



NEW MEDIA AT DTFF: QUESTIONS AND (SOME) ANSWERS FOR FUTURE OF MEDIA IN THE ARAB WORLD

Panelists Discuss Freedom, Piracy, and Social Change at DTFF Panels

Doha: October 28, 2011: A major theme of discussions amongst industry guests at the Doha Tribeca Film Festival (DTFF) this week was the impact of ‘new media’ on the film and television industries in the Arab world. A series of panels saw industry experts debating the new opportunities and challenges presented in this time of political and technological flux.

One thing all panelists agreed on was that the change is inevitable. Avsar Panesar, VP Operations of Yash Raj films, one of India’s biggest film studios, pointed out that like India, the Arab world’s population is overwhelmingly young—approximately 60% of the Middle East is under the age of 30, and like their Indian counterparts, they are tech-savvy, live most of their lives on social media, and are not adequately represented in their nations’ politics. The best way to reach young people is online.

Online platforms can also access a wider geographical audience, as Mohammed Hefzy, producer of the DTFF film *Tahrir 2011*, pointed out—there are large communities of Arabic speakers in South America, for instance, who are not able to access Middle Eastern television channels.

Hefzy also pointed out that an advantage of online is that it is harder for governments to control. He said that Filmclinic is considering launching a film online, since the spirit of openness “goes along with the principles of the Egyptian revolution - that you don’t have to go through censorship. You are free.”

Many outlets have begun producing content solely for online consumption for this reason. Katia Saleh, producer of the thematically daring BBC Arabic series ‘Shankaboot,’ about a delivery boy in Beirut, agreed. In a panel called ‘From Web Series to Social Media: A New Era of Storytelling,’

Saleh said: “We deal with themes such as foreign workers in Lebanon and drug abuse—you can’t deal with these things with a television station, since not all of them will air this.”

MBC has also begun production on an online series called ‘Classified,’ to be directed by Ali Mostafa, the Emirati director of *City of Life*. Like ‘Shankaboot,’ the series promises to be more daring than most of the material aired via traditional satellite networks.

The problem is that while themes may be freer online, the content is also free. Fadi Ismail, Director of Programming at MBC group, pointed out that most online content has not been monetized.

However, novel business plans are starting to emerge. Carine Chaiban, Senior Acquisitions and programming manager at Integral, discussed the company’s recent unveiling of a Video on Demand (VOD) serial to be accessible only in Saudi Arabia that they are betting will bring in a new revenue stream.

Major social media companies are getting in on the act as well. Facebook recently launched a Video on Demand service for Facebook users across the region, and the company’s Head of Platform Partnerships for New Markets, Amina Belghiti, said that online content could take a cue from social gaming. Many games are available on a ‘freemium’ basis, where basic applications are free but users can choose to download enhanced versions of games for a price.

Piracy was a problem that all panelists agreed was undercutting the industry. Fadi Ismail cited the fall-off in acquisitions of Turkish serials such as the massively successful ‘Noor’: “People are not going to wait for next week to watch. They can watch the next episode right now, online, and they can find it subtitled. Subtitling is very expensive, but there are fans on YouTube who will subtitle for free!”

All panelists agreed that the relationship to the audience is fundamentally changed with online content. ‘Shankaboot,’ for instance, is set within an interactive world where fans can give their input on the story and answer polls. The team behind the show regularly travel around Lebanon visiting schools, putting on performances and feeling the pulse of young people.

A novel approach was introduced by Souleiman Bakhit, founder of Aranim, who presented his online game. Bakhit stated that the interactive platform integral to the online environment is ideal for introducing social change. He suffered a racially-motivated attack as a student in the United States after 9/11, and instead of retreating into anger, developed a series of Arabic-language superhero comic and an interactive online game, which have garnered a massive fan base in the Arab world. Bakhit is now dedicated to giving young people a chance to practice conflict resolution inside the ‘world’ the game provides.

Despite all of the new media springing up, Fadi Ismail said that it is still too early to throw out the television: “TV is still important and viewing is on the increase,” he said. “TV is the only

means to produce and buy content. Online does not replace but supplements traditional TV. Advertising still comes from television, and that's the way it goes, until further notice."

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Notes to Editor

About Doha Film Institute (DFI): The Doha Film Institute (DFI) is an independent cultural organisation established in 2010 to incorporate Qatar's film initiatives under one banner.

Located at Qatar's new cultural hub, Katara, DFI's many initiatives include film and television funding for MENA and international films, year-round education programs, film screenings, and the annual Doha Tribeca Film Festival (DTFF).

In addition, DFI has established a number of strategic cultural partnerships with leading local and international organisations including Katara Cultural Village Foundation, Tribeca Enterprises, World Cinema Foundation, Maisha Film Labs and Giffoni Film Festival.

DFI was founded by H.E. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani. Along with Her Excellency, DFI leadership comprises DFI Board Vice-Chair and Festival Board Chair, H.E. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Fahad Al-Thani; DFI Board Member and Festival Board Vice-Chair, H.E. Dr. Hassan Al-Nimah; DFI Board Member, Mr. Mansoor Ibrahim Al-Mahmoud; Festival Board Member, H.E. Sheikh Jabor Bin Yousuf Al Thani; and DFI Executive Director, Amanda Palmer.

For more information, please contact:

Gregg Fray
Seven Media
Tel: 00971 50 812 9566
Email: greggfray@sevenmedia.ae

Majid Wasi
Doha Film Institute
Tel: 00974 33247800
Email: mwasi@dohafilminstitute.com