

# The Environment in Arab Media

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## I. INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to talk about a special identity of Arab environmental media in the same way as one may talk, for example, about an identity relevant to Arab political, cultural, economic, or sports media. An information identity requires some fundamental conditions to be considered autonomous and genuine. One such condition is the existence of professional patterns concerning varieties of news collection, presentation and analysis based on a particular theoretical framework pertaining to environmental issues. Another condition is the existence of a nucleus of media professionals who are well-trained and dedicated to the environment, and capable of influencing public orientations. A further condition has to do with continuity as contrasted to sparse news and irregular comments. Indeed, all these conditions are absent in the case of most Arab media when they deal with environmental topics. The problem of Arab environmental information may be related to a larger problem concerning Arab science journalism, which is still marginal in Arab media.

In 1987, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) presented a plan for Arab environmental information to the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) and the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment (CAMRE).<sup>1</sup> If we were today, two decades later, to formulate a new plan, we would come out with the same recommendations. Much has changed during the last 20 years, with the entire face of the world becoming different, a new outlook towards environment and development having emerged, and environmental issues forcing their way onto governmental agendas. While the environment was barely alluded to in the Arab media and we had to coin terms for writing about subjects not yet raised, we find today that some Arab newspapers have dedicated sections for the environment and have exhibited concern in treating the problems of environment and sustainable development. Moreover, the environment has found its way to Arab radio and television stations, whether in news bulletins, reports, and debates, usually exhibiting reactions to international events. However, the Arab media treatment of environmental issues lacks follow-ups, and is characterized by immediate descriptive content rather than

analysis and even accurate information. Such a quality of information does not help much in propagating environmental awareness.

Although the occurrence of the term “environment” and its derivatives has increased thousands of times in Arab media during the last decade, the tackling of environmental issues has, in most cases, been limited to mere news and instantaneous reactions to world events, mainly catastrophes. Major international conferences on environment and development, since the Earth Summit in 1992 with the participation of Arab countries in it and their signing of almost all the ensuing treaties of international character, have contributed towards motivating the Arab media to discuss environmental issues at length. However, this interest has been mostly exhibited in quoting bits and pieces of news exactly as transmitted by foreign news agencies. It is observed that most Arab media are satisfied in conveying addresses, often too general in character, of government officials during the opening of conferences and meetings on the environment, while they neglect what is offered by experts, which, alas, is at the heart of the matter.<sup>2</sup>

A study concerning media coverage of environmental issues in Bahrain found that, despite the appearance in the six dailies of the country during 2004 of over 2000 articles on local environment issues, most of them constituted mere news and interviews, while only 4 percent belonged to reports, news analyses, and comments.<sup>3</sup>

What this study of Bahrain has concluded applies to all the Arab countries covered by a survey of the leading Arab environmental monthly *Al Bi'a Wal Tanmiya (Environment and Development)*, which has come out with the following remarks:<sup>4</sup>

1. Less than 10 percent of the Arab press has a full-time editor specialized in issues concerning environment and sustainable development. A similar percentage of this press designates a weekly page or a regular corner for environmental issues.
2. Even publications which assign a page for environmental topics withdraw this under the pressure of political or economic events or increasing advertising bookings. Such a withdrawal might be permanent or limited



to months or even years, a measure never to be seen in political, economic, athletic, or social pages of the same publication.

3. Many environment pages in the Arab press receive financial support from government organizations, like ministries of environment, a practice depriving this press of its neutrality and rendering it practically incapable of criticizing these organizations. The environment page of *Al-Abram*, the leading Egyptian daily, dedicated in its issue of 1 June 2008 four reports featuring the Minister of Environment, out of five.
4. With the exception of *Al Bi'a Wal Tanmiya*, published in Beirut since 1996, no other pan-Arab magazine which is specialized in the subject of the environment could achieve the status of a mainstream publication, distributed on a large scale throughout the Arab world, and which can be bought from newsstands that sell common interest publications.
5. Reliable sources of information on the environment are still weak or non-existent on the local level. This explains why some articles on the environment in the Arab press lack the strength of information, which is the basis of modern journalism.
6. The percentage of environmental issues in reports, interviews, and debates on Arab television channels is under 1 percent, while they reach 10 percent on channels in many European countries.
7. A boom has been witnessed during the last five years in the number of Arab environmental websites, although it is still incomparable with what exists in developed countries and even in most third world countries. The content of these sites is still trivial; and the information that they offer is mostly old, non-documented, and inappropriate for referential use even when these sites are run by governments. We have noticed that the content of most Arab websites on the environment is published as raw material, lacking scrutiny and editing. While some of these sites are serious and open to improvement, the major deficiency of all the Arab environmental sites is their lack of interaction with the public and the paucity of users reflected in the scantiness of comments, and failure to attract 'chatters'.
8. Environmental titles that have gained primal concern in Arab media are related to general topics like nature, wildlife, solid wastes, environmental health, marine pollution, and disasters. Industrial pollution and desertification have acquired priority in Algerian media, whereas the subject of water has been brought to the fore in Oman and Jordan. What is highly remarkable is the quasi-absence of topics like air pollution (except in catastrophic cases), efficient use of energy and land, and town-planning.

9. The simultaneity between the fourth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the occurrence of natural calamities and extreme weather conditions in several Arab regions raised the preoccupation of Arab media in 2007 with the issue of climate change. This concern was augmented after hurricane Gonu hit Oman by the middle of that year, followed by floods in Mauritania, and the hurricane in Yemen in 2008.

Blame cannot be put only on the media for failing to produce the sort of information which can effectively tackle the problems of environment and sustainable development. Three interrelated elements are at play here: (1) official development plans and environmental programmes; (2) a base of environmental scientific studies; and (3) a large public comprising millions of citizens who need to know about the environment and get involved in environmental and developmental action.<sup>5</sup>

Environmental information ties these elements together. Besides supplying news on them, it participates in supporting sound environmental measures. Furthermore, far from being an autonomous variety of information open to amateurship, environmental information is a professional brand sharing the precise characteristics of information in general.

Modern information takes its starting point from the public that it addresses. It depends for continuity on its success in drawing the attention of this public and obtaining its support. Failing to achieve this is equivalent to putting oneself at once outside the market. Arab information on the environment is still a newcomer to the scene. Undoubtedly, it has recognized the significance of the environmental element for development; and its interest in environmental issues has been clearly and increasingly reflected in the media. What is still lacking, however, is to transform the headlines into serious articles and convert the environmental press towards professionalism.

## II. ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA IN ARAB COUNTRIES

In this section we are going to survey the state of environmental information in the Arab printed media, with a special reference to programmes

dedicated to the environment at the national level on radio and television stations. We intend to describe the situation objectively in 15 Arab countries where we were able to observe how the media approach environmental issues in daily newspapers with widespread distribution, in periodicals with lesser readership, as well as in the audio-visual media.

In the United Arab Emirates, the environment is an almost daily preoccupation in the media, although most of the treated subjects are related to occasions and activities held by various environmental groups. Undoubtedly, the concern about environment and nature in the UAE media bears the indelible mark of the late head of state, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nayhan, who admired nature and possessed a sophisticated outlook on the relation between environment and development. Thanks to his personal interest, the environment occupied, in many cases, the cover pages of the country's media. The leading dailies of the Emirates publish environmental news in their local sections. Among them, *Alkhalij* is the only one that dedicates a weekly page for the environment. Despite the daily presence of environmental topics in the UAE media, the material is generally presented in the form of news and announcements concerning activities and plans, remaining poor in analytic commentaries, especially about the environmental impact that some huge construction projects generate. There are six magazines and periodicals with environmental titles, issued by various bodies, mostly newsletters with limited circulation.<sup>6</sup>

In the Saudi media, there are two remarkable sections on the environment run in two dailies, one of them appearing weekly in *Aliqtisadiyya*, and the other appearing daily in *Okaz*. In addition, there are two quarterly reviews dealing with issues concerning environment and nature and published by government organizations. Radio and television channels lack special environmental programmes, except for the ordinary coverage of world environmental news, besides official Saudi activities and press releases, taken generally from the Saudi News Agency. The scope of coverage becomes wider during conferences and meetings on issues concerning environment and development.<sup>7</sup>

In Kuwait, the environment has occupied a prominent place in the media since the mid-

nineties, with the emerging interest in the persistent environmental effects brought about by the Iraqi military invasion and the ensuing war. First, the media concentrated on air pollution as a result of well fires, and marine contamination by oil leakages. The problem of radiation pollution with depleted uranium had been unnoticed by the Kuwaiti media even after the year 2000, when talk about radiation dangers in the Balkans, especially in the vicinity of destroyed armoured machinery, became widespread. Almost all the news of environmental character in the country's media revolves around wastes and marine, coastal, and industrial pollution. *Alqabas* daily newspaper publishes a weekly supplement entitled "Our Environment Is Our Life," whereas the daily *Alanba'* runs an intermittent environmental page. With the exception of these two publications, the environment is virtually absent in the printed media. The audio-visual media, on the other hand, have no regular programmes on the environment. However, Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) runs a section under the title "Health and Environment," with regularly updated news. Almost six magazines and publications with environmental titles are issued by official organizations and other Kuwaiti institutions, but with a limited circulation. The monthly series "World of Knowledge," run by the government, publishes, inter alia, some important books on the environment, especially translations of UN reports on environment and development.<sup>8</sup>

In Bahrain, only one of the six daily newspapers devotes a weekly section to the environment. However, the papers of Bahrain constantly publish environmental articles and news, borrowed mainly from the regional office of UNEP in the capital Manama. A Master's thesis, presented by the researcher Maha Mahmud Sabbagh to the Environment Management Programme at the Arab Gulf University in 2005 under the title "Priorities of Local Environmental Issues in Bahraini media," is probably the first documented study to deal, in detail and with scientific analysis, with environmental trends in the Arab printed media. In 2004, the six dailies of Bahrain published 2014 articles related to the local environment.<sup>9</sup> The emphasis, however, remains more on news – especially receptions, official visits and celebrations – than on in-depth reports, comments, editorials, and analytical essays. Radio Bahrain broadcasts two weekly episodes on the

environment under the titles "Environment and Society" and "Native Life in Bahrain."

Coming to Oman, we find that the environment occupies a prominent place in the media. This reflects a truthful concern on the part of the government and the citizens. While one of the six daily newspapers in the country allocates a weekly page for the environment, environmental issues, both local and international, are strongly present in the contents of the remaining dailies and periodicals. *Oman*, the first official newspaper to appear in the sultanate, publishes, with the collaboration of the Ministry of Regional Municipalities, Environment, and Water Resources, a weekly page on environmental issues. The Omani television presents a weekly programme entitled "Together for Protecting the Environment," jointly with the same ministry. Oman radio broadcasts a weekly programme called "Environment and Life."<sup>10</sup>

In Qatar, with the exception of the weekly programme "You and the Environment" on the national radio station, the media are almost devoid of pages or sections dealing with environmental topics. This radio programme is prepared by the Higher Council for the Environment and Natural Reserves. It revolves around the news and activities of the Council, besides interviews, reports on key environmental issues, and covering of related occasions. In 1996, *Alsharq daily* started a page on the environment which was short-lived. But the paper continued to publish environmental topics and reports within the framework of exchange that it has with *Albi'wa Wal Tanmia* magazine. Between 1999 and 2005, the daily *Alraya* of Qatar ran a weekly page on the environment.

In Lebanon, *Alnabar* is probably the first Arab daily to have devoted, since 1997, a daily page for the environment, though it is simultaneously concerned with heritage issues. Historical and archaeological subjects often outweigh environmental subjects on this page. *Alnabar* would have done better to merge environment with development. In any case, this page is suspended during political upheavals to devote its space to topics which are considered more timely and urgent. *Almustaqbal* newspaper has assigned a weekly page for the environment since it was first issued in 1999. *Alsafir* has a weekly environmental page



characterized by continuity, and following the method of analysis alongside news. The official Lebanese channel Télé Liban presented – during 1997-1999 a weekly programme prepared by *Al-Bia wal-Tannia* under the title “The Environment Club,” in the form of a televised magazine consisting of various sections. This channel has ever since aired the programme time and again.<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of 2008, the new channel Future News started a weekly environmental programme entitled “Blue, Green.” One of the outstanding radio programmes specialized in environmental education is “The Environment Is Your Home” presented weekly, since 1997, by Alnour station. Another private radio station, Voice of Lebanon (VDL), has been broadcasting, since 2004, a weekly live programme receiving citizens’ complaints on the air and seeking immediate answers from specialists, then referring them to officials to find solutions. The programme is prepared by “Environment Online,” the hotline service of *Al-Bia wal-Tannia*. While this magazine addresses a pan-Arab audience, being issued in Beirut where its main offices are located has contributed towards inducing a broad environmental awakening in Lebanese schools. The magazine is distributed to all school libraries in Lebanon, and students participate in the contests that *Al-Bia wal-Tannia*

organizes. In many official examinations, texts on the environment have been chosen from this review for tests in civics and Arabic literature for the high school certificate.

In Syria, interest in environmental information has been witnessing a big evolution since 2004, especially in the domains of printed and electronic media. A short period of only two years witnessed the issuing of three licensed environmental magazines belonging to the private sector, followed in 2007 by a quarterly of the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment. The distribution of these publications is still limited, and they lack professionalism. Electronic media in Syria has appeared, at its best, in a web site called “Environment News,” a private initiative which later disintegrated. The Syrian *Althawra* is probably the only daily in the Arab world to have published, during a certain interval, a series of environmental editorials on its first page, written by Najib Saab. All Syrian dailies actually run a weekly or bimonthly environmental page supervised by a specialized editor. The Syrian news agency (SANA) is characterized by earmarking a special entry about the environment on its web site, although its content is not renewed regularly. The Syrian television broadcasts a weekly programme entitled “Environment and Man.”<sup>12</sup>

In Jordan, information on the environment in daily newspapers appears usually in the various traditional sections, with no dedicated page. During the past five years, *Aldoustour and Alarab Alyawm* have devoted pages for the environment before closing them for one reason or another, among which are the conviction of the publishers that such topics do not attract enough advertisers. The Jordanian television presented, until the end of 2003, a weekly programme on the environment, after which environmental issues made their comeback in diverse reports within local programmes and interviews with officials. The radio station broadcasts a weekly environmental programme with local content. Among the specialized environmental periodicals in Jordan, *Alrim* quarterly, issued by the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature, centres on nature and biological diversity.<sup>13</sup>

Coming to Iraq, we remark that interest in the environment during the past two decades has been more conspicuous in the opposition media outside Iraq than in the local media domestically. The environmental preoccupations of “emigrant” Iraqi press were not restricted to disasters like drainage of the lagoons or pollution by chemical weapons, the blame of which it put on the bygone regime, but surpassed these to raise issues like contamination by depleted uranium during the 1991 war. Iraq has experienced, since 2003, a boom in the media, both printed and audio-visual, exhibited nowadays in more than 1,000 newspapers and magazines, besides several radio and television satellite stations. *Alsiyada*, *Almashreq*, and *Alsabab* dailies all run weekly sections on the environment. Prominent among their concerns are subjects like water and air pollution, the degradation of health conditions related to the environment, wastes, and radiation contamination. In 2006, the Iraqi Ministry of Environment launched a monthly review called *Albi'a Wal Hayat* (Environment and Life), with worthwhile and varied content. Its main subjects are, besides the news and activities of the ministry, international projects and programmes. The review is distributed to civil servants throughout the country.<sup>14</sup>

In Yemen, environmental concern makes its special appearance in the printed media. The daily *Althawra* published a weekly environmental page between 1994 and 2000, after which it was re-

named “Water and the Environment.” Another daily, *14 October*, runs a weekly page on the environment. *Adam and Hawwa* magazine has a monthly environmental section. At the official level, the Yemen Environment Protection Council issues a quarterly under the name *Albi'a* (Environment). It has a general content, varying between news, statements, reports, interviews, and studies.<sup>15</sup>

In Egypt, the media coverage of environmental topics is linked almost completely to the State Ministry of Environmental Affairs which provides the media with financial support and information. This explains why most of the published material on the environment revolves around the news and activities of the ministry and around the conferences that it organizes or takes part in. Partly, this is a positive indicator since it has contributed towards circulating environment dialogue in popular media. However, this is not sufficient since genuine information surpasses the communicating of mere news, and must include offering comments, analyses, and investigations. While all the Egyptian widespread dailies carry environmental news and articles, the environment page in *Alahram* remains the most regular. Pages on the environment appear periodically in *Aljumbhuriyya*, *Alakhbar*, and *Almasa'*. In their turn, weekly magazines publish environmental reports, often descriptive, on diverse subjects. What catches the eye is that the opposition media in Egypt may be the only ones to run on their front pages articles of environmental content or interest. Usually, this occurs within the framework of unveiling what the opposition dubs as “official scandals.” Foremost among these media is *Alwafd* newspaper, published by the party bearing the same name.

The Egyptian television presents some general environmental programmes based mainly on interviews. One of them, “A Clean Environment,” is transmitted by Channel 2; another, “The Environmental Review,” is transmitted by Channel 3. Many Egyptian radio stations broadcast environmental programmes with awareness content. Outstanding among these audio-visual programmes is “It Is One World,” which has been presented weekly by Dr. Umayma Kamel on Channel 2, in the period 1992-2007. It offered surveys and analyses of environmental issues, both at the local and inter-

national levels, while evading the type of public relations information. Foremost among the radio programmes, to the extent that it does not stop at transmitting news but treats fundamental environmental issues, is “For Life on Earth” presented by Ms May Al Shafi’i on the General Egyptian Broadcasting Corporation.<sup>16</sup>

Tunisian media have witnessed a considerable growth in the last years, especially as Tunisia became the first Arab country to incorporate the name “development” with the ministry of environment, to become “The Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development.” The press coverage of environmental subjects reflects in general the activities and plans of the ministry. Materials appear in the form of news, reports, and diversified topics. *Alsahafa* is the only daily newspaper to single out a page for the environment, periodical but intermittent. Almost all the radio stations devote fixed weekly programmes for the environment. The Tunisian Channel 7 presents a weekly scientific programme entitled “Secrets of Nature,” while Channel 21 broadcasts once per week a general environmental programme with the name “Always Green,” “green” being the most popular epithet of the country. With the collaboration of the ministry, the Tunisian audio-visual media regularly broadcast short passages aiming at educating the public on particular environmental issues.<sup>17</sup>

In Algeria, the only daily paper with a weekly page on the environment is *Alsabah*, newly established and narrowly spread. Its environmental topics, which turn on local and international themes, are treated in a general way. This page concentrates on bits and pieces of information, aiming at environmental awakening. *Alshouruq* daily ran, for three years, a weekly environmental page that has been terminated despite its treatment of important issues starting with domestic wastes, contaminated water, and assaults on green areas, and ending with uncovering some major environmental violations. At the audio level, two weekly programmes are broadcast in Algeria.<sup>18</sup>

What is remarkable in Morocco is that most of the publications which devote weekly sections for the environment prepared by specialized editors are published in French. These are two daily

newspapers: *L’Opinion* and *Le Matin du Sahara*, and two weekly magazines: *Tel Quel* and *Le Journal*. The subjects of these specialized sections vary between local, regional, and international themes, related to natural disasters, wastes, and pollution of air, water, and coasts. One distinctive feature of the Moroccan television is its ‘clip’-type brief programme “A Drop of Water,” presented each evening since 2005. The Moroccan radio runs a weekly programme called “Environmental Issues.”<sup>19</sup>

### III. ARAB ENVIRONMENT IN REGIONAL MEDIA

Among the Arab media that address a regional pan-Arab audience, as well as Arab-speaking residents in other countries, are three publications with outstanding experience in environmental information: (1) *Al-Bia wal-Tanmia* monthly magazine, (2) *Al Hayat* daily newspaper, and (3) *Monte Carlo Doualiya* Radio.

*Al-Bia wal-Tanmia*, published in Beirut since 1996 with Arab and international content, is distributed in all Arab countries by major distribution companies, and to Arabic-speaking subscribers around the world. This is an independent media enterprise, financed by its publisher, advertisers, and readers. It has a network of correspondents throughout the Arab world; it is affiliated to its own research centre which provides it with scientific content; and it is produced by a group of professional journalists. Thanks to its genuine independence far from governmental and other organizations, it has been able to maintain a wide scope of freedom and pose key issues with courage, objectivity, and professionalism. Being the only Arab publication specialized in the environment and edited, produced, and distributed in accordance with the most rigorous professional media standards, it has occupied a leading place among the major political, economic, and social publications. Its motto, “A specialized title for all readers,” expresses its editorial policy based on simplifying environmental topics in such a way as to address the general reader, without compromising scientific integrity.

*Al Hayat* daily, published in London and distributed in the Arab countries and worldwide, runs, in collaboration with *Al-Bia wal-Tanmia*, a



monthly environmental page, besides periodical reports on the environment. This page is characterized by a diversity of content, comprising news analyses, reports, interviews, and documented news. An outstanding campaign launched jointly by both publications about depleted uranium stirred up many reactions and led to a series of practical measures. This campaign was a major factor that induced the Iraqi environment ministry to attend seriously to the problem by measuring the radiation and publishing the results, then calling for corrective action. The campaign had a big influence on awakening large sectors in the Arab world, especially in the Gulf countries, to the problem of depleted uranium.

The Arabic section of Radio Monte Carlo, broadcasting in Arabic from Paris to the whole Arab world, presents a weekly environmental programme entitled "The World Our Home," which is prepared by Hassan Al Talili and presented regularly since 2003. The programme is produced in the form of an audible magazine with news, interviews, reports, and comments. One of its distinctive characteristics is that, in many cases, it broadcasts from the very site of the environmental event.

While Arab satellite television channels do not allocate programmes to the environment, some of them present serious environmental topics, albeit sporadically. Aljazeera station is leading in this dimension. On its screen Mr Ahmad Mansur has devoted, during the last three years, a few episodes of his renowned programme "Without Limits" to environmental subjects, most of which were prepared in collaboration with *Al-Bia wal-Tanmia*. Mansur was among the first to raise the question of depleted uranium on an Arab screen. Towards the end of 2006, Aljazeera launched an environmental programme, live and brief, presented by Ms Rawan Al Damen.

Alarabiya television has presented varied reports on the environment, the most outstanding of which were those prepared by Ms Maysun Azzam on depleted uranium. These reports stand among the most comprehensive and accurate about the subject.<sup>20</sup>

In November 2006, a satellite channel, *Beaty* (My Environment), commenced experimental broadcasting from Cairo under the supervision of

its sponsor, the Environment Authority in Saudi Arabia. During its brief life, this channel lacked programming, while most of its sections consisted of pictorial scenes of nature and wildlife, usually of amateurish character and transmitted with no comment or voice-over. Unsurprisingly, the channel was off the air before it could celebrate its first birthday.

#### IV. ARAB ENVIRONMENT ON THE INTERNET

Some Arab countries exert big efforts to join the era of information technology. Yet the modes of internet exploitation in the Arab world are more driven by consumer habits rather than the desire to generate, accumulate, and propagate knowledge. Reports on the state of Arab human development prepared by UNDP reveal a lot of alarming and disquieting truths. Besides pointing to the fact that the rate of internet users in the Arab countries is still among the lowest in the world, UN reports indicate that Arab policies which attempt to fill the information gap concentrate on the infrastructure at the expense of the content. Most of the content available on the internet is written in English, proficiency in which is restricted to a minority of the population, while the Arabic content is so scanty that it falls short of satisfying the needs of the majority for useful information.

A survey carried out by the Study Centre of Quantitative Economics (Madar) has shown the number of internet users in the Arab world at the end of 2005 to be about 26 million, comprising 8.5 percent of the Arab population compared to 14 percent worldwide. The survey also showed that while the rate of internet users in the Gulf countries, especially UAE, witnessed an increase, it is still lower than 6 percent in 12 Arab states.<sup>21</sup> Undoubtedly, these rates reflect a big stride compared to less than one percent, the rate recorded by the Human Development report for 2002.

The fact remains that the size of useful environmental information is meagre. Most websites belonging to Arab official, private, and civil society bodies are in English. For the most part, their promotional and advertising content outweighs their scientific information content. It may be safely said that most Arab websites concerned

with the environment are promotional sites aiming at attracting foreign granting institutions. Even at this level, they are weak as public relations sites, besides their deficiency in information.<sup>22</sup>

In general, it is possible to get some information on the Arab environment from the internet. But this requires a big effort, with the necessity to be familiar with the international websites containing the required information, taking into consideration that most of these sites are in English. The persisting problem is the scarcity of novel and credible statistical reports, which are either originally non-existent, or there is no organization which assumes the responsibility, before presenting them on the internet, of compiling them in a way relevant to evaluate and compare. Arabic websites have to move away from a mentality of laudation and promotion towards a mentality of amassing reliable information, critical analysis, and founding platforms for interaction and dialogue.

## V. CONCLUSION

Arab environmental information seems to be an expression of Arab environmental action as it stands in need to define its concepts, frameworks, and goals. As an integral part of a general environmental policy rather than a means to proclaim a ready-made policy, environmental information aims at developing environmental awareness inside the various social sectors, thus enabling them to participate effectively in developing, supervising, and revising environmental policies and preparing the public to engage positively in supporting the achievement of such policies and measures. Among the major preoccupations of environmental information is to effect a behavioural change in people's attitudes towards the environment, and to act upon the natural resources as if they were objects which have value and price tags rather than as gratuitous gifts.

While information is a main instrument for achieving environmental policy, it cannot be effective if it is not viewed as complementary with other measures like laws, rules, and financial measures, be they incentives or deterrents. Being conscious of a certain problem does not always dispose the knower to participate in solv-

ing it, taking into consideration all the restraints that such a solution might entail. Information is liable to facilitate the endeavour to convince people through laws and regulations. In their turn, laws may incite people to accept the calling of the environment. Financial incentives and deterrents contribute towards a better acceptance and observance of the laws. Environmental information aims primarily at motivating the public to engage effectively in attending to the environment by means of encouraging them to embark upon personal action and to involve themselves in dialogue and convey their opinions forcibly to officials in such a way that information becomes an element in decision making. This requires opening channels of dialogue through which the opinions of citizens can directly influence the officials, while the officials pass to the citizens clarifications about the steps taken by government and official bodies for the protection of the environment.

Environmental information urges the public to engage in the process of planning and decision making. The participation of the public in environmental dialogue leads to the propagation of public awareness for safeguarding natural resources. It also provides the officials with a clear description of public concerns.

National policies concerning environmental information approach the subject from the following perspectives:

1. Information is a means to pass to the public credible facts about the environment, and a channel through which the public can transmit their opinions to the officials and have a dialogue with them. Information here is an open means for dialogue and partnership in decision.
2. Information is a means to communicate to the public official policies and explain environmental plans and measures as an expression of granting the citizens their natural right to a free access to information and to secure the transparency of official action.
3. Information is a means to produce a change in people's behaviour and establish affinity with the environment, either within the framework of personal, voluntary conduct or



within the framework of securing support for official environmental policies and laws.

4. Information is a means for public relations, as official environmental policies cannot succeed in the absence of a system of relations between the persons in charge of these policies on the one hand (usually ministries of environment) and the civil society, industrialists, merchants, professionals, educators, consumers, and the rest of official and public bodies on the other.<sup>23</sup>

Almost all Arab media stand in need of specialized editors, except for the traditional sections like local news, world news, culture, economics, sports, and reports. In most cases, the same editor is asked to work for more than one section.

Reports on local environmental issues usually concentrate on subjects which attract the sight, like wastes in the streets, or on disasters like oil leakages or oil-well fires, while they overlook other issues of magnitude, like the impact of industry on the environment, the depletion of natural resources, the pollution of water, the destruction of coastal lines, and the uncontrolled urban expansion. The Arab media often attend to such momentous environmental issues only when they receive ready-made materials on them from international organizations or news agencies.

While a journalist is not expected to be a scientist with expertise on the environment, it is indispensable that he should be sufficiently acquainted with his subject in such a way that he is able to locate the credible sources of information; then, having collected the basic information, to present and analyse it. This shows the importance of cooperation between the media on the one hand and environmental experts and organizations at the Arab, regional, and international levels on the other. Another matter of priority is to establish channels of communication between environmental writers and news providers, whether they are individual experts, official bodies, or organizations. One main obstacle remains scarcity of data, and restrictions on access to what might be available.

While governments, besides regional and international organizations, have a major role to assume in supporting Arab environmental media, the biggest responsibility falls upon the media, whether they are individual journalists or institutions. But the persisting question is whether environmental information is to be practised as an end in itself or as part of an environmental pre-occupation encompassing all sectors of society—scientific, economic, political, and NGOs. Are the media to forge an environmental state of affairs, or to deal with one which is already in existence? Media can indeed be part of environmental change, through spreading awareness and instigating action, but only as an integral part of a wider environmental drive mobilizing various sectors of the society.

Ultimately, quality environmental information requires professional approach to both environment and media. Unfortunately, environment in Arab media is overwhelmingly controlled by media and environment amateurs.

## NOTES

All the literature referred to in the following notes, whether in book form, articles, or reports, is in Arabic.

- 1 "Arab Information and the Environment," a paper presented by Najib Saab in 1987 to a conference held in Tunisia and organized by the Arab League education, Culture, and Science Organization (ALECSO) under the auspices of UNEP. See the full version in Najib Saab, *Environmental Issues*, Beirut: Technical Publications, 1997.
- 2 Najib Saab, "The Public and the Sources of Information," in *Environmental Issues*, pp. 23-24.
- 3 Maha Mahmud Sabbagh, "Priorities of Local Environmental Issues in Bahraini Media," MA thesis, Environmental Management Programme, Arab Gulf University, Bahrain, 2005.
- 4 The surveys were carried out by the correspondents of Al-Bia wal-Tanmia in 15 Arab countries, and based on reviewing the content of local media between November 2005 and September 2006. Data have been collected exclusively for this study by the following correspondents: Imad Saad (JAE), Ali Al Anzi (KSA), Ghada Farhat (Kuwait), Zakaria Khanji (Bahrain), Mahad Bin Ahmad Ma'sheni (Oman), Ahmad Hussain Abdul Rahman (Qatar), Nisrin Ajab (Lebanon), Abdul Hadi Alnajjar (Syria), Bater Wardam (Jordan), Kazem Maqdadi and Fadel Badrani (Iraq), Sadeq Al Assimi (Yemen), Wajdi Riyad and Khaled Ghanem (Egypt), Fathi Alhamrouni (Tunisia), Fatiha Alshar' and Younes Fassih (Algeria), Muhammad Altefrawi (Morocco).
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