



USER POWER

After 15 years with the BBC, **Hosam El Sökkari** joined global internet brand **Yahoo!** early in 2010. As Head of Audience his role is to build the strategy for both audience and content for Yahoo! Middle East Arabic and English gateways, merge user experience across platforms and develop a stronger tie between media and community channels. Keen on user generated content, he believes users have already left behind the division of 'traditional' and 'future' media. We asked him: what is specific about Yahoo! Middle East?

When Yahoo! decided to go to the Middle East, it did not attempt to build the experience from scratch. In 2009 it acquired Maktoob, the Arab world's largest online website and community. Maktoob's strength in the region is based on the fact that it emerged from the Arab world, developed within its cultures and addressed its issues and problems. The new Yahoo! Maktoob is an extension of this.

At the end of 2010 we launched our Arabic and English portals for the Middle East, using advance technologies that Yahoo! uses in the US allowing the website to adapt to its users and learn their habits when they interact with the site.

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Technologies that will tweak the way the page appears the more users use it.

How does Yahoo! perform in the ME versus other search portals?

Yahoo is much more than a search portal or engine. Search is one of the services that we offer and as you know Yahoo! and Microsoft have signed a deal for Yahoo! to use Bing as a search engine which is a deal that will be implemented in stages. What we do at Yahoo! is about bringing everything to you in one place. All your online experience side by side with your email, news, current affairs, sports, celebrities or entertainment news. We do not even differentiate between our own products and others that you enjoy. You can bring Gmail/Google Mail to your Yahoo! front page, integrate it and access your email on Google via Yahoo!, you can access Facebook via

Yahoo!, you can bring everything that you use on the internet into your Yahoo! experience. As a company we provide content, we aggregate content, we partner with relevant media and content providers in the region to create a rich immersive experience for our users.

What are you doing in mobile content?

We are building our mobile content strategy for the coming year. Our goal is to give Yahoo! users the same joyful experience on their mobile platforms as they experience on the web.

What are the initiatives in the area of Connected TV?

There are different viewing experiences that are internet based and we are working on all of them. Firstly we are working on our VOD channels which we have already launched with Rotana, Al Jazeera

and many others offering news and entertainment in video. We are also in negotiation with other vendors to bring the movie experience closer to home which will be very useful for places that do not have access to movie theatres. In addition, we are exploring with regional operators the potential for internet and IPTV.

You are providing content yourself for example in news, weather, finance – what else is planned?

We provide and commission content. My aim is to work with the industry in the region to develop and support content creation and provision as a business model. We have recently signed a deal with Saudi Research, one of the biggest publishing houses in the region to have the right to distribute the content of more than ten flagship publications online. We have launched a new entertainment destination for celebrity news and features bringing OMG as a brand to the region. The content is provided by production houses we have commissioned: NGi and Arabia Inform.

I am also working on future initiatives that are similar to what I have done before at the BBC. Initiatives that integrate the social media environments bringing users and their experiences to the forefront of the production process itself. Turning them into an integral part of the creation activity.

What is your relationship with traditional broadcasters?

I don't believe that what we describe as traditional is radically different from what we call new media. We will eventually stop using these terms: "traditional", "future" or "new" when we talk about the media. Users don't differentiate between these experiences. They move seamlessly between platforms depending on their mood and needs. Only journalists seem to make an issue there!

It is all about content that we need to create and format in such a

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way that would allow it to travel through pipelines that can be shared between devices and production environments.

Quite a lot of the Arabic content that exists in the region is in linear formats (some of them are digital but still linear) and to catch up we need to work on transforming such linear content into digital content that is malleable enough to be formatted for different channels and devices. At the same time we should encourage content creators to be mindful of digital future production issues and to improve the quality not just the quantity. We in Yahoo! put a lot of effort into working with the providers, standardising the process and taking them through what is needed to get their content in shape for digital sharing and manipulation. This investment is very important for the whole region and needs everyone's support.

We should also not forget that we often have a lot of content sitting around but not treated properly as content! In Yahoo! Maktoob we have a large number of forums and blogs. These have existed since roughly 2000 before the emergence of major social platforms. The content is really rich and full of experiences of users and information that people have gathered. We are working hard to put this content in the right place so that it can be enjoyed by others and be an integral part of a content portfolio that can be supported and monetised.

The challenges here are both technical and conceptual. Users are becoming very powerful and treating their content and experience with respect is key for future success. In the next three years we are expecting 50 million new Arab users to join the internet. This will put a lot of responsibility on us and everyone reaping the benefits of the new digital economy.

What is the most exciting aspect of your work?

To feel that you are part of a revolution not just in content, but a

revolution in the mind set, in the way that people think about information and use it, in the way that they distribute it. It's a two-way process – you are benefitting people and at the same time they reshape whatever you produce for them in ways that make you rethink how to improve it even more.

On a daily basis we analyse traffic to understand how people consume information on our website and what topics are trending so that we can include them in our editorial plan. It's not just getting information from the traditional sources and the licensed content that we get from the agencies it's also what I call sensing the social pulse - what people are talking about and what they would like to talk about and bringing it to the forefront of attention.

What does the future hold for the average consumer?

He or she is shaping the future of this industry by adopting or abandoning technologies and by showing us the way. We go where the consumer wants us to go. We are being forced to merge our production environments because consumers are merging their experiences across platforms. We need to anticipate and follow and work on consumer habits and consumption trend changes.

Users will increasingly dictate the agenda. If you follow the communities from the region on Twitter and Facebook you can see that they are reshaping the information we receive, nothing is taken for granted as it used to be. A piece of news can be a focus of ridicule so that the actual content will be of less relevance compared to the experience around it, taking it far away from what producers intended for it. This is worrying some governments in the region. They are paying more attention to social media now - they have started creating groups and infiltrating others in an attempt to recapture the media initiative.

Hosam El Sokkari, thank you.