



## Ajyal Talks opens with insightful discussion on influence of media in shaping public perception

**Doha, Qatar; November 30, 2017:** The first session of Ajyal Talks, the insightful discussions held as part of Ajyal Youth Film Festival, presented by the Doha Film Institute, put the spotlight on how media is shaping public perception, especially in today's era of fake news and false propaganda.

With films being screened at Ajyal discussing the issue of divisiveness, the discussion was a timely reminder to the audience that truth often lies beyond the obvious.

Ahmad Shihab-Eldin, Emmy-nominated journalist and presenter; actress Sophia Bush, known for her focus on environmental and health-related issues; Dana Mado, public relations and strategic planner; and Ali Bin Towar, explorer and television presenter, took part in the discussion.

Swapping insights gathered in the course of their careers, the panel focussed on how the public can reshape wrong perceptions, stressing the importance of learning to differentiate between opinion and fact through research and fact-checking.

This complements a study by the Qatar Foundation that 79% of social media users only occasionally or rarely resort to fact-checking, while a study by Forbes Magazine noted that 59% of social media users share news based merely upon reading the headline.

Shihab-Eldin, who co-created and hosted Al Jazeera English's interactive talk show, *The Stream*, and who is a senior correspondent on AJ+, said media has become decentralised with the advent of smartphones. He illustrated a report from Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, which he said was filmed and edited entirely on a smartphone.

"Social media has changed the way we communicate; reality has become a context that we create but too often, people are searching for information that confirms what they already think," he said. He added that with the 'socialising' of media, the young generation has more power to influence opinion than he did, when he was their age. "We need to focus on how we tell our stories, our community's stories, at a time when we are distracted by division and overwhelmed by information."

Mado talked about the pressure the rapid nature of social media places on people to form an opinion. "We feel obliged to react as quickly as possible, so sometimes we form hasty opinions and respond without thinking of the aftermath. The perceptions we rely on to make that opinion may look, feel and sound real but we need to look deeper, to be sure where that information is coming from."

Bush, who rose to fame with the long-running US TV show, *One Tree Hill*, emphasised the responsibility of using social media with integrity. "We have to be sure that what we say and share comes from a place of compassion, we have to check our facts," she said, adding that social media has the power to bring the world together. "The other side of living in such a connected world is that we can use our connections to build bridges, literal and metaphorical. We each have to ask ourselves how we can use social media to put more love and truth into the world."



Bin Towar, whose work and personal interests have taken him to 52 countries and led to a book and a television series about the different cultures he experienced, focussed on the beauty of social media and its ability to unite.

“People followed me on my journeys and I found they were really curious to hear my thoughts and impressions of everything I experienced,” he said. He congratulated Qatar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the way they are handling the current blockade crisis. “We have seen ‘wars’ start on social media, on Twitter, Instagram. The Qatari government is working 24-hours a day to make sure we can continue to create and innovate, to reach our goals without getting distracted.” His comments were received with a round of applause.

The panel discussion was followed by an interactive Q&A session with the Ajyal Jurors.

More **Ajyal Talks** will be held at 6pm at Katara Drama Theatre today and tomorrow Dec. 2.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Ajyal Youth Film Festival runs until Dec. 4. Tickets are priced QR25 for general screening, and can be purchased 24 hours a day at [ajyalfilm.com](http://ajyalfilm.com) or from the Ajyal Katara Main Box Office in Katara Building 12 or Ajyal FNAC Ticket Outlet, FNAC Qatar at Doha Festival City.

Katara Cultural Village as its Cultural Partner of the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; Qatar Tourism Authority is the Strategic Partner, and Occidental Petroleum Corporation and Ooredoo are the Principal Partners. For more details on the Ajyal Youth Film Festival, please visit [www.dohafilminstitute.com/filmfestival](http://www.dohafilminstitute.com/filmfestival)

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**About Doha Film Institute:**

The Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

Doha Film Institute

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