Universal Ethics?

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Among reporters who cover the Middle East, few assignments have a duller reputation than the annual summit meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council.[i] In 1990, however, things promised to be different. Iraq had invaded and occupied GCC-member Kuwait and a war over the issue was clearly imminent. Thus, a few days before Christmas, a rather larger contingent of Western press than usual trekked to Doha, the small, quiet capital of small, quiet Qatar to cover the annual gathering.

The summit, as usual, was about as transparent as a desert sandstorm. The summiteers were ensconced in a hotel at the end of the city. The media were all required to stay in a hotel at the extreme opposite end. Most of the roads between were closed.

So a French colleague and I were intrigued when a Qatari journalist offered us a scoop. The summit was collapsing, he said. The six leaders were virtually at one another's throats. Working in the controlled environment of Qatar's media he, of course, could not report this story, but perhaps we would like to run with it?

Quizzing the Qatari we constantly returned to one question: Who or what was his source? He hedged for half an hour before finally saying in exasperation, "This is not how we do it here! We don't have 'sources.' We *smell* the news!"

The French correspondent and I looked at each other, rolled our eyes, and began searching for a polite way to end the conversation. Neither of us used the story of the summit's imminent collapse, which was just as well because the meeting finished as scheduled and made – as these things usually do – very little news.

There are legitimate differences in journalistic culture from one country to another, but at some point what begin as questions of style often become issues of ethics. That, in turn, raises the broader question of universality. Are there certain norms of ethics and conduct that all journalists – Americans and Iraqis, Indians and Chileans – can agree on? Or are

even basic standards relative? Is it OK to "smell" the news if one comes from a particular culture or is there such a thing as good versus bad reporting? Is objectivity a journalist's highest calling? Or are there situations and issues that call for it to be put to one side?

On a very basic level it is difficult to find anyone who denies the existence of universal standards. "They're not many," says Nart Bouran, head of news at Abu Dhabi Television, but they do exist. "There are universal things: you can't lie, you can't make things up. These are things that all journalists learn no matter where they are from."

"It is very unethical to be on the payroll of a person you are covering. It's very unethical to sleep with your source," says Youssef M. Ibrahim, who spent more than 20 years as a foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. "Do not cow under the pressure of the government of which you are a citizen. Do not, literally, fabricate stories in order to make one side look more favorable than the other."

Ibrahim calls these "fundamental, common denominators with which you cannot argue very much."

Go further, however, and the picture becomes murkier. North American journalists are trained to treat gifts and other free perks with the deepest of suspicion.[ii] In the United States and Great Britain, news organizations sending reporters to cover the president, secretary of state, prime minister or foreign secretary pay for their seats aboard official airplanes. Arab news organizations sending a reporter on such an assignment would not dream of being billed by the government for airfare and hotel rooms. European attitudes are more nuanced. Over the years I have known many European newspaper and television correspondents who gladly accepted free flights and hotel accommodations, or a car and driver from a host government. Most will argue that as long as they and their editors know themselves not to be influenced by this largesse there is little to worry about.

The Arab world, however, has long had a reputation for condoning journalistic behavior that would never be accepted in the West. Near the end of that Gulf summit in Doha a briefcase was delivered to the hotel room of every journalist accredited to the meeting.

These were filled mainly with inexpensive items designed to promote Qatar (a desk calendar, an album of Qatari folk music, etc), but the briefcases sent to the rooms of some Arab correspondents also contained envelopes filled with cash. More recently Iraqi officials from Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's party defended their practice of giving Iraqi journalists attending the prime minister's news conferences envelopes containing $100 bills. "I'm from a tribal background and in (our culture), it's just hospitality," said Adnan Janabi, Mr. Allawi's campaign manager.[iii]

It is, perhaps, with this sort of history in mind that Al-Jazeera, the region's most prominent television news channel, recently framed a code of ethics and a code of conduct to apply to all of its journalists. The codes identify Al-Jazeera as a specifically Arab television channel, one founded to reflect an Arab view of world affairs. They also, however, echo many values no Western journalist would take issue with: "Endeavour to get to the truth and declare it in our dispatches, programmes and news bulletins in a manner which leaves no doubt about its validity and accuracy," declares one of the code's ten items. "Distinguish between news material, opinion and analysis to avoid the pitfalls of speculation and propaganda," reads another.[iv]

The channel's editor-in-chief, Ahmed Al-Sheikh, says that Al-Jazeera has adhered to these values since its launch in 1996, but that its increasing role as a lightning rod for criticism both inside and outside the Arab World made a clear statement of editorial philosophy necessary.

"It became more imperative for us to announce these things because we were coming under pressure from certain governments in certain circles, and we have to show them the philosophy that we work with," he said.

Many of the channel's early staffers, including Al-Sheikh himself, came to Qatar from jobs at either the BBC's Arabic-language radio service or at the BBC's short-lived Arabic-language television channel, an operation which folded a few months before Al-Jazeera went on the air. This is important because in both the English and the Arabic-speaking worlds the BBC remains one of broadcasting's most formidable, and trusted, 'brands.'

“We were almost 30 people who came from the BBC directly to launch the channel,” Al-Sheikh says. “So, when we came over here we were acquainted with these things from the BBC. We were familiar with them. We used to practice them.”

“I don't know why over the past seven years the previous management didn't think of writing these things down,” he adds.

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The implication, however, that Western values are universally applicable, even in a broad sense, remains problematic in many parts of the world. For its own training programs the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting has been trying to change the terms of debate, avoiding references to the West in favor of the term “international standards.”

Alan Davis, the institute’s director of strategy and assessment, candidly calls this a case of rebranding. ‘Western,’ he says, has become “an emotive label” that confuses the issue.

Nart Bouran of Abu Dhabi Television, a Jordanian who spent more than a decade with Reuters and the Associated Press, says the Western media are often better than their Arab counterparts at defining and teaching the norms of the profession.

“There are certain things that you learn at a Western (news) agency,” he said. “With an agency … you have to give both sides of the story and you have to be completely neutral because it's not your story. It's a different approach. There are certain things that you learn: not to make something up, not to exaggerate. … If there were 200 people at a rally, then it's 200 people and not 2,000 people just because you like the issue that they're rallying for.”

Salah Nagm, assistant general manager at Al-Arabiya, the Dubai-based news channel that is Al-Jazeera’s main competitor, is another Arab journalist with extensive experience in Western organizations, having spent 14 years working for the BBC and Radio Netherlands, among others. With that background, he says, “I can understand the misconceptions from the two sides.”

Nagm believes that much Western criticism of Arab media ethics is really a critique of Arab attitudes toward the West in general, a critique that generates double standards.

"I don't think that most journalists are anti-American," he says. "And I think that there is an existing universal code of ethics between journalists and there is no real difference between them."

Yet, he says, British newspapers "are not perceived as anti-American when they publish a story about Abu Ghraib, for example, and maybe spread some unconfirmed stories or, let's say, rumors. … But if that happens from an Arabic organization it's perceived as anti-American. The fact is: it is not. You have to see the whole scope of Arab media and then judge upon that."

This, in turn, raises the broader question of ethics in practice, as opposed to theory. Put another way, it is important to realize that saying universal norms exist is not the same thing as saying they are universally observed. More than a few critics have taken the American media to task for its shortcomings in the run-up to the Iraq War.[v] Some individual media outlets, notably the *New York Times*, have engaged in a degree of public soul-searching over the same issue. Such critiques are possible precisely because the American media generally acknowledge a certain set of standards as the ideal within their profession, even if those standards are not always adhered to.

Davis of the Institute for War and Peave Reporting is not alone in wondering aloud whether the Western media are best placed to lecture the rest of the world on journalistic ethics. Contemplating the standards of the US and British media over the last decade, he says, "I've seen a steady decline"

Nagm notes, "Universal standards will be: not to accept any financial aid that will affect your output. If you guarantee that, then this is universal. But the practice is different, because sometimes you have weak people who will be subject to temptation. It depends on the management of any newsroom to be able to find that out, spot it and prevent it."

It remains an open question whether Al-Jazeera's widely publicized code of ethics will become a region-wide model. If it does, will that, in turn, lead to more introspection on the part of the Arab media? Executives like Al-Sheikh clearly see Al-Jazeera's code as both a challenge to the rest of their profession as well as an answer to critics further afield.

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In the early months of 2005 Lebanon has become something of an open-air laboratory for these issues.

On Feb.14, 2005 a powerful bomb exploded outside one of Beirut's main hotels killing former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, seven of his aides and bodyguards and 12 other people. Many Lebanese blamed the killing on Syria, which has run Lebanon as something approaching a protectorate since 1990. In the weeks following Hariri's death a series of ever larger opposition demonstrations took place in central Beirut, galvanizing the country's hitherto fractious opposition.

For Lebanon's media this has been a defining moment, a period when traditional conceptions of journalistic ethics have clashed with the ideological agendas of the politicians who control much of the country's media. On the whole, ideology has triumphed.

After an initial moment of shock as the news broke of the attack on Hariri (during which the television station owned by Hariri himself briefly ran a documentary on fish as a way of killing time) most of the country's television stations went to full-time coverage of the assassination and its aftermath. "For the first week or ten days the airwaves were full of this. There was no way you could avoid it," says Michael Young, a political analyst who is also editorial page editor of Beirut's English-language *Daily Star* newspaper.

How the story played out over the ensuing weeks often had as much to do with the political alignment of a given channel's owners as it did with the news value of individual events.

Six weeks after the assassination Hariri's station, Future Television, was still broadcasting little but eulogies for the dead leader interspersed with debate shows focusing on the country's future. A black mourning band was placed atop the channel's on-screen logo. Beside was the opposition slogan, "… for Lebanon" and a running count of the days since Hariri's death. According to Elsa Yazbek, an anchor and reporter for the channel, Future's anchors were required to wear black on the air as well as buttons featuring Hariri's photo and a blue ribbon, another opposition symbol.

"The media has had a huge impact at several different levels. It was the vehicle that promoted mass mobilization … providing a sense of solidarity," says Rami Khouri, editor-at-large at the *Daily Star*. "Even just by watching the media at home you felt fortified and you felt part of something big."

"TV and newspapers are not only following the news, they are part of it," says Yusef Bazzi, a columnist for Al-Mustaqbal, Future Television's sister newspaper.

Young, however, puts it most succinctly: "Future has become the focal point." Other stations, he says, "are trying to avoid this issue."

For example, Young sees Al-Manar[vi], the station run by Hizbollah, a Shiite Muslim political movement that also retains an armed militia, as taking an overtly partisan approach to Lebanon's political turmoil. When more than 1 million Lebanese (nearly a third of the country's population) demonstrated near Hariri's tomb on March 14, the one-month anniversary of his murder, Al-Manar was initially alone among Lebanese stations in not carrying the protest live. Instead, the channel showed a documentary on wartime ties between Lebanon's Christians and Israel. "They did show (the demonstration) later on because they could not *not* show it, especially because the other stations showed *their* demonstration," he said, referring to a large Hizbollah-organized protest in the same square six days earlier. That night, however, Al-Manar's evening coverage emphasized the involvement of some right-wing Christians in the protest. It seemed, Young believes, designed to scare Shiite viewers and make the demonstration look like a right-wing Christian rally to promote imperialism.

According to Young, Lebanon's most popular station, LBC, has "sort of fluctuated." The station is owned by Christians – one shareholder is Lebanon's interior minister – and has ties to the people who ran Christian militias during the long series of civil wars that wracked Lebanon from 1975 to 1990. The station increased the amount of news it carried during the first two weeks following Hariri's assassination, but soon returned to its regular fare of movies, game shows and soap operas.

It is, perhaps, surprising that this approach is casually accepted by other Lebanese journalists. "All Lebanese TV stations are owned by somebody. Everyone understands this," Yazbek, the anchor/reporter at Future Television says. Echoing her, Al-Bazzi shrugs, noting, "the owners of the media are politicians." And objectivity? "It's very relative."

Lebanese journalists interviewed for this article all spoke of the need for objectivity as a requirement of retaining their stations' or newspapers' credibility. Yet those linked to the opposition also came close to arguing that at a moment of national crisis a higher calling takes precedence. "The first mission is we want the truth. The first mission is to keep the subject (the search for Hariri's assassins) alive in the minds of the people," Yazbek says.

During an earlier conversation in London, Davis of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting said that "the Holy Grail of international standards is the local journalist who can speak beyond his own ethnic group."

As recent events in Lebanon have shown, the best of intentions do not always bring that to fruition. Journalists may not resort to "smelling" the news, but when high politics meets journalistic ethics they may find the choices required of them less than clear cut.

Months ago Arab media, symbolized by Al-Jazeera, were seen by many in the West as unconstrained practitioners of ant-Bush, anti-American propaganda. For their part, many Europeans saw some American media as a voice of the "war party."

Are media practices now converging ever so slightly, guided by the basic principles of journalism? In a regional confrontation so aggravated and complex, it's a lot to imagine.

Yet the prominent and often bruising American neo-conservative Richard Perle in March 2005 praised the value of some of Al-Jazeera's content as contributing to a more constructive atmosphere throughout the Muslim world.

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About the Middle East Media Project: The USC Center on Public Diplomacy Middle East Media Project is funded by a grant from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy. The project examines core issues at the intersection of media and public diplomacy in the Middle East. It aims to answer the following questions: How do the Arab and western media interact and perceive each other? How are U.S. foreign policy goals promoted to and perceived by people in the Middle East? And most importantly, what sort of new initiatives could be effective in deepening mutual understanding between the Arab and western worlds?

Notes

[i] Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman

[ii] We are concerned here only with news coverage. The ethical rules governing film, theater and book critics, travel writers etc. have long been treated within the profession as different from those governing political and economic reporting and are beyond the scope of this essay.

[iii] $100 notes for journalists 'are just Iraqi hospitality,' by Jim Muir, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 January 2005. Online at:
www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/01/12/wirq12.xml&sSheet=/news/2005/01/12/ixworld.html

[iv] The complete code can be viewed on Al-Jazeera's website at:
http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/07256105-B2FC-439A-B255-D830BB238EA1.htm

[v] See particularly Michael Massing's work in the *New York Review of Books*: "Unfit to Print" (24 June 2004) and "Now They Tell Us" (26 February 2004)

[vi] In separate moves the United States and France have both banned broadcasts of Al-Manar's satellite channel in recent months. France cited anti-Semitic programming. The United States considers Al-Manar's parent – Hizbollah – a terrorist organization.