



MEDIA ENTREPRENEURS MIDDLE EAST

Dr Fazal Malik is Lead Faculty for Media Entrepreneurship at **Higher Colleges for Technology** in Dubai, where as media practitioner he uses a very hands-on approach with his Emirati students who are keen to enter the media. And his impressions from the 9th Arab Media Forum show that there's a buzz in Arab media right now

HTC is the largest institution of higher education in UAE, offering Diploma, Higher Diploma, Bachelors courses in Engineering, Aviation, Health Sciences, IT, Business and Media – over 18,000 students are enrolled at 15 different colleges. Here at the HCT, we adopt a project based learning approach to develop both vocational and analytical skills needed in today's highly competitive media industry. This approach goes well with the technology savvy students in UAE which has the highest mobile and Internet penetration in the region.

Over the last few years, I started a news magazine for the first year students which integrated courses in journalism, graphic design and marketing. In order to develop the spirit of entrepreneurship, we gave students the ownership of this publication and set it up as a business - at the end of the semester, we had a magazine

researched, written, edited and designed by our students, at the same time they did the marketing and raised funds to sustain this publication.

Here on the sprawling Dubai campus, we have also set up a campus radio. Students learn how to perform in front of the microphone and make packages and documentaries. At the same time, they market the station, and manage it on a day to day basis. We have applied for an FM licence, and it would be phenomenal if we get it as our station would be the first university radio in the region. Right now, we do podcasting and organise live streaming on special occasions. It's a very hands-on experience, and we are an incubator for ideas. In this region there is a strong tradition of family businesses and some of our students go with this experience to set up their own business.

What do they do with their degree?

Our students are very clear on what they want to do. The majority of

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students go into TV and video production, others go into advertising as graphic designers, some go into journalism while a good number prefer to enter the public sector where they work in public relations and promotion. More students are now travelling abroad for further qualifications and specialization. We have women also entering journalism and TV, but we don't see many of them fronting media organisations as yet.

What impressions did you take away from the 9th Arab Media Forum?

Major themes this year were citizen journalism, rise of Chinese and Indian media, censorship in the satellite age, science and media, and how the Arabic channels (Al Jazeera in particular) are changing the whole media landscape in the region.

What Al Jazeera Arabic certainly has done is that it has created a new media culture in the region. The question whether Al Jazeera English is making any impact was debated, with one argument put forward that AJE is not about

changing public opinion in the US but about projecting a point of view. Members in the audience said Al Jazeera should perhaps try to change its focus and not only look towards the US and Europe for its legitimacy as there are more people speaking English in China, India and Latin America now than in the US or Europe.

The session that discussed the rise of China and India in the region argued that for social, economic and cultural reasons, the Middle East needs to look East and not just West for inspiration. The session which was moderated by Dr Tayab Kamali, Vice Chancellor of the HCT looked at how elements of media developments in those countries can be a role model for the Middle East – e.g. can the Middle East learn from the way the media has diversified in China and India?

Another session looked at how changing production techniques impact Arab traditions and etiquette. In Arab culture it is rude to interrupt in the middle of a conversation, but in the war of ratings every TV network now has a journalist like Jeremy Paxman who asks probing questions. The Arab world, it was argued, is living in the new information age now and people have a right to know.

What was said about censorship?

Censorship remains a touchy subject in this region. Now with more than 300 different channels available on cable, satellite and Internet in the region, controlling media content is getting increasingly difficult. While it was argued that the promotion of hate, racism, extremism and provocation needs to be curbed, critics felt that it was difficult to do so without stopping the free flow of information. Training of journalists and more international exposure was also suggested as many felt that self-censorship is a big challenge.

Panelists felt that media institutions are under threat in the region and efforts should be made to protect them as intellectual products.

While the debates on censorship are continuing, something very interesting is happening in the Arab world; a new media space is being created, this space is known locally as "Arab street". In this space people debate political, social, cultural issue and this 'street' is becoming very vibrant and dynamic. It has access to international media and uses various social media like Facebook, mySpace, Twitter etc. Since this region has a very high penetration of Internet and mobile phones along with the availability of satellite broadcasting, it becomes increasingly difficult to curb the freedom of speech or have media censorship. With this explosion in information and various ways of accessing it, the traditional stigma attached to media is also disappearing. If you look at the demographics of the region, these countries have a very young population who have the means and know-how to use the new media tools selectively. In the cafés and Malls and in new media organisations this young generation contributes to the vibrancy of 'Arab street'.

How do people choose what to watch?

It is a highly saturated market with hundreds of local, regional and international TV channels available via satellite and cable. But the international channels are not making much general impact – they are mainly watched by an elite. When you ask my students, most of them would go for the local Arabic channels and Al Jazeera, but at the same time the number of channels coming in from abroad has given them more choice in terms of looking at different points of view. The younger generation watches less TV now, their attention span is short, they watch clips on YouTube. Actually the other day one of my students put together a very good package with footage from different sources – I don't think he watched all these different TV channels, he simply got the clips on YouTube.



▲ **Main Image:** Fazal Malik in the lecture room
Above: Panel at the 9th Arab Media Forum

What are the most interesting trends?

Following the huge growth of media networks, there is now a phase of consolidation. Only those will survive who have a strong financial basis and a mass following in the region, offering programming of interest to the young population. A few niche channels serving special interests are also emerging, reflecting the diversity of the media environment.

Channels like Al Jazeera have given the blueprint for pan-Arab networks, and this model is being replicated across the region. One of the Saudi princes is planning a channel similar to Al Jazeera. Another trend emerging in the region is the coming together of various industries, formats and styles. Hollywood and Bollywood is creating interesting new combinations – the first Emirati film 'City of Light' is a good example. Dubai forms a bridge between Europe and Asia, and with its media free zones is proving very attractive to media entrepreneurs from both East and West. The large expat population in the region is making such projects profitable.

There are dozens of Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan channels available in UAE which are more popular here than the BBC and CNN. Some TV channels which are not allowed to broadcast from Pakistan beam their programmes back to Pakistan from Dubai via satellite. It's not surprising there is a buzz on 'Arab Street' as media from East and West is converging and creating new, exciting products with a much wider appeal.

Fazal Malik, thank you.

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