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On Muslim-Western Relations



Innovation goes full speed ahead in the Arab world

by **Rasha Dewedar**

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Cairo - When it comes to the Muslim world, the media often focuses on foreign policy, terrorism and the differences between the Muslim world and the West. But in the book *1001 Inventions: Muslim Heritage in Our World*, University of Manchester's Professor Salim Al-Hassani draws a different picture of Muslims, highlighting their artistic and scientific progress. This progress, in fact, was the spark that initiated most modern Western advances in medicine, mathematics and science starting in the 16th century.

But Muslims around the world are also contributing to innovation today. In the Middle East this contribution is evidenced in the growing science culture.

One of these projects is *Stars of Science*, a pan-Arab television contest showcasing young Arab innovators aged 18 to 30. It is the first of its kind: a Middle Eastern science-based reality television show.

Approaching its second season, the programme selects 16 young innovators to transform their project ideas into reality by working at a specially designed workshop in the Qatar Science and Technology Park, equipped with state of the art tools, materials and labs. Cameras follow the students as they tackle new challenges and compete for a \$300,000 cash prize.

Science programmes have rarely attracted considerable audiences in the region. However, the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development hit it big with this show, which airs on 17 channels throughout the Arab world.

In the first season, which began in May 2009, the show's three judges selected 16 students from 11 Arab countries out of almost 6,000 applicants, demonstrating the demand for such a programme. The 16 finalists developed products such as a unique underwater device that captures and stores wave frequencies and converts them to usable power, a low-cost safety vest to minimise injuries following a car accident and a wheelchair that can read brain wave patterns helping users to get around with greater ease.

Other Arab initiatives to promote innovation include the recent Cairo Science Festival, held in collaboration with and concurrent to the international, multi-cultural Cambridge Science Festival in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Cairo Science Festival makes science come alive through interactive shows and exhibitions – such as an art collection illustrating the beauty of the nano world, plays, star gazing and workshops on intellectual property, the heritage of science in the Arab world and nurturing creativity at home and school. The festival gave visitors the opportunity to talk to five Nobel laureates through videoconferences and included activities for children – unlikely guests at such events.

Unprecedented scientific events like these must be given the attention they deserve, and therefore reporters in the region play an important role. While this event was covered extensively in Egyptian media, science journalism is not very common in the Arab world, a need the Association for Arab Science Reporters, which emerged in 2004 after The World Conference of Science Journalists (WCSJ) Montreal conference, is trying to address.

Another effort, the Arab Science Journalists Association (ASJA) has worked hard to become internationally recognised and raise funding to stay afloat. ASJA was officially launched during the 2007 WCSJ in Melbourne and sponsored by the Arab Science and Technology Foundation (ASTF) in the United Arab Emirates.

Two years later, ASJA won the bid to organise the next WCSJ conference, which will be held in Cairo in 2011, beating out the Finnish Association of Science Editors and Journalists and the Uganda Science Journalists Association among others. This is the first time that the WCSJ will be held in a developing country, giving developing countries a long-awaited voice in this specialised field.

Notably, the first president of the ASJA is a woman: Egyptian science journalist Nadia El-Adawy. She is also one of the conference co-directors and the current President of the World Federation of Science Journalists.

For someone living in the Middle East, these developments present a new trend in the region. Arab leaders in science are pushing to move science out of books and research labs and into popular culture and the global media. Arab scientific innovation is not just a facet of history books; it is happening now.

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* Rasha Dewedar is an Egyptian journalist with a special interest in the Middle East, gender issues and science. This article was written for the Common Ground News Service (CGNews).

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