

A Tale of Three (Media) Cities

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Abstract

In the early years of the twenty-first century, three of the 23 Arab nations – Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt – have established media cities in the hope that knowledge-based industries will push their economies forward. All three cities are the direct result of government policy and offer financial benefits to companies located in the cities. The intention is that a combination of media, business, technology, and finance will become inexorably linked and that the resulting synergy will provide thousands of jobs. As well as generating jobs and leapfrogging their economies into the twenty-first century, these cities are also meant to be shining symbols of modernity in societies that have tended to look backwards rather than forwards. This paper looks at the vision behind these cities, who owns them, the business models employed and their likelihood of success. It also considers the key issue of freedom of expression and the free flow of information in these cities, in the context of societies that traditionally have restricted the flow of information and blocked freedom of expression.

Introduction

As the 2002 report by the United Nations has suggested, the Arab world – much like the opening of the Dickens novel *A Tale of Two Cities* – is full of contradictions. On the Arabian peninsula it is the best of times; it is the worst of times. It is the age of wisdom, it is the age of foolishness, ... it is the spring of hope, it is the winter of despair. The Dickens novel, which first appeared in 1859, is set during the darkest period of the French Revolution and offers a mythic tale of good versus evil, during a time of intense change. In Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt these changes and contradictions are obvious in everyday life, and especially in the media which reflects that life. The architects of the future in these countries have decided that knowledge-based industries based at media cities will propel their economies forward. Rising above the Middle Eastern sands, governments have seeded media projects with cash and concessions in Dubai Media City, Jordan Media City, and the Egyptian Media Production City. The great hope is that these zones will drive the knowledge economy in their respective countries by assembling a critical mass of talent, money, and technology, and that these cities will act as magnets for human capital and cash.

In these three master-planned communities the vision is that media, business, government, technology, and finance will become inexorably linked and that the synergy will provide jobs for thousands. One great expectation is that these master-planned communities can help make the most out of the area's most available (and growing) natural resource – human capital. Besides generating jobs and leapfrogging economies into the twenty-first century, these cities are also meant to be shining symbols of modernity – lighting the way for media people among the Arabic Diaspora to come home. Though these special cities have shared a great hope of become a shining city on the hill, the expression of that hope has differed in each country – as has its achievement of success. Part of this has been by plan as each has sought an appropriate niche to best take advantage of its mixture of talent, economy, and infrastructure. Part has also been the result of happenstance, a consequence of the vicissitudes of the marketplace, politics, and winds of war.

For a variety of reasons which this paper will explore, the governments of three nations in the Middle East have decided to create media cities in the desert. In the case of Egypt and the UAE, the desert theme is real: The cities have been built on what were literally moonscapes of sand and rock. In Jordan's case the media city has arisen, phoenix-like, from the ashes of a failed media production project in the capital, Amman. This paper explores the development of these media cities, in the context of a region in which the media are not permitted freedom of expression. Indeed, the United Nation's *Arab Human Development Report* for 2002 noted that “not a single Arab country had genuinely free media”. The report listed only three states with media that was rated as even “partly free” (UNDP *Arab Human Development Report* 2002a, p. 118). We begin with some background.

The three media cities

All three projects resulted from direct government policy or action. Jordan Media City (JMC) and Egyptian Media Production City (EMPC) are national projects that are public/private partnerships. Dubai Media, while reflecting the technological priorities of the national government, is the product of one emirate and one visionary. The UAE

consists of seven emirates, and the emirates (or kingdoms) of Dubai and Abu Dhabi are by far the richest. In 2001, the ruling families of both emirates featured among the ten richest families in the world (Forbes 2001). Although work on DMC started later than the other two media cities, it opened earlier because of the drive of the emirate's crown prince, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, and the availability of plenty of money. The latter meant that the project initiators could make use of the vast amount of cheap labor in the emirate to carve their dream out of the desert.

Jordan was the first nation in the region to raise the idea of creating a media free zone (Sullivan, 2001a). JMC was built in 1978 on about 18,000 square meters of government-owned land near the Jordan Radio and Television Corporation in the central east of the capital, Amman. It is a 45-minute drive to the airport. The joint government/private sector Jordan Production Company began operating there in 1982 but folded nine cash-starved years later. The facility was mothballed until 2001 when a Saudi businessman, Sheikh Saleh Kamel who owns the Dallah Media Production Company, provided the funds for a technology overhaul and a cash infusion for uplink equipment, encoders, and multiplexers (high speed data links).

Dubai Media City (DMC) rises from whitish sand dunes about 20 kilometers south of Dubai's central business district. Today, the first phase of DMC occupies about 33,000 square meters, but the site is scheduled for significant development in the immediate future. Depending upon the quirks of traffic on Sheik Zayed Road, which links DMC to Dubai and the airport, the trip can be up to an hour's drive (or more) from the airport. DMC has very much a "field of dreams" feel. The designers built the project on the hope that companies would come to its grounds. Other developers have built thousands of housing units nearby, betting that the city grows southwards in DMC's direction. It has been designed to provide "an infrastructure, environment and attitude" that will enable new economy and media enterprises to operate locally and globally out of Dubai. The facility shows the consequences of the brute muscle of money and a singular vision. It opened officially in January 2001 and took only a year to build. Initial cost of the project has been estimated at between \$700 million and almost \$1 billion, depending on the source of information (Schleifer, 2000; Sirri, 2003, p. 2). Money has never been an issue. DMC rests on land donated by the crown prince, who has deep pockets and views this as a pet project.

Built in the shadows of the pyramids, the Egyptian Media Production City (EMPC) is about 30 kilometers west of Cairo and 10 kilometers from the Giza pyramids in 6th of October City. Even on a good traffic day, EMPC is more than an hour's drive from Cairo and a 90-minute drive to the airport (Shahawi, n.d., p. 1). The site opened officially in June 2002 but work started a decade earlier. Money has been a constant problem. The depreciation of the Egyptian pound (it has fallen from about 3.8 to the dollar in 1992 to about 5.7 by early 2003) has made funding the project in the marketplace difficult (see Onada.com). To date, EMPC's physical plant has cost about \$400 million and a further \$89 million has been spent to equip the fully digital studios. Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) donated the land, which measured about 2 million square meters of studios and buildings as of January 2003. EMPC is bigger than the other two media cities combined because it has 18 studios (29 were originally planned). Ten of the 18 are outside shooting areas, which occupy most of this land. The EMPC is third largest production facility in the world after Hollywood and India.

Two of the three cities are modernity incarnate, and the third has been redecorated in high quality materials. All consist of spires of glass and concrete on the outside, with acres of wood paneling and sophisticated interiors on the inside. Each looks surprisingly similar to the other, albeit with appropriate cultural icons as part of the interior design. Like much of Dubai's architecture, DMC is a manifestation of modernist aspirations. The initial phase consists of three buildings, each of five storeys. The exterior walls are made of gleaming white glass interspersed with large tinted windows and white support structures. Inside, faux and real oak paneling and mottled glass walls feature, along with stylish decorations and art work. Further phases are lower – mostly three storeys – but equally stylish in design and conception. Public sculptures and fountains feature at key locations throughout DMC. Phase one boasts 200 acres of manicured parks and gardens, maintained by Pakistanis and Indian workers. These parks, combined with a lake the size of two football grounds, fed by the nearby Arabian Sea, provide visual relief from the surrounding desert. The main buildings of the EMPC are equally stylish and modern, rising four storeys from the surrounding desert. Similarly to DMC, no expense has been spared on the furnishings and fittings. Most of the chairs are ultra-expensive Aeron models, and the walls and floors offer an ambience of luxury and high style. Egyptian icons in the form of sculptures, murals and paintings adorn the walls and halls. The classroom of the International Academy for Media Sciences, discussed later in this paper, are ultra-modern. JMC is less flashy and expensive, because it has been refurbished, but like the other media cities it still exudes an air of modernity. All three media cities are symbols of their countries' aspirations to be major media players on the world stage.

Project vision

On one level, these media cities share two common goals. Those goals are to generate income and create jobs for the teeming masses in the Arab world who must find work. Despite sharing these basic needs, JMC, DMC, and EMPC have approached solving the jobs issue from different directions.

In Jordan, the JMC is part of a government Information Communications Technology (ICT) initiative to improve services and to ensure the economic growth of the country. Government policy seeks to develop market incentives contributing “significantly to economic and social development by creating the legal, institutional, and commercial environment in which the ICT market is nurtured, grown, and sustained” (National ICT Policy, n.d., p. 1). King Abdallah of Jordan has giving his full support to the JMC, said Radi Al-Khas, who is overseeing the project. Al-Khas sees this arrangement as part of a favorable media climate developing in Jordan. King Abdallah officially opened JMC on 25 March 2002. Al-Khas also has predicted that the next parliament will pass a media free zone law. “Jordan believes in the deregulation of the media and is forming a regulatory body, analogous to the FCC, to issue licenses for private sector channels,” Al-Khas has been quoted as saying (Sullivan 2001a).

In the United Arab Emirates, Dubai Media City receives the benefits of special regulations. It is part of a much larger area known as TECOM, which consists of Knowledge Village, Dubai Internet City, and DMC. Dubai's rulers see TECOM's cities and village as “symbols of the potential of the knowledge economy in the region” (Anonymous, 2002a, p.22). The first CEO of Dubai Media City Saeed Al-Muntafiq said the vision was not merely to be a regional hub for broadcasters “but to be one of four or

five global bases for broadcasting as we move forward over the next few years” (Sullivan 2001b). Dubai Media City has emerged as a focal point of media activity in the region. Its superior infrastructure – combined with its largely imported pool of talent and multiple incentives – has tempted several leading media companies to relocate their global and regional headquarters. Global groups with regional headquarters include Reuters; CNN; Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), one of the largest Arabic TV networks, and CNBC. The first three have gained naming rights for the three buildings that comprise the initial stage. Regional giants include Saudi Research and Publishing (SRPC), the largest Pan Arab publisher.

The EMPC was designed as a shooting location and tourist destination. Besides period sets, the comprehensive development plan included theatres, a services compound, a children’s village, a film processing workshop, a training center, a five-star Movenpick hotel, and an employee’s club. Locations included a neighborhood areas reflecting different Islamic eras with buildings in the Ottoman and Mamluke styles, a rural area, an ancient Egypt area, the desert and Bedouin Area, the famous Egyptian Cites area, and an Entertainment area called Magic Land (Shahawi, 2002). One great hope was that EMPC would become a destination park much like Universal studios in Florida and California to which tourists could come and in which film-makers could practice their craft. Film production was seen not only as a jobs-and-income generating area, but also as a way to protect the cultural heritage of Egypt – and of Islam. Academics and critics viewed these films and programming as a way to resist cultural invasion, cultural incursion, and cultural pollution (Taweela, 2002). To date, this hope is largely unrealized (see also Walters and Quinn, 2003). Few tourists come and only about 1,300 people are employed on site.

Who owns it and runs it

The relationship between government-controlled local media and the international media assembling in these cities will be fascinating to watch. Saudi Arabian businessman Sheikh Saleh Kamel owns the Dallah Media Production Company which established and runs the Jordanian Media City Company, which he chairs. JMC operates a large production and uplink center in Amman. The sheikh’s own Arab Radio and Television (ART) network, itself based in Rome, is JMC’s main tenant and client. ART had been using one of the two 600-square-meter studios for production of five of their programs for some months prior to the official launch. The rapid startup was possible because most of the facilities were already in place. The complex was originally built in 1978 and started operations in 1982 as the joint government/private sector Jordan Production Company. But the facility fell into disuse when the company folded in 1991 (Sullivan 2001a, p.1). Even though many years had passed, the infrastructure was still in excellent condition when it was refurbished. “This was the best facility built in the Arab world, from a technical standpoint and an architectural one,” said Radi Al-Khas, ART’s vice president for technology and development, who is overseeing the startup of the media city project. JMC’s refurbishment cost about \$140 million and another \$1.5 million was spent to overhaul existing equipment. Some old equipment, such as lighting and sound mixers, could still be used. Digital equipment, including studio cameras and edit suites, was moved in from Avezzano in Italy, a location which ART initially had considered as a major production center. “Because of the expenses there, and of getting our people there,

we've moved some of the equipment to the Middle East, both to Lebanon and to Jordan," said Al-Khas.

Brand-new is the \$2 million of uplink equipment, encoders, and multiplexers; ART currently receives eleven of its channels here, encrypts them, and sends them out on Arabsat. Soon they'll add to that ART's newly acquired STAR Select channels. Reception-only Asiasat dishes are positioned on the roof with plans, as clients move in and demand increases, to build more uplinks. "This is the first private uplink from the Arab world," said Al-Khas. Despite ART's close relationship with the project, they are treated as any other client. Al-Khas is negotiating with other broadcasters who could rent production space, office space, and use of facilities. "The advantage for a broadcaster who might be looking at coming here is that you aren't under any government control. The whole area is a free zone. That also reduces cost, because we can import equipment tax-free. There is no license for the uplinking, so the total cost for someone who wants to operate from here is significantly less than elsewhere" (Sullivan 2001a).

Tecom is the acronym for Dubai's new economy hub: The Technology, Electronic Commerce and Media Free Zone Authority. As of March 2003 Tecom consisted of Dubai Media City and Dubai Internet City, with Knowledge Village scheduled to open at the end of 2003. The last replaced Dubai Ideas Oasis, an e-business consulting and financial venture which was quietly put to rest about the middle of 2002. Tecom is designed to provide "an infrastructure, environment and attitude" that will enable new economy and media enterprises to operate locally and globally out of Dubai. Dubai's rulers see Tecom's cities and village as "symbols of the potential of the knowledge economy in the region" (Anonymous 2002a, p. 22). As of March 2003 the initial phase of the new economy hub covered an area of about 1,000 acres of grounds and buildings. Tecom plans several major expansions, which are discussed later. Knowledge Village is envisaged as a learning community that will develop the region's knowledge workforce and catalyze new economy growth. DMC encompasses anything connected with the media, while Dubai's rulers see DIC as the UAE equivalent of California's Silicon Valley. The cities are located near each other on a beautiful site, about 20 kilometers south of the city on Sheik Zayed Road, the highway linking Dubai to the capital, Abu Dhabi. Many of Dubai's most prestigious hotels and residences are situated between the highway and the coastline in this part of the city.

Abdul Hamid Juma replaced Saeed Al-Muntafiq, DMC's first CEO, on 24 March 2002 when Al-Muntafiq was promoted to chair the DMC board. Juma runs DMC for Dubai's crown prince, Sheik Mohammad bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, who announced plans to found the city in 2000, and who is seen as the visionary behind it. Juma's background is in sales and marketing with companies such as Citibank, Jebel Ali Free Zone, and Dubai Internet City. He has a BA in economics from the University of Colorado at Boulder and a certificate in personnel management from Ashridge College in the United Kingdom. DMC is really run and operated for the benefit of the Al-Maktoum family and its business friends. Because Dubai is a monarchy with absolute rule, any law can be changed or altered simply by uttering the words "We hereby do declare..." The advantage of this ability is that the bureaucracy is streamlined and things can move quickly. The disadvantage is that things could quickly change for the worse, too.

In Egypt, the Egypt Radio and Television Union (ERTU) ultimately controls EMPC, through a complicated system of ownership. Until relatively recently,

broadcasting in Egypt has been effectively a government monopoly: ERTU has controlled the three national terrestrial TV channels and six regional domestic stations since 1960. ERTU owns the Egyptian Satellite Channel, which consists of Channels 1 and 2 plus Nile TV International. ERTU also has a near monopoly in radio. It runs all of the country's eight national radio networks that broadcast on FM, medium-wave and short-wave. Egyptian Satellite Channel (ESC) is the first and main Arabic language TV channel to beam its programs via satellite. ESC has the support of the country's huge program-making industry and has access to a large library of old Egyptian films and TV programs. ESC covers almost all Arab countries, nearly two-thirds of Africa and is also seen in most of the European, Asian countries, the USA, Canada and Mexico. In November 2001, Egypt's first privately-owned satellite network, Dream TV, was launched with two channels: Dream 1, targeting young viewers and Dream 2, a movie and variety channel. As soon as the free zone project in Egypt was announced, several people expressed their intent to launch media related projects. Esmat Al-Sadat, an Egyptian businessman and a member the Egyptian-British Businessmen's Council, said he would call for a consortium among businessmen in Alexandria to set up the first privately-owned television channel in Egypt. EMPC presents, then, the potential for non-government groups to get involved in broadcasting in Egypt.

Media free zones

The Media free zones into which the three countries have put their media cities are perhaps unique to the Arab world. Modeled after duty free zones in airports and duty free repackaging and redistribution centers, these media-oriented areas offer special incentives and rules. Businesses find them attractive because of cost savings. Besides the lure of new facilities with a better infrastructure, the structure typically includes: 1) administrative rules, 2) an administration to apply those rules, 3) specifically defined activities for the area, 4) incentives to come to the free zone 5) and requirements for establishing a business there.

Currently, JMC lags behind the facilities in Dubai and Cairo in creating a media free zone. While King Abdullah has spoken about establishing a special set of rules, creation remains in the uncertain future. Proponents hope that JMC features a largely deregulated area administered in the same arms-length way that the Federal Communications Commission oversees broadcast media in the United States.

Tecom, which houses Dubai Media City, has rules separating it from media operating outside the zone. DMC boasts that it "provides a tax-free environment, transparent relationships with government and legislative authorities and a one-stop shop for all services. One hundred percent foreign ownership is permitted within DMC" (Dubai Investment and Development Authority, 2002). The latter is something not permitted outside the zone; there you must seek an Emirati co-owner. The Free Zone also exempts businesses from all taxes for at least 50 years and reduces sponsorships and visa requirements. The zone is governed by an authority consisting of a chairman – Sheikh Maktoum bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, son of the crown prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum – plus a director general and an executive body. The absolute ruler of Dubai, Sheik Maktoum bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, appoints the Chairman and the director general (Anonymous 2002, p.22).

The Egyptian government established a media free zone in 2000 to house the Egyptian Media Production City, the Egyptian Satellite Company (Nilesat), Cable Network Egypt, the Nile Communications Network and various transmission centers plus 18 studios. ERTU, EMPC and Nilesat own the free zone. Abdel Rahman Hafez is effectively the king of broadcasting in Egypt. He chairs the boards of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union, Cable Network Egypt (which re-transmits CNN) and Egyptian Media Production City. Among the permitted activities within the zone are radio and television broadcasts; production of radio, television and cinema activities; production of advertising; and hosting of exhibitions for equipment and technologies of communication and media production. The zone also has a board of directors (Shahawi, p. 5).

Business models

The three media cities offer savings and create distinct revenue streams. Cost savings reside in reduced bureaucracy, modern infrastructure, lower unskilled labor costs, synergy, and one-stop shopping for skills and services. Current, revenue streams are generated largely by rents because little intellectual property of value is being generated anywhere in the Middle East. The World Intellectual Property Organization, WIPO, calculated that in 2001 the 23 nations that constitute the Arab world produced no more than 20 patents in total. Spending on research and development among Arab nations is one seventh of the world average (UNDP 2002b: 2).

JMC is a mostly a facilities house. It rents studios, staff and equipment. Because the area is a free zone, costs are kept low though concessions such as an absence of taxes on imported equipment. Given the fact that most broadcasting technology is produced outside the Arab world, this is a considerable savings. Companies also do not have to pay a license for uplinking – transmission of programs and signals to satellites.

Dubai Media City operates on the concept of “anchor stores.” This concept is commonly used in a shopping mall, in which an anchor store is recruited and positioned with the aim of drawing other stores and customers who are impressed by the anchor store names. At DMC, the anchor concept has been achieved by attracting Reuters, CNN and the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC). All have named buildings even though they occupy little space. CNN occupies a tiny portion of its building – perhaps five per cent of the top (or fifth floor). Reuters similarly occupies only part of the fifth floor of its named building. MBC uses most of its building. DMC housed another 557 tenants as of December 2002 (Staff reporter, 2003, p. 34). Media represents perhaps 40 per cent of all businesses there. Marketing represents the largest single group (Staff reporter, 2003). Rents are costly in DMC; in 2002 these rents were about 20 percent more expensive than mid-town Manhattan. The hope is that the infrastructure, the attractive location, and the synergy of the city will overcome these costs for the average business.

Back in 1995 EMPC was envisaged as the “Hollywood of the East” – that is, as a place where movies and television would be made for the Arab world. That vision has not materialized because of the high relative costs and the depreciation of the Egyptian pound. EMPC could never overcome startup costs to reach the critical mass necessary so now it makes most of its money selling use of its facilities. Thirteen of the 18 studios are rented to companies such as the Middle East Broadcast Center, Dream TV, Orbit and Arab Radio and Television. All of these, apart from Dream TV, are Saudi owned.

Expansion plans

Future expansion for these cities depend upon money, reputation and regional political stability. JMC's great wish is to attract the media who have left, and to make locally-produced programs. While future plans are muddy, they certainly will require a cash infusion, improved regional political stability, and the creation of long-delayed special laws by the Jordanian Parliament. The shared border with Iraq and uncertainty about the political situation in Palestine and Israel do not suggest that regional political stability can be assured. JMC has attracted some clients but it needs more to create the impression that it houses more than Saudi interests. Money will always be a problem because Jordan's economy is struggling, and war will produce thousands of refugees. *Businessweek* estimates that 200,000 Palestinians have spilled over Jordan's border since the Israeli-Palestinian conflict started in 2001, and perhaps 600,000 more are expected from Iraq if war erupts (Sandler 2002).

Of the three cities, Dubai Media City has the grandest plans. Over the next decade, parent organization Tecom hopes to employ more than 50,000 people and house a population of more than 10,000 (WAM, 2002). Phase II is spread over 46,450 square meters and will cost \$32.6 million; Phase III will cover about 34,300 square meters and will cost \$40.8 million. Network Productions is building a production studio to make films and TV programs, and the project will cost somewhere between \$16 million (*Digital Studio* magazine, October 2000) and \$30 million (undated DMC brochure 2001). Late in 2002 Tecom offered land for joint ventures, inviting in outside investors. The development of media and technology centers, and indeed any plans for expansion and innovation, require money to pay to establish them. Early in 2002 Dubai's crown prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum announced establishment of the Dubai International Financial Center, which had been designed as the link between world financial markets and the emirate. It was intended as a "gateway" for the flow of capital to and from the region, and to strengthen links to international capital markets. The crown prince said it would become "a crucial node" in global finance and a regional center of financial services. It would, he said, put Dubai "on the global financial map" (Staff reporter 2002).

A further million square meters of land has been set aside for expansion at EMPC in Egypt, but development hinges on further finance. Today that is problematic. EMPC is not doing well as a publicly-listed company. Its share price has crashed in the past year. For the 52 weeks ending 9 February 2003, the price dropped 35.9 percent to 8.15 Egyptian Pounds a share (about \$1.43), drastically reducing the possibility of raising the cash needed for expansion in the open market. As in Jordan, proximity to regional conflicts will do little to boost confidence in the region.

Training and education

Creation of jobs through the making of television programs and the rental of production facilities represent potential revenue streams at each city. Another is training and education. These are viewed as both revenue-generating operations and enhancement programs to create graduates capable of navigating their way through a high-technology economy, driven by developments in intellectual property.

The future of this effort is unclear. JMC has little money, and no current plan to move forward in this area. One hope of JMC is to retain the highly-trained professionals who are leaving the country for higher paying jobs elsewhere, but lack of stability in the region presents a major problem. In Dubai, Knowledge Village will open near the end of this year near DMC. Knowledge Village recognizes that media industries need trained people. The situation may be boosted by the process of Emiratization, whereby companies are required to hire prescribed minimum numbers of locals (even though nationals make up perhaps 20 percent of the population). Current legislation requires some companies to increase the number of Emiratis by 4 percent a year. If this percentage rises, then training nationals will become a priority. Knowledge Village will effectively become another form of real estate venture – it has no plans to run training courses; rather it will rent space to training providers and take a percentage of the tuition fees.

In Egypt, EMPC contains the newly-established International Academy for Media Sciences (IAMS), located next to the EMPC headquarters. IAMS is a private university that specializes in media production. The five full-time and 10 part-time staff are seconded from the University of Cairo, the American University of Cairo and the nearby 6th of October University, along with professionals from ERTU. IAMS started its academic program in September 2002 and had 274 students in first year (<http://www.iams.edu.eg>). Similar numbers are expected in subsequent years. The academy follows a US model of a four-year degree and offers two 16-week semesters a year, plus a summer semester. The academy is unique to the Middle East in being the only tertiary institution offering a wide range of hands-on media production courses. Years one and two cover design, technology, fine art, marketing, ethics and basic production skills. Students then major in production in one of four areas: radio and television; cinema; advertising and marketing; and multi-media and Internet. Tailored and postgraduate courses of different lengths for university students, graduates and professionals are also available or planned. A master's degree is planned.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression and expression of that freedom remain important issues defining both the structure and form of media in the Arab world. As in other parts of the world, freedom of expression is part of the political, social, cultural and economic environments. All constitutions, even Arab ones, recognize the right to communicate and preserve freedom of the press. But the reality of the situation is, as in all other places, that all expressions are restricted by ancillary law and practice. Thus, media in the Arabic world often finds itself either bound to the regime – or walking a tightrope and highly dependent upon largely autocratic governments (Johnston, 1998; Taweela, 2002; Walters and Quinn, 2003). Thus serious questions arise about what serves the public interest best, how job creation fits into the picture, and how (and what) represents the best interests of the society (Johnston).

A media free zone law that has been widely debated in Jordan's Parliament has never been passed. JMC is operating under the country's general free zone laws that are applicable to any commercial operation and a press law that many regard as chilling. This means that commercial laws, not media specific laws, apply to JMC. ART vice president for technology and development Radi Al-Khas, who was overseeing the startup, has noted that "The parliament may have been afraid that under a media free zone law

anyone, not just well known and respected broadcasters, could come and set up in Jordan. How sure can they be that they know the companies, they know the owners? This [arrangement] works because it's an agreement between the government and a well-known and reputable company" (Sullivan, 2001). The fact that JMC is run by a very conservative Saudi is another significant factor. The above means that Jordanians not only practice a form of self-censorship, but that censorship on the media exists in all its forms in Jordan. That includes governmental, societal, and religious censorship as well as direct, indirect, institutional and auto-censorship (New Media and Change in the Arab World, 2002).

On the surface, the situation is better in Dubai. Sheikh Hasher Al-Maktoum, director of the Dubai Information Department and a cousin of the crown prince, told a press conference at Zayed Center for Co-ordination and Follow-up on 23 October 2001 that Article 30 of the country's Constitution "guaranteed and safeguarded" freedom of expression to journalists. But he also noted that a press law regulated their profession. "Press regulations are not meant to curtail freedom of speech but [are] rather aimed at regulating operations of the press." Sheikh Hasher noted that journalists were expected to exercise their freedom not to politicize society but to focus on issues such as education, health and economy. "If journalists operate within regulations, there should be no qualms or problems," he told reporters (Al Bakry, 2001, p. 3). What this means, in effect, is that journalists are expected to appreciate the environment in which they must work and to exercise self-censorship. Certain topics are seldom if ever covered. An ombudsman-like group first mooted in 2000 that was supposed to be established to arbitrate on issues relating to freedom of expression, and establish a code of ethics for DMC, had still not met as of early 2003. And, if the managers of DMC do not like what a company has been doing, all they need do is not renew their license. Some Western journalists question whether the government will allow freedom of expression in the Western definition of the term. *Time* magazine, in noting that Dubai's government had promised freedom of expression at Dubai Media City, said some people questioned whether the government had "the stomach" for the kind of openness to ideas that "run contrary to beliefs in this part of the world". The magazine's reporter concluded that information was one commodity that brought with it "a host of challenges for a new generation of Dubai's rulers" (Kelaita, 2001).

Companies operating television channels in Egypt's free zone will have to abide by the media code of ethics. As of early 2003, the Ministry of Information was still preparing that code of ethics. When completed, both Egyptian and foreign companies must abide by this code. During times of crisis such as wars, natural disasters and "matters related to national security," Egyptian companies operating in the free zone will have to comply with rules and controls issued by the cabinet. Whatever else, it is clear that no licenses will be issued to a channel of a religious, sectarian, violent, or sexual nature, or to channels affiliated to any political party (Shahawi, p. 6.)

Of special interest to all three cities is the foreword to the UN's *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, in which Dr. Rima Khalaf Hunaidi said Arab countries needed to rebuild their societies on the basis of freedom, empowerment of women and knowledge. This was specifically related to "full respect for human rights and human freedoms as the cornerstones of good governance" (2002, p. vii). The report noted that any society was only as free as its media, and concluded that "not a single Arab country

had genuinely free media”. Only three states had media rated as “partly free” with Kuwait the best of those (UNDP *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, p. 118)

Conclusion

As entrepreneurs and governments on the Arabian peninsula scramble to meet the future, they are faced with growing population pressures and the need to create and fill jobs. Some are more blessed with the financial resources drawn from petrodollars. Others are not. But even those with petrodollars are living on borrowed time. Facing scarce (or quickly diminishing) resources, all must do more in developing what they have an abundance of – human capital. They need to create a culture that teaches and fosters creativity and innovation (McConnell International, LLC, n.d., p. 15). One way to do this is to put the resources they have to best use in developing media technology. In a way, Jordan, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates are doing just that. Each has moved forward to capitalize upon what they can do best within the context of their own society. A brief glance at education, communications infrastructure, and income figures shows that. Egypt has little money, a largely uneducated population, and little infrastructure. But, when times are calm, it does have site-seeing wonders to which the EMPC could be added. The rulers of the Emirate of Dubai are preparing for a future that is not oil driven. In doing, they are making use of the brute force of cash to create a world-class technical infrastructure to become the media meeting point between East and West. And Jordan, lagging behind, without cash and in an unstable political environment, must depend on the kindness of Arab neighbors for development. Table 1 below summarizes the situation in each country.

Table 1: ICT and infrastructure at a glance

| | Egypt | Jordan | United Arab Emirates |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Adult literacy rate* | 56.1 | 90.2 | 76.8 |
| Purchasing Power Parity* | \$3,790 | \$4,080 | \$19,410 |
| Telephone lines per 1000 people | 86 | 93 | 291 |
| Mobile telephone use per 1000 people | 21 | 58 | 548 |
| Daily newspapers per 1000 people | 35 | 77 | 156 |
| Radios per 1000 people | 339 | 372 | 318 |
| Television sets per 1000 people | 189 | 84 | 669 |
| Personal computers per 1000 people | 22.1 | 22.5 | 385 |
| Internet speed and access | 4.2 | 4.3 | 5.6 |
| Internet effects on business | 3.3 | 3.6 | 4.1 |
| Highly skilled It market | 4.8 | 3.7 | 6.1 |
| Laws relating to ICT use | 3.1 | 3.6 | 5.2 |

* 2001 figures. All others 2000. Source World Bank.

The vision of what the future might bring is unclear. In some sense, these cities are competing in a tiny marketplace. With only 23 Arabic/Islamic countries and about 250 million people in total, too many players may be chasing too small an audience worth too few dirhams, dinars or pounds (see Pan Arab Research Center, 2003). Current

Arabic/Islamic society has not been known for a strong sense of freedom of expression and has had a love-hate relationship with the media.

Are these media cities capable of creating anything of lasting value? Do the benefits merely accrue to a connected few or to the government? Can cash bring happiness (Johnston, 1998; see also, Tawella, 2002)? The answers to these questions are unclear and distant. But some things are clear: Arabic society is a complex dynamic over which a thin veil of dazzling new communications technology has been placed, and no new development is ever really neutral (Johnston, 1998, p. 241). In the end, as Darwin has said, it is not the strongest or the most intelligent species that survives. It is the one that is most responsive to change. Amid the contradictions and contrasts of the Arab world the media cities of Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt may yet have a fascinating tale to tell.

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