

Challenges facing Arab American news media

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Early immigrants and the Arab media

Immediately upon arriving in America, Arab immigrants launched businesses and they also launched small local irregularly published print news publications in Arabic. These publications are among the only real references we have to what Arab Americans did and who they were during the early 19th Century, although most focused on concerns that were focused overseas.

Today, some but not much has changed. Here is an overview of challenges Arab American publications and media face and that hold them back from achieving their full potential.

Published in Arabic only

The first challenge facing the Arab American media came during the early immigration and the establishment of the first Arab newspapers. The issue was language and almost all were published in Arabic to address the Arabic speaking audience. That resulted in separating the Arab community from the mainstream community and further prevented assimilation.

It also contributed to the lack of understanding of non-Arabs of Arab culture and the Arab experience. Non-Arab Americans had no reference or resource to understand the challenges that Arab immigrants to America faced.

Limited advertising and income revenues

The second challenge also involved the focus on Arabic rather than on English. As a result of publishing only in Arabic, the media excluded mainstream American businesses. This severely restricted advertising revenues. Most Arab businesses did not advertise. Only a few did and collections were difficult.

Very few American businesses advertised in the Arab American media and as a consequence, Arab media relied on two very restrictive sources.

Non-existent subscription income

The first source of income was from subscriptions, which were extremely low. Most Arab American publications were distributed free of charge through local Arab businesses. So subscriptions produced very little income.

The second source of income came from the actual owners of the Arab American media. Most paid the printing and distribution bills, and the costs associated with writing and obtaining original stories from their own pockets. Many Arab media were published by individuals who worked in other businesses or earned their income from other businesses, such as restaurant owners, grocery stores and other blue collar businesses.

Immigrants came from countries that punished not rewarded free speech and communications

Another challenge facing Arab American media was the origins of the publishers and meager reporting staffs and the origins of the target audience, Arab American immigrants.

Most did not have any real experience in publishing newspapers but entered them based on what they knew coming from regions where the Arab media was a propaganda arm of the tyrannical governments in the lands where they lived.

Arabs came to America from countries where free expression was severely restricted and opinion was punished not encouraged. In the Arab World, Arabs could be imprisoned or even killed for expressing opinions critical of the power elites or the government. Citizens in Arab countries were conditioned to embrace the propaganda of their governments and taught and conditioned not to "think" for themselves.

So, Arabs tended to engage in two forms of unrestricted expression which included singing and music, and poetry. Some poets did use

their writings to address problems in society in creative and allegoric means, never directly speaking to injustices and unfairness in their lives but did so using allegories and euphemisms and other methods of addressing indirectly the problems of their lives.

Arab immigrants to America brought this conditioning with them, which is one reason why they encouraged their children to become doctors, lawyers or grocery store or small business owners. These were professions that were "safe" in the Arab World. They never encouraged their children to enter communications or journalism because communications and journalism was punished in the Arab world, not taught.

No experience in understanding real journalism

Coming from oppressive countries in the Arab World where free expression was punished, not encouraged, Arab immigrants tended to focus their journalism in their newspapers in angry outbursts. Rather than "report" on events in the community -- serving as a "publication of record" for a community documenting events and its history -- most Arab media focused on political opinion and commentary and editorials. They lashed out against injustices here that they could not address back home. Worse, is that with no experience in professional journalism, they had no reporters who were experienced in writing news stories that were objective or professionally written.

What is the role of a news media? It is to report the news. Report events. Document what is happening. A publication thus becomes a "publication of record" meaning that it documents the history of a community. Instead, Arab media focused on fighting injustice in a country that did not understand who Arabs were.

Anger with bias in mainstream American news media

Arab Americans have become angry with the mainstream American news media because the mainstream American news media tends to only publish negative articles on the Arab Americans. They rarely report positive news and when they do, the amount of positive content is probably less than 10 percent of all the content published.

Violence is a theme that attracts the mainstream news media to the Arab community. We are portrayed always as being in conflict and turmoil and trouble. We are portrayed in a very negative manner that makes the community defensive and causes the community to be confrontational rather than seeking coalition building.

Arab Immigrant community fails to understand importance of press releases

One of the most important ways for organizations in the community to get attention to their important events is to write press releases. Press releases are not what we think of today as eNewsletters. They are actually professionally written stories that try to mimic what a professional news story about the event they are publicizing would actually look like. The Arab Community didn't start producing press releases to promote their events and achievements until late in the 1980s. None were created or distributed in the 19th Century. Yet today, only a small handful of organizations know how to publish a press release which is a mandatory role communities must embrace in order to create a professional community news media.

(For more information read my book called "Power PR: Ethnic Activists Guide to Strategic Communications" at Amazon or Google Books.)

American governments don't provide grants or resources to Arab Media

The local governments that buy advertising in almost every other ethnic publication only rarely buys advertising in Arab American publications because those publications are often viewed as being predominantly focused on politics and controversy and issues that are considered "unpopular" -- such as criticism of Israel.

Arab Americans are taxpayers but they are excluded from receiving government grants which come from their taxes that they pay.

Professional Journalism Associations excluded Arabs as a cohesive entity

The Society of Professional Journalists, and UNITY: Journalists of Color exclude Arab Americans as a group. They can join as individuals but efforts to give Arabs a voice in these organizations have resulted in conflict and resistance.

Arab American slack their own journalism associations. They exist in name only and are restricted to the cities were they are based. Arab American "journalists" do not have strong professional networking. Efforts by this writer (in Chicago) and Laila Alhusini in Detroit to organize Arab Americans under the banner of the National Arab American Journalists Association (NAAJA) were opposed by many Arab journalists mainly for reason of power politics and power rivalries.

Evolution of Arab media

The number of newspapers continued to expand over the years. Prior to Sept. 11, 2001 there were more than 100 Arab American newspapers, most published in Arabic but with some published in Arabic and English.

Almost all of the newspapers were published on a monthly basis, mainly because the publishers did not have the money to: published more than one edition a month; hire reporters to provide enough news to fill more than one newspaper a month; lacked advertising revenue to grow into a real journalism industry.

Expansion to broadcasting (Cable TV and Radio)

Some Arab Americans turned to broadcast media to address issues on Cable TV (with very limited audiences) or to radio which has the potential to reach the most people. The focus on the Arab language restricts much of the broadcast media and only those that offer news and interviews in English reach a wider audience of Americans.

Geographic restrictions

Most Arab media focuses on their local community and are not networked nationally. They don't work together. They don't share news stories. So the Arab American news media is fractured. There is no national media network. As a consequence, they are not taken

as seriously as other ethnic media which have larger regional distributions, larger subscriptions and larger advertising resources and revenues.

Goal of a media

The media has two important goals. The first is to report on and convey what is happening in the community of concern, in this case the Arab American community.

The second goal is to inform the American public about the truth of Arab culture and the Arab community. And most Arab media does a poor job of addressing non-Arabs. They tend to "speak to themselves" or to "only speak to the choir" or to their "followers" people who understand the problems that the Arab Community face. The people who need to understand the problems the Arab Community face are the non-Arabs in America but if an Arab media is not speaking to Americans, Americans won't hear or learn anything and will instead continue to believe the inaccurate and often racist stereotypes.

Internal Arab Community rivalries

The Arab community is also a very divided and factious ethnic group, more so than most other ethnic communities because of the pressures they bear of the Arab-Israeli war. Pro-Israel Americans are far more engaged in the mainstream American news media and the Jewish and Israeli-American news media are every professional. Jews have been actively engaged in communications, public relations and journalism far more than Arab Americans. So there is an imbalance in the American understanding of the Arab Israeli conflict and Arabs are stereotyped as being violent aggressors and threats.

As a consequence, many Arab American publications are prevented from being distributed in non-Arab stores. Most American business owners view Arabs as controversial and even violence prone and therefore avoid them, block them, and refuse to advertise in them.

Today's Arab Media

There are about 35 Arab American publications, most publishing monthly. One publishing weekly (Detroit's Arab American News). There are only a handful of radio stations with the most influential being the US Arab Radio Network and radio director Laila Alhusini. Programs on the US Arab Radio Network are broadcast several hours each day live on radio, 24 hours a day online, and also simulcast on several radio stations across the country.

There are a few independent radio programs of 30-minutes in length or 60-minutes in length broadcast once each week.

Prognosis

The Arab American news media is anemic. It has a low advertising base. Most of the editorial content is in Arabic. Most of the editorial content is Opinion Commentary, rather than reporting that documents community events or achievements. There is no "Publication of record."

The Arab American media is fractious, divided and polarized.

There is no network that shares information.

Distribution is poor.

Advertising is minimal so the costs of publishing an Arab American media is financially prohibitive and owners are forced to invest their own money into their media enterprises.

The content is narrow and focused on opinion commentary, anger, and reflect conflict. There is very little features or news.

The major organizations