



Conference Report
"Broadcast Media in the 21 Century: Engaging the World"
Salzburg, Austria
February 4-7, 2005

CSIS, in partnership with the Salzburg Seminar, gathered 25 senior Arab and Western broadcast journalists for three days of focused discussions in February 2005. The conversations were remarkably honest and self-critical and covered such shared professional concerns such as journalistic standards, accountability, government pressures, and the power of language and image. They captured the dynamic of Arab media in transition against the backdrop of dynamic yet uncertain political change. Arab and Western journalists built valuable relationships and expressed appreciation for important new perspectives they gleaned in Salzburg.

Participants also expressed great enthusiasm for creating an ongoing series of meetings to pursue these issues further. They wanted more time to discuss the relationship between images and violence, the changing role of women on Arab television, and a host of other issues. They recommended holding at least one of those meetings in the Middle East in order to facilitate the participation of a wider number of the most senior executives from the Arab networks to help go beyond the realm of discussion and to affect actual practices. Indeed, one prominent Arab host told the group, "I will go back home and I will press our administration to get a code of ethics. That's for sure." CSIS and Salzburg are planning and fundraising for these future efforts.

Narrative:

Soon after convening, discussion focused on how news outlets portrayed the falling statue of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Most journalists present agreed that the event had been planned, but some objected to the contention that it was "staged." They discussed how a journalist should signal to his or her viewers that what they are seeing might be, in some cases, created for the camera. Arab journalists asserted that they and their viewers are often skeptical of governmental authority and question it, while American news media tend to be more trusting of government positions. Turning to the recently completed Iraqi elections, they agreed that news media around the world—including in the Arab world—reported quite favorably on the Iraqi elections. Yet, as the discussion evolved, the journalists wondered how many voting problems went unreported because reporters had difficulties moving freely throughout the country.

Two full days of professional discussions followed, examining issues such as language, bias and accuracy, and how dissent is portrayed. In a particularly rich discussion, the U.S. journalists talked about the importance of protecting their credibility so as to protect their market share. Arab television, as an industry that largely survives on subsidy, balances different pressures.

The conference discussions reflected most clearly that maintaining ethics is an ongoing task, and the extent to which Arab journalists are still in the very early stages of agreeing what their ethical responsibilities should be. As one U.S. participant pointed out, agreeing that journalists should pursue fairness, accuracy and honesty is easy; the hard part is agreeing on what constitutes compliance.

Outcomes:

Many of the Arab journalists arrived at the conference seeming almost star-struck to meet their U.S. counterparts. Yet, those same Arab journalists left being respected by those they admired. Longtime veterans of CNN saw some of themselves in the Arab journalists, who were clearly trying to work out some fundamental issues while maintaining on-air coverage 24 hours a day.

The Arab journalists also noted that they rarely had occasion to see each other outside of conferences like this. While most discussion groups after the first night combined Arab and Western participants, the Arab journalists also clearly enjoyed the opportunity to connect with their peers.

There was widespread agreement on the utility of future meetings. They also agreed on the desirability of a range of other activities: producing teaching materials, cooperating on co-production arrangements, and others.

Organization:

The conference brought together two dozen senior journalists and executives from the U.S., Europe, and the Arab world, along with one Turkish participant and one South African. Frank Sesno, a veteran of CNN now teaching at George Mason University, acted as a resource person, and CSIS Middle East Program Director Jon Alterman helped shape the discussion. Prof. Khaled Hroub of Cambridge University was the senior Arab academic, and the noted American actor Richard Dreyfuss contributed as an informed outsider.

Support:

CSIS and Salzburg carried out this seminar with the cooperation of the Imagining the Future Fund. Generous financial support came from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Knight Foundation. Al-Jazeera and CNN provided significant financial and in-kind support, and additional financial support came from the Charles H. Revson Foundation, Home Box Office, and NewsCorp.