What Underlies Children, Media and Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)?

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When all have access to the lights of knowledge, the time of democracy will have come. (Victor Hugo, circa 1840)

The daunting reality of the contemporary world is that autocracies and semi-authoritarian states lack the basic foundation for building a democracy. In these countries, the media are weak, fragile, and at risk of collapse, which means that the challenge is not to pressure media and media educators to surrender power, but rather to figure out how to regenerate legitimate power in the first place. The imperative is not just mediate empowerment of citizens but also make them interested in truth, in full and universal knowledge, rather than in improving society. This would be 'political thought', which instigates the achievement of knowledge, by making the civil society play a role in forming a collective view and a common mission to make the states serve the interests of their people instead of the current reverse situation that ended by strikes, violence and societal disintegration in Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan and Egypt.

At the same time, the media could be a powerful entertainment and educational tool for children, given the right programming. Media also play a crucial role in shaping a healthy democracy, because they simply make us aware of the various social, political and economical activities and developments taking place around the world. Moreover, a democratic system of governance is supposed to enable citizens to choose their rulers and live equally within a state of law and order, where the citizens are the key factor in the process.

In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in the role of media in the lives of children. Much of this interest has been inspired by those who recognize the immense potential of the UN Convention on the Rights of Child (1989) – which contains many messages for media practitioners – to become a universal standard against which society's attitude towards children can be judged.

However, it is important to note that the media emerge as an independent institution with a certain logic to which other institutions have to accommodate. Besides, the media have simultaneously become an integrated part of other institutions, such as politics, work, family and religion, and media activities are increasingly performed through both interactive and mass media (Hjarvard, 2008: 105).

At this historical moment, we cannot ignore the inseparable roles of mediatization and social change, which the media could offer to societies, especially children, such as the extension of human communication abilities in both time and space, replacing social activities that previously took place face-to-face, instigating the amalgamation of activities, and combining face-to-face communication with mediated communication, thus causing the media to infiltrate everyday life. Moreover, different actors in different sectors must adapt their behaviour to accommodate the media's evaluations, formats and routines (Schulz, 2004).

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), governments are not subject to the will of the people, but instead dominate and control their subjects. However, the region is still suffering from internal disputes over different issues, such as wealth and power, which makes democracy an alien notion within the traditional political vocabulary.

The primary conditions for any media development include the availability of a potential audience, the development of symbolic language, technology, and the evolution of freedom of expression (Hick, 1977). Having said so, the attainment of the concept of "deliberation of democracy" requires not only the ability to offer independent acceptable reasons, but also to articulate the concept of justice that legitimizes such reasons. This situation sets a high bar that certainly excludes children (Cohen, 1997).

However, a proper media discourse and real advocacy of political and civil society activists, as well as schools, could still orient children to the fact that democratization expands into the political participation of citizens and provides for real and meaningful collective control over public policy. The key to democratization is inspiring younger generations to believe it is possible, even though the general picture is dim. This requires a complete reshuffling of the traditional political systems, even if the fierce resistance from factions with deeply rooted interests in maintaining the current status quo makes any development almost impossible (Al-Asaadi, 2007).

Having said this, the present article seeks not only to "include" the children of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the media, and not only to ask how the media treat them as disenfranchised apprentices to adult society, but also to position them at the heart of human rights standards and empower them in a democratized society.

This is happening at a time when the region faces the challenge of having a very young population. As mentioned in the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) Arab Knowledge Report 2009, the 10-24 age group accounts for 60 per cent of the population, and is expected to number between 125 and 150 million by 2025. Many of these young people are unemployed, and the data

show that unemployment rates have risen continuously, from 10.6 per cent in the 1980s to 14.5 per cent in the 1990s.

The present article also attempts to find ways to equip children in MENA with the knowledge and tools needed for meaningful participation in civil society and democracy. Hence, the central question is: "How do we instil the values of citizenship and active participation in the youngest, and in many ways the most important, members of our society?"

Considering the current Middle Eastern political map, one can readily understand that democracy is a cause and effect for any possible development, and accordingly there must be a drastic change in the current setting before introducing any real democracy in MENA. At the same time as many scholars from the region describe it as having common dominators – such as religions, cultures and languages – they usually forget to include violence, instability and the dominance of authoritarian regimes that have created a real "culture of fear" and uncertainty. Having said so, these regimes everywhere in MENA both reject any democratic restructuring, and also block any possible change that might alter their status quo as the ultimate powerful actors in these troubled societies (Saleh, 2010).

In this kind of environment, it is quite rational to find that the majority of the public is not interested in learning or permitted to learn that they have certain freedoms and rights. According to Amr Hamzawi, a senior researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the concept of citizenship is new to our region. A situation that makes this progressive idea a cosmetic media reality and a privilege that some might marginally enjoy while the majority of the angry publics remain deprived of it for many reasons (Al-Asaadi, 2007). A sad reality that made young generations in the MENA states as in the case of Tunisia and in Algeria reach a point of burning themselves alive in public place as a last call for attention to their miserable lives.

School textbooks, government-controlled mass media and chauvinistic national celebrations tend to glorify the heads of state (regardless of whether the state is a monarchy or a republic), resonating with the idea of the Pharaoh in ancient Egypt as the ultimate sacred figure, who remained in power for decades. Those rulers behave like they own the country, and they commonly pass on that ownership to their sons, as if the country were a family heirloom.

It is thus possible to summarize the four main criticisms of media in the Middle East and North Africa: The first is that the media only half-heartedly endorse freedom of expression and of the press, while ignoring other basic human needs. The second is that the media take a superficial approach to freedom and democracy, something that marginalizes the interests of the majority to preserve the ruling minority's interests. The third problem is the media's overemphasis on major regional issues – such as the invasion of Iraq, Islamophobia, and the "resentment and tyranny" motivated by hatred for the Arab-Israeli conflict – while ignoring the vital local and national issues that affect the lives of the public directly and indirectly. The fourth problem is the simplistic official analysis of the multifaceted complexities that produce a perception of fear of the "other", and with that excessive use of force against the opposition.

There are numerous examples, including Syria, because when Hafez Al-Assad died, his power went directly to his son, Bashar, and the constitution was changed to satisfy the condition of age, as he was not yet forty. It is feared that the same thing will be repeated in Libya, Egypt and Yemen, although Egypt considers itself to belong to the "emerging democracies" (Saleh, 2007).

The MENA countries are still operating under authoritarian systems, so their roles are limited to advancing government policies, because they are at the mercy of their governments, through licensing, legal action and financial assistance (Saleh, 2003).

There is a growing phenomenon of either not carefully reading the statistics, or trying to project an inaccurate utopian reality, motivated by pride or lack of knowledge or even a clash of interests, such has presuming that every young man in the region wanders the streets carrying his laptop (!). For example, when there was an escalating threat of the influenza AN1I11 in 2009, the MENA states recommended use of the internet for distance education (!). This statement ignores the fact that millions of students can neither follow lessons on the Internet nor perform examinations over the network because they do not have Internet in their homes in the first place.

In 2009, The Egyptian Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics revealed that the total number of TV sets in all households in the Egyptian governorates was about 16,580,832, which means that at least 750,000 households in Egypt do not have TV sets (some households have more than one television). Furthermore, the number of computers in the country was about 1,376,343, while approximately only 428,451 computers out of this number were connected to the Internet, which is equivalent to only 32.1 per cent of the total number of households owning computers in the country (Abd El-Wahab, 2009).

The UNDP Arab Knowledge Report 2009 points out that the Arab media operate under government control, exercised through many channels of official oversight anchored in multiple laws (pp. 65-66). In addition, there is an unlimited number of obstacles facing the media practice, which range from licenses to financing, including the infrastructure. Censorship is widespread in the pre-publication stage and may also take the form of removing books from the shelves, after a number of years of publication. Given these impediments, the Arab civil society is absent from the global scene (p. 78).

In this kind of socio-political setting, the media scene in MENA is one of the most contradictory models in the world, with almost no attention given to children or to democracy *per se*. In this context, societies are troubled and overwhelmed with the negative effects of imposed democracies and the internal tripled-edged syndromes of illness, poverty and illiteracy. In reports on global indicators, most of the traditional media reflect a taming media and journalism practice by the governments making their roles a more public relation apparatus than a real forum for ideas. This dim picture is not different from media aspects that relate to democracy for children.

For example, in the Democracy Index published by the Economic Investigations Unit of the London weekly *The Economist*, all of the MENA states, with the

exception of Iraq, Lebanon, and the occupied Palestinian territories, were ranked low (DI, 2010). And Transparency International, based in Berlin and publishing the Corruption Perception Index, stated in its 2009 report that 17 of the 22 Arab countries scored less than 5 (on a scale from 0 to 10) (CPI, 2010). The rankings correlate with the decline in the levels of freedom and democracy, the spread of corruption, and the decline in government performance.

It is thus not in the mind-set of many scholars, officials and educators in the region to value the possible role of media education in creating this sense of need for orientation that can alter the current societal values and promote a sound democratic practice to function properly and to keep up with the complex whole, as well as the continuously changing environment for children.

Even among children of the elite, who can afford to have a computer, can speak more than two languages other than Arabic, and are computer literate, these indicators seem alarming. In a media and society project sponsored by the British Council in Cairo, statistics emphasized that "surfing/navigation on the Internet" comes fifth in the ranking (62 per cent) after "watching TV" (100 per cent), "reading newspapers" (100 per cent), "hanging out with friends" (74 per cent), and "listening to the radio" (73 per cent). When the sample was asked about their computer skills, only 8 per cent said they are comfortable using the computers, while 47 per cent said they only know the basic applications. And 11 per cent said they are "very poor" in their computer skills, 4 per cent that they are "poor", and 30 per cent that they need to learn the basic skills (Saleh, 2007). The age of the students range from 18-22 and they are defined as elite who belong to high-income families. Nevertheless, this represents a very marginal percentage in societies with very high rates of illiteracy, poverty and illness.

In sum, Internet penetration is a far-fetched dream for the majority of our deprived societies, with the exception of the oil-producing countries, which have very few locals with Internet penetration in comparison to the foreign expatriates living there as in the case of the United Arab Eremites, Qatar, etc.

In an explorative study conducted in a course on media ethics and responsibility at the American University in Cairo in collaboration with "Soliya's Connect Program" over a period of five years (2004-2009), an attempt was made to assess the role of e-learning in attaining four main goals in the context of democracy: understanding democracy, knowledge development concerning democracy, skills building needed for democracy, and how this media education can help students improve their intellectual and human freedom (Saleh, 2007). The programme allowed sophomore students (2nd year) to engage in active participation and discussion among students from 49 universities all over the world through a sustained dialogue of 1.5 hours/week. One result was that 90 per cent of the students agreed, or strongly agreed, that the "Connect Program" gave them a better understanding of why people in the U.S. think the way they do. One student said:

> I learned a lot of things but most importantly, I started reading more about other cultures and even my own culture. I started educating myself more on different issues. (female, Sudanese, American University in Cairo)

Prior to the programme, 21 per cent of the students rated their knowledge of history and politics as "high" or "very high", and after the programme, the corresponding figure was 50 per cent.

Discussion

There is a need to change the direction of the power flow of communication between the educators and children in MENA. There must be a priority to engage and educate educators in the first place, before empowering children through skills building and outreach to everyone with lower levels of education and everyone living in rural areas, who are less aware of their rights. Most of the children in MENA live in a lie and die in silence (Saleh, 2009), especially because they neither have access to the media nor are allowed to embrace diversity in all its aspects, leaving them entrapped in their daily problems without the chance to think about media as a new window of development.

There is certainly some legitimate explanation for the current dim picture, which may be the result of long years of prevailing media hegemony that has failed to appeal to children, or to alert educators to orient children towards any ideas of civil liberties. In this context, there is no room for the luxury rights, at the same time as the majority of the public (with the exception of the Gulf States United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia) is affected by more urgent matters, such as poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. At the same time, the media are heavily coloured by censorship and opinionated reporting to justify their corrupt practices, and furthermore promote the common practice of self-censorship, creating a culture of fear for future generations (Saleh, 2009).

But most importantly, the tragedy really lies in the dysfunctional relationship between the public and the state, and the absence of vision and strategy to address it. The media's role has been converted into a platform for pseudo-patriotism and embedded discourse of acute fear based on external threat. For example, Egypt and Algeria had a serious diplomatic crisis as a result of typical fights between soccer fans, at the same time as the crucial issues were completely disregarded.

This clouded situation has created a state of dissonance and continuous fighting between the angry publics and the autocratic states on the one hand, which resulted in further signs of vulnerability of the structure of civil society, on the other, causing societal tension and setbacks in democracy and impoverishing children.

A cornerstone in the current situation relates to the educators themselves and the blurring difference between their self-interests and the welfare of societies, and the overwhelming red lights that make any progressive initiative directly threatened by the autocracies in all the MENA states. Hence, media education lacks the authority to maintain personnel and implement curricula, to deal with problems in a transparent manner, and to produce sufficiency well-trained edu-

cators who are accountable and have the potential to believe in democracy and develop its related aspects of skills building and effectiveness.

Hence, there is a growing phenomenon of disengaged students, increasing rates of dropouts, lack of reading habits in general and motivation for reading about other cultures. The media in MENA are overwhelmed with heavy entertainment, absence of investigative reporting, widespread artificial academic barriers that have caused "contentious politics", and an absence of critical thinking and analytical skills due to the political climate and educational policies (Saleh, 2008). In addition, the schooling system in MENA continuously copycats Western curricula without any localization of the model, including the UNESCO frame of reference.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present article deals with the current phase of media, democracy and children in a hostile and confusing setting in MENA. Yet one would safely frame the setback in the process of democratization due to many factors, which are all hampered by the Arabic media's "linguistic isolation" in the area of information technology, which puts the media in a complete state of flux for developing appropriate tools for work and production. And the media contents, coloured by religious extremism and intolerance, have been further aggravated by the current spin and dissemination of radical religious discourses.

There are two levels at which to address the many concerns about what underlies media, children and democracy in MENA:

At the micro levels, the value of teaching to promote democracy should have been a crucial part of the students' lifelong education; yet it has rarely been given sustained attention, if any, in the formal curriculum or the school community. Children's media education in democracy has to begin in their primary years, when the learning foundations of children's skills, habits and knowledge are laid. Children must learn how to question the reliability and validity of decisions and to offer constructive criticism and alternatives, as well as to understand that there exist other viewpoints, solutions or perspectives in addition to their own. The skill of listening to others and accepting and respecting their points of view are valuable lessons that could be taught in a classroom or in a children's programme that values democracy. In the end, children should realize that the aim of a democracy is never to convert people to one view, but rather to seek common ground and learn ways to improve society as a whole.

At the macro level, the media systems in MENA should aim to codify and amalgamate in a positive way the enthusiasm of children, their creativity, emotions, frustrations, fears, and anger and to generate safety valves so as to consolidate the modes of democratic production that are found in the micro-actions of everyday life, but that are still too weak to content ourselves with. If we acknowledge the necessity of conceiving of democracy's progression in MENA

as the realization of two parallel phenomena, rationalization of the operation of institutions and codification of the modes of informal resistance, the problem nevertheless remains and is difficult to solve – how to harmonize the various aspects of this dual approach.

Teaching children the skills, processes and values of democracy involves the serious process of reflecting upon how we want to live as a society. Indeed, children's participation in building up democracy in their community through media would engage them in an active learning process.

The goal is primarily based on how we can attain real "edutainment" in the schools, universities and the media in a concurrent and complimentary paradigm that rests upon modelling the way democracy works. Tolerance, respect, and a willingness to learn from one another are primary values that must be provided through active learning at school and through the media – acquiring the necessary media skills – and through educating the educators.

In the end, there must be immediate attention to the question of "why media should teach democracy to children". As media educators, we need to have a firm conviction that democracy is possible, and that the value of a democratic way of life can be lived through media in conjunction with integrating it into the media discourse, not just in the school curricula. Hence, we need to focus on developing children's skills. Moreover, there should be a gradual construction of media accountability to unite the centrifugal forces now competing in society and to transform these forces into constructive energies.

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