

# Kamal Adham Center for Journalism Training and Research

The American University in Cairo

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## Final Report and Overall Analysis:

### *The Arab Online Journalism Project-*

#### Intended Goals and Assessment of Results

**Evaluation By:** Dina Basiony, Project Coordinator  
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#### **Points of evaluation:**

- 1- Understanding the goal of the project.
- 2- Highlighting the main events of the project.
- 3- Defining the outcome of each phase.
- 4- An overall assessment.

## Understanding the goal of the project

In an era marked by various major crises facing journalism in the Arab world - from the unjustifiable censorship and oppression of freedom of expression, personal agendas in each media outlet affecting the credibility of news coverage and the journalists' overall severe lack of training, professionalism or respect to ethics- we find that the readers, the citizens of the Arab world, became victims.

Citizens of the Arab world become victims when the governmental media in their countries hide major parts of the truth to serve specific agendas. They become victims when the opposition media constantly, and sometimes unjustly, attack and demonize the governments without solid arguments or proper deliverance of the full picture of events. They also become victims when they get exposed to media produced by journalists who have no sense of ethics or understanding of the devastation and chaos that sloppy reporting creates in any given society.

We understand that the media greatly shape the public opinion and affect the thoughts and behaviors of the citizens. We also need to acknowledge that the unprofessional practices of journalism in local media in many Arab countries have negatively affected the citizens' development, their understanding of their countries and their surroundings.

The situation is becoming even more dangerous with the growing of online journalism, the most appealing and speediest source of information for many citizens today. Millions of personal blogs and personal websites across the region have been created by non professional journalists. This has made it even harder for the reader to find a trustworthy piece of news among all the online sources that are characterized by the hasty, and in most cases, faulty coverage.

The role of the *Arab Online Journalism Project* comes to bring some credibility, ethics and professionalism back to the stage of online journalism. There are tens of promising journalists across the region who have the potential to make a significant positive impact in their societies by their responsible coverage of critical issues-had they been given the opportunity to receive proper training.

The *Arab Online Journalism Project* gives the chance to a number of 13 Arab journalists- selected from countries that severely lack training and has the worst cases of oppression to freedom of expression- to be invited to the Kamal Adham Center at AUC for a series of workshops on the proper professional practices of online journalism.

Our aim is to have a group of distinguished journalists, help them start their own online spaces and give them proper training on the highest standards of professionalism, and help them write about some of the most critical issues the media in the Arab world need to shed more light on. The result is to have better informed public on the long run.

The *Arab Online Journalism Project* is implemented in the shape of four workshops- one week each- over the course of one year.

In addition to introducing the selected journalists to the technical aspects of online journalism, they also get training by professional national and international journalists on the basis of high standard journalism.

Each workshop of the project has a theme. The journalists are required to write online stories about the theme of each workshop when they get back to their countries. The results are in-depth news stories from different Arab countries on unified themes, to be published on the Center's website later.

The themes selected for the four workshops were; Civil Society, Culture Exchange, Professional Political Analysis and Climate Change.

All journalists wrote articles on each theme and have been getting professional instructions from accredited journalists, as well as, national and international experts on all themes.

Before analyzing the outcome of each workshop, it's rather important to shed light on the participants who've committed themselves to the project for a whole year. The participants have added significantly to the success of the goal of the project due to their harmonious relationship with one another, eagerness to learn and benefit each other from their experiences.

## **Selection of Participants**

It was very important to make sure that all participants selected for the *Arab Online Journalism Project* are genuinely interested and committed to the goal of our project and the serious work we are planning to conduct.

As a result, in selecting the Arab journalists, the project coordinator (who is a journalist), depended primarily on her contacts in the field of journalism. We knew that opening the gate for receiving applications- through the Kamal Adham Center's website- will only result in collecting a massive number of requests from people providing their CVs. But, there are no guarantees that those people are as good or experienced as the CVs imply, and there is no way that the level of seriousness and commitment of the different participants can be detected merely through their CVs.

The Adham Center was able to reach out to the various significant publications and media outlets in the different Arab countries, working through the Center's extensive network of contacts, along with those of the project coordinator, herself a journalist. We contacted the Editors in Chief or Managing Editors and personally asked them to recommend a couple of outstanding journalists from their publications to take part in the project.

A simple example to illustrate the process is the selection of the Bahraini journalist, Ali Al-Aliwat. In Bahrain, Al-Wasat newspaper is one of the most significant, credible and widely-read publications. Following a meeting between then-Center director Lawrence Pintak and Mansour Al Jamri, Editor in Chief of Al-Wasat, the project coordinator followed up with al Jamri, whose publication has an online edition which is still under developed. We knew that teaching a journalist from this paper will eventually help a significant paper in Bahrain become even more professional, credible and widely read outside the country.

The Editor in Chief has been provided by an official overview of the project that included the objectives of the project and its agenda. After a couple of emails and phone calls, he was able to recommend Al-Aliwat who is a senior reporter in the paper and head of one of the papers' most important sections. Al-Aliwat was accordingly contacted- after the project coordinator has personally read his work in the paper. After four workshops, it is quite appropriate to say that Al-Aliwat has proved to be a dedicated, serious journalist who is an asset to our project.

Worth mentioning is that, after the third workshop of our project, Al-Aliwat was able to produce a video piece-thanks to the camera and editing classes he received in the workshops- on "political belonging or the political identity" in Bahrain, which is a very controversial issue in Bahrain nowadays. The video has become the story of the hour in Bahrain and was posted on the paper's website.

All participants have been chosen similarly. It was important to choose the participants from places that lack professional training. We wanted to offer the opportunity to those who hardly get golden journalism opportunities. It was also important to choose the participants from significant publications so that whatever they learn in the workshops can later be used to help many others in respectable, well established publications in different Arab countries.

All participants had to be either actively practicing online journalism- but with no proper background or training- or have the desire and willingness to learn this field of journalism.

## **The First Workshop (March 15- March 21)**

### ***Theme: Civil Society***

The first workshop included sessions training the participants on how to use video cameras, how to upload video materials online, how to write for online publications and introduction to the world of the software program Second Life.

Significant professors at AUC took part in training our participants. In addition to the technical training, the participated engaged in experience-sharing sessions moderated by Hassan Ragab, AUC journalism professor who has 30 years of experience in Egyptian and Arab press.

The discussions the participants had were priceless for the amount of knowledge expansion, understanding and experiences shared between all of them.

Since the theme of the first workshop is "Civil Society", the participants received visits by significant guests of relevance to the theme.

#### **The Lecturers:**

- 1- Jan Sandl: Lecturer on camera usage and videotaping at the Kamal Adham Center.
- 2- Dina Saad: Lecturer on editing video materials at the Kamal Adham Center.
- 3- Hassan Ragab: "what's unethical in the practices of Arab media?" session by AUC journalism professor.
- 4- Safaa Kanj: senior editor in the AFP. "How to write and report for online journalism?" session.
- 5- Mohammed Yahi: Introduction to *Second Life* and how journalists can use it professionally to get sources and bridge the cultural gap with fellow international journalist.
- 6- Yasir Khan: Lecturer at the Kamal Adham Center. Session: "How to upload videos online to support online articles."

#### **The Guests:**

- 1- Ayman Abdel Wahab: Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies Expert.
- 2- Ali Leila: Sociology Professor at Ein Shams University.
- 3- Atef Hozayen: Managing Director of Al-Ahram and a journalist specialized in civil society coverage.

## **The Second Workshop (May 15- May 21)**

## ***Theme: Cultural Exchange***

Working on the second workshop was quite a challenge. The material taught, the lessons learnt, the sessions and the discussions that all participants admired and benefited from in the first workshop made it quite challenging and motivating for the project coordinator to top the success of the first workshop and present the participants even better, more informative materials in the second workshop.

In the first workshop, the participants were introduced to the global professional standards and code of ethics that need to be applied in writing, reporting and editing for online journalism. They have been introduced to the professional usage of camera in shooting small clips to accompany their print articles, or even small video news pieces that stand on their own in blogs or online publications.

Our second workshop had two major purposes; first, engage the Arab journalists in one big, lessons-learnt conference with fellow journalists from different parts of the world for what sharing the experiences will have on adding to their knowledge, confidence and eagerness to use online journalism. The conference will most suitably be held for three days; two days of discussions and debates and one day of bonding between all the participants through cultural activities.

The second goal of the workshop was more focused on one aspect, practically practicing online journalism. Sami Ben Gharbia, the director of Global Voices who is also a Tunisian blogger practicing the craft for over 10 years, was the trainer of the participants in the workshop.

He trained the participants on how to establish their own blogs and/or websites, the different forms and methodologies they can follow, the diversity of options and the methodology of publicizing for their work and their blogs through facebook and Twitter was also discussed.

The workshop also included sessions by trainer, Mohammed Yahia, journalist from *Islamonline* and an active member of the 3D program Second Life, to train the journalists on the usage of Second Life, how to connect and communicate with other journalists through it, organize for major events and spread the word of journalism through the program.

### **The Lecturers:**

- 1- Sami Ben Gharbia: Director Global Voices Online.
- 2- Mohammed Yahia: journalist *Islamonline* and specialist in Second Life.

### **The Guests:**

- 1- Mohammed El-Sawy: Head of El Sawy Cultural Wheel.
- 2- Said Sadek: Head of cultural program at Finnish Embassy and Professor of Sociology and Arab Society at AUC.

## **"Blogging the Future" Summit (May 15-17)**

Arranging the summit happened in collaboration with Yosri Fouda, former chief investigative correspondent of Aljazeera. Fouda's wide range of contacts helped us get in touch with some top notch blogger and/or journalists from distinguished news institutes internationally.

The diversity of the participants of this summit played a crucial role in the depth and quality of the discussions.

The summit was divided into sessions that allow a group of participants to present their views on specific issues while being in either; the panelists or the respondents' board. After each session, the floor was open for analysis and debate among all participants.

In the summit, Foda helped us monitor the discussions and Lawrence Pintak, our director, was there to comment and share his thoughts and views with the participants and clarify any misunderstandings happening between Arab and international participants.

### **Outcome:**

The summit was a smashing success. The Arab journalists, for the first time in their lives, got to meet fellow journalist with the same interest from other parts of the world. All participants discussed the common problems online journalism is facing and discussed suitable common solutions. They have also discussed means to collaborate in the future. On a personal level, being in such a diverse group and finding out that journalist all over the world have common problems, dreams and aspirations tightened the bond between the groups of journalists. They have all won each other as long time contacts and friends both professionally and on a humanistic level.

The summit has been covered in **Rozalyoussef newspaper**, **Al Youm Al Sabae** online news website and various blogs and website that belong to the participants and others that don't.

Also all journalists have started their own blogs and/or WebPages and started practically practicing online journalism.

[You can check out articles written on the summit and second workshop here:

<http://www1.aucegypt.edu/academic/cej/news/detaileditem.cfm?newsid=372>

<http://www1.aucegypt.edu/academic/cej/news/detaileditem.cfm?newsid=368>]

## **The Third Workshop (September 25- October 1st)**

### ***Theme: Political Analysis***

The third workshop's goal was to explore new faces of online journalism with the participants. Evading censorship, or merely, understanding the different forms of censorship and learning the tools to deal with them were essential subjects to be discussed in the third workshop.

The third workshop also tackled a theme that is popular among online writers and readers in the Arab world today- that is the professional political analysis. Due to the interestingly complex nature of political systems in the different Arab countries and the importance of political analysis to the awareness of Arab citizens, there is a growing interest among online readers for political analysis articles.

Given the online journalism's relatively free nature, almost any person can write a political analysis. The role of the workshop comes to offer the participants a professional training on how to write and edit political analysis pieces. They also had the chance to meet and be lectured by national and international professional journalists and/or political analysts on the subject.

On the subject of evading censorship, Walid Al Saqaf, Administrator of YemenPortal.net and Phd Candidate, Orebro University-who has created a software program

to detect and evade censorship called *Al Kasir* (Arabic for the Breaker), was invited to lecture the participants on the subject.

Al Saqaf was able to give a two-hour lecture for three days during the workshop. During the lectures, the participants practically learnt how censorship occurs, what the tools used to impose censorship are, the means to avoid or get around censorship, the means to adopt safety procedures against hacking or any web obstacles.

For the professional political analysis writing, Safaa Kanj, Senior Editor at the French News Agency, AFP was invited to practically help the participants write and edit political pieces.

For encouraging rich and in-depth discussions on the nature, importance, goals and different methods of political analysis, a number of guest lecturers were invited.

### **Lecturers:**

- 1- Walid Al Saqaf: Administrator of YemenPortal.net and Phd Candidate, Örebro University [Subject taught: Evading Censorship of online websites].
- 2- Safaa Kanj: Senior Editor, AFP [Subject taught: Methods of writing and editing a professional political analysis].

### **Guests:**

- 1- Hafez Al Mirazi: renowned, widely popular Arab journalist and current director of the Kamal Adham Center.
- 2- Gamal Soltan: Director of Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.
- 3- Scott Macleod: Cairo Regional Bureau Chief of *Time* magazine.

### **Outcome:**

There has been enormous benefit from this workshop with regard to mastering writing professional analysis pieces, which are key components for most online blogs or websites. The guest lectures were smashingly successful, described the participants. An open dialogue on the subject as well as exchange of lessons learnt and experiences have been shared amongst the participants.

The trainers' sessions were quite informative. Al Saqaf's sessions discussed crucial issue linked to online journalism. Participant liked them, though few thought the subject was little bit too sophisticated. Kanj's sessions were quite productive. The stories written after the first workshop have been edited collectively in the sessions. All participants produced political analysis stories and are planning to create their own collective blog.

## **The Fourth Workshop (November 15- November 20)**

### ***Theme: Climate Change***

The fourth workshop focused on wrapping up all what the participants have been learning in the first three workshops. This included receiving revision sessions on the Camera and Editing sessions they had in the first workshop.

They had the opportunity to practice writing professional articles on the workshop's theme, climate change.

Climate change is one of the most critical topics journalists all over the world are encouraged to write about nowadays. A category on covering environment and climate change issues has been added to some of the most prestigious international awards. Unfortunately, journalists in the Arab world are still behind in their understanding of the urgency of this issue.

The fourth workshop gave the journalists the opportunity to get introduced to experts on climate change issues, do research and write different stories on the matter.

### **Guests and Lecturers:**

- 1- Wael Hmaidan: Director of IndyAct organization specialized in environmental activism.
- 2- Moshira Hassan: PhD, Environmental activist affiliated with the UN.
- 3- Suliman Din: Pulitzer Prize winner, session on investigative reporting.
- 4- Ranian Al Malky: Editor in Chief of Daily News Egypt on responsible coverage and professional usage of freedom of expression.

### **Analyzing the Outcome of the Project**

"What the Arab politicians failed to do, which is uniting the powers and efforts of Arabs, we are successfully accomplishing it here at AUC [through the project]," says Ayman Al Adly, a journalist in the Egyptian Radio and Television Union and one of the participants in the *Arab Online Journalism Project*.

Al-Adly and the rest of the 13 participants have been giving us confidence throughout the project that we did the right thing by offering a golden journalism opportunity to those who needed it.

After four workshops, all participants have learned numerous subjects and shared what they learned with their colleagues in their different countries. We can confidently say that this project has improved their professional career and this can easily be seen in the quality of their work-especially in the work of Ayman Adly (ERTU journalist through his articles in Egynews.net, the official website of the ERTU) Ghamdan Al Yosifi (through his work in the Yemen news agency), Mustafa Al Nagar (through his blogging in Waves of Change blog that has been quoted repeatedly in numerous international publications).

Participants like Adly shared all materials, handouts and professional tips they learnt in the workshops with their colleagues at the publications they come from. Adly shared with the entire staff of the egynews.net website and with the consent of the Head of the News Sector in ERTU, Abdel Latif Mennawy. Adly helped us expand the professional training we were offering through the workshops to many journalists who weren't officially part of the project.

On a personal level, Toufik Bougaada, Algerian participant said, "This workshop is the best workshop I attended in my entire life [...] now I even have brothers from [8 different Arab countries] that I never would have dreamt of knowing if it wasn't for the project."

The tight bond that has been demonstrated in the participants' relationship with each other from day one was astonishing to the project coordinator, all lecturers and guests. A beautiful spirit of brotherhood has been demonstrated throughout the workshops.

Meeting other journalists from other parts of the Arab region and listening to their stories and experiences regarding online journalism, in specific and practicing journalism, in general, in their home towns is definitely an experience that educated and benefited the participants on many levels.

"I have participated in numerous workshops, but this one is very different and very important especially in the seriousness of the sessions and the good organization," says Ghamdan Alyosifi, 30, one of the Yemeni participants in the workshop.

All participants have engaged in long, in-depth discussions about the economical social, educational, cultural and developmental conditions in the Arab world. All participants have won each others as loyal, long time colleagues and sources in neighboring Arab countries.

The participants we had are all professional journalists who hold good positions in the news institutes they come from and this was important for us because they are the kind of people who can expand the mission and goals of our project to the many people they know, supervise and work with in their countries.

All participants have expressed their frustration that the project had to come to an end. If the circumstances allow us, this project could be implemented again in the future with expansion, bigger plans and accomplishments and different groups of journalists who can build a network of contacts among journalists in many Arab countries. The benefit could be tremendous to both; the journalists and the readers in the countries they come from.

### **Looking at the project's accomplishments can help us identify the following points of success:**

- 1- All participants have established their own blogs and/or websites. They have all become active online journalists.**
- 2- All participants have written professional articles on four different important topics (Civil Society, Cultural Exchange, Political Analysis, and Climate Change).**
- 3- All participants have been introduced to accredited lecturers and experts on the different subjects discussed in the workshops. They have the luxury of personally contacting those experts anytime in the future while working on related stories. [This is a priceless bonus as the journalist's most precious achievement is the set of contacts and sources he/she builds over the years.]**
- 4- All participants have been introduced to respectable mentors who can help them with their stories in the future or with giving any sort of journalistic,**

professional, career related or personal advice. [ The list of mentors include Safaa Kanj, AFP senior editor, Rania Al Malky, EIC of Daily News Egypt, Yosri Foda, Aljazeera Former Chief Investigative Correspondent, Hassan Ragab, maven Egyptian journalist and Wael Al Ibrashi, Distinguished Egyptian Journalist, anchor and TV personnel.]

- 5- Participants have produced a video piece on the *Arab Online Journalism Project*.
- 6- The participants have created a google group to share all work materials, articles, tips and updates amongst them in the future.
- 7- Most importantly, meeting people from different backgrounds, befriending and learning from them have enriched the participants' personalities, understanding of themselves, life and the Arab world.

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