Understanding the Communication Strategies of the UAE

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Abstract

In attempt to understand the main characteristics of UAE communications strategy, this research discusses UAE media in light of three frameworks; soft power, identity consolidation and agenda setting. The researcher interviews communication professionals of different backgrounds, asking them questions related to the frameworks of the study. interviewees remarks are consistent with the findings the findings of this research; media is an integral tool in the consolidation of national and cultural identity, the UAE is developing its soft power through traditional strategies such as broadcast and innovative strategies such as media free zones, last but not least, there is an agenda setting aspect to the yearly themes.

Key words: Soft power; Branding; Media clusters; Identity consolidation; Agenda setting

INTRODUCTION

The role of media is essential in the nation building and identity consolidation process in every country. This is certainly the case in the UAE, where the government has strategically utilized media to effectively mobilize its population in support of the national transformation process which placed it among the leading countries of the world. As the country develops, the role of media in supporting the developmental goals is becoming more complex and sophisticated, requiring a much deeper understanding and knowledge of the transforming felid in the context of a transforming country. The aim of this paper is to understand the main characteristics of UAE media and basic characteristics of UAE communication strategies. In order to achieve this aim, the research explores three frameworks: First, it examines the idea of media as soft power by discussing the impact of establishing media clusters on the image of the UAE and its ability to influence global discourse and the impact of hosting international conferences and exhibitions. Second, it discusses the concept of media as an identity consolidator by examining the role of national Media council, the coverage of cultural and national events and finally, the role of broadcasting platforms. Finally, it explores the concept of media as an agenda setter by examining the impact of regulations and theme setting initiatives such as the years of innovation, reading and giving on the public discourse of the UAE. The research concludes that the media strategy of the UAE is centered around the three main goals: building the soft power, consolidating the nation and identity, and finally, setting the priorities and the public agenda.

1. BACKGROUND ON MEDIA THEORIES (LITERATURE REVIEW)

As communication technology develops along with the variety of media platforms so does the theories of communications. Some theories fall out of relevance as technology advances or as sociopolitical conditions change. The hypodermic needle theory, for example, which maintains that the audience is likely to believe everything viewed on television, fell out of relevance with increased media literacy and multiplicity of media platforms. This theory developed into what is known

as the cultivation theory, which maintains that the constant repetition of certain ideas in media cultivates and reinforces these ideas in the minds of the passive audiences.

The concept that repetition reinforces ideas takes us to the agenda-setting theory, which maintains media can determine what people prioritize. As described by Bernard Cohen: "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." (Dearing, 1996, p.1). In sever places of her book, the making of Arab news, Mellor argues that unlike global media, where the agenda setting functionality is powerful, Arab media seem to exercise an agenda setting function only with regard to foreign affairs (Mellor, 2005, p.41). She brings the example of Saudi Arabia where she argues that there is a huge discrepancy between the media's agenda and the public agenda: "The news media followed the official line in avoiding reporting on controversial topics" (Ibid., p.60).

When it comes to the UAE, Pejman argues that if agenda-setting is interpreted as merely informing, then UAE print press can be considered to have an agenda setting function. But if agenda-setting is interpreted as influencing debate and analyzing the data, then it does not. (Pejman, 2009, p.8). Scholars have differed opinions on media's capacity as an agenda setter in the UAE, however, the matter will be explored in detail in a dedicated section.

Soft power theory on the other hand refers to "the ability to achieve desired outcomes in international affairs through attraction and rather than coercion. It works by convincing others to follow, or getting them to agree to, norms and institutions that produce the desired behavior" (Klaehn, 2010, p.273).

The soft power of American media became so important that "UN Secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali once described the all-news network as the sixteen member of the UN Security council…. But it was the launch of the Arab-language satellite network Al Jazeera that altered the soft power dynamic in the global information war" (Watanabe & McConnell, 2015, p.118). In their book, Rickli and Almezaini (2017, p.31) argue that while Qatar focused on building its soft-power with Aljazeera, the UAE preferred to build its hard-power… and although the UAE put and emphasis on hard power, it did engage in a state branding competition with other small gulf states. Moreover, it can be argued the establishment of the UAE as a media hub is in an effective strategy for building soft power, perhaps as effective or even more effective that owning a network like as Jazeera or BBC.

The final concept is media as an identity consolidator. As Thomas and Hassan argue, "National television can create a very powerful, shared national identity. It communicates directly, simultaneously and emotionally to literates as well as illiterates. It synchronizes large segment of the population, and presents a particular version of reality to all" (Thomas & Hassan, 2006, p.275).

2. MEDIA AS SOFT POWER

Soft power can rest on the appeal of one's ideas or the ability to set the agenda in ways that shape the preferences of others. If a state can make its power legitimate in the perception of others and establish international institutions that encourage them to channel or limit their activities, it may not need to expend as many of its costly traditional economic or military resources (Klaehn, 2010, p.273). This research argues that the UAE is building its media soft power through three main strategies: First, by establishing Dubai as an international media hub where international corporations are hosted and regulated by the UAE media law. Second by initiating and attracting strategic international media conferences and events where the UAE is branded and strategically promoted. Third, by establishing the UAE Soft Power Council.

3. MEDIA CLUSTERS: ESTABLISHING DUBAI AS INTERNATIONAL MEDIA HUB

While Qatar has Aljazeera as a strategic tool for building its soft power and international influence, and Saudi Arabia has MBC, the UAE has conglomerates of international corporations based on its land and regulated by its law. This is not only a commercial success but a seed for a growing soft power that will have an influence on a global scale in the future:

> In addition to directly generating revenue and employment, successful media clusters yield domestic and international soft power by magnifying political and commercial communication and by augmenting metropolitan visibility, which can be leveraged to create economic opportunities. Media industries help to brand the host city and spurring consumption downtown leisure and entertainment services. (Karlsson, 2011, p.76)

Although the media city faces the challenge of offering an integrated environment that is capable of accommodating international journalistic standards, Dubai has already become one of the world's capitals of media and culture due its attractive location, safety and stability, excellent communication infrastructure and attractive tax incentives. The media city of Dubai is one of five media clusters in the UAE which include: Dubai Studio City, Abu Dhabi Twofour54, Ras Al Khaimah Media City and the Creative city of AL Fujairah (Ibid., p.281). We can conclude that UAE Media clusters are utilized as a mechanism of soft power through the following four approaches:

First, by regulation, "the National Media Council is the sole media regulatory body in the UAE. NMC is chaired by a government ministry who reports directly to the cabinet. The council's double mandate is media licensure

and content follow-up" (Guaaybess, 2013, p.26). It is worth noting, however, that the "NMC has engaged media organizations in its functions through the establishment of its Advisory and Coordination Boards" (Ibid.). A step that will enrich and solidify media clusters by fostering communication between the government and the private sector.

Second, by magnifying Emirati communication; policies, events, government and commercial statements are covered by the clusters due to proximity. The same can be said about London and New York where local issues are covered around the world due to the fact that a big number of reporters are clustered in those cities and connected to government officials and corporate CEO's who can comment on political and commercial issues directly as they develop, communicating their points of views directly. Proximity is crucial to determine relevance and importance. The statement of Facebook CEO explains the notion of relevance that is created by media topology of our modern times, "A Squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa". Having clusters of media organizations in the UAE means that Emirati communication will be more relevant to the international viewers as these clusters develop.

Third, by increasing metropolitan visibility and creating economic opportunities; The same concept of relevance by proximity works to general new business opportunities by featuring the UAE as a metropolis with the right infrastructure for good business. Reporters indirectly feature infrastructure and diversity when they cover other local events. "A screen industry cluster brings celebrities and their halos, while a vigorous and visible interactive media cluster suggest that the host city is at the leading edge of cognitive cultural production and consumption" (Karlsson, 2011, p.76).

Finally, by place or national branding which as Ying Fan and others argue is an important tool in the development of a nation's soft power:

A successful nation branding campaign will help create a more favorable image among the international audience thus further enhancing a country's soft power. Branding a nation is much more than just finding a catching slogan or window-dressing but requires the study of a nation's soft power sources in order to exploit them effectively to promote the national image. Nation branding has been practiced in two different ways: one is closely related to place branding or destination marketing with specific commercial purposes (promoting tourism or inward investment)—Branding New Zealand being a notable example (www.newzealandthinking.com). Another focuses mainly on the political or diplomatic dimension: the US State Department has an under-secretary for public diplomacy with a mission of "turning around anti-American sentiment in the world" (Fan, 2008, p.17).

Dinnie argues that two events showcased the need for brand management to the development of the UAE. The first event was DP World's acquisition of British P&O which managed American ports. The Negative American public reaction to their perception of Middle East takeover (with the September attacks still imprinted five years after the event) resulted with Dubai government relinquishing the rights to manage the ports even though the deal was cleared. The second event was the 2009 financial crisis when Dubai Emirates came under a British media attack. Moving forward, the UAE demonstrated strong attention and confederation to brand management. In 2010, M&C Saatchi helped create the Abu Dhabi Global Tourism Brand "Travelers Welcome" logo, which streamlined how the Abu Dhabi brand was to be represented Dubai introduced a new logo to the Arabian market 2014 that can be read in Arabic and English (Dinnie, 2016, p.25).

According to Fan, there are three key components in nation branding, or in other words, a nation's brand consists of three sub-brands: political brand, economic brand and cultural brand. These three brands are intertwined and need to work in synergy to achieve the same goal of promoting a nation's image (Fan, 2008, p.17). It can be said that the UAE is actively engaged in national branding politically, economically, and culturally:

The most notable is the economic branding of Dubai as a business and logistic capital. According to Ong, it can be said that the enormous success in attracting international investment can be attributed to the government success in controlling its image in contrast to India for example:

The lack of control over images produced about India creates extensive anxiety, seen for example, in the confused nationalist responses to the success of the film Slumdog Millionaire during the 2009 Oscar awards. At once Jubilant for the international acclaim, newspaper editorials and politicians criticized the movie as focusing solely on the negative. (Ong, 2011, p 90)

Examples of cultural branding are the establishment of the cultural district in Al-Saadiyat island near Abu Dhabi where the infamous louvre and Guggenheim are located on a walking distance from each other. The cultural district is home to Zayed National Museum, performing arts center and maritime museum as well.

Sporting events including football, (Emirates Airlines and Arsenal Football Club and Manchester City Football Club), Formula 1 (Abu Dhabi Grand Prix), cricket (the Indian Premier League 2014 season began in UAE), Tennis (Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships), golf (Abu Dhabi HSBC Golf Championship and Omega Dubai Desert Classic), equestrian events (the Dubai World Cup is the richest horse race in the world), running (Standard Chartered Dubai Marathon), Volvo 0ceon Race (stops at Abu Dhabi) and skydiving (Dubai International Parachuting Championships are some examples of halo branding. (Dinnie, 2016, p.27)

In addition to their primary aim of promoting happiness and tolerance within the Emirati society and beyond, the establishment of the ministries of happiness

and tolerance carries the positive impact of cultural branding by highlighting the significance of happiness and tolerance in Emirati culture.

Political branding in the UAE, on the other hand, can be seen in initiatives like Taqdeer awards. This should not be understood as a minimization of the genuine intentions behind these awards which aim to improve the quality of life for migrant workers by encouraging the private sector to improve their standards. While these awards promote empathy towards migrant workers by featuring their individual human stories and highlighting their contribution to society, it does in addition to that carry a positive political branding impact as it challenges the western representations that overemphasis the negatives aspects and ignore the positives:

Dubai is more often than not portrayed in a negative light in Western media. The excesses of development— particularly the man-made island real-estate developments (The Palms, The Palms II, and The World)—are often discussed with deep cynicism; Dubai is portrayed as a "sinister paradise" striving for excess, realizing the vision of benign despot and being built upon labor exploitation (Davis, 2005, 2006)…much of it is also rooted in anti-Muslim bias (Ong, 2011, p.100).

4. HOSTING INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

In addition to becoming a hub for international media corporations, the UAE hosts a number of influential and strategic international media conferences. This does not only help the UAE brand itself as a global mayhem for media and culture but also it provides the UAE with a platform to share its views and perspective with the world. Among the many media conferences hosted in the emirates are The Arab Media Forum, Abu Dhabi Media Summit, and the International Conference on Film Studies and Audiovisual Translation (ICFMAT 2017). In addition to media conference and events, "Abu Dhabi and Dubai host international film festivals and bid for major international congress and events such as the World Expo that will be held in Dubai in 2020 (Dinnie, 2016, p.27).

5. THE UAE SOFT POWER COUNCIL

The soft power council was announced one 29th April 2017 as a government body that aims to share the story of the Emirates with the world, enhance the reputation of the country internationally. Council guides public policies effecting soft power. The council aims to achieve five main tasks; first, enhancing the country's reputation and ensuring that it is loved and respected internationally. Second, discussing and suggesting projects and initiatives that support and develop the UAE soft power. Third,

understanding and identifying the sources of soft power in the UAE. Fourth, drafting soft power policies and strategies. Last but not least, suggesting and reviewing existing laws and policies that impact the reputation of the UAE (Albayan, 2017).

6. MEDIA IDENTITY CONSOLIDATION

One of the characteristics of broadcast, is its ability to cause standardization. "Research has indicated that the dialect variation in several European countries was reduced during the twentieth century thanks to national radio and television, where a few nationally acknowledged variants were dominant" (Thomas & Hassan, 2006, p.275). As a young state with a small citizen to resident ratio, UAE is strategically utilizing media as an instrumental tool for consolidating and preserving their national and cultural identity. The UAE has responded to the challenges that demography and globalization bared on identity and culture through three main approaches:

First, by establishing the national media council which is entrusted with supervising the media sector, setting strategies, and supporting the UAE government in communication goals. Second, by comprehensively covering and promote cultural and national events on a large network of channels. Last but not least, by broadcasting Emirati music and poetry on national broadcast as well as nationalistic content.

7. NATIONAL MEDIA COUNCIL

The National Media council was established in 2006 as a government body that aims to cultivate the power of the media in building a strong national character. It is responsible for the regulation and supervision of media content in the UAE, among its stated goals is protecting national policies and identity, improving public awareness and support the country in becoming a hospitable environment for media businesses and corporations (national media council, mission).

8. THE COVERAGE OF CULTURAL AND NATIONAL EVENTS

Cultural and national events in the UAE enjoy extensive coverage as a way to amplify and give voice to Emirati voices in a deviser's demography. Every year the UAE hosts a number of events and festivals that aims to consolidate national and cultural identity. These events include the National Day, the Flag Day, the Mother of the Nation Festival, Sheikh Zayed Heritage Festival and more. What is interesting about such approach is the presentation of informative cultural awareness in format that is both entertaining and encouraging of social and family outings.

9. THE ROLE BROADCASTING PLATFORMS

According to Guaaybess: In 2008, a national conference on national identity called on media to stand up to the challenge of safeguarding national culture from the deluge of external flows…to achieve that, national UAE broadcasters are expected to demonstrate two things: (a) They have initiated substantive Emiratization programs to ensure heavy UAE nationals' presence in the national broadcasting sector, and (b) they have included a compelling amount of national identity content in their programming. According to a study commissioned by the National Media council and carried out by the author in 2010, national broadcasters seem to have scored high on a National Identity Index (NII) developed for the study (Guaaybess, 2013, p.21). A similar law exists in Canada where according to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, broadcasting platforms are required to have an average of 30% Canadian content. This quota changes more or less depending on the genre of music and the availability of Canadian content (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission).

10. MEDIA AGENDA SETTING

Mellor states that according to the first Arab study investigating the agenda-setting role of the media (Hamada, 1993), the media has little effect on the public opinion. Nonetheless, the print press was given a far more important role than the electronic media, probably because the later have been assigned other functions, primarily entertainment, that reduces their agenda-setting capability (Mellor, 2005, p.61). Whether or not agenda setting capability reduces as channels focus on entertainment is a subject of debate, but what is important however is to recognize that there are more sophisticated ways in which the agenda is set in the UAE. The first is by regulation and the second which is the most interesting and innovative is by setting a theme for each year and directing the energy towards a highlighted issue:

11. REGULATION

Regulation plays an important role in agenda setting in any media system in the world. It serves the purpose of gate keeping by virtue of licensure. All broadcasting platforms in the UAE are regulated by the National Media Council which outlines the broad rules that should be followed by both national and free zone broadcast. While NMC deals with issued related to policies and content, the Telecommunication regulatory authority handles technical matters relating to spectrum and frequency allocation (Guaaybess, 2013, p.18). "Local governments and free zones play a supporting regulatory role through internal policies, standards and codes." (Ibid.).

12. THE YEARLY THEMES

Setting a yearly theme is most of the most effective strategies to mobilize both citizens and residents towards a public goal. The years of innovation, reading and giving served the double purpose of setting the public agenda and branding the country by focusing on the local public discourse and international coverage towards the declared themes:

The year in innovation, 2015, was associated with the establishment of Muhammed bin Rashid space center which is currently leading the way in the exploration of Mars. During the year of innovation 800 initiatives were launched in association with the theme. Public and private institutions were engaged in the activities of the theme (Albawaba, 2017).

The year of Reading, 2016 enjoyed extensive media coverage in the UAE and internationally as the Arabic reading challenge was launched to involve students in reading 50 million books. 3 million and a half students from 15 countries participated in the challenge, reading more than 170 million books. The theme motivated the society to implement long-term strategies for promoting reading as a way to reach the strategic goal of establishing the UAE as a hub for knowledge and content (Al Hashimi, 2016).

The year of giving, 2017, aims to motivate volunteerism as a social value in the UAE and to motivate people as well as corporations to embrace the concept of social responsibility and give back to society (UAE Cabinet) Media places an essential role in the promotion of the theme in line with the NMC strategy of involving media in support of national goals. Examples of the themes agenda setting function are the corporations race to publicize their contribution to the theme:

- Du Celebrates 10 wonderful Years by Giving Customers 10 Times More Reasons to Smile (Du press release)
- Dewa launches 27 public initiatives during the year of giving (Dewa press release).

13. METHOD

This is a qualitative research based on the analysis of secondary sources. The essay is divided into four main sections each exploring an aspect of the UAE communication strategy. The conclusions of this research are supported by the literature review and the answers of the interviewees. The advantages of the method are that it combines both theoretical and applied research. The questions used in the interview cover the three frameworks of the study and allow the interviewees

indirectly address agenda setting, national and cultural identity consolidation and well as soft power. The questions were asked using email, linked in and over the phone. In addition to the name, age, education and other demographic questions, interviewees were asked the following questions:

- How much Emirati media content you are exposed to, and how does it contribute to your knowledge of Emirati culture, identity and art?
- If your answer is no, then what do you think is needed to increase the reach of local content?
- "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." How is this quote true or false in the context of UAE media?
- If countries where brands, what would you say are the three main platforms used in the self-promotion of brand UAE and how?
- Do you see a connection between the theme of the year in the UAE and cooperate advertisement practices?
- Using examples, how do you explain the connection or lack thereof?

14. ANALYSIS

The first section of this paper provides a background on main communication theories from which soft power, agenda setting and identity consolidation are selected and used to explain and understand UAE communication stratifies. This chapter is supported by the review of literature.

The second section of this paper; media as soft power discusses two things: the impact of establishing international media clusters on the image of the UAE and its ability to influence global discourse and the impact of hosting international conferences and exhibitions. In one of the interviews, one interviewee states that Dubai's focus on branding as a way to boost its economy through featuring tourism, real-estate and cosmopolitism. She referred to the roll of the expo in branding:

> The upcoming Expo in 2020, which the UAE has been gearing up to for many years. is expected to raise the population to 3.4 million by 2020 from about 2.7 million today. The Expo is forecasted to also generate an additional 270,000 new jobs.

The third section of this paper discusses the concept of media as an identity consolidator by examining the role of national Media council, the coverage of cultural and national events and finally, the role of broadcasting platforms. While the research maintains that UAE media sufficiently covers Emirati cultural heritage and national identity. Some interviewees suggest that unless one is an Arabic speaker, they are not exposed to enough local content, however, they are mostly exposed to American and western content which suggests the need for producing more content in foreign languages:

> I feel that TV doesn't emphasize on the need to delve into the local culture as it caters to the expat majority in Dubai (unless you are viewing Arabic speaking channels). Hence, you are more likely to see American films and television programs. The art scene is booming in the UAE and is gathering a lot of international attention, which is forcing people in the country to be more aware of Emirati traditions.

A British communications professional maintains. Another interviewee who is Arabic speaking maintained that Emirati content is present in Arabic speaking channels and website covering different aspects of culture and Identity.

The fourth section explores the concept of media as an agenda setter by examining the impact of regulations and theme setting initiatives such as the years of innovation, reading and giving on the public discourse of the UAE. Interviewees seem to agree on that development and its fast pace is a main theme dominating agenda setting in the UAE media, listing many different example. While one maintains that "Newspapers devote many column inches to commercial properties that break world records, business success stories and government initiatives." Another talks about on the sensational time laps videos of iconic buildings rising from the desert and the statements communicated and narratives created though such filming techniques.

DISCUSSION

The researcher finds that the UAE communication strategy focuses on three main goals. Building and fostering its soft power, strengthening and consolidating its national identity and cultural heritage and finally, setting the National Agenda. The UAE is steadily achieving these goals with complementing policies and organizations. The research is based on the reviewing of secondary sources as well as the opinions of communication professionals which were gathered by direct interviewing as described in the methodology section of this paper. Both the literature review and the interviews support lead direct the attention towards the three strategies and frameworks identified in the introduction. UAE communications strategies can be better understood in light of the soft power theory, the agenda setting theory and the framework of media as a tool for standardization and consolidation. One of the limitations is that limitation the many of the discussed subjects are recent such as the media clusters which does not seem to attract the interest and attention of the interviewees who focus more on the traditional branding methods which makes it less possible to draw conclusions on media clusters and their role in building the soft power in the UAE. As for the directions for further study, this research suggests a comparative study between the communications strategies of different

GGC countries particularly Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar and the prospects for complementation.

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