



Jordan Media Institute ♦ معهد الإعلام الأردني

Keynote Address

Her Royal Highness Princess Rym Ali

**The New Media Environment:
Paths to Understanding**

The Aspen Institute in association with the
Ford Foundation and the Jordan Media Institute:

Arab-US Media Forum



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**Your Royal Highness,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a pleasure for me, as a former journalist, to address issues that have been and remain of great concern to my work.

It is also a welcome opportunity to share thoughts on media-related matters that are of major concern to us in Jordan.

I would like to thank those of you who have traveled a long way - and are probably still jet-lagged... I hope I don't put you to sleep...

And I trust a good night's sleep on the banks of the Dead Sea will help you recover in time for tomorrow's working sessions.

Looking at the report on the Arab-US media forum held in 2006, I cannot but commend the truly laudable effort led by the Aspen Institute and its Communications and Society programme, to bring about much needed change in US-Arab relations: some of the ideas raised by the esteemed participants at the previous Forums are truly inspiring: fostering internships and increased exchanges among working journalists to build empathy; collecting political cartoons by Arab and American cartoonists or photographs that appeared in US and Arab media; joint reporting and - last but not least - creating an Arab journalism review...

By focusing on how the vectors of communication, or the media, operate on either side of the so-called divide, in their own very effective way, the Aspen Institute's previous US-Arab Forums have put their fingers on some of the most sensitive and crucial issues that have an impact on our relations.

I look forward to seeing even more action come out of this session as we all examine how today's ever evolving technology will influence these relations and *what we can do* to harness that potential for more understanding.

It would not be appropriate for me to stand before such an eminent and experienced panel of experts as is gathered here today with answers. I would like, therefore, in all humility, to put forward my own *questions* to help stimulate in the coming days a discussion that will take a hard look at how to end the misunderstandings, mutual ignorance and recrimination which we seek to address...

The double-edged sword of the media is well known to all of us, but it takes another dimension as information is no longer the prerogative of journalists but available to all through increasing access to ever-evolving technology.



With all the blogs available, with all the access to images depicting all sides and with all the willingness in the world to bring about mutual understanding, one would think there were no room for misunderstanding – yet the overflow of information is such that it becomes like a tower of Babel – and making sense of it all can be challenging, to say the least.

In this context, more than ever today, Arab and American journalists have a crucial role to play.

But there are limits to what even journalists in *this pivotal* position can do, when faced with certain realities, as I found out during my time reporting for CNN in Iraq. I had thought – maybe a bit naively – that as an Arab journalist working for a Western news network with both a domestic and an international audience, I was in an ideal position to truly *shed light* on what was happening in Iraq, in all objectivity of course, but with the extra advantage of understanding the culture and language. I also felt that with my understanding of the West, where I had grown up as a child and where I later studied and was trained, I could bring some answers to the questions asked from across the Atlantic, about this far away land many were told would be the model for democracy in the Middle East.

With that in mind I would eagerly go about my business, in Baghdad, asking questions to Iraqis from all walks of life. But *I* would invariably be the one faced with questions, such as: are you going to tell us that the greatest military power in the world is truly incapable of restoring electricity to our people?

Is there really nothing they can do to restore law and order? Is it possible that this was not all calculated from the start to take advantage of our oil?

The questions were numerous and challenging

What *do* you tell Iraqis and Arabs who ask you why the world's superpower cannot stop the looting, the kidnapping, the violence, or provide the minimum of electricity and water sanitation, and why US authorities in Iraq did not count Iraqi civilian deaths?

And as you work hard to report on what you see, in the most unbiased possible way, what *do* you tell millions of viewers watching you in the US, as you are asked yet other questions by an anchor based in Atlanta, New York or Washington, about why their sons and daughters are being killed on a daily basis, and why many Iraqis just don't seem to appreciate their newfound freedom – *all* in the two minutes of air time allotted to you?

I admit there are days when I still wonder whether I could have provided better answers...

It's been four years since I settled in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. I feel extremely privileged to have been welcomed by Jordanians as one of their own. Insofar as my experience in the media allows me, I try to contribute what I can to the country *I* now call my own, and its culturally rich and diverse people.

In daily dealings within the context of my work, there is one question that comes back relentlessly, concerning the perceived Western media bias, when it comes to



stereotyping Arabs in general and when it comes to reporting on Palestinians in particular.

It is a question that my years as a journalist for Western news organizations can only help me answer partially – for while I have witnessed ignorance and at times bias, I have also seen a great deal of erudition, open-mindedness and good faith.

Arabs still resent the fact that in the West, selling the ideals of a democracy where people's opinions can truly influence policies, the media on the ground pays little attention to the Arab perspective on the conflict, when it comes to denouncing acts of violence which, at the end of the day, are very *similar* in nature to those they have seen and denounced everywhere else, from the Balkans to South Africa.

So I wish here to put to our eminent panel of guests a question:

As the previous Aspen Forum underlined, we can offer both perspectives on, for instance, the latest Iraqi war and say History will judge whether what we all witnessed was the toppling of a dictator, or an act of colonialism.

But if we take another example, say, the conflict in Bosnia, we all, Arabs and Americans agree that what happened in 1995 was ethnic cleansing.

So it seems that on some issues, we're happy to talk about irrefutable facts while on other, comparable, matters we tolerate different perspectives.

Aren't we then all guilty of indulging in double standards?

Are we, even in forums such as these, the most honest and open I've seen *to date*, still hesitant to look at what is happening in the Gaza Strip as facts, rather than matters of perspective?

When a Palestinian suicide bomber, in an act of terrorism kills a number of civilians, including children, it is rightly reported as such. When an Israeli missile kills a 20 day old baby among other civilians, it is also a fact, not a matter of perspective, yet somehow it becomes a factual headline only in Arab media outlets –elsewhere it becomes the consequence of Hamas' actions.

One can also discuss how the Arab media portrays the equally horrific killings of innocent civilians on the other side.

We all have our taboos – and it may not be the time to break them all.

But isn't it high time we at least lifted the veil on these taboos, took a hard look at them and understood what they are and why?

On a more concrete level, these double standards have negatively affected our ability to persevere in promoting the peace and dialogue to which we are committed by changing mindsets - a more difficult task than critiquing, as Crocker Snow so rightly pointed out.

All these double standards are very much seen as part of a more general bias, something well illustrated in the Danish cartoons and much publicized anti-Islamic film that the Dutch MP Geert Wilder has promised to release soon.

These issues are not a matter of perspective, they are *racist and inciting*.



I was educated at the French Lycee in Algeria and there, I was taught about the devastating and tragic effects that anti-Semitic propaganda had in Europe at the eve of the second world war: I remember very vividly, to this day, the page in our history book showing us a picture of posters that were plastered on the walls of Paris during that period, of the Jew with the knife between his teeth. And while I'm grateful that the consequences of racist imagery today bear no remote comparison whatsoever, I cannot help but ask *how* the image of our prophet with a bomb in his turban is different from a poster of a Jew with a knife between his teeth.

I, for one, do not believe the answer is to throw back at each other's faces those inciting and hateful cartoons that also exist in our part of the world, just as I do not accept the argument that engaging in biased journalism here in the Arab world is justified by the bias that exists in the US media ...

For we are guilty too: one of my most memorable souvenirs of covering the aftermath of 9/11, was meeting with many other Arabs, among them newspaper editors and intellectuals, who after lamenting how dreadful that attack was, engaged in the denial with which we're now familiar, explaining to me that this couldn't have been perpetrated by an Arab - while at the same time stating their view that the US, with their unjust foreign policy, had brought it upon themselves.

Some newspaper editorials published these notions.

So while we lecture the US media on how biased they are, we could certainly take a hard look at what our media is publishing and broadcasting in the name of free speech.

I think two wrongs don't make one right and I think the current media crisis in the US shouldn't be used to justify our own shortcomings.

We are all, in the Arab world as in the West, grappling with the potential consequences of the overflow of un-regulated content, some of which goes against inter-cultural dialogue and understanding.

Here, as much as in the United States or in Europe, we seek, for example, to eradicate child pornography on the net.

Here, as much as in the United States or in Europe, we seek to control the spread and the content of violent and extremist websites.

There is a large volume of other content on the net that certainly does *not* promote or create paths to understanding between cultures, on the contrary, and that does not contribute to the harmonious and stable growth of our societies.

We perceive a great need to provide our youth, our people, with an education that allows them to take their time to harness, in a positive, knowledgeable, and constructive way, the seas of "popular" wisdom that they now find on the net.

We also need for the West, where access to knowledge, any kind of knowledge, may have become a constitutional right, not to consider countries such as ours as backward and in violation of freedom of speech, when we express concern at the content of the knowledge, the information to which our citizens, our youth in particular, are exposed.



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As we suffer the consequences of an extremely volatile neighbourhood, we in Jordan feel it is important to balance security and stability concerns with the pressure, the urge, and the apparently inevitable occurrence of an unlimited, unfettered access of all individuals to all and every kind of content –at times simply created by individuals in search of an outlet to “gain their 15 megabytes of glory”.

I am not a legal or a constitutional expert, but I would put this question to those of you here that are:

As information circulates beyond borders, and audiences are multi-faceted and multi-cultural, with different sensitivities and concerns, how do we ensure, when it comes to freedom of expression, that the highest humanistic values to which we adhere, and that are spelled out in the universal declaration of human rights, are not lost?

This leads me to another issue, which also tries to address, upstream, ways of enhancing mutual understanding.

In order for us to create an enabling environment, we must confront certain harsh realities.

Proper dialogue implies equality.

Yet, if we were to be brutally honest, we would observe that we don't equally know or seek to understand each other:

If we look at how this translates into the world of new media, there is obviously an issue with language to begin with.

In “Second Life”, for example, there is a translation device, for European languages, but not for Arabic.

The UN Arab Human Development report has told us we need to translate much more international publications into Arabic, and it is clear that we *need* to keep encouraging our children to read more and a larger variety of works.

But whether passively –through the media, thanks to Hollywood in part – or actively –through study – we generally know more about the US than Americans about us.

We learn about the US, its history, its presidents, and its authors in school, but who in the US has read at school, Ibn Khaldoun, Al Mutannabi or Mahmoud Darwish?

John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed's book “Who speaks for Islam?” mentions the result of a poll carried out in recent years – When Americans were asked what they admired about Islam, 57% said “nothing” or “I don't know,” while a majority of Muslims around the world easily named several specific things they admired about the US, including its democracy, technology and liberty.



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As far as we Arabs are concerned, we may claim we have more knowledge of the other, yet we tend to allow our emotions to dictate our reading and reporting of events involving the other.

I have often been asked why Arabs have such a bad image in the West and why the Western media seems intent on portraying Arabs in a negative light.

While I acknowledge that there are some clear cases of distortion, there are a lot more cases of genuine misunderstanding, and my answer is: why do we Arabs expect others to take responsibility for our image? We have our share of work to do and we need to take a more active approach.

Our passive victim-stand does nothing to change these mindsets, and it is up to us to lay the ground for a more equal dialogue.

In that respect, there is a lot we can do *individually* as well as *institutionally*.

I would like to refer here to Monroe Price, who wrote: “the major resource for enhancing the enabling environment is *indigenous talent* because, ultimately, the answers must almost always be local.”

How can our own environment contribute to creating these paths of understanding with the advent of new media?

To begin with, there is a need for us to face the realities the internet age is bringing.

As far as Jordan is concerned, we cannot but acknowledge that there is room for change, if only to improve the legal framework within which the media operates.

The Jordan Press and Publications law, which makes it mandatory for journalists to be members of the Jordan Press Association in order to exercise their profession has been put into question, not least by His Majesty King Abdullah himself.

It is widely recognized that Jordan is among the very few countries in the region with a law guaranteeing freedom of access to information, but generally speaking, our system includes too many regulatory bodies that restrict the media scene and the implementation of these laws is often subject to interpretation.

And while we, in Jordan, pride ourselves with having access to the best media technology available, the regulations seem to be lagging behind and act as brakes to more media investment.

The way in which the Press and Publications Law regulates online content could probably also be reviewed, and while we're mindful of balancing security requirements, there is a need to address these issues.



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In the post 9/11 era, we're probably not too far from asking questions that are being asked everywhere in the world.

But it's clear that our laws need to be adapted to the new media sector as a whole, and anyone who reads Jordanian blogs will know these debates are already on the table within our online community.

Realities on the ground also reflect our steady move toward more positive change and FM radios have been pushing the boundaries of what can be said and discussed publicly.

The change we all seek may not happen overnight: we need time, we need to have a certain number of tools to regulate properly, we need tools to train our youth, to teach them to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources, to get them ready to cope with the inevitable, to enable them to make the best out of the new media, beyond their online communities and personal interest groups, not only for themselves, but also for the diverse people that is Jordan.

We in Jordan believe strongly in the value of education which can lay the ground for genuine change.

The World Bank has rated Jordan among the top education reformers in the region - with a literacy rate of 91 percent, compared to an average of 70 percent in the Arab world as a whole.

But we are also aware that a special kind of literacy is necessary, if only to help our youth find their way into today's high-tech labour market.

To address that need, and to increase internet penetration which currently stands in Jordan at an estimated 12%, an education initiative provides free internet access in schools and through knowledge stations across the Kingdom.

But Jordan's drive to improve education at all levels does not stop at internet literacy.

I am pleased to announce that a new media institute is being established here in Jordan that aims to set new professional standards in journalism education in the region.

Taught in Arabic, the Jordan Media Institute's programme will seek to address the demand by media owners, editors in chief, journalists and students alike in Jordan and in the region to improve media output and help raise the profile of the profession.

Our approach is two-tracked: it includes an academic Master's programme and a professional training component which both focus on field work and research, exposing students to the latest media technology.



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We plan to introduce our students to a great diversity of perspectives that will compel them to engage in serious critical thinking.

By exposing them to a full spectrum of journalistic theories and practices, we want to enable those working in print, photo, radio, broadcast and internet journalism, to apply their skills to the realities of our own cultural, societal and media environment while upholding the highest ethical standards and journalistic principles of balance, accuracy and objectivity.

JMI is hoping to start its programme in September 2009.

Yet, as new media evolves, not just here in the Middle East, but everywhere in the world, so, too, will the challenge of upholding high journalistic standards and of offering content that is truly informative and unbiased to an increasingly media-savvy regional and international audience.

And who knows what other technology will develop in a year's time, that our students will also need to master...

We all, in the Arab world and in the West alike, will face many dilemmas. And it will not be enough to just "go with the flow" to face the profound changes this new era will bring about, making all sorts of content available to all, faster and further.

But at the end of the day, no matter how fast and how far it travels, content remains key.

Virtual space can be an exciting place to look for new content, whether it is entertainment or information.

But how new can content get?

Like the news business, internet games can be geared toward serving the most basic humanistic values and allow us to remain true to our ideals of understanding, peace and mutual cooperation, rather than inciting to violence against specific groups. Their appeal to our youth is evident to anyone visiting internet cafes near the Jordan University campus or, from what I hear, those of Yale or Harvard.

But talking online to young men and women who use the internet for several hours a day, to chat and trade notes on lifestyles, as some of them told me, with people as far away as Japan, can also contribute to better know the other.

Can new media achieve what traditional media couldn't, so far?



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Where then should we begin to make sure we get a head's start in creating healthy dynamics for tomorrow's new media age?

Shouldn't we start with trying to achieve proper equality in all fields, including economic equality?

Can we rely on self-regulation, or will we eventually need a new International Charter to remind the ever growing online communities that we are all one, regardless of race or religion, and that our differences are our wealth?

Is it utopia to believe we can actually foster that change when the overflow of information and opinions seems to create as much misunderstanding as it does positive bridge building?

And at the end of the day, should we not remember that the value of face to face interaction is irreplaceable, when it comes to fostering more understanding?

That you are all gathered here to imagine ways of making sure we don't lose sight of what binds us all, is telling enough.

I wish you all the best and thank you for your attention.