

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, BBC MEDIA ACTION CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

BRAVE NEW MEDIA - EPISODE ONE – TRANSCRIPT

00.00

[STING: BRAVE NEW MEDIA]

[STING SETTLES INTO INTRO BED.]

00:11

MAHA TAKI

You're listening to Brave New Media –

a new podcast where we hear from independent media organisations from around the world.

In each episode we'll hear from one media outlet facing significant challenges

– and we talk to specialists about possible solutions.

You don't need me to tell you that free media is facing huge obstacles right now.

This podcast is about listening to the stories of those at the cutting edge...

learning from their experience,

and exploring the solutions that may help future proof independent media.

I'm Maha Taki from BBC Media Action – the BBC'S international charity.

I'll be presenting the first mini-series of Brave New Media with three stories.

One from Ukraine, one from Paraguay

and for this episode, we're going to meet a journalist, based in my hometown of Beirut.

[STING BED FADES INTO EPISODE MUSIC.]

01:11

DIANA MOUKALLED

One of the stories we covered, called the graveyard of the ‘Manboothat’... a noun in Arabic, meaning neglected women neglected or left out. It’s a graveyard in northern Iraq and Kurdistan. Those who are buried in it are young women, who either chose to have their own lives to marry the ones they love, or just being killed for trying to cross the norms and build their own lives. So even after they die, after they are being killed, they are denied their identity.

They are denied the names, they are either given numbers or nothing at all. Nobody visits them, nobody looks after them. It affects me because it goes beyond life, it goes to the afterlife as well. So it's, I felt it was so cruel.

We need the people to know these stories. We need the public to know what kind of injustices and to see these injustices in proper narrative and a proper context to be able to refuse it and try to change it.

This is how we start building a different public opinion, a different approach towards our issues.

[MUSIC FADES.]

02:32

MAHA

That was journalist Diana Moukalled on one of her stories that she is most proud of, because it exposes injustice and promotes positive social change.

She told this story through her digital media platform, Daraj, which she co-founded with two other journalists in Lebanon.

Daraj uses text, image, video and audio to focus on under-reported topics that are in the public-interest...

from the rights of foreign domestic workers living in Beirut,
to the role Big Tech plays in supporting authoritarian regimes,
and the exploitation of call-centre staff in Egypt.

But Diana's ability to report freely on those kinds of stories has been hard-won.
Her story starts in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s.

03:17

DIANA

I'm Diana Moukalled. I'm a Lebanese journalist. I'm a feminist.

I was born and raised in Saudi Arabia.

My relation to Lebanon was limited to stories I heard from my parents. I couldn't visit the country because there was Civil War at that time. I'm talking about the period of 70s, early 80s.

At that time, my sense of censorship, whether it's personal or political, started to grow. As I started monitoring myself as a girl, what to wear, whom to speak to. The sense of authority also was very visible to me, because of the news and what's happening around me, either in Saudi Arabia or in the region.

[MUSIC FADES IN.]

04:06

MAHA

Because there were few educational opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia, in the late eighties, Diana moved to Lebanon to study.

The year the war ended in 1990, Diana graduated and decided to become a journalist.

[MUSIC RISES.]

04:20

DIANA

You know, in the early '90s, I started working as a journalist and discovering what journalism is actually, while the country was recovering from war, and the new settlement and the new era of Lebanon, postwar, was evolving. And at that time, censorship also was taking place.

There was the audio-visual law that divided televisions in Lebanon upon political sectarian powers. So each media outlet would represent a certain political party or a certain sect in Lebanon. So we did not really play our role, media was a reflection to the division of the country. [It] was not a reflection to the interests of citizens of Lebanon. It was the interests of those who ruled the country.

And I remember in the early 90s, there was this incident when all news bulletins were banned for a couple of months, none of the Lebanese media were able to broadcast news bulletins, it was a censorship because it was a kind of punishment at that time for crossing borders and crossing red lines.

[MUSIC FADES OUT. SOUNDSCAPE REFLECTS CENSORSHIP – DARAJ CLIPS.]

So since then, it was clear to me that it was, it was impossible to cover local politics without jumping over the red lines. Since then, I started evolving my own formula, which is I covered the stories that I can cover properly and avoid the things that may compromise my integrity as a journalist.

[MUSIC RETURNS BRIEFLY.]

I did make this balance between me trying to improve as a journalist, being professional, as much as I can, and trying to have these compromises where it did not affect me, or did not affect my integrity entirely.

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

06:31

MAHA

Fast-forward twenty years, and Diana has built a successful career in journalism and is a familiar face as a TV reporter for a mainstream media channel.

But when the wave of protests known as the Arab Spring came to Lebanon in 2011, she began to question the whole basis of her work.

[DARAJ SFX RISE.]

06:51

DIANA

That time, we started seeing also the counter revolution. And the first who were to pay the price for these counter revolutions were activists, were human rights defenders and journalists. We started seeing journalists being assassinated, we started seeing how revolutions have been turned into a bloody bath, where many have been imprisoned or tortured or killed or being shot at. So at that time, being part of the media. I thought to us we had to make a choice. The model that was that was there in the '90s could not repeat itself after 2011. There was too much blood there was there was too much violence that you cannot tolerate it anymore and since then we started thinking, I started thinking of having my own path.

[BEIRUT SOUNDSCAPE BUILDS.]

07:49

MAHA

After the Arab Spring, Diana dreamt of creating her own independent media outlet, so she could report on whatever she felt audiences should know about.

It wasn't until a few years later, in 2017, that Diana met two like-minded journalists with whom she felt she could turn her idea into reality.

One of them, Alia Ibrahim, worked for the pan-Arab news channel, Al Arabiya, which, like many media organizations in the region, had strong connections to the Saudis.

[BEIRUIT SFX RISE.]

08:20

DIANA

It was a sunny day, it was in the afternoon. It wasn't raining or something. But we were shocked. I mean Alia, she was going - I went to her office in the early morning to discover that it was closed, she couldn't enter. I called her I knew before her I was telling her Alia, Al Arabiya have closed in Beirut, she thought I was joking. The office of Al Arabiya was closed in Beirut because of political reasons, the Saudis wanted to punish Hezbollah. So they decided that they didn't want any presence in Lebanon. So their office was closed, and she was released from the office. And she was in disbelief that this could happen because of political reasons. And when she went there and discovered that she couldn't access her office, we met in downtown.

It was Casper and Gambini cafe in downtown Beirut.

[SOUNDSCAPE SHIFTS TO INTERIOR OF CAFE.]

Unfortunately, it was one of the cafes that was that were destroyed in the Beirut blast. So we used to go there, it was very central, close to our offices. This is where we used to meet, whenever we have a short period a short time where we can grab a coffee, talk about our work and our frustrations and we make we make fun of what's happening around us.

09:41

MAHA

On that sunny day in Beirut, all three journalists decided that they had had enough of the tightly-controlled media environment and its political affiliations. It was time for a change.

[MUSIC BUILDS.]

09:55

DIANA

So we thought, let's move on, let's think of something. It's about time to create an independent media where we don't jeopardise our integrity. And when we can cover properly, the type of stories we would like to cover, and there are plenty of them.

So we thought we are in a hole. And we wanted a way out. This is why we came with the name 'Daraj'. Daraj is a noun meaning steps. So we felt we are in a hole and we wanted a way out. So we thought Daraj would be suitable for our platform. This is how we came with the with the name.

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

10:44

MAHA

But when they tried to establish Daraj, they soon ran into obstacles.

10:49

DIANA

It was new to us to discover how to create a media company. The three of us, we are both - we're all journalists, none of us has business experience. We're all cut, we all share the same background. So discovering exploring how to have a business model, how to have a strategy, how to have a budget was something new to us.

And the question of funding was very very sensitive... Because we want our editorial line to be independent. We didn't want anyone or any party or any side to have leverage upon our editorial outline.

So this is when we started looking for funders who wouldn't exercise any kind of editorial pressure upon us. And this is why we decided we will not take any money from any government, at least not the governments that are aligned to the political dimension in our region.

[MUSIC SLOWLY BUILDS.]

First of all, we tried to approach progressive investors who might be interested in having an independent media and having this project. Frankly, we were not lucky. We had some meetings. Some businessmen liked the idea, but they did not have the gut or they did not feel comfortable. We knew it wasn't easy, because businessmen have interests with those who are either in power or aligned with those who are in power. It is impossible, impossible, not only in Lebanon, but in the whole region, to have a business or to run a business without having certain kind of compromise or being affiliated to somebody who is really powerful.

It was weird and frustrating at the same time, because you have to deal with people who are not journalists who don't share with you necessarily the same values.

[SFX AND MUSIC FADES IN.]

I remember one of the meetings was with an advertisement agency.

It was a really horrible meeting because they - we speak different languages. We have different priorities. They think of advertisement, they think of clients; we think of integrity, we think of objectivity, we think of commitment. So to us that was a disastrous meeting and we reached a moment where we thought it will not materialise, we will not be able to create Daraj.

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

13:23

MAHA

But they did manage to launch their public interest platform in 2017, after obtaining funding from international foundations. But they were determined that it wouldn't be a non-profit organization, reliant solely on donor funding. The goal had to be financial self-sufficiency.

13:40

DIANA

Daraj shouldn't rely that much on funders but also rely on the outcome of our own enterprise. It could be subscription, advertisement, production. So we need to diversify our streams of funding to be able to sustain because this is how you preserve your editorial independence.

14:04

MAHA

Daraj is now able to generate part of its total budget from the profits of a subsidiary production consultancy, with the rest coming from international donors.

But it still lacks the funding that would allow it to meet its ambitions.

For example, it needs more people on its team that are specialised in areas such as data analysis and marketing to engage and build audiences. But Daraj can't really afford that yet. And its income streams will never match the massive state investment in mainstream media in the region:

[MUSIC FADES IN.]

14:36

DIANA

If you look at the key players in the region, they are investing billions of money. Saudi Arabia have announced that between now and the year 2030, they will invest \$64 billion in entertainment. This is not to mention what Qatar is investing what Iran is investing, what Russia is investing. We're talking about major players using billions of dollars to hijack or to manipulate the public sphere, whether entertainment, whether media, whether whatever, name it they are controlling the narrative by those billions of dollars. So to us, we are being funded by a few thousands. Or I mean, the whole budget does not exceed \$1 million a year. I'm not undermining what we do actually I'm saying what we do has a value, because it is challenging the billions that are being spent on propaganda from all sides from all the key players in the region.

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

15:47

MAHA

Despite the funding challenges, Diana has been able to use Daraj to report on the stories she believes need to be told. But it has not been without consequences for her personally.

[MUSIC FADES IN.]

15:58

DIANA

My friends who still live in the Gulf, because I'm outspoken, because I, I criticize extensively in my work and in my comments, they tend not to show any kind of relation or, or any pictures with me publicly.

They wouldn't like my personal posts, they wouldn't share my stories, they wouldn't put a smiley face on one of my images.

I understand that, but at the same time, it hurts. So you lose this basic communications with your friends. But again, it's not them I'm blaming, I'm blaming the regimes that would put someone in prison for five to 10 years for doing something on social media, that it made it a something that would monitor those who are affiliated to someone who is critical on social media.

[MUSIC SHIFTS.]

17:04

MAHA

Because of this toxic media environment, around a quarter of Daraj journalists use pen names, so they don't have to live in fear of repercussions.

Despite these dangers, Diana knows what a positive impact it can have when people have a platform that gives them a public voice.

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

17:24

DIANA

One of our female writers, a writer-journalist, she's from Iraq. She's very young. She's very motivated. And she writes with a passion. She covers social issues in Iraq. She called me a couple of weeks ago, sobbing, crying, that one member of her family beat her up because they found her smoking in one of the cafes. To me, I mean, hearing the story trying to comfort a young journalists and telling her it was her basic right, to be able to go out and smoke outside and do whatever she wants, was really agonising for me and for her as well. Trying to comfort a journalist who is covering other stories, where she is herself is a story.

Journalism is helping her and me. I need people like her to find the same support that I couldn't have. So it's not only her, plenty of journalists, plenty of people, plenty of voices that nobody hears nobody just give a damn about.

I think it's my responsibility as a person as someone who is responsible in Daraj, to enable our platform to reflect those people and enabling them and make them feel that they are worth it. And they can do it.

[MUSIC BUILDS.]

18:49

MAHA

When I interviewed Diana, I asked her what it felt like to have reclaimed her voice through Daraj, after years of having to self-censor.

18:57

DIANA

It's hard to describe the feeling, but it is a very satisfactory one. It's not that you feel good about yourself. You will never feel good. You earn you need to earn this kind of feeling. But it's an accumulation of doing what is right that you couldn't do it before. But now you can do it and you will keep doing as much as you can.

[MUSIC SHIFTS TO TRANSITION STING.]

19:18

MAHA

Speaking to Diana, it's clear that co-founding Daraj was an act of empowerment and liberation.

Its helped her reclaim her own public voice, given opportunities to others to do the same and shone a light on issues that would have otherwise been ignored by mainstream media.

But it hasn't been an easy journey.

She's had to resolve the funding challenges that make it so difficult to compete, especially with politically affiliated outlets with deeper resources.

I wanted to take a closer look at the funding issue and to reflect on what Daraj's experience so far tells us about the future of media in the region. So I put Diana's story to a professor with both media experience and extensive knowledge of the region:

20:05

NAOMI SAKR

I'm Naomi Sakr. I'm a professor of media policy at the University of Westminster in the UK. But before that, I was a journalist and a country analyst, which kind of explains, the journalism part kind of explains my interest in media.

20:21

MAHA

Naomi, you just listened to Diana's story. Can you share with us what you thought was the most moving takeaway?

20:30

NAOMI

I mean, there's a lot, especially the sense of despair. But, it puts me in mind of a visual image. So one time on a work trip to Beirut, I saw this wonderful enlarged photograph of an old stairwell in an old apartment block. And it so if you imagine the stairwell curving up from the darkness to the light, and I found that image so symbolic, I absolutely had to have it. And you know, it means a lot to me. And when I listened to Diana, and she was talking about the

explanation of why Daraj is called Daraj. And of course, I knew what Daraj meant. But when she described it, it immediately brought that image to my mind. So I feel a huge kind of affinity for that, for that aspiration let's say, and that's kind of one of the moving things, I guess for me, emotionally.

21:28

MAHA

Do you think that Diana's journey is typical, typical of others who have gone down the same independence route?

21:34

NAOMI

Yeah, I don't know about typical. I mean, I think we underestimate how many people in the region actually do get it about independent media and do want independent media. But we also underestimate that the kind of chilling effect of authoritarianism because people are afraid to get into trouble by saying that, you know, saying what they believe. And actually, Diana says that in the interview, she said to her friends in the Gulf, are still her friends, but they're extremely careful not to endorse what she's reporting. They're not gonna, like, show their support for it in public. And I think, I mean, this is one of the things that independent reporting in the region is not seen as independent, it is seen as opposition or criticism, right? So you either toe the government line, or you're a political opponent, which means that there is no room to analyse freely.

And obviously, in Lebanon, again, when you asked about typical, Lebanon is a special case because of the kind of confessionalist alignment of the media so that you know, media associated or affiliated with different communities Sunni, Shia, Maronite, Orthodox and so on. And which makes it really hard in Lebanon.

And I think basically the short answer is we shouldn't underestimate how much people actually do appreciate and want independent media.

23:11

MAHA

And we know, we both know, how independent media and particularly investigative journalism requires a lot of funding. And we, you know, we've heard Diana's story and the struggles that she went through to stay financially afloat. Do you think there are solutions out there or do you think it's always going to be a struggle in this kind of climate?

23:34

NAOMI

Yeah, there are, there are solutions.

The thing is, I mean, I've described editorial independence, it means being able to publish something that is going to annoy people and you've got to be able to carry on publishing, despite that person, like withdrawing their support, or whatever. So the financial model you need to do that, is one, that means that you can still keep going, you know, regardless of, of what you expose in your editorial output.

So, you know, you can provide services where you cross subsidise you provide services like translation or artwork for ads, or customised news bulletins or training or whatever, and you use the revenue from that to subsidise your journalism. And then another idea is a subscription model whereby readers, you know, you get readers to actually subscribe and I mean, that does work for many good outlets, reliable outlets in, in North America and Europe. And the idea is that if you can get a diasporic readership, they can pay higher subscription rates, then people locally. But the thing is, I mean, there is an important point to make, it's all very well talking about revenue. But independent startups have got costs that you can't ignore, right?

24:58

MAHA

And what are these costs? Can you explain them to us?

25:01

NAOMI

So if you have a respectable independent outlet that wants to treat journalism seriously, they're going to face multiple cost pressures. If you want your staff to be valued, you have to kind of offer a career development structure you know, with a salary that matches you want to give them the proper technical resources and office space. You've got to invest in fact checking because you've got to be doubly sure because you're gonna have to probably face court cases and litigation you know, just for doing your job so that takes extra resources.

So those are the cost pressures. And at the same time, yes, they can seek out advertising revenue. But it's going to be from the small advertisers that, you know, we're not going to get government contracts anyway. And that are not part of kind of the crony networks of the regime. But small advertisers have small advertising budgets, and they don't have the experience in placing ads. So you've got to invest, in actually kind of cultivating that sort of advertising culture. And then if you think about it, if you've got a subscription model that serves a local readership and a foreign, diasporic readership, what kind of advertising is going to be matched to that very kind of diverse readership? So, you know, it's, it's a big challenge. And it's important to think about costs, as you know, the costs as well as the revenues, I would say.

26:42

MAHA

It does seem like there is a lot of experimentation out there with these models now – subscriptions, memberships, cross-subsidizing from for-profit services and as in Daraj's case from a production company. Is there anything else they can do ?

27:02

NAOMI

If the independent start-ups, if they can position themselves as kind of potential allies of other players in the sector, who may be kind of partially public interest and partially commercial for example, if they can, you know, create coalition's and alliances with those people and develop some kind of solidarity. I think, I think that can work. I mean, what comes

to mind, for example, is Roya TV in Jordan. So they've, they've worked with, they need content, and because they need content, they work with, you know, smaller outlets, and, you know, people who upload stuff to YouTube, local satirist, and so on. So, if you have this sense that, you know, expression is really important and people want to express themselves, then maybe you can create these kinds of coalitions, coalitions of solidarity, you know, in a, in a national community that will help to defend the different outlets, you know, when they, when they face difficulties.

28:24

MAHA

Ok so this quite a big question but what does Diana's story tell us about the future of the media landscape in the region?

28:36

NAOMI

I mean, I think, I think it's credibility at the end of the day that that draws people. And credibility means reflecting, you know, your everyday experience.

The younger generations have shown that they don't want sectarian media that they want media that are that relate to their experience. And I think, again, this is something that, that we shouldn't underestimate, is the sort of the aspirations of a young of a younger generation, you know, people sort of 15 to 35. Who, whose outlook on life and whose concerns and worries are really very different from those of their parents. And I think that their news diets reflect this.

[SERIES BED BUILDS.]

29:38

DIANA

I've said it before, and I will keep saying it. There are journalism and activism in general, because sometimes activism and journalism cross. So this kind of public work is my response to what's happening to us as people and to people who live with us. I was one of the Lebanese depositors who the bank have stolen our money. I am one of the survivors of the Beirut blast. I'm one of the people who have so many injustices because I'm a woman living in, in a country that discriminates between men and women. So my reflection to what's happening around me is through journalism, it's through my work and others. And I think this kind of reflection will remain with me as, as long as I live.

This is what I do. This is what I want to do. This is the only way to respond to what's happening around me.

30:43

MAHA

That's it for now. I hope the Daraj story and Naomi's insight gives some food for thought. And action. We want this podcast to be of practical use so do let us know if this is the case for you or what you'd like to hear more about.

In the next episode we'll be talking to the founders of Zabarona, a media organisation publishing news from inside Ukraine. Subscribe to Brave New Media to make you sure you don't miss out.

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

This episode was a Holy Mountain production for PRIMED, a project that supports the provision of public interest content. PRIMED is led by BBC Media Action, the BBC's international charity.

It was produced by Saskia Black and Boz Temple Morris and executive produced by Maha Taki and Paul Harper

The series music was created by Alisdair McGregor.

The clips were provided by Daraj.