



Models of Innovative Experiences of Young Media Women Between Conservative and Open Surroundings

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Searching for definitions and classifications of innovation took me a lot of time, and I almost fell in the trap of the male standard authority, which defines what is beautiful and what is not, and sets the standards of success and failure. I was faced with puzzling and confusing questions such as: Is there a feminine innovation that is different from the male one? I almost overlooked the whole topic, convinced that placing innovation in fixed stereotypes would strangle innovation itself. Nevertheless, some interviews that I carried out with young media women encouraged me to take the chance, to go beyond innovative and non-innovative definitions and classifications and to play the game of innovation itself based on the game of life continuity. I kept moving up and then down the innovation threshold as I saw fit, in an attempt to recreate it. I put forth my own definition of innovation, saying to myself: "Since women have been cast away for so long in the dungeon of the familiar and the customary, why don't we regard the mere consideration of women to step out of what is common as a potential for innovative capabilities? Maybe if they had been given more attention, they would have definitely shown new innovations reflecting positively on the situation of women, society and maybe innovation. Doesn't innovation end when it is proclaimed as such? It needs constant creation and renewal.

I looked for innovation and picked up its pieces from the fresh experiences of young media women who made their innovative experience their own way and left their path open for other, but not necessarily similar, experiences. In the light of my meetings with them, I dared say they were distinguished by their own imagination. They created their own world to which they fled from the world of blackmail and dependency. They produced their own media, set the topics they wished to deal with and felt them differently, so they succeeded in depicting them and exposing a side of the conceptions, predominant in the society, about male and female values and the roles of the two sexes.

Since media innovation, like other innovations, is not separate from the world but talks of it through pictures, illusion and virtuality, it is important that our introduction to this topic revolves around the media environment itself and the changes that took place in this field that affected, one way or the other, the work of media men and women. Then we shall move on to talk about the profiles, components and causes of innovation. Finally, we shall wonder about the future of these innovations: Where did they settle? How were they invested? In other words, what was their result on the experience of women as media women and on the profession?

The Media Environment

The increase in Arab satellite broadcasting stations has naturally resulted in attracting a large number of media men and women handling different jobs and tasks. It has also led to the emergence of news media patterns different from the prevailing ones, and to the change of many roles and positions preset for both sexes; in particular, the economic and technological shifts in media and communications encouraging the rise of the culture of image and the changes that affected women in relation to education and work, in addition to the expansion of specializations to encompass new and modern fields, pushed women towards more acquired rights, thus breaking the preset roles. TV stations used to employ men for politics and serious topics and women for varieties and seduction-mixed entertainment, creating a media pattern that led to the many existing clichés about media women. Yet, this trend soon subsided amid the escalating competition game for numerous reasons, such as:

- The fast progress in media and communications.
- The establishment of leading media groups which started to impose their professional criteria on media around the world.
- The many major events that shook the Arab world, which led some to call for establishing Arab news channels and media channels that can address the global public opinion well to convince it of the Arab just causes in a professional fashion.
- The increase in numbers of media women majoring in communications and journalism in all Arab universities.
- The media experiences acquired by Arab media women, to an extent that Egyptian, Lebanese and Moroccan media women fiercely compete because looks and beauty criteria are no longer sufficient and more culture, knowledge and language proficiency are required.

In short, the presence of women in the visual media is an indicator of the access of women to the general domains from which they have been absent for a long while. Moreover, it indicates that they are taking on new roles with idea creation and production no longer being reserved for men or message presentation for women. In the light of this new media environment, women increasingly participate, one way or the other, in the diversity of TV stations' cultural values and media experiences. No doubt this will influence the work environment especially since it has become obvious that media women are not of the same type. Aside from the category conforming to work to male standards which rely heavily on good looks and receiving all the attention in a way that denatures other categories, and which impacts negatively on the work of women and empties it of its value, there is a cat-

egory of media women who, out of self-awareness and belief in their potential capabilities, broke out from their preset roles. They improved their skills in a way that enabled them to push through the preset stereotypes and barged in on new previously men-exclusive fields. They worked as directors, producers and reporters in dangerous locations; they competed with men and added a new, rarely seen before, dimension to the Arab media work.

This new Arab media reality informs us of the emergence of new feminine innovative profiles in the visual media even though they are still modest. Yet they can be considered as a new cultural aspect, which women helped in creating as it carries their conception and flair for phenomena and events in the world.

Profiles, Components and Causes of Innovative Experiences

Probably the reason for first choosing Diana Moukalled and Janane Mallat as two indicators for innovative young feminine media experiences was because, as a journalism instructor, I highly appreciate their experience and have great admiration for their personalities. Both women started work at an early age and made their own media experience. They proposed the idea of the show and argued for it to convince managers of its usefulness. They continuously developed their work by technically or professionally benefiting from either foreign or local media experiences or through grasping the background and local cultural and social context of the topic to be filmed. That way, both women parted with the preset girl roles and decided to take the difficult path. They worked on depicting feelings and people's happiness and sorrow. Their work was a search journey for alternatives to develop their work. Therefore, they can be considered as two main producers in the Arab media field.

Both women also entered the social field and addressed taboos and hidden subjects, exposing a side of the concepts prevailing in the society about male and female values and roles of the two sexes.

In short, their innovation journey was a continuous learning phase, as both of them refused to enclose themselves in one type of experience. They moved from one experience to another. Their innovation was highlighted by the way the society and professional circles reacted towards their production.

Moukalled grew up in Saudi Arabia, in what she describes as a conservative environment with all the implicit social disturbances, confusion and caution about the work and role of women in general. Upon reaching the university level, she moved to Beirut to pursue her



studies majoring in journalism at the Lebanese University. "These university years reshaped me. Through them, I discovered the country, the war and the relations between men and women. I felt homesick. I had a few ideas about media. It was a period of self discovery more than the establishment of a career," Moukalled says, and then she adds: "It was a period of shattered dreams. It was not the university that I dreamt of, at least when it comes to the place."

She kicked off her career at New TV station in "*Al Naskha Al Oula*" (First Version), where she learnt bits and pieces of the techniques of the profession that she handled in conformity with the then overall zealously opposing environment of the station. "Soon I realized how naïve this style of work was. Even though the then female news director heavily criticized my work, not because she is a woman but rather because of her party inclination (for instance, she pushed us towards the direct style of criticism), she did teach me about and bring my attention to topics that interest people, and pointed out that, even if not directly, real journalism is done in the field and not behind an office desk," she says.

Mallat grew up in an open environment. She studied at Saint Joseph University and in France. Aside from being a member of an open and liberal family, Mallat's father participated in political roles and took on high law posts. "I was surrounded with total care and affection which made my independent personality even stronger and encouraged me to be different and understanding of others' differences," she says.

She entered the media business by chance, by way of her female friend (a relative of an ad agent), when she was asked, straight away, to be a program manager at the French-speaking channel C33. At first, she didn't get the idea and she answered: "TV is not my major, I have a degree in French Literature and I work in teaching." However, her friend told her that everybody in Lebanon is approaching TV and that it was a new phenomenon. Not to mention that the reply of the station manager was a challenge to her when he said: "TV is a sea that we throw you in. Either you swim or you drown."

Movement and Transition Within the Same Profession

Mukalled moved from New TV to Future TV that had already started broadcasting, announcing its need for media personnel. She says that she found that the world of Future TV was bigger and that its approach to matters was less severe and enclosing as it was a financially rich TV station at least. The station provided her with the primary materials necessary for her media experience: to be trained at the hands of foreign journalists and to travel

abroad to attend seminars. She discovered that she could benefit from foreign journalists as much as she could benefit them, since explaining many topics and phenomena that occur in our country was like solving a riddle for them. She began producing reports about social and humanitarian subjects that caught the attention of foreign agencies and stations. They asked her either to produce topics or accompany their journalists and carry out a joint production. Meanwhile, she was aware of her role in the station. She didn't forget or neglect her rights that she found unsuitable with her obligations and work, highly appreciated by foreign and Arab media. Sometimes she implied to her bosses about matching the opportunities given to her with the capabilities and proficiencies she acquired, and some other times fished them out wittingly. She even left the station for a few months and worked with foreign and Arab stations until she made the station managers recognize the importance of her work. She returned but on her own terms and with an idea for the "*Bil 'Ain El-Moujarrada*" (The Naked Eye) program, considered as a social documentary program prepared intellectually and professionally in a skilled manner.

This young woman was not taken by the glamour of travel and star life. She remained in a constant learning phase and was interested in dangerous places and hard topics. She set the foundations for a feminine media model worthy to be shown off by girls because she went up the professional ladder without submitting herself to any manager. She is currently a member of the team responsible for the satellite news bulletin. Yet she did not give up on being a reporter first and she is not 34 yet. It does not matter if her looks or clothes were attractive or not, she says, what is important to her is addressing the mind of the viewer and raising problems from the heart of society.

Mallat lived her professional life in C33 then in LBC. She gained her expertise through the richness and variety of her experiences. Her drive, intelligence and courage helped her too, allowing her to become a program producer that made huge profits for LBC. So profitable in fact that she convinced the chairman of the board of the usefulness of her work. Therefore, he gave her total freedom, allowing her to move from one challenge to another: from managing programs in C33 to producing taboo topics in LBC, to producing the social talk-show "*El-Shater Yehke*" (Let The Clever One Talk), to moving to a totally different pattern by producing the entertainment program "*Ya Leyl Ya 'Ein*" which caused quite a controversy in the Arab world yet brought in a huge amount of advertisement. Mallat simply says that she willingly moved to varieties because she refuses to be enclosed in one pattern, especially that her wager on the social talk show to produce change was a losing one. The topic was

exhausted along with the issues dealt with. She wonders why the transition should be so strange; the entertainment program resembled an aspect of her life since she is a girl who likes to party in pubs and clubs and to watch people and their interaction with songs. "It is an aspect of my personality and I saw that it was time to make use of it. In my life, I don't rely on one weapon, I have many weapons and I use each one at the appropriate time and need. Fun and entertainment are as much part of this arsenal as seriousness. That's the game of life," Mallat says. I would like to point out here, between brackets, that she innovated in convincing me about her experience and her show that I have always criticized. Now she is preparing new programs with new patterns to avoid repetition. Isn't that a constituent of innovation?

This case also proves to growing girls that idea management and producing programs is not impossible for women. Mallat describes the joy of pulling strings and finds herself, as a producer, in a power situation, saying: "When we stand in the shadow we see clearly, whereas when we are in the limelight we are the one who is seen. This requires a great deal of energy and creates in us a feeling of need to protect ourselves."

Upon asking them how they defined their achievements in the media work, Mukalled answered that her experience on the social level was culminated by drawing attention to the necessity of media work on main human rights (treatment of domestic servants, child labor, child trafficking, poverty, etc.). As for women, there is a new trend in Arab stations to send women reporters to dangerous locations such as Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq. There are new needs that imposed themselves on Arab satellite TV stations and media in a way that going back is no longer possible.

As for Mallat, she said: "Maybe my experience is a lesson to others. Once, while admiring my work, the station manger asked me what work I would have done if I hadn't been in the media field. I simply answered: "A garbage woman but with the same enthusiasm." What is important is the serious professional work. Innovation is not breaking out of the ordinary for one time; it is a continuous renewal journey. It is setting for ourselves a ceiling higher than the one already set and convincing others of it for they will eventually follow us and support us. As soon as I feel that the program has neared exhaustion I put an end to it."

Concerning femininity and whether they have a feminine point of view, Mallat says: "I am against those sayings because I aspire for a society that considers a woman equal to a man, and sometimes a man equal to a woman. Women are basically stronger because they are

allowed to express themselves and to get emotional. The pressure on a man is enormous. He can't feel or cry." As for dealing with society as a female, she answers: "I use my imagination, sometimes I use my personality, sometimes my knowledge, my femininity, my weakness, or my strength. It all depends on who I'm dealing with." When asked about the reactions of society towards her work, Mallat said that sometimes they were violent upon bringing up certain subjects. Many attempts were made to stop the show. Nevertheless, on one hand, she is in a station that can take some pressure on her and the presenter's behalf up front, and on the other, she respects the conditions of the profession, believes in human rights and accepts what is different. She also adds that, through their shows, they were able to find solutions to various problems making them burden the show with more than it can handle. For instance, she followed the case of Badria who got AIDS from her late husband and was practically cast off from society. She went to her milieu, brought her together with people and made her make up with her society. Through this show, she discovered the pleasure of production.

When a person sees that he/she is different, knows that he/she is different and accepts the difference, he/she makes people get used to it. Mallat started introducing herself as different because this difference gives room for the difference of others. It was not strange then that upon my arrival at her house – and it was my first visit – she sat, talked and moved in front of me comfortably and without any pretense, as if she wanted to tell me that she was different. Mallat lives away from her parents and is annoyed by curious persons who ask her whether she is married or not. On the other hand, Mukalled hides another kind of worry in her eyes. She carries the concern of a modern girl bearing the heritage of tradition.

Finally, these distinguished experiences that can have their equivalents in other fields and places have been burdened when labeling them "innovative", as innovation is relative. However, we can say that these two experiences were innovative because they were distinctive compared to other previous experiences and to other experiences in the media field. Yet, to become fully developed, turn into an original innovation, in a continuous creation process, and to become fruitful when it comes to women - in other words, to affect the intellectual and social structure in our communities and the media profession, the suitable infrastructure must be provided to these experiences in order not to become void, not to get hampered by social dilemmas and emotional and family problems, not to fall under the pressure of institutions and stereotyping emerging sometimes from them, from people, from the inner self, and maybe from innovation in itself.

Translated by Nadine Khoury