

## Children & Media in the Arab World

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Media plays an important role in representing society's issues. The adoption of a certain cause by media often leads to a change in the society's perception of it, be it a negative or positive change. Therefore, various countries place great value to media as a tool that supports the development process. Since children are the wealth of nations to build a prosperous future, their issues are amongst the priorities of the development media of many countries. Media allocates a great deal of its focus on children's issues or on providing a specialized media content that contributes to the formation of a child's personality which has led to the rise of "children socialised media".

In this context, I recall an old saying by the Russian Minister of Education at some stage, when he said that "there exists one cesar in our country towards which all efforts must be directed to him, the child." In fact, children are the main focus of nations that seek prosperity and progress, children compromise the future that will be heard, they are the investment in which one should invest, as they are the hope.

It is remarkable that in the past, addressing issues related to children in media, journalism, and literature, was considered a kind of devaluing media and literature! However in year 1973, and during the Arab Writers Union some writers demanded that children's literature be included as a hub of literature. However, it was surprising that this request was rejected on the grounds that children literature should not be classified as high standard literature.

This view was supported by many Arab writers such as Naguib Mahfouz and Najib Kilani, who were once sitting in a cafe. Kilani was ashamed to review his writings dedicated to children! This was the case of media, which is not directed to children. If we go back to the golden era, it is clear that the press has paid attention to

children's issues, through magazines and television programs. Namely we recall the regional children's program "Open Sesame" whose production had stopped more than 40 years, at a time when the children of the seventies and eighties in the last century, lived under the banner of child oriented media in terms of cognitive and intellectual education. So how close are Arabic nations in this day and age to that mindset? What portion are children allocated in Arabic media policies, if any at all? Is there a budget specified for the production of information materials for children (books, cartoons, stories, films, plays, games, videos, magazines, etc.)? What are the ideas, values, and traditions that can be planted and imparted by the media on children?

### **Child-Oriented Media in Arab Countries: Shortcomings and Contradictions**

The reality of child oriented media in the Arab world calls for pessimism, and prompts us to ask several questions as we realise that many contradictions and shortcomings do exist. There is a massive influx of foreign media material related to children, that is larger than any domestic production. This makes the latter far from competitive to counter foreign cultural industries. Talking figures, Arab countries import 80% of its media provided to children; 90% of which comes from the United States of America. Arab countries also import more than 45,000 hours of television a year, most of which are children programs. The quantity of imported publications becomes more significant when we consider the values portrayed and presented through this imported media material, produced for western communities and children, and in accordance with certain values and specific objectives, that may vary or even completely contradict the values, ethics, and customs of Arabic cultures.

Further, there is a lack in human and financial capabilities specialised in children material in the Arab world. Low budgets are allocated for the production of information materials for children. There is also a lack in studies, research, and data on Arabic children. Surveys and field studies related to children and their needs in the field of media consumption are very limited and almost non-existent, which means that what is provided to the Arab child from a local subject, is not based on scientific grounds.

### **Specialized Channels for Children's Affairs: an Urgent Need**

In November 2015, a press conference was held to announce professional principles for Arabic media to address issues of the rights of the Arab child. The Lebanese Information Minister Ramzi Greg highlighted the necessity of using

specialists in various fields such as education, law, psychology and other social sciences. This aims for information material dedicated to children through which awareness of their rights and fundamental concepts and its application can be raised.

In this context, there is a need for the establishment of specialized television channels dealing with children's educational, recreational, health and other aspects. In addition Arab channels are urged to produce programs and material that develops the abilities of children and modernise it to enable children to keep up with the requirements of modern education. Media experiences should be utilized through programs for children that have been successful on a global level and the use of social media to inform children of their potential to raise awareness and knowledge.

### **Lack of Coordination Between the Arab Ministries and Their Media Institutions**

On the other hand, it is evident that there is a lack of coordination and cooperation in most Arab countries between ministries, media bodies, and institutions regarding the production of media material aimed at children. Further, the public sector is completely absent in most Arab countries from the process of supporting and sponsoring child-oriented cultural industries. In area they are very shy and almost negligible!

In a comparison between the Arabic and Turkish models, TRT Cocuk of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) is an example of the official national media. The channel responds to the demand of the contemporary Turkish child for animation, music, news and sports, thus satisfying their mental, psychological and moral needs according to high quality international educational standards. The channel also introduces Turkish children to the correct Turkish language and culture.

### **Stumbling Budgets**

On the Lebanese front, the number of media channels exceeds 8, one of which is the governmental channel Tele Liban. And even though there is a number of children's programs, there is a definite shortcoming in the Lebanese media roadmap regarding kids programs, represented in a lack of executive plans along with financial budgets for television channels, which leads TVs to dedicate available budgets to entertainment and political programs that draw a larger audience, thus neglecting kids shows.

### **Lebanese Media: a Role Media Model**

One of the most prominent faces that accompanied the rising generations of Lebanon in the 1990s was Desiree Farah, known to children as “Dede”, and served as a prelude to the famous children’s program “How and Why”. The program has been a great success in Lebanon and the Arab world, and has aired for nine consecutive years since 1993 via the Lebanese satellite television channel LBCI. The characters of the program remain stuck in the minds of everyone who has followed it to this day. Even Dede herself does not hide her joy that she has accompanied several generations through her work in her field. “Many of the children of yesterday who were following me have become young men and women.” In a special interview with her, Dede noted that “her ambition at the beginning was to educate children in schools and to study the issue of raising children.” But she used her experience on the screen where she delved into the child’s world inventing characters who became the hallmark of many Arab children, such as the character of “Miss Curiosity” the icon of the curiosity, “Jojo the clown” the cheerful symbol, “Miss Blabber” the symbol of people who talk too much. The aim of these characters is to teach lessons to kids.

And unlike many of children’s programs currently broadcasting on Lebanese screens, which lack studies and research in the period of their preparation, “How and Why” TV show, preceded many actions before launching the program on air. Children’s requirements and the guidance to be provided were examined carefully. The program also tried as much as possible to prevent the child from feeling that he or she were following instructions at school. Therefore, the program was divided into several sections where the child learns right from in his daily actions in an indirect and enjoyable way.

And in a quick stand at some media material directed at the Arabic child and produced in Arabic countries and in Lebanon, it is clear to us that the content of the material is weak and does not take into account the characteristics and abilities of the child both mentally and intellectually. Many rely on the blind tradition of the Western product, and neither adopts Arabic values and principles, nor incorporates the developmental goals in the Arab countries.