

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Bridging Gaps ^[1]

Salzburg, Austria

I have spent the weekend here at a conference entitled “Broadcast Media in the 21st Century: Engaging the World”. The Salzburg Seminar and Washington DC’s Center for Strategic and International Studies brought together about 35 Arab and western journalists for a long weekend of discussions about how we perceive the world, the Middle East, our profession and each other. There were a smattering of people from outside either broadcasting or the media, but it was mostly television people and mostly Americans and Arabs.

Topics here have included language and bias, how death is portrayed, external pressures on the media and the search for a universal system of journalistic ethics. To promote candid discussion conference sessions were off-the-record, but as I prepare to return to Jordan there are some thoughts I can share.

It quickly became clear that even those of us familiar with the Middle East have a lot of questions about how the Arab media sees itself and its role in society. This is hardly surprising granted the revolutionary change stations like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya have brought to the Middle East in recent years. Arab satellite media remain a relatively new phenomenon, and are still trying to find their exact role in the region’s political and media cultures. Satellite channels still operate essentially at the sufferance of local governments. Qatar, in the case of Al-Jazeera and Dubai, in the case of Al-Arabiya, currently regard hosting a provocative media channel as something in their interests. Were attitudes to change, however, the stations enjoy none of the legal protections we in the West often take for granted.

A certain defensiveness on the part of many of the Arab attendees was hard to miss on the opening day, a sign of the unfortunate gulf of understanding still separating Arab and western media communities. When clips of Al-Arabiya’s Iraqi election coverage were screened with translation several of the westerners expressed surprise to see how closely it resembled American television coverage of the same event. It was a moment highlighting the degree to which the West’s understanding of the media revolution taking place in the Middle East remains based on hearsay and fifth-hand information. Another case in point: a western participant, inevitably, spoke about the televising of beheadings of hostages in Iraq. To his credit it was a western news executive who leapt in to remind everyone that no Arab news channel has ever aired a beheading. Ever.

The conversations have been both illuminating and useful. One (Arab) participant pointedly asked why the Arab media, when speaking in Arabic to an Arab audience should be criticized for failing to take American sensitivities into account. This is a legitimate question. Since the Afghanistan war in 2001 Arab satellite stations have been criticized in the United States for showing casualties. American viewers are angered by scenes of bloodied civilians and, occasionally, of dead Americans. To my mind, however, much of the American criticism of Arab war coverage over the last few years has amounted to a charge that Arab journalists are

not sufficiently patriotic in their coverage of American wars. But then, why should they be?

The weekend was also a humbling reminder of the extent to which the best Arab journalists know, and are comfortable in, our culture despite our lack of familiarity with theirs. The conference was conducted entirely in English for the simple reason that most elite Arab journalists speak English fluently, while it would be near impossible to find even half a dozen similarly senior American media figures who could attend a conference where Arabic was the working language.

The weekend was especially refreshing in that it combined candor with an impressive lack of rancor and invective. The really heartening thing was seeing how much we all share as journalists. At a time when the dialogue between Americans and Arabs, particularly concerning the media, is more often marked by accusations than by understanding this was a truism of which I was happy to be reminded. As Sunday night turned to Monday morning about ten of us – a mixed group of Arabs and westerners – gathered around a TV set to watch the Super Bowl (which sounds really, really strange with German commentary) – a final act of bonding to wrap up an unexpectedly successful weekend.

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