press, but he hopes to generate more strictly local content soon.

The international material costs more than sending his own reporter to, say, Afghanistan, but for now it yields more thoughtful and sharply written copy than his own staff could generate. The international material, he says, also makes it easier for him to push the boundaries of a media culture that has loosened considerably over the last decade but is far from completely free. Ministers, he says, will freely tell a reporter from the *Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* things they will not tell the local media, things the local media might get in trouble for printing. Saying 'well, we just reprinted what was in the *Times*' can offer a degree of protection when

the subject at hand is a sensitive one.
