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Arab and Japanese media views of horror

By Fouad Hamdan

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The images of Japanese towns eradicated by the tsunami on March 18 are horrific. The ones of bloody street protests and of fighting in Libya, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen and other Arab countries moving toward democracy are shocking, too. When following events simultaneously, in disaster-struck Japan and in troubled Arab countries, one cannot but notice that both societies have different styles of reporting about calamities and human suffering.

TV reports literally beam you in front and above the waves that destroyed cities and killed thousands in Japan. The images that stick are of cars and houses being washed away and of large areas littered with all sorts of vehicles and debris. Near total destruction you see in doomsday films like “War of the Worlds” and “Armageddon” – or in black-and-white documentaries of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that were flattened by U.S. atomic bombs in 1945.

In none of the tsunami footage broadcast by Japanese and foreign TV stations, and in none of the following reports by foreign teams on the ground did I see corpses, except rare scenes of rescue workers carrying victims on stretchers. These victims are covered and hardly visible, no wounds, no blood. Dramatic tsunami footage always stops the second waves eating homes and landscapes get close to people in cars trying to escape death. You just do not see people close-ups of badly wounded, dead or dying.

In contrast, images from Libya and Yemen, where dictators hang to power and order policemen and soldiers to shoot, are different. I see bullet wounds, mutilated bodies and pools of blood on streets. Hospital staff have no problem allowing cameramen to violate the privacy of patients.

In Japan, there is respect for the dignity of victims and their grieving relatives. Why show mud-covered bodies when the devastation on the ground is horrific enough to make your heart bleed? Why zoom in on mutilated bodies? Imagine gruesome details if you wish. The images of razed cities are tragic enough. No need for maxi horror.

The Japanese media follow an ethical code not enshrined in law as this would violate the right for free expression in a democratic system. Foreign correspondents in Japan respect this code, even Al-Jazeera TV. Switch to the world’s most famous TV station and to many other Arab TVs and wonder why this code is respected when it comes to Japan. But the moment they report from the Gaza-Israeli frontline or from Libya “blood flows to the knees” (Arabic saying).

This trend started sometime in the 1980s when two events happened at the same time. First, private TV stations mushroomed and more camera teams were sent to troubled areas, all competing for the attention of couch potato consumers. The more gruesome, the more viewers are glued to screens, so goes the logic of media managers. Second, autocratic regimes allowed TV stations to show in detail how Israeli soldiers kill Palestinians and Lebanese. The aim has been to divert popular frustration and anger on Israel. I will not elaborate on tasteless advertisements between tragedies in the Gaza Strip or in southern Lebanon.

Arab newspapers were under pressure, especially after photos on websites and amateur films on YouTube crossed any remaining ethical line by showing what even Al-Jazeera TV did not. Many followed suit and printed pictures that would never find their way in Japanese or European media. Sadly, most Arab media and amateur Internet journalists do not ask themselves what impact showing horror has on the sanity of viewers and readers, especially children. Is this good for the Palestinian cause? Does this encourage more violence? Does this make violence banal? Does it increase fear, and does fear lead to more violence?

University of Michigan professor L. Rowell Huesmann argues that 50 years of evidence show “that exposure to media violence causes children to behave more aggressively and affects them as adults years later.” Jonathan Freedman of the University of Toronto claims that “the scientific evidence simply does not show that watching violence either produces violence in people, or desensitizes them to it.” So there is no consensus among [experts](#) on the question of whether exposure to media violence increases levels of aggression and violence in youth. I believe Mr. Huesmann.

Back to the Arab media: I am against laws trying to stifle Internet and conventional media. Politicians should not fiddle with the principle of freedom of expression; this is an untouchable universal human right. However, Arab media associations have a responsibility to formulate and adhere to a modern media code of ethics. We do not need to show violence and pain in detail. We do not need shocking images from the occupied Palestinian territories to be convinced that Israeli troops are committing crimes against humanity.

Japan’s “[Cannon of Journalism](#),” adopted in 2001, reads: “Respect for Human Rights: Member newspapers should pay utmost respect to the dignity of human beings, put a high value on individuals’ honour and give serious consideration to their right to privacy.” The respect of human rights is a headline; you cannot be clearer. In contrast, the outdated “[Arab Code of Ethics](#),” adopted by the Federation of Arab Journalists in Baghdad in 1972, is weak on that subject when it reads: “Journalists adhere to respect the right of individuals to privacy and dignity”.

The [Islamic Media Charter](#), adopted by the International Islamic Mass Media Conference in Jakarta in 2000, promotes “Islamic values and ethical principles.” It says, “Islamic media men should censor all material which is either broadcast or published in order to protect the Ummah from influences which are harmful to Islamic character.”

In Nazareth, the Palestinian Media Center l’lam in 2008 published “The Media Center – [Code of Ethics for Palestinians](#) in Israel.” Under the headlines “Objectivity and human rights” it says that “in their coverage, journalists must rely on general, universal values and on human rights.” It adds, “Objectivity, as a supreme professional value, is consistent with human rights, human freedom, human dignity and other such values.” This document is quite good, but it does not explicitly elaborate on media violence.

In the light of the current pro-democracy wave in the Arab region, time has come for Arab journalists to rethink how they report about violence and natural disasters. They should formulate a new Arab Media Code of Ethics enshrining freedom of expression and respecting dignity and privacy of people. Strictly religious media outlets should have the rights to promote their beliefs as they wish. All other private and state-owned outlets should be open to all political opinions and religious beliefs in a fair way. On media violence, time has come to stop desensitizing and traumatizing Arab societies.

Fouad Hamdan is an independent Arab pro-democracy activist who established and headed Greenpeace Lebanon in 1994-1999 and was the founding executive director of the Arab Human Rights Fund in 2008-2010. He was a journalist at the German Press Agency from 1987-1992.