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From Dubai to Reno

Story by Deidre Pike
RSJ Faculty

Before the honors media literacy class began, one journalism freshman felt concerned. Would the students from Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, be judgmental toward Americans? Would the exchange of opinions become messy arguments?

In a joint class offered at the University of Nevada, Reno, and the American University in Dubai, students are learning to analyze media--and how culture impacts that analysis. And it hasn't been messy at all.

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RSJ Professor Jake Highton introduces his new weekly blog...

April 17 Advising sign-ups begin. Advisement begins April 19 for seniors; April 24 for juniors and April 27 for advanced sophomores. Sign up for advisement in office, 3rd floor.

April 24 Join us 7:30 p.m. at the National Judicial College, main auditorium, for an **interactive panel discussion** about the Muslim cartoon controversy with four renowned speakers.

Tuesday, May 9: 6:30 p.m. Savitt Awards Banquet, Silver & Blue Room, Lawlor Event Center.



Illustration by Ed Lenert/RSJ Faculty & Cristian Rojas / RSJ Graduate assistant

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From Dubai to Reno

Students view media from across the cultures

Before the honors media literacy class began, one freshman student felt concerned. Would the students in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, be judgmental toward Americans? Would the exchange of opinions become messy arguments?

In fact, things turned out the opposite of what student Chelsea Hackett might have expected. In a reflective essay on the merits of a new joint journalism venture between students at the University of Nevada, Reno, and students at the American University in Dubai, Hackett wrote she's learning about the importance of suspending bias while analyzing media.

"It is not hard to decipher [in media] the same things as students thousands of miles away have seen," Hackett wrote. "I was amazed to see how similarly we think. Even though the structure of the papers that we wrote seemed to differ, we all still saw the same trends in the media pieces."

Reno journalism instructor Ed Lenert said the experience has allowed him to see how the two cultures diverge. For one assignment, students were asked to read commentaries on the recent seaport controversy. At stake, the sale of port management businesses in six U.S. seaports to a company owned by the UAE. Students in Reno and Dubai read an editorial from The Wall Street Journal and a column by Dr. James Zogby, head of the Arab American Institute in Washington, D.C., from the Gulf News, a major English-language daily newspaper in Bahrain.

Lenert wasn't surprised that the Dubai students, under the instruction of Dr. Hamid Khani, arrived at different conclusions.

"Arab students were much more likely to name racism against Arabs as cause for scuttling of deal than Americans were," Lenert said.

Observing and navigating this cultural dissonance is what makes the experimental class taught by Khani and Lenert so important. Few issues facing the world these days carry more import than better understanding between Americans and the Arab world.

"I can't think of a more important question to address in school of journalism and public communication," Lenert said.

The course goal is lofty: "To eliminate fear, prejudice and misunderstanding through scholarly dialogue."

To that end, students in Reno and Dubai plan next to watch the recent Steven Spielberg film, *Munich*. The students will hold teleconferences via Internet to talk about the film with their cultural counterparts.

"We expect, Hamid and I, that strong feelings will come to the surface," Lenert said. "For the

Arabs, the Palestinian conflict is central to how people feel about everything. ... We're asking students to analyze how the movie portrays this and whether that portrayal is fair or unfair."

Hackett hopes to continue correspondence with the Dubai students, even after the course's end.

"I feel that I will be better able to make judgments about what is going on in my nation if I am able to speak to someone with an objective opinion," she wrote.

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Reno-Dubai Teleconference

University of Nevada, Reno, USA
American University of Dubai, UAE
May 9, 2006, 8:00 AM PST



Cornealius Morton interacts with
AUD student Saud



Freshman Chelsea Hackett listens



Kelly Briely and Dr. Hamid Khani



Dr. Khani sets up the video link to Reno



From Reno, looking toward Dubai



Dr. Edward Lenert
Intercultural Media Literacy (Hon. 200)

DRAFT FOR COMMENT

TO: Dean Cole Campbell
FROM: Edward Lenert
SUBJECT: New class for spring 2006
DATE: July 5, 2005

PROPOSAL

I have been doing some thinking about what might be the most significant contributions I can make to the curriculum at the Reynolds School of Journalism. It appears that there is the potential for a growing alienation between Arab societies generally and American society generally, and therefore one of the most critical needs I can identify is ways for journalism and other forms of public communication to develop so as to lead to increased understanding among Americans and people of Islamic faith or from the Arab world.

To this end, I propose that the RSJ develop a new course (or adapt an existing course) that will combine news analysis, visual literacy, and intercultural awareness. The goals of the class would be the development of skills to empower persons to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using image, language and sound in an intercultural context.

The essence of my proposal is this: Two groups of students, one in the United States and another in an Arab state, United Arab Emirates, will participate in the joint study and discussion of the applied principles of media analysis. Specifically, a selected group of our undergraduate students from RSJ will work in conjunction with their counterpart class of students at the American University of Dubai (AUD). In Dubai, I would work in collaboration with Dr. Hamid Khani, a visiting professor of Communication and Information Studies at AUD, who will help design the curriculum and coordinate the preparation of the students and their participation in a shared dialog. Both groups of students will study the same curriculum and analyze the same newscasts.

In other words, each class, after studying fundamental media analysis curriculum, would then apply these lessons to ongoing coverage of events. The focus would be on a

comparative analysis of selected segments of *CNN International Edition* and the English language editions of *Al Jazeera*, the 24-hour Arabic language satellite news channel. The entire course in both locations will be conducted in English. The class would culminate with a series of live teleconference discussions between the Muslim students in Dubai and the American students in Nevada.

The intercultural perspective on news and society that the students in Dubai and Nevada will share with one another during the course is an important element of this proposal. A comparative analysis of *CNN International Edition* and *Al Jazeera* will require the study of real people, communities and issues. This kind of reality-based inquiry can create a foundation for developing the skills required for students to have the opportunity for substantial engagement and participation in the world. For the American students, there would be an opportunity for them to better understand and reject certain stereotypes in an overall media climate that permits US media a higher level of negativity about Arabs and Muslims that isn't usually applied to other groups. For the Arab students, there would be a similar opportunity to learn first-hand about American attitudes and opinions.

Finally, a significant goal of this project is the increased understanding of *Al Jazeera's* role in the creation of the global environment of public opinion. For example, Hussein Ibish of American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee has written that, "*Al Jazeera* has created a revolution in Arab news media and public opinion, emerging as the first independent, professional pan-Arab news outlet. Now that *Al Jazeera* is the primary international news organization providing serious coverage from inside Afghanistan and is commanding the attention of Arab public opinion--a key constituency in this most political of conflicts--the station's coverage and its audience have become more important than any other in the world." In other words, it is possible that "*Al Jazeera* represents the best trends of openness and democratization in the Arab world" and it is a part of and "emerging two-way street in the global flow of information and opinion."

I anticipate that the students who participate in this project can address the shared problems of Arab media and American media. For example, one focus can be the interaction of media and government and the related issues of objectivity in the context of loyalty to state and religion. What safeguards are needed to make the Arab and American media genuinely independent? What are the range of responses to objectionable journalistic practices such as irresponsible commentary and reporting?

There are additional benefits to this class proposal in the creation of a companion graduate class in research methods. The graduate students, supervised by faculty members, could participate in this class by conducting observation and research on this "real-time" lab experiment. Issues for graduate students will include qualitative and quantitative research methods, including research design, sampling, and critical analysis. There would also be opportunities for scholarly research and publication by RSJ faculty. It is also possible that the class would be the subject of an interesting documentary piece.

SUGGESTED TIME LIME

SUMMER 2005: Name and create course. Make arrangement for RSJ –AUD collaboration. Decide on faculty staffing issues.

FALL 2005: Secure funding. Research and design curriculum in conjunction with Dr. Khani and other advisors. Conduct a "focus group" with RSJ students to test curriculum. Initiate and test communication technologies to link classrooms in RSJ and AUD. Select undergraduate students to participate in the new class. Bring RSJ graduate students "on board" who wish to participate in research opportunities.

SPRING 2006: Begin teaching class.

SUMMER: Review and evaluate. Consider future options.

RESOURCES REQUIRED:

Faculty resources

Telecommunication services

Publicity and Grant writing services