

Journalists Face Challenges Preserving Watchdog Role **Samar Fatany, Arab News (12 Feb. 2007)**

The role of the media in shaping public debate and covering politics is one of the most important concerns facing journalists today. During a recent study mission to the US, we met with members of the Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ) and exchanged views on the issues we have with the American media and the challenges that media professionals face in Saudi Arabia.

My colleagues and I had the opportunity to meet two prominent members of the organization, Executive Director Jeffrey Dvorkin and Founding Chairman Bill Kovach, during our study mission.

Kovach shared the main points of his book “The Elements of Journalism” co-authored with Tom Rosenstiel — a must-read for every journalist. In the book the authors examine how journalism today is moving away from its serious role of watchdog toward a model of entertainment news.

Investigative journalism has suffered in the last 50 years. There is no desire to address serious concerns and there is no independent press. The author asserts that, to maintain its professionalism, “the press must not only watchdog the government but an expanding nonprofit world, a corporate world and the expanding public debate that the new technology is creating.” Indeed, this confirms the fact that concerned journalists have to worry about the future of their profession. Kovach identified nine elements of journalism, led by journalism’s first objective — truth; its first loyalty is to the people, and its essence is a discipline of verification. Journalism also must maintain independence from those covered, and it must serve as an independent monitor of power.

Other important elements include that journalism must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise, and it must also strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.

Unfortunately, this basic element is so much abused. What we see today in the news is hype in stories that bear no relevance to the issues of the day, and there is an absence of accurate analysis on major problems of public concern. The news has become a source of entertainment.

Talk show hosts suddenly have become experts on almost every subject, and every Tom, Dick or Harry is in the news talking about politics, terrorism and strategic planning.

The author also maintains that journalism must keep the news both comprehensive and proportional. Finally, he stresses that its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience; in other words, they must neither be intimidated nor forced to apply self-censorship.

Citing these guidelines of journalism we can see how the profession has been compromised and why the public is turning away from newspapers and other traditional news sources for political news. The public has lost faith in the credibility and integrity of journalists; as a result they have become disinterested or have chosen the Internet as a main source of information.

There are obvious reasons behind this sorry state of affairs. One is that journalists today are pressured by deadlines and want to publish as quickly as possible, sometimes sacrificing accuracy in their haste. Another reason is that 24-hour news networks have weakened the quality of news coverage because of the need to fill the airtime with any available news items — no matter how trivial or even fallacious. Moreover, news outlets are avoiding complex issues, and journalists often avoid controversial subjects. Many have been seduced by power.

Were journalists to take a stand and protect the profession's ethics, then the media would better serve the people by providing information that exposes injustice and the causes of conflicts and social unrest.

The integrity of journalists is key. Professionals in the field who lead media outlets have a duty to set an example and influence the quality of the news. Our study group appreciated the meeting with Dvorkin who is an example of such leadership and has influenced the standards of several news outlets through NPR. He served as NPR's vice president for news and information from 1997-2000. He came to CCJ from NPR where he was responsible for upholding NPR's editorial standards and ensuring the excellence of news and information programming.

Statistics show that NPR is the only credible radio network left in the United States. It is such leadership and integrity that make the radio network popular both in the US and around the globe. After meeting with these two leading media personalities we had a better understanding of the problems that face journalists today and the challenges we must face to maintain our professionalism.

The Committee of Concerned Journalists has an important task ahead to protect the profession from disintegration. Our study group became members of the CCJ in hopes that a global exchange and cooperation among journalists will create a better informed media and help professionals in the field provide the public with more accurate information and a better understanding of complex issues that threaten world peace and global security. Journalism will regain its respect only if we as journalists recognize our mistakes and respect the ethics of our profession.

I hope that we can have our own committee in Saudi Arabia where journalists, publishers, owners and academics work together to raise the professional standards of our media and monitor its performance.

Such an organization can help us achieve our mission of empowering journalists to mobilize and move the public debate toward positive attitudes and global thinking — dire needs for the progress and development of our country.

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