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Egyptian journalist exposes media lies during recent uprisings

Beirut, Lebanon- 22/05/2012 - Hani Shukrallah, a leading Egyptian journalist and managing editor of Al Ahram newspaper, described how the country's activists and bloggers have been using new media tools in recent years to counter the “flagrant lies” of the toppled regime of Hosni Mubarak and its successors during an AUB lecture May 21.

The lecture, originally titled, “Covering the Arab Spring: Myths, Lies and Truths,” was changed to focus on the Egyptian case where, Shukrallah explained, social media has been forcing the country's tightly-controlled traditional media to cover or investigate incidents that would have otherwise been ignored.

“What happens is you have bloggers and the Twitter and Facebook activists release the story, show the evidence, and then you get the television stations, feeling obliged to pick it up, showing some of the footage that was captured by the citizen journalists,” he said. “So it's really been the new media that has been at the forefront of relating the story and forcing it to be picked up by the mainstream media.”

Among his many examples, Shukrallah pointed to a scandal whereby female demonstrators arrested during the Egyptian uprising were routinely subjected to “virginity tests” performed by the military. The story was initially covered up with no traditional media daring to report on the humiliating process until social media activists began to expose specific cases.

Shukrallah also spoke of government and media lies surrounding the massacre of peaceful, unarmed Coptic demonstrators by government forces last October who were protesting the burning of a church. He revealed an image of an Egyptian television news channel claiming that the demonstrators were attacking army and police with stones. A state television channel went so far as to claim that the demonstrators were shooting at security forces with the presenter calling on Muslims to intervene and “save the army.”

He described the attacks on the minority Copts in Egypt as a “convenient distraction” used by Mubarak and later the ruling military council.

“The scandalous thing was not just the massacre, it was the behavior of Egyptian television,” he said.

The role of the media, according to Shukrallah, should be to create “narratives of truths” through research and investigations. It is not enough to be merely “balanced,” he said, as printing claims by both sides does not determine what really happened.

“I remember being in many media conferences where people complain about the new media, saying it's opinionated, biased, lacks verification, unbound by criteria of objectivity and balance. But, come on, being an Arab journalist, when you hear these things, you are describing the traditional media,” he said with an ironic laugh. “If you are describing Al Ahram or (the Egyptian) Al Akhbar, that is exactly what you are talking about.”

Shukrallah blamed the failures of traditional Egyptian media to report truths largely on “the eradication of political space” over Mubarak's three-decade rule. In contrast, Lebanese journalism is of the highest standard in the Arab world, he said, due to a deeply political society in spite of the problems Lebanese media face in terms of ownership and the influence of Gulf money.

“If you look at the scene now in Egypt, journalists don't even have the basic skills of writing a decent news story, let alone a feature or investigative report,” he said.

The lecture was organized by AUB's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (AUB-IFI) as one installment of its “Nadim Makdisi Memorial Fund Annual Lecture,” which was established in 2010 as part of the Nadim Makdisi Memorial Fund, set up by the Makdisi family in memory of Nadim Makdisi, one of Lebanon's accomplished journalists and publishers.

The fund, which is housed in IFI, was established in 2009 and has two components: the annual lecture by a prominent Mideast journalist or current affairs expert and research grants offered to AUB students to write their thesis on contemporary issues in journalism and current affairs.

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Note to Editors

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