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SUMMARY: Newsroom managers throughout the Middle East recognize the need for improved standards among the region's journalists, and training programs are proliferating.

It's no surprise that reporters in places like Iraq need to learn the most basic skills of the craft. But in the rich oil states of the Gulf the sheer diversity of newsrooms, where as many as a dozen nationalities work together, can pose problems as different journalistic cultures clash.

All this has turned media training into a large and growing business, with governments and foundations underwriting training work carried out by NGOs, as well as by some of the media industry's biggest names.

Some, however, question the utility of it all. By some estimates as much as $30 million was spent on media training in the Balkans and, by some accounts, things are worse now than they were before the well-meaning Westerners arrived. Moreover, the training environment in the Middle East now involves many of those same players.

So in the Middle East, it needs to be asked when the money is spent, what the trainees really will take back to their newsrooms.

* * *

AMMAN, Jordan --- In a hotel conference room, 27 journalists from Iraq, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories sit around a large U-shaped table facing two instructors. Generally in their mid-20s, most are reporters for Arabic-language newspapers, though a few write in English for papers like Amman's Jordan Times. (A few of the Iraqis are "fixers," locally-hired news assistants working for the Baghdad bureaus of major American or

British newspapers.) Mid-way through a week-long training course they are about to get a rude shock.

For an hour Bob Sullivan, a free-lance television producer and former UPI correspondent, has been lecturing the group on the basics of story structure: the art of pulling the most important fact from a long news event. Sullivan ends by giving the students a quick assignment. The previous day they met and had a private news conference with Jordan's foreign minister. Now Sullivan wants them to write the lead to a story on the news conference: two sentences highlighting the single most important thing to come out of the minister's remarks. They are to presume they are writing for an international news agency, not their own local newspapers.

When the students take turns reading their work a couple of problems immediately become apparent. First, many of the young writers clearly do not understand the difference between a headline and a lead (the opening paragraph).

More seriously, none of the reporters demonstrates much ability to make an independent assessment of facts and their relative importance. Every trainee has identified a comment about his or her home country as the most important thing to come out of the news conference. Facing the students, Mahmoud Tarabay, Sullivan's fellow media trainer and a journalism professor visiting from Beirut, shakes his head and takes the students collectively to task.

The assignment, he reminds them, was to write the lead as though they were working for an international news agency. That requires looking beyond one's own parochial concerns. Moreover, he says, every single student has chosen the answer to his or her own question to the minister and identified that as the most important element of the news conference.

As he shakes his head the session's organizer, Nedal Mansour of Jordan's Committee to Protect the Freedom of Journalists takes over, rebuking the trainees with the remark, "Only a minority of you were looking for new ideas or information."

Sessions Become Widespread

The scene is one that is being played out throughout the region almost every day. With the Bush administration promoting an agenda of openness, democratization and political reform, media training has emerged as a big business throughout the Middle East. The session described here was organized by the Washington-based International Center for Journalists, but ICFJ is hardly alone in its activities. Throughout the region a growing number of media organizations and NGOs are involved in media training. The list includes universally recognizable names, such as Reuters and the BBC, charitable organizations such as ICFJ, for-profit NGOs and a growing number of Arab media players including the region's most prominent news channel, Al-Jazeera, and its two most widely-watched television networks, MBC and LBC.

Funding for these activities comes from an equally diverse group of sources including the U.S. departments of State and Defense, the U.S. Agency for International Development and its British opposite number, the Department for International Development. There is money from the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and the International Republican Institute, the international democracy-building NGOs linked to the two main American political parties. There are funds and programs from the European Union and even from Japan.

ICFJ, which is particularly active in the region, gets backing for its programs from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. According to Carolyn Robinson, who runs ICFJ's Middle East programs, the group has trained more than 250 journalists in the Arab world since August 2004, running workshops in Beirut, Damascus, Amman and Doha, Qatar, as well as organizing on-site programs at two Lebanese newspapers and at state-run television channels in both Syria and Jordan.

"This number is certainly up from past efforts," she wrote in an e-mail answering questions for this article. "It has been ICFJ's most comprehensive, broad-based and lengthy training program in the Middle East to date."

But even this does not tell the whole story. The image of places in dire need of media training in the Middle East usually focuses on journalists in places like Iraq or

Syria, countries struggling to emerge from decades of oppression. The reality is far broader, and finds even editors in the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf moving to bring foreign experts in to improve their staffs' performance.

Diversity Poses Problems

These newsroom leaders face far different challenges from their colleagues in Baghdad and Damascus. Several cite misunderstandings stemming from ethnic diversity and a general lack of trained staff as core problems they hope training can help solve. If basic skills are what is needed most in emerging journalistic cultures like Iraq or Syria, training that both standardizes output and raises general skill levels is an equally significant problem in better-off parts of the Arab World.

Two years ago Gulf News, a daily based in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, unveiled a new "look," the result of a year-long redesign project, according to the paper's editor-in-chief, Abdul Hamid Ahmed. Ahmed was seeking to move the paper toward what he calls "visual journalism." He chose USA Today as a model, emphasizing crisply-written stories with lots of graphics and sidebars. Immediately, he said, "in the redesign the issue of training came to the surface." Quality was a particularly tricky issue because of the sheer number of nationalities more than a dozen represented in the paper's newsroom. (While this sort of national diversity would be nearly unheard of in the United States or Europe, it is fairly common in many workplaces in Dubai and elsewhere in the Gulf States.) This sort of diversity, Ahmed said, makes it difficult to establish a single journalistic "culture" within the institution. That, he says, makes training all the more important: It is often the only way to get everyone to approach journalism in the same way.

Nart Bouran, head of the news department at Abu Dhabi Television, says differing national approaches to the news have sometimes been a challenge within his organization too. As a broadcaster, however, he faces an even more basic problem: "There are far more TV stations around, and newsrooms, than there are trained journalists. That is a big problem."

He added, “I think a lot of the mistakes that happen to some broadcasters are really out of non-experience. In many cases they don’t mean to take sides, they just don’t know better.”

Some of the Arab world’s newspapers have long and distinguished pedigrees. Cairo’s Al-Ahram was first published in 1876 and now sits at the center of a sprawling semi-official publishing empire including an English-language weekly, its own in-house journalism school and a think tank, the Al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies. Beirut’s An-Nahar is more than 70 years old.

Television, by comparison, is in its infancy. The region’s best known TV news station, Al-Jazeera, only went on the air in 1996. Its main rival, Al-Arabiya, debuted in January 2003. Both are on the air 24 hours a day. In addition Bouran’s Abu Dhabi Television broadcasts 5 1/2 hours of news per day. These constitute the “big three” of Arabic-language TV news, below which a plethora of both private and state-run broadcasters offer varying amounts of news coverage.

Rather than sending the staff off to week-long seminars, as is the norm in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, Abu Dhabi Television and Gulf News both have the resources to assemble their own training programs and run them in-house. Both have hired the UK-based Thompson Foundation to work with their staff. Gulf News also brings in trainers from the Reuters Foundation twice a year, according to Ahmed, while Bouran says Abu Dhabi TV has hired CNN to help run some of its training programs.

“All of that is exposure for our staff,” he said. “It’s good. They have to see how other organizations work. And they always come back with something - some kind of skill that they’ve acquired on the training course.”

BBC a Major Player

Another major player in the world of training is the BBC, which enters the fray supported by what is arguably broadcasting’s most formidable brand-name. Many of the BBC’s training operations are run through its international charitable arm, the World Service Trust.

"I think that we have a philosophy really of doing no harm. In that sense we are trying to deliver BBC values, BBC journalism, professionalism," said Jaldeep Katwaala, a project manager for the Trust's Media Development Unit.

"Sometimes, we've gone to donors and said, 'This is work that we think should be done,' and we've then suggested an outline of action which the donors are then prepared to fund. … [Alternately] people will come along to us and say, 'We want you to deliver X, Y and Z weeks of professional journalism training because you're the BBC.'"

Drawing its teachers mainly from the BBC's pool of journalists, the Trust puts trainers through a week-long "training of trainers" program and emphasizes ability to teach in the local language.

"It's really important because in some countries it will be difficult to accept an English-speaking trainer, for practical reasons and for cultural reasons as well," says Ibrahim Helal, a project director in the training unit.

"We had to have symposia in different countries to understand the [sort] of journalism in each country better before trying to train them. So when we come to the training point we can use our knowledge from the symposium, we can use examples, we can refer to names and newspapers television as examples - good examples sometimes. [We try] to convince them that they have something good that they need to build on--that they have something good journalistically but they have some gaps they need to fill with BBC values."

Katwaala says the Trust does media development work in more than 20 countries worldwide, including half a dozen in the Middle East. It gets its funding mainly from Britain's Department for International Development and from the European Union, and does not draw from the BBC's main operating budget.

Operated as a Business

As the market for training around the region has grown so, too have the number of players involved. In late 2003 the Dubai-based Middle East Broadcasting Center (Al-Arabiya's parent company) was hosting groups of trainees from Iraqi television for

training programs. These generated some criticism back in Baghdad when it emerged that MBC, though an Arabic-language network, was running the training programs in English, a language few of the trainees spoke.

The clearest sign that training is seen by some, particularly in the Gulf, as a business, however, can be found in Doha, headquarters of Al-Jazeera and, since February 2004, home to the Al-Jazeera Media Training and Development Center. Unlike the BBC or ICFJ, Al-Jazeera runs a "retail" training operation. The center's director, Mahmoud Abdulhadi, says it was set up on a commercial base, but not a profit-making one. "We are just looking to break even."

In practical terms this means that unlike other programs, which aim to improve the skills of people already working in the profession, the Al-Jazeera center's courses are available to anyone who cares to fill out a form and pay the required fees.

Though Al-Jazeera has assembled specific training programs for specific clients (notably Sudan's state-run television channel), Abdulhadi says most of the students are individuals. They pay around $600 each to attend week-long courses in editorial or technical skills. Month-long courses, which include accommodation and some meals, cost around $3,400. Students have come from Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco, more than 500 in the center's first seven months.

Though advertisements on Al-Jazeera itself feature shots of the network's reporters, writers and anchors in action, the training center is actually located in a different section of the Qatari capital, Doha, a 20-minute drive from the television channel's headquarters. The facilities, including a complete TV news set, are state-of-the-art, though they aren't a working newsroom.

Surprisingly, whereas the BBC draws on its own staff for trainers, Al-Jazeera - like MBC - is importing Westerners to do most of its teaching. Abdulhadi has sought trainers from the Thompson Foundation, from a journalism school in Lille, France and, more recently, has partnered with Robinson and the ICFJ.

"We have professionals in Al-Jazeera in their work. But, until now, there are not enough professionals in training. So, step by step, we are preparing them to be trainers,"

he says. “They can help us when they have enough time, because they are busy also with their jobs.”

With Westerners doing much of the actual training it is perhaps unsurprising that Abdulhadi says Al-Jazeera’s training “serves the same principles, the same objectives” as any Western organization. “We are just seeking to have a share with other organizations to develop the media in the region,” he adds.

Too Short to Matter?

The rapid growth of training as a region-wide business means the activity is not without its critics. “These are all pinpricks,” said Hassan Fattah, former editor in chief of the English-language newspaper Iraq Today. As an editor Fattah sent students on courses. Later he worked on a number of courses as a trainer himself both inside and outside Iraq. Both experiences led him to question the value of training as it is currently practiced. “They’re not necessarily doing anything for the long term,” he said. “Too many of these programs are bringing in journalists for a week and then sending them home.”

Fattah noted that during a single week in December 2004 there were four separate training programs for Iraqi journalists taking place in Amman at the same time, including programs sponsored by the U.S. Embassy, ICFJ and by the Reuters Foundation.

That month alone more than 120 Iraqi journalists received some sort of training in Amman. Fattah wondered, however, how effective the training could be, noting that when he ran Iraq Today he was constantly asked to send people abroad for training, so much so that taking all of the available opportunities would have left him with too few staff to run the paper. Though every staffer at Iraq Today was eager to participate in any program involving foreign travel, he said, the number who returned home with new usable skills was minimal.

“How many of them (the Iraqi trainees) are actually journalists here to improve their skills and how many are here for the vacation?” he asked. [In my own experience supervising journalists at Iraqi television, this problem also arose. Iraqis, after so many

years cut off from the outside world, tended to view training courses more as vacations than as professional development opportunities. - Gordon Robison]

Though results would be far longer in coming, Fattah believes that scholarships would do more to improve the quality of the region's press. Noting that a week-long training course in Amman for 10-12 Iraqi journalists costs about $20,000 to run, Fattah asked "How much would 20K get you if you took one or two people and gave them scholarships to real journalism programs?"

Bosnia a Cautionary Example

The irony is that Fattah's observations are not particularly new. Alan Davis, director of strategy and assessment for the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting, notes that the 1990s saw between $10 and $30 million spent on media development in the Balkans over a five-year period, "and the consensus is it has achieved nothing." Many observers, he added, believe standards in the Balkans are actually worse now than they were a decade ago.

"That's what the industry keeps saying: we don't want another Bosnia," agreed Tim Williams, a former BBC staffer who was involved in some of the broadcaster's early training efforts in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. "That's a shared view."

At its worst, he said, the problem in Bosnia was "an explosion of radio, TV stations, and print." This weakened the ability of any media outlet to support itself with advertising revenue, effectively leaving all media open to political manipulation, since political organizations were often the only local sources of money. It was an environment in which Western aid organizations wound up competing with one another.

In Afghanistan, following the American-led war to remove the Taliban from power, and subsequently in Iraq, there have been conscious attempts not to repeat those mistakes. NGOs working on media development have developed an "industry checking system" involving twice-monthly meetings to coordinate their activities. As a result, Williams said, "There hasn't been that same explosion that you had in Bosnia … where

every small village seemed to need to have its own television station, its own football stadium and its own newspaper."

Coordination may help avoid some of these problems. But it is also a fact that many of the people and organizations that took on media development tasks in Iraq list time in the Balkans as a primary credential on their CVs. San Diego-based Science Applications International Corporation cited its media development experience in the Balkans as a prime factor in winning a $100 million U.S. government contract to rebuild and run state-run Iraqi radio and television in 2003-04. Simon Haselock, the British official charged with rewriting Iraq's media laws for the American-led Coalition Provisional Authority, headed up a similar team in Bosnia. Other NGOs such as IREX, InterNews and IWPR itself are either active in both areas, or have been actively bidding on media development work in the Middle East.

Part of the problem, Davis contends, is precisely this tendency to see the same people over and over. "It is kind of like a traveling circus," he said. "There's no sort of learning curve. It just moves from one-to-one."

This raises the questions any training program must ultimately answer: What sort of training actually works? And how does one assess the success or failure of any particular program?

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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?