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THE PROBLEM OF TOP-DOWN TECHNO-CENTRISM IN PAN-ARAB NEWS MEDIA

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The Problem of Top-Down Techno- Centrism in Pan-Arab News Media

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Abstract

What drives the logic and culture of digitisation in pan-Arab news? Based on interviews conducted with Arab journalists and editors in London and Dubai, as well as focus groups with Arab students, this paper shows the prevalence of a top-down techno-centric approach in the pan-Arab news industry. We define this as the push for the adoption of technology in news to serve state funders of media organisations rather than audience interests. We identify three key features of top-down techno-centrism in Arab news organisations. These are: 1) perceiving audience apathy about news as a problem of technology rather than content, 2) seeking to expand digital following and deploying digital aesthetics in news in pursuit of prestige for state-funded media rather than of providing a public service, and 3) relying on flawed and limited data on audience attention, use and interest, including the conflation of social media metrics with audience figures and public opinion. This culture of pursuing new technologies in Arab news, we argue, fails to consider the perspectives and priorities of both journalists and audiences and ends up being a convenient strategy to evade fundamental questions in journalism pertaining to freedom, trust and public interest.

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Introduction

Digital technologies have changed the way news audiences are conceived and engaged with. There is global concern about data driven journalism and how newsroom metrics are a ‘powerful form of managerial surveillance and discipline’.¹ The Arab world is no exception to these developments. In fact, Arab governments have sought to aggressively expand their presence and project their power over digital content and spaces.² Major Arab news organisations have been at the global forefront of deploying slick graphics, integrating user-generated-content in news production, and running multiplatform news operations. Arab journalists are enthusiastic about innovation³ and open to automation and adoption of communication technologies in news making.⁴ On the surface, this indicates that Arab news organisations are innovating to enhance a vibrant offering in the service of their audiences and in planning for the future of the news industry.

In this paper, we situate attitudes and uses of digital technologies in newsrooms within a critical perspective and a regional political and media context. In line with longstanding global trends,⁵ we note that news managers and editors play a leading role in newsroom digital culture. However, while in the American context, for instance, that drive is justified by an audience-driven profit rationale, the pan-Arab news media system is largely state-funded⁶ and therefore has a different political economy calculus.⁷ So, what drives news digital culture? We argue that major pan-Arab news organisations deploy top-down datafication and digitisation of news content to serve state funders’ media prestige and power, with little consideration to the priorities of journalists and audiences. For this research paper, we conducted thirteen elite interviews, mostly as part of online roundtable discussions with Arab journalists and editors, based in news organisations in London and Dubai – two cities with an important role in Arab news production, and where we, the authors, are respectively based. We also conducted four focus groups with young Arabic speaking students in both cities. While these interviews and focus groups are not meant to be representative of the wider body of Arab journalists and audiences, we use the issues raised as clues about how young, educated Arabs select news sources and content, as well as to shed light on journalists’ perceptions of the digital culture in pan-Arab news.

¹ Caitlin Petre, *All the News that’s Fit to Click: How Metrics are Transforming the Work of Journalists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. 6.

² Marc Owen Jones, *Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Deception, Disinformation and Social Media* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2022).

³ Rana Arafat and Colin Porlezza, ‘Exploring News Innovations, Journalistic Routines, and Role Perceptions during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Egyptian Journalists’, *Journalism Studies* (2023): 1–22.

⁴ Khayrat Ayyad, Mohamed Ben Moussa and Bouziane Zaid, ‘Journalists’ Perception of the Adoption of New Communication Technologies in the UAE’s Media Organizations’, *Journalism Practice* (2023): 1–21.

⁵ Nikki Usher, *Making News at the New York Times* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

⁶ Bouziane Zaid, Mohammed Ibahrine, and Jana Fedtke, ‘The Impact of the Platformization of Arab News Websites on Quality Journalism’, *Global Media and Communication* 18/2 (2022): 243–260.

⁷ Carola Richter and Bettina Gräf, ‘The Political Economy of Media: An Introduction’, in *New media Configurations and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Asia and the Arab World* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2015), pp. 22–35.

From the perspectives of student participants, our focus groups confirm the available data that the young, bilingual, educated demographic mostly gets news from social media platforms,⁸ with many mentioning Instagram. Meanwhile, when asked about their trust in news and their priorities as an audience, our student interlocutors demonstrate that they constitute an active news audience. They have a high level of understanding of the political agendas and ideological affiliations of different news sources as well as an informed scepticism over their news agendas. For their part, the journalists we interviewed discuss their sense of alienation from top-down decisions about how to incorporate digital technology in their work. They relay how these decisions follow trends, for example, pressuring journalists to be active on different platforms, and incorporating certain video conventions in news reports. They argue that such directives come across as alienated from their work priorities and the many challenges they face from increasing authoritarianism, sharp political divisions, intense competition, and difficult economic circumstances in much of the region.

Background

Though the pan-Arab news media environment is crowded, its diversity is questionable. Whether it is regional or foreign funding, most news sources are (directly or indirectly) state funded and, despite differences in editorial standards, they push a news agenda in line with respective government priorities. The big players are Gulf funded pan-Arab 24-hour broadcast media channels, mainly Saudi *Al-Arabiya*, Emirati *Sky Arabia*, and the Qatari *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Araby* channels. There are also several Western state funded channels like US *Al-Hurra*, British *BBC*, French *France 24* and German *Deutsche Welle*. In addition, Russian *RT*, pro-Syrian *Al-Mayadeen* and Iranian *Al-Alam* are popular with a segment of the audience. Countries also have national-focused or subregional channels like the Egyptian *Nile TV* and Saudi *Al-Ikhbariya*. Overall, Arabic language news channels compete for an audience of more than 400 million Arabic speakers spanning more than twenty Arab countries and their diasporas.⁹

Arab news media have long played an important role in political struggles and in forging popular aspirations. Historically, the Arabic language press across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and in the diaspora mobilised liberation movements to achieve independence from the Ottoman Empire to European colonialism. With the mass adoption of radio in the mid twentieth century, radio stations, mainly the anti-colonial Egyptian Arab nationalist *Voice of the Arabs* addressed listeners as ‘the Arab people’, a designation that marked conceptions of the Arab audience and its intersections with public opinion and political identity.¹⁰ Following that period, different Arab states used radio and TV not

⁸ Damian Radcliffe, ‘How the Middle East uses Social Media: 18 Things we Learned in 2018’, *Medium*, 10 February 2019. Available at: <https://medium.com/damian-radcliffe/how-the-middle-east-uses-social-media-18-things-we-learned-in-2018-1d3b2679ae35> (accessed 18 April 2024).

⁹ Abeer Al-Najjar, ‘Public Media Accountability: Media Journalism, Engaged Publics and Critical Media Literacy in the MENA’, *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 35 (June 2020).

¹⁰ Joe F. Khalil, “‘The Mass Wants This!’: How Politics, Religion, and Media Industries Shape Discourses

only to consolidate control but to project power across the region. Furthermore, under Arab authoritarian regimes, public opinion was a matter of speculation rather than measurement and engagement. It is no wonder that another term ‘the Arab Street’ got traction in the past decades in reference to a vague notion of an Arab public.¹¹ The political potential of a unified audience got renewed attention with the launch of the first pan-Arab news network, *Al-Jazeera*, in 1996, with a wave of scholarship assessing its political impact.¹² Most recently, it was social media that was credited with relaunching the idea of politically active Arab media users.¹³

Globally, the notion of the news audience has been reshaped by digital technologies as it has come to be conceived as datafied and quantified.¹⁴ However, when it comes to digital journalism, a lot of the academic literature on newsroom metrics is only partially relevant to the Arab news context.¹⁵ The academic literature on datafied publics and audiences is focused on the political economy of digital news, particularly as it pertains to misinformation and disinformation.¹⁶ However, the fact that major news players in the Arab world are state funded poses other questions. Gulf states in particular have deep pockets and see the popularity of the news organisations they fund as part of their regional and global power and reach and their public diplomacy efforts.¹⁷ As wars raged across the region over the past decade in places like Libya, Yemen and Syria, Arabic news media spurred widely different narratives and editorial lines that were unabashedly skewed towards their countries’ foreign policies. In the case of Western-funded Arabic news media, they are also part of such soft power logics as they project influence into the MENA region.¹⁸ So, given this history of the Arab audience, and the political economy particularities of news organisations in the region, there is a need to contextualise the push for the quantification and datafication of the audience in a broader approach to what we are calling top-down techno-centrism in Arab news media.

about Audiences in the Arab World’, in *Meanings of Audiences* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 111–22.

¹¹ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹² Mohammed El-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar, *Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network that is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism* (London: Hachette, 2008).

¹³ Omar Al-Ghazzi, ‘“Citizen Journalism” in the Syrian Uprising: Problematizing Western Narratives in a Local Context’, *Communication Theory* 24/4 (2014), pp. 435–54.

¹⁴ Tomás Dodds, Claes de Vreese, Natali Helberger, Valeria Resendez and Theresa Seipp, ‘Popularity-Driven Metrics: Audience Analytics and Shifting Opinion Power to Digital Platforms’, *Journalism Studies* 24/3 (2023), pp. 403–21.

¹⁵ Nikki Usher, ‘Al Jazeera English Online: Understanding Web Metrics and News Production when a Quantified Audience is not a Commodified Audience’, *Digital Journalism* 1/3 (2013), pp. 335–51.

¹⁶ Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou, ‘Fake News as a Floating Signifier: Hegemony, Antagonism and the Politics of Falsehood’, *Javnost-The Public* 25/3 (2018), pp. 298–314.

¹⁷ Mohammad Ayish and Noha Mellor, *Reporting in the MENA Region: Cyber Engagement and Pan-Arab Social Media* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

¹⁸ Marie Gillespie and Alban Webb, eds, *Diasporas and Diplomacy: Cosmopolitan Contact Zones at the BBC World Service (1932–2012)* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

Argument and Method

Our main question in this paper then is: What rationale characterises the adoption of digital technologies in pan-Arab news media? We identify a gap between an enthusiasm by news executives in major Arab news organisations to embrace digital technologies without much planning, and a critical scepticism by journalists, audiences about the relevance, quality and reliability of the news offering. We critique what we call a top-down techno-centrism – the ways news organisations push for the adoption of new technology in their news content and dissemination with little consideration of audience and journalists' priorities. Techno-centrism is defined as an approach that privileges technological mediation as solution or explanation of a process at the expense of ongoing and longstanding power relations.¹⁹ We argue that news techno-centrism is characterised by a circular logic wherein digital technologies are talked about as simultaneously standing in the way of delivering quality journalism, and as the solution, in the sense that the way news organisations are to capture and maintain audiences, is in luring them with new tech aesthetics and chasing them across platforms.

Drawing on our interviews, the main features of top-down techno-centrism that we outline below are: (1) interpreting audiences' concerns about news as a problem of technology rather than content; (2) seeking to expand digital following, and deploying digital aesthetics in news, in pursuit of prestige for state-funded media rather than public service; and (3) relying on inadequate data on how the audience is measured, including the conflation of social media metrics of uploaded news content with audience figures and public opinion. The effect of this techno-centrism is a failure to prioritise public interest and audience concerns in news making, as well as the perspectives of journalists regarding how to deploy new technology meaningfully in their work.

We conducted our research in the cities we are based: London and Dubai/Sharjah. London has historically played a significant role in Arab news making,²⁰ as it was the main hub for pan-Arab press, and it continues to be a primary destination for Arab students to pursue higher education. The Dubai-Sharjah metropolitan area is the major contemporary Arab media hub²¹ and is also home to a large pan-Arab student population.

The method we conducted combined in-depth interviews with journalists, editors, and news managers (13 in total, conducted in 2022) and four indicative focus groups with young Arab students in London and Dubai/Sharjah.²² The interviewees were selected in their capacity as seasoned journalists with professional experience in different pan-Arab news organisations. Most of the interviews (10) were conducted as part of roundtable

¹⁹ Seeta Peña Gangadharan and Jędrzej Niklas, 'Decentering Technology in Discourse on Discrimination', *Information, Communication & Society* 22/7 (2019), pp. 882–99.

²⁰ Najm Jarrar, 'The Rise and Decline of London as a Pan-Arab Media Hub', *Arab Media and Society* 4 (2008).

²¹ Joe F. Khalil, 'Towards a Supranational Analysis of Arab Media: The Role of Cities', in *National Broadcasting and State Policy in Arab Countries* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 188–208.

²² The Sharjah focus groups were conducted in March 2022, the London ones in November 2022.

discussions or panels wherein we asked participants the same questions, but they were able to respond to and build on each other.²³ The advantage of this format is that it helped instigate lively discussions between participants. Since these were elite interviews with journalists and editors from different organisations, our interlocutors were able to speak of their different experiences freely and challenge each other when they disagreed. Our questions centred around current and future policies and approaches to digital technologies in pan-Arab news organisations, particularly in terms of expanding audience reach. This instigated discussion on wider understandings of the audience, and on the challenges faced by journalists as their organisations pursue digitisation. We also spoke to more than 40 Arabic speaking students in Dubai/Sharjah and London in four focus groups to get an indicative understanding of their news consumption and preferences as well as their broader attitudes and opinions towards what is on offer in Arabic news and what is lacking. We start with our focus group findings.

Student Focus Groups: An Active and Suspicious Digital Audience

The four focus groups conducted in Sharjah and London included students from different Arab countries, undergraduate and postgraduate and from a wide range of majors and specialisations including medicine, engineering, and social sciences. Discussions centred on their news habits, preferences and assessment of the current Arab news media landscape, including on social media and digital platforms. Despite the limited number of focus groups, they were useful to give an idea about how young, bilingual and educated Arabs select news sources and content.

The focus groups reflect young people's active mistrust and suspicion towards legacy news media sources. Focus group participants were keen to counter accusations that they are simply passive and apathetic in the public domain. When asked about assumptions that youths are uninterested in news and current affairs, we received considerable push-back. As one Palestinian student in London said 'It is not that we are uninterested in news, it is that we are not interested in the news they offer' – in reference to mainstream pan-Arab news media. An Iraqi student in Sharjah echoed that point in relation to public opinion: 'There is no point asking us about our opinions as no one cares whether we have an opinion in the first place.' Others point out their awareness of the costs of expressing 'the wrong opinion' that may capture governments' unwanted attention.

There was consensus among students that they mostly access news on their smart phones. Most said they actively pursue news sources on social media platforms, particularly news-focused influencers and/or video content by news organisations on Instagram, Snapchat and/or X (formerly Twitter). Some said they actively pursue live coverage or news bulletins to follow a breaking story. Those who were generally less interested in politics said they receive news via their social media networks. In general,

²³ One roundtable discussion was conducted on 22 March 2022, another on 5 April 2022 and a third on 20 May 2022. The three other interviews happened in November 2022. Two journalists interviewed preferred to remain anonymous.

there was agreement that Arabic news channels do not produce quality news content on social media platforms.

Indeed, the focus groups suggest that young, educated Arabs constitute an active news audience with a clear understanding of the affiliations of different news outlets. They are suspicious of mainstream news channels as they gravitate towards sources, which they judge to be more independent and ‘closer’ to events, including witnesses or influencers with no declared or assumed affiliation. Many participants shared examples of how they pick and choose what sources to follow, depending on the news story, and how they gravitate towards local news. For example, some said they may choose to follow one source for news about Palestine, another for news related to the Gulf or to the COVID story. Despite the suspicion over mainstream news content, we find that generally there seems to be less awareness of the platforms themselves in terms of algorithmic bias and data extraction. But the focus groups confirm that there is a gap between student perspectives, as young and educated news consumers, and how news executives conceptualise of young people’s priorities.

Features of Top-Down Techno-Centrism in Pan-Arab News

Management ‘Panic’ over Perceived Audience Apathy

The first feature of techno-centrism that we note is managers’ premise that audiences, particularly the young, tune off mainstream news content because of social media and new digital technologies. Ironically, this attitude ends up justifying the neglect of the audience, rather than rising to the challenge of providing improved content. It also shows the circular logic of digital discourse, as new tech is discussed as simultaneously a problem and solution to the challenges of news making. When we asked a senior director in a major Arab media organisation about the mistrust and suspicion expressed by our student groups, his response was to blame competing news narratives that are easily accessible on social media. On social media ‘you see the same news from different angles. All these together make everything suspicious. This is compounded by the spread of false or fake news’, he explained. This response shows a downplaying of the awareness expressed by the student audience.

Another Dubai-based news manager explained that the source of one of the biggest challenges mainstream Arab news media face comes from young content creators. In response to a question on the challenges facing Arab news organisations in providing digital content, he says: ‘While videos by youths on make-up or food receive millions of viewers, content about the effects of inflation, for example, barely get any attention’. In this answer too, we see how it is often easier for managers to blame failures of reaching wider and younger audiences on the ways young people use social media and new tech, rather than on larger questions of trust in politically controlled news.

Furthermore, several journalists we talked to indicated that managers and editors’ internal communications about digital technology seem to come from a place of panic about the loss of audience, particularly young audiences. As one journalist who prefers to remain

anonymous told us, there is a lot of top-down directives to journalists about how to change their practices to deliver digital news, particularly video content, but without providing evidence on rationale or logic. For example, journalists get specific prompts from management to appear relaxed in video reports, to sit down rather than stand up, to focus on ordinary people and tell their stories emotively, as well as to start the first few seconds of reports with a close-up on the news subject, preferably on the eyes. These directives are framed by management as preferable for digital news video content, despite not providing evidence for these prompts, or their effectiveness and relevance for the target audience. To our journalist interlocuter, these directives indicate management's shallow understanding of audience preferences and unwillingness to engage with journalists to understand their perspectives and priorities.

Another problem is that there is little understanding of how to adjust practices and productions to accommodate TV and digital platforms and a tendency to deploy glitzy digital graphics without editorial judgement. According to Rami Abu Jbara, chief content officer at the Arabic podcast and audiobook app, Wajeez, many newsroom managers think digitisation is simply about uploading TV content on digital platforms, mainly YouTube. 'Original digitally created content is very minimal in the Arab world. It's more TV content that is repurposed for digital media'.²⁴ At the same time, as Jafer Al Zoubi, Head of News at *Al-Mashhad TV*, points out, it is also common for Arab news organisations to rely on advanced digital graphics and aesthetics in news without much thought into editorial added value. Commenting on war reporting in pan-Arab broadcast news, he wondered what the purpose is 'of an impressive graphic of a tank, a missile or an F-5 jet, for example, if devoid of any larger message' in the news bulletin.²⁵

Quantifying the Audience Motivated by Prestige, not Public Interest

The academic literature on news media and digital technology focuses on the political economy critique that as news organisations become more dependent on advertisement revenue, they drop editorial standards to pursue 'click-bait' journalism, which impairs democratic governance and spreads disinformation.²⁶ The pan-Arab news industry does not neatly fit within this dominant frame as most news organisations are state funded. The main pan-Arab news networks are Gulf funded and have plenty of resources. Even the main advertisers on these channels, as Jafer Al Zoubi, head of news at *Al-Mashhad TV* told us, are the state-affiliated oil and gas companies.²⁷

So, to what extent do Arab news media rely on and need advertisers? And why are resource-rich Gulf news channels so keen on boosting audience numbers if it is not for financial need? According to Mazen Singer, Chief Strategy Officer at *Nabd*, a highly popular digital Arabic news aggregator, 'it's all about ego and the ability to claim "I am number one. I have the number one audience. I have the biggest number of page views; I have all of these things."'

²⁴ Interview conducted as part of roundtable discussion held online, 22 March 2022.

²⁵ Interview conducted in Dubai during visit to *Al-Mashhad TV* newsroom, 1 November 2022.

²⁶ Lilie Chouliaraki and Omar Al-Ghazzi, 'Beyond Verification: Flesh Witnessing and the Significance of Embodiment in Conflict News', *Journalism* 23/3 (2022), pp. 649–67.

²⁷ Interview conducted in Dubai during visit to *Al-Mashhad TV* newsroom, 1 November 2022.

In his assessment, advertising revenue still matters even if in a lesser degree than in other media systems, with print news media as the most vulnerable to advertising pressures.²⁸

This idea that Arabic news media competition is about the prestige of numbers, rather than offering the best quality news was reflected in several interviews we conducted. For Issam Uraiqat, editor at the London-based satirical news publication *Alhudood*, news media rarely adjust their content to attract audiences, rather it seems the audience must adjust to what is already on offer.²⁹ For instance, as far as print media are concerned, several interlocutors mentioned that the lack of subscription model of funding is an indication of lack of interest in building and providing quality news offer for a loyal audience.

Furthermore, there are discrepancies in the general pan-Arab news coverage as some countries and stories get ignored if there is no political interest to cover them. This is true in broadcasting and in digital content. For example, 'a story about Yemen cannot compete with a story from Egypt or Syria' as former digital editor at the *BBC World Service* Mai Noman explains.³⁰ This is partly due to how Yemen has been historically neglected in Arab political and media circles. But it also reflects political steers and audience preferences in powerful Gulf states. For Fahad AlZoghi, Chief Information Officer at *Al-Arabiya*, Saudi audience tends to go more for international pan-Arab content, as compared to Egyptians for example who prefer national news.³¹ This skews the coverage to a Saudi take on pan-Arab politics. The same dynamic happens online. Arab states are also in competition over who has most influence online and on which platform. For example, as AlZoghi indicates, in the Gulf states, X (Twitter) is the most popular platform, while Facebook and YouTube tend to be more popular in other countries like Egypt. Given that Gulf governments and advertisers are the most influential in the pan-Arab media sphere, and Gulf users are the ones targeted by advertisers, this gives X (Twitter) more weight as an assumed reflection of Arab public opinion, regardless of its reach.

In fact, the political economy of Arab news media, according to our interlocutors, is also tied to the authoritarian logic of news making. Ibrahim Hamidi, Senior Diplomatic Editor of the London-based pan-Arab daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, suggests that advertisement revenue generated through government affiliated business in Arab media piles up pressures in newsrooms to self-censor any critical coverage of government-affiliated elites. Similarly, Najla Abu Merhi, London Bureau Editorial Chief at *Al-Araby TV*, notes the dearth of independent media in the region given the government affiliation of the major news players.³² She says:

Each pan-Arab outlet has an owner, a funder and a vision. They already know that they want to approach the Arab world according to how they see the Arab audience. They want to address that audience to reinforce their vision and they do so through the editorial line and the news agenda.

²⁸ Interview conducted as part of an online roundtable conducted, 22 March 2022.

²⁹ Interview conducted as part of an online roundtable conducted, 5 April 2022.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Interview conducted as part of an online roundtable conducted, 22 March 2022.

³² Interview conducted as part of an online roundtable, 5 April 2022.

Indeed, Arab news media have long been vehicles for governmental influence over a transnational Arabic speaking audience. In that sense, the potential to influence millions of Arabic speakers takes precedence over producing content to better inform localised populations, whether at the levels of individual countries, cities, local communities, or diasporas. According to chief content officer at the ‘Wajeez’ app, Rami Abu Jbara, modern standard Arabic (the language of the news) also takes precedence over local dialects, and that is another factor in alienating some viewers and online users.³³

Relying on Flawed Data

The third feature of top-down techno-centrism in Arab news is the reliance on flawed data about the digital quantification of the audience, including in terms of the lack of reliable audience figures and their conflation with social media metrics of uploaded news content. This is in line with global trends on how journalists are unsure what audience analytics data means and how it should be used.³⁴ Our journalist interlocuters stressed that Arab news media rely on poor audience data. Some of the problems mentioned include the outsourcing of audience measurement to market research companies that may not have experience with media, the lack of qualitative studies that engage audiences on their preferences, the fixation on numbers of clicks and pageviews, and the conflation of social media metrics with audience behaviour.

For some, like *Al-Arabiya*’s Chief Information Officer Fahed AlZoughibi the problem is that some news organisations do not focus on user behaviour as they rely on tools and platforms with flawed measures of the audience.³⁵ Mazin Singer from the *Nabd* news aggregator agrees that there is a superficial focus in Arab news on website traffic, page views and clicks without an understanding of demographics in relation to indicators like gender, age, interests, and educational level, and thus making it difficult for news executives to understand audience segmentation.³⁶ Another problem with superficial readings of the numbers, according to Samya Ayish, freelance media trainer and journalist, is that Arab news organisations neglect meaningful quantitative indicators like measuring the time people spend on their websites, instead they prefer to talk about pageviews and unique visitors.³⁷

Indeed, the fixation on one set of numbers of pageviews and clicks also shows that there is little qualitative data about the Arab audience. This pushes debate to focus on how to present news formats, rather than to question news content per se. Rami Abu Jbara, of the ‘Wajeez’ app, recalls that management in one major Arab news organisation consistently rejected the idea of conducting in-depth interviews with website users and TV audiences.³⁸ Media trainer Samya Ayish agrees that there is lack of reflection on what metrics to use for measuring audience behaviour and preference in terms of news content and delivery.³⁹

³³ Interview conducted as part of an online roundtable, 22 March 2022.

³⁴ Petre, *All the News that’s Fit to Click*.

³⁵ Interview conducted as part of an online roundtable, 22 March 2022.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

When the driving force of digitisation is based on shaky assumptions about audience behaviour, rather than engagement with audience preferences on content, news organisations get caught up in a losing game of chasing audiences across platforms, explains Mai Noman, the former *BBC World Service* Digital Editor.⁴⁰ This is especially true for large news organisations like the BBC that struggle to be agile while maintaining a big brand. ‘The tricky part,’ Noman elaborates, is taking decisions on how to present digital content given the fast-changing relation between the audience, the platform and its algorithm. By the time decisions trickle down in a big organisation, ‘it is already too late.’ Platforms change their algorithm, ‘then you are left in a fit trying to catch up in how to change the structure of your storytelling and the headline and everything.’ This is in addition to the challenge of having your news organisation’s content, she suggests, on third-party platforms that leaves it vulnerable to copyright breaches, and to problems in audience reception as news pieces are not contextualised within a wider news context. Therefore, smaller brands and sub-brands seem to have more agility in using audiences’ data to make decisions relating to content.⁴¹

All in all, then, as Najla Abu Merhi from *Al-Araby TV* sums up, Arab news organisations measure the audience mostly through a mix of outsourcing to market research and consulting companies, and using social media metrics, which is basically counting interactions, such as the number of likes, emojis, views, and considering how long they remain trending.⁴² This is why, Abu Merhi explains, news media become fixated on certain programs that engage with social media. Indeed, several pan-Arab channels have programs to report on social media, which are usually exclusively focussed on X (Twitter). Typically, the show’s anchor reports on a controversial trending topic and simply reads out individual tweets by ordinary users without much explanation of news value or public interest.

Projecting editorial value on to social media metrics has affected the work of journalists, and disproportionately impacted women journalists. It is of course true that social media have made engagement with news easier and introduced a mechanism for immediate accountability to news organisations, which is a shift particularly in authoritarian contexts.⁴³ However, the ways social media metrics act as drivers of the news can also be problematic as they undermine public interest and other editorial values in pursuit of clicks, likes and shares.⁴⁴ In the Arab region, the problem in reliance on social media metrics is also because they get easily manipulated. They fail to capture how long audiences engage with news material, and they add to a sense of alienation by journalists, who feel unsupported by their organisations in navigating social media. As Rami Abu Jbara explains, some news media exaggerate estimates of web traffic by measuring it in different ways and pay platforms to promote their content— while claiming interactions reflect audience preferences.⁴⁵ For her part, media trainer Samya Ayish, adds that, even

⁴⁰ Interview conducted as part of an online roundtable, 5 April 2022.

⁴¹ *Al-Jazeera’s AJ+* was listed as a rare example of agility in incorporating audience data in decision making and in quickly developing good sense of audiences.

⁴² Interview conducted as part of an online roundtable, 22 March 2022.

⁴³ Al-Najjar, ‘Public Media Accountability’.

⁴⁴ Petre, *All the News that’s Fit to Click*.

⁴⁵ Interview conducted as part of an online roundtable, 22 March 2022.

if authentic, social media metrics are a poor indication of the audience as most users are ‘one-timers’.⁴⁶ They might have liked a news item’s title, but they may not come back again. Regardless, she explains, these become considered as evidence of audience interest, which should not be the case.

Also, while news organisations become subject to the algorithmic changes of social media platforms, journalists are left to deal with these platforms and the adverse effects of social media on their own. Ayish suggests that the semblance of audience engagement should not steer attention away from the work conditions of journalists, who, in addition to their concerns about the lack of freedoms, are told to engage on social media platforms with very little training. This is especially relevant when we are talking about countries where journalists are paid low salaries like in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt, she adds.

Al-Arabiya’s London bureau chief Rima Maktabi outlined some of the often-gendered pressures that social media have presented journalists, who find themselves competing with non-professionals like citizen journalists and influencers.⁴⁷ This presents challenges, as is well known, in terms of verification of user-generated-content. But Maktabi also stresses that women journalists face particular pressures online. In highly patriarchal Arab social media spaces, women are left more vulnerable to attacks, harassment, and unwanted attention. Rasha Qandil, former *BBC Arabic* news anchor, echoes this point that while Arab men journalists may get attacked for their journalism, attacks on women journalists on social media take the shape of comments about their appearance.⁴⁸ These gendered features of adverse social media effects are not only ignored by Arab news organisations, but they may also count as favourable audience figures by news organisations, both warned.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Interview conducted as part of panel discussion at the ‘Arab Media Futures’ conference held in London, 20 May 2022.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Conclusion

This paper has laid out that pan-Arab news digital culture is characterised by a top-down logic that fails to engage younger audiences and to train and support journalists. Overall, both our student and journalist interlocutors relayed in interviews their sense of estrangement by news organisations' digitisation. As we have argued, the enthusiasm for new tech in Arab newsrooms is justified by claims of following the preferences of the audience, particularly the young. However, this techno-centrism is framed in isolation from politically engaged and socially and culturally informed understandings of Arab audiences. It is characterised by a circular logic whereby technology is discussed as both problem and solution to a perceived audience apathy to news.

As for recommendations, we find that Arab news organisations would do well to rethink what data they use to measure the audience and to reconsider the value of the data, as it currently fails to qualitatively understand the priorities of audiences, particularly the young. Of course, our concern is not about whether Arab newsrooms should adopt new technologies – as that is inevitable. Rather, it is about thinking of how digitisation occurs and to whose benefit. Our focus groups clearly show that younger people want digital content on different platforms, but they also want content from credible sources they can trust. The former desire should not undermine the latter.

Major pan-Arab news media tend to reduce the audience to clicks, views and shares. This exclusive numerical focus on a problematically conceived digital audience ends up further alienating Arab audiences, particularly younger people, who constitute the group news organisations are most keen to engage. In other words, the digital chase of the audience from one platform to another, we maintain, is bound to be a losing game if it is not driven by a meaningful engagement with people's expectations about the role of news in society and politics. As long as technological adoption in Arab news is a top-down phenomenon, it will end up serving an authoritarian state agenda rather than informing Arab publics or facilitating the work of journalists. New technology, no matter how slick, cannot evade the fundamental problems resulting from state editorial control over news media in the Arab region.

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Cover Image

Reflections of television feeds in the editing room at the *Al-Jazeera English* news network in Doha, Qatar, 3 August 2009.

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