

Interview with Heba Afify, Egyptian journalist

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Heba Afify was invited as a panellist to the roundtable titled “Youth, the agent of change?” that took place on 14.11.2016 in Ljubljana. The roundtable was co-organised by Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI) and the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the attempt to discuss, with the voice of young people, common challenges and opportunities of the youth across the Mediterranean. It is hard to think of a person that constitutes a better match for that occasion. Heba is a reflective, critical, broad-minded and pragmatic individual whose contribution stretches beyond that of a panellist in a one-off event. Fortunately, she is a regular contributor to an Egyptian newspaper and she also agreed to this short interview.

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1. You marched through various local and international newspapers based in Egypt, but it is really your current affiliation with Mada Masr that stands out as a manifestation of determination and courage. Could you map the newspaper [media] landscape in Egypt and situate Mada within it?

The distinction between privately-owned and state-owned media which has been the main categorization in Egyptian media has been fading within the last three years as most mainstream media has conformed on most issues to a unified and largely state-aligned voice, where it became common to find the same main headlines on all newspapers, private and state-owned alike. This is particularly apparent when it comes to coverage of issues such as the state’s announced war on terrorism. There are exceptions to this with websites that attempt to break this conformity and individual journalists who challenge and raise the ceilings of their institutions. Mada falls within the category



of media that challenges the current stagnation in media and attempts to continue to do critical and independent journalism that is based in research and inquisition rather than political agendas.

2. *What is the role of newspapers, both printed and online, in the larger media scene in Egypt? How relevant is the thesis that newspapers are dying out in the Egyptian context?*

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The newspaper business in Egypt suffers the same recession witnessed in its counterparts elsewhere. Although the official numbers of circulation are kept secret, the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) has announced in recent years drops without revealing numbers. Publishing business insiders have estimated that newspapers circulation dropped to around half a million down from over two million during its peak in 2011. Subsequently, newspapers suffer financially and periodically raise their prices, which further affects circulation. The reasons are similar to those affecting the global newspaper market, as news consumers resort more and more to television talk shows and online resources. This is coupled with a general drop in political engagement that has also affected the numbers. That being said, newspapers still maintain a certain prestige in the Egyptian media scene and are more trusted than other outlets.

3. *Mada Masr was established in 2013 by a group of journalists, most of whom were under the age of 30. [How] did that age influence the outlook and ambition of Mada? Do you feel that the drive of Mada is directly related to the attitude and interests of the age group below 30, which represents more than half of the Egypt's population?*

The young nature of Mada has definitely influenced it in the sense that it channelled some of the most universal characteristic of youth that transcend political alignments and other differences like the urge to be heard, to make a difference and to inflict change. As Egypt is in the grip of severe political polarization, the youth are as affected by this divisionism as everyone else,

that's why it's difficult to list a common agenda for them beyond the basics of enhancement of educational system, work opportunities and better economic conditions. Beyond that, the youth are parts of several sub groups within society that range from those who demand more freedoms and decry violations of human rights and those who subscribe to the state's narrative and believe that all types of opposition have to be subdued as Egypt gets through this difficult juncture.

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4. The values of autonomy, independence and freedom of expression lie at the heart of Mada's identity. But you also openly strive to be a progressive media outlet. As the meaning of "progressive" is heavily dependent on the context at best and diluted at worse, it would be interesting to hear what direction for Egypt are you able to distil from the work of reporters and editors. What are the foremost aspects of the social change that Egypt should be pursuing?

As a journalist, the aspects of social change that I am most invested in seeing in Egypt have to do with the development of critical thinking and independent opinion. As we see the bulk of public opinion being manipulated by a handful of media personalities whose often widely inaccurate portrayals of events are adopted by a majority with no verification, my hope is for the continued presence of quality journalism to play a role in developing a collective sense of healthy skepticism and autonomy in opinion to disrupt the effects of the propaganda machinery that features so prominently in Egyptian politics.

5. Another key feature of Mada is the fact that it reports in both Arabic and English. The ability to reach an audience beyond the Arab-speaking one is incredibly important. What has been your primary target audience? Do you have a good understanding of your readership?

Our readership is varied between local consumers and readers abroad who are interested in the region and Egypt specifically. Our main readership depends on those looking for nuanced coverage of the area including academics, researchers and other



civically engaged individuals, as well as citizens who have lost faith in mainstream media and are looking for alternatives. Taping into the full potential of readership that our dual linguistic advantage allows, which comprises people with widely different educational levels and interests, has been a process that is still ongoing as we continue to discover how to best appeal to this large base.

6. *As a journalist, do you work with the notion of the Euro-Mediterranean region? Is an awareness of a Euro-Mediterranean identity present in the regional media?*

Our work is very much affected by international and regional events, which inevitably have their echoes in Egypt. As Egypt shares the same issues with its neighbors such as terrorist activity and as its economy and political scene is heavily influenced by its relations with world powers, international and regional developments heavily inform our coverage. The Euro Mediterranean is not a very relevant categorization of the region in our work, except in specific stories like the Juilio Regeni case and migration. When I speak of a region that Egypt belongs to, I mean the Middle East.

7. *One of the defining values of Mada is experimentalism – you approach the news and stories using different narratives and visual methods. Can you share with us some of your personal and Mada's experience (as well as those from other media you follow) in trying out new forms of communication? What, perhaps, is a promising but currently underexplored method? Or, what technique is in decline?*

One of the main realizations that we made early on in Mada is that the reader is exhausted of dry stories and responds better to stories with a voice, a human interest angle or a visual storytelling mechanism. In response to this, we have been flexible with the rules of journalistic style, allowing things like writing a feature in the first person, publishing hybrids of opinion articles mixed with reporting and other forms. We have also learnt not to shy away from long form pieces and in depth investigations which, if done well, succeed to draw readers in despite being heavier reads.