



NEWSPAPER ARCHIVING IN THE UAE

by Phillip Cass

This paper is a preliminary survey of newspaper archives and holdings in the United Arab Emirates. In order to provide an indication of the extent of the holdings available to researchers it looks at commercial, government and university archives in the emirates of Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The paper also presents a brief explanation of the origins of the UAE press and compares the fate of those early newspapers with the effort being made to preserve the second generation of Emirati publications

Ten years ago I addressed the annual conference of the Australian Journalism Education Association in Vanuatu. I had just started work on what would eventually become my MA thesis on the missionary press in German New Guinea and was enthusiastically describing all the fascinating things I had found out. Little did I know at that stage how difficult it would be to actually find copies of those early newspapers. A century of humidity and two world wars had wiped out most of what I was after, although in the end I did, with a great deal of help, manage to piece together a fairly accurate picture of what had happened.

I have two of those early newspapers – or at least what remains of them - at home. One is a roll of microfilm from the ANU and the other is a set of photocopies made from the original newspapers in the Micheal Somare library at UPNG. Now, I can't read the languages in which either newspaper was written, but at least I've managed to preserve them.

A decade and two countries later I find myself facing an even bigger challenge writing about newspaper history in the United Arab Emirates, where my wanderings have taken me. And once again I find myself making a preliminary report on a very tentative foray into another country's newspaper history.

One of the major problems with any form of research into the print media in the UAE by outsiders is the language barrier. Unless the researcher speaks Arabic or has the support of a translator who knows where to look for material, the he or she may be induced to repeat things which are simply wrong. Christine Ogan, for instance, contends that there were no newspapers in the Gulf states until the 1970s.¹

This is simply not true. There was a newspaper in Sharjah as early as 1927, but the only reason I know this is because one of my students asked me if I would like her to translate some material from an Arabic language book on the media in the UAE as part of a class assignment.

¹ Ogan, C., 'The Middle East and North Africa' in Merrill, J. (ed) *Global Journalism: Survey of International Communication*, New York, Longman, 1995, p191.

Had it not been for her determination (one she shares with the rest of my Com303 class) that I should learn as much about the UAE as possible, I would still be entirely ignorant of these matters.

True, my chances of finding any of these papers are slim. One was a wall newspaper pasted up clandestinely, one was written on the backs of shopping bags and they were probably all hand written.

Copies may exist in the hands of the families which produced them, but this is uncertain. I have found no record of them in my preliminary search for newspaper archives in the UAE. This is not entirely surprising. Until very recently literacy levels in the UAE and the Gulf generally were probably round one to two percent, being confined to men and those who attended religious schools where the emphasis was on learning to read the Holy Quran. Communication was oral and private, being highly effective nonetheless.

Tehrani identifies a dual system of communication (that is, oral and private and public and printed) existing in contemporary Iran, a situation also referred to in a somewhat larger context by Mowlana.²

Thanks to the leadership and vision of Sheikh Zayed, education has become universally available in the UAE since the former Trucial States were unified in 1970 and now stands at around 70 percent of the total national population of 2.5 million. There was simply no market for newspapers before there was mass literacy and given the methods of production, it would not be surprising if such ephemera had completely disappeared.

The early newspapers reflected the limited nature of literacy, being produced by men who stood out because they were literate, had travelled and were aware of political events outside their own country.³ They were generally merchants and therefore powerful figures in a relatively poor country. The use of their proto newspapers to protest against the British may have been influenced by their resentment at such British policies of forcing them to sell their pearls – one of the Gulf's staple commodities – to Indian middlemen, who could be taxed, rather than directly to Europeans, who could not.⁴

The first newspaper in the UAE was *Al Oman*, founded by Mohammed Al Medfua in 1927. He wrote about news from other countries, rewrote articles from Arabic magazines and newspapers from other countries. He was joined by Sheikh Abdulla bin Ali Mahmood, Sheikh Ahmad bin Abdurman bin Hadeed and Sheikh Abdulla bin Saleh Al Mutawa.

The next paper to be founded was *Al Amoud*, a wall newspaper that used comedy and sarcasm to criticise the current political situation.

In 1933 *Saut Al Asafeer* (which translates as 'the sound of birds') appeared as an underground newspaper attacking the British presence in the Gulf. It was written by Ibrahim Al Medfua, who had started *Al Amoud*, Hassan Al Medfua, Handal Saleh and Ali Mohammed Al Sharfa. The paper was published in Dubai and Sharja. Significantly, the Emirati writers were joined by writers from two other Gulf states, Abdulla Al Sani from Kuwait and Abdulrahman Al Moawda from Bahrain.

Saut Al Asafeer was pasted up on walls and in the souqs, such as the Al Roukham, Al Oud and Al Tawaweesh.

² See Ogan 191 and also Mowlana, 1996. I also discussed this with Mowlana during the second international conference on religion and the media in Edinburgh in July 1999.

³ Ogan, p193

⁴ Interview, Sarah Saeed, Zayed University.

At the beginning of the 1930s a remarkable newspaper appeared. This was *Al Nakhi*, the brain-child of Musabah bin Ebeed Al Daheri. Every morning Al Daheri went to the coffee houses in Al Ain to gather news and stories from local people. He took the stories home and wrote them up in the evening on the backs of shopping bags. The next morning he stuck the bags up in his shop for his customers to read. He wrote about accidents, crimes, births, deaths and marriages, travel, the doings of the ruler – all the normal contents of a daily newspaper.⁵



Map of the UAE

While these newspapers are known about, there seems to be little physical trace of them. If so, this is a pity, because it would mean that a unique event in the UAE's history had been lost. I shall, however, keep looking. The fate of the second generation of Emirati newspapers has been far more promising for future generations.

When newspapers reappeared in the UAE, they were mostly produced by the governments of the different emirates, but gradually commercial press appeared, run by educated men and backed by prominent families. The 1950s and 60s were a time of ferment in the Arab world, with nationalist sentiment and pan-Arab feelings. In the Gulf the day when oil revenues would change the balance of world economic power forever were approaching. In Abu Dhabi the British backed the rise to power of Sheikh Zayed and the first moves towards unifying the emirates were being made. Across the red Sea Egypt's President Nasser, with his own brand of Arab socialism, was upsetting the West and using his own state-controlled media to criticise the wealthy families who held on to the wealth of Saudi Arabia. It was into this atmosphere that the second generation of newspapers and magazines in the UAE was born. This is not the place to present a history of the press in the UAE; suffice it to say that within the past half century the Emirates has experienced the same entwined growth of the press and literacy seen elsewhere in the world.

⁵ The material on old UAE newspapers comes from Abdulla Ali Al Taboor, [The Development of the Media Establishment in the UAE and its effect on Cultural Development](#). Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi, 2000. It was translated for me by Rheem Ali, one of my third year students.

At first the publications were fairly innocuous things like the Arab Postal Union magazine, but as power devolved more and more on the emirates, so too the governments began to see a need for government publications that would promote the official view and represent the rulers to the slowly growing number of literate people.

The first "proper" newspaper in the UAE was *Al Ittihad*, which remains to this day. Once the emirates were united in 1970, the government used the press to promote national unity and to encourage literacy. More interestingly, the government also began publishing in English in order to provide news and information to the large expatriate population. Apart from native English speakers, English has also served as a medium of communication for people from Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Philippines. The UAE has therefore developed two parallel newspaper systems, one in Arabic and the other in English. Sometimes, as in the case of *Gulf Today* and *Al Khaleej*, the same company produces newspapers in both languages. Unlike their predecessors, however, the future of some of these newspaper seems assured. As will become clear in the next section, however, the survival of a particular newspaper can depend on its parent company being willing to commit very large sums of money.

The following survey of what is being done in four locations in the UAE brings to light a number of key issues in newspaper preservation. One is the very large sums of money needed to preserve newspapers and the problems of keeping physical copies of newspapers. It also raises the debate over the relative merits of electronic as opposed to physical preservation. This debate has recently been brought to fever pitch in the library community by Nicholson Barker's book *Double Tug*, which has engendered some heated responses.⁶



⁶ See, for instance, Richard Cox, 'The Great Newspaper Caper: Backlash in the Digital Age,' http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue5_12/cox/

The Gulf News, Dubai

The *Gulf News* is set to embark on an extremely ambitious project to convert the paper's entire back run, which dates back to 1978, to digital form.

The paper keeps files of papers in current usage, going back two years. Papers from the past five years are kept in an air conditioned basement. Papers from before that are in an air conditioned shed.

According to the paper's administrative editor, Nicholas Coates, there have been few problems with page survival.⁷ The main problem, as anybody who has worked in newspapers knows, is with people cutting pages and articles out of papers.

Coates said this was not so much a problem when the paper kept duplicate issues, but they no longer do because of space problems.

One legacy of the cutting is that the paper's first issue is missing its masthead and all complete copies of the first issue have disappeared.

Coates said the paper averaged about one member of the public a day coming in and asking to look for something in a back issue. These could be people looking for old advertisements or stories, or students researching a topic. The paper usually asked the person to be fairly specific about what they wanted and generally limited searches to about half an hour. Anything older than six months was rarely looked at because of the complexity of wading through stacks of old papers.

Coates said the *Gulf News* was constantly assessing the need to keep old copies of papers. The copies are not bound, but folded and kept in order. The *Gulf News* also keeps copies of all other UAE papers going back 10 years.

The *Gulf News* started life as a tabloid in 1978. It used a very light newsprint when it started, "almost airmail weight." The paper went to a much heavier glossy paper about 10 years ago to meet the demands of advertisers who wanted good reproduction for colour ads. Apart from the physical storage of back issues, the *Gulf News* also keeps an extensive cuttings collection. It now has about 10,000 files.

The paper is now considering a plan to transfer all of its archives to digital form. Under the proposal all issues will be scanned using a system developed by Scottish company Televisual.⁸ This will allow the pages to be stored as full image pdf files and simultaneously broken down into its component parts, the whole to be linked to a fully indexed search engine. This will allow people to either call up whole pages or to search for individual stories, photographs, headlines etc. Coates said the proposal was to begin scanning the papers from the most recent editions and work back. He estimated the project would take three to four years to complete. Tests have already been carried out to see how early editions stood up to scanning and to determine whether the lightweight paper used on early editions would allow text to show through the pages.

The *Gulf News* already has an online photographic archive for current use, but for the archiving project it will select about 50-60,000 pictures for electronic storage. The main aim would be to keep local and national photographs of historical significance. Coates said the *Gulf News* had considered microfilming its archives, but had decided against it. He said the proposal for a digital archive had been made about 10 years ago, but the company had only recently found a system that could do what it wanted.

⁷ Interview with Nichols Coates, Administrative Editor, *Gulf News*, Dubai, May 30, 2001

⁸ Televisual, which is based in Dundee, is at <http://www.televisual.co.uk>

"It's going to be very complicated," he said.

"We will need three types of scanners, but we will need backups because of the tremendous use they will have."

"They will wear out and bulbs will burn out."

The electronic archive will have multiple redundancy. Everything will be backed up on tape and if one system fails another will come on line and when it is brought back up it will automatically update itself.

Costs for the project are about Dhs700,000 (Aus\$350,000) for software and Dhs10-20,000 (Aus\$5-10,000) for hardware. If approved, the contract with Televisual will be for service, maintenance and updating to the latest standards so the system will always be up to date. Ultimately Coates hopes there will be access to the archives via the Internet and a terminal in the paper's waiting area for members of the public to use. He hopes the project will be underway by the end of 2001.

Al Khaleej, Sharjah

The *Al Khaleej* information center is reputed to be one of the best and most extensive collection in the UAE.⁹ They have many requests from people to look for material, with many academics doing research, Many of *Al Khaleej's* senior staff went on to become academics, reflecting the tradition that papers were founded by intellectuals and people who held prominent positions in the country. Among its founders were men who went on to become ambassadors and government ministers.

The paper has had two lives, having been launched for the first time on October 19, 1970 and stopping on February 22, 1972 because of financial difficulties after about 300 issues. The first issue was a four page broadsheet and was printed in Kuwait. The paper was relaunched in 1979 with 16 pages and its own press.

In common with most Gulf papers it publishes regular daily supplements on such diverse subjects as sport, culture and health as well as special publications for such important events as Ramadan.

Its other early venture was *Al Sharooq*, a monthly magazine which lasted for 12 issues. It came back as a weekly on April 9, 1992. The company prints several specialist magazines aimed at women (*Kul Al'Ousra*), children (*Al Azkya*), students (*Shebal Al Khaleej*) and a regular business magazine, *Al Eqtisadi*. Most of these magazines were all launched in 1996. It also began publishing of a daily English newspaper, *Gulf Today*, on April 16, 1996.

Musaa Abu Eid, a journalist with the paper's information center, said everything had been kept since the first issue, although when then first issue was reprinted a few years ago, it was a composite of several imperfect copies.

Two copies of everything the company publishes are kept in bound volumes. There are no back copies on microfilm, but whole pages of current issues are now scanned. A start was made on scanning the centre's large collection of cuttings files, but this was halted because of the time it was taking.

⁹ Interview with Musaa Abu Eid, journalist, information centre, *Al Khaleej*, Sharjah, May 23, 2001

The information centre's cutting files go back to 1980. They are divided into 50 sub-categories arranged by such categories as region and government. As an example, the Australian file is divided into students, politics, elections, press, children, women, government, sport and religion etc. The Australian arts and science files are very thin! The cuttings files contain material from a wide variety of sources including books and other UAE publications. The paper has now started a computerised clippings system.

Al Khaleej's photographic files are equally extensive. As an example it has 70,000 pictures filed under the names of people and somewhere between 5-10,000 photos of Sheikh Zayed alone.

In common with most UAE publications, the paper has an online archive on its daily website, but this only goes back a week.

Zayed University library, Abu Dhabi

The ZU library keeps copies of the papers it gets for three months and then throws them out because of lack of space.¹⁰ Stacks of papers are also regarded as a fire hazard. Three months is judged to be adequate for student needs. The problems with magazines are the same. The library has cuttings folders, but these are actually taken off the net.

Library supervisor Daphne Selbert and information literacy librarian Fiona Hunt are aware of the debate over the best way to preserve newspapers, journals and magazines. They said the challenge with electronic preservation was whether the systems would stay the same.

"You can't guarantee the length of time material will survive or how formats will change," Selbert said. "There is a story that NASA can no longer look at some of its earliest Mars pictures because nobody knows how to retrieve them anymore."

There may also be a problem with electronic archives that rely on private or government funding suddenly losing their financial support.

"Even with online subscription services there is the possibility that if a magazine or journals switched to another provider we could lose everything," she said.. "However, some databases have systems where you can own the magazine so if they change you at least keep the back issues."

Despite all these problems, Selbert believes that electronic storage offers better ease of access because of indexing. "There is so much out there and you don't have to wade through things physically," she said.

"Students are usually looking for something specific, by date or event, so they will usually just go to the net or a database to find what they want and this is where the advantage of indexing lies. "Our students like doing it this way."

Centre for Documentation and Research, Presidential Court, Abu Dhabi

The fact that a complete run of *Emirates News* exists is solely due to the decision of Dr Frauke Heard-Bey to start keeping copies of the paper in a tin trunk in her home in Abu Dhabi.¹¹ When the trunk filled up she moved the papers to the national archives in the presidential court and kept collecting the paper.

¹⁰ Interviews with Fiona Hunt, information literacy librarian and Daphne Selbert, library supervisor, June 3, 2001

¹¹ Dr Frauke Heard-Bey, Centre for Documentation and Research, Presidential Court, Abu Dhabi, June 10, 2001

Three years after the paper's demise it is, she believes, the only extant complete run in existence.

Newspapers, she said, fell into the real of 'grey' material, neither library nor archival. Along with the archive's main task of documenting and gathering printed information about the UAE and the Gulf, Dr Heard-Bey has made a point of collecting the ephemeral material put out by government departments, such as newsletters, statistics, pamphlets and so on. It seemed obvious to her that she should also collect newspapers and so the archive's newspaper collection was born.

Emirates News started life as a four page tabloid weekly and ended its days as a glossy broadsheet. It went through various name changes, being called the *Abu Dhabi News* and the *UAE News* at various times.

The archives' newspaper collection has continued to grow, but in 1979 it diversified when Dr Heard-Bey began to cut articles out of newspapers and file them chronologically. Eventually she changed this to a subject based system. Since then the *Khaleej Times* and *Gulf News* have been regularly marked and cut up for filing. *Al Khaleej* is also occasionally used. The cuttings are now arranged in an extensive filing system. However, she believes that having the original cutting with its headline and layout gives researchers a sense of its context that is not available in electronic form.

Dr Heard-Bey believes that microfilm has advantages for archival purposes and believes that microfilmed records should be good for at least a century. The major daily papers, such as *Al Ittihad*, *Al Khaleej* and *Al Bayan* are being filmed. The centre has every one of the UAE's many daily papers and tries to maintain a representative sample of papers from the Gulf Co-operation Council countries. The centre's newspaper collection is bound in volumes which are kept in air conditioned rooms.

Electronic storage is a possibility for the future.



The Abu Dhabi News

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Newspaper Archiving in the UAE

A paper given at the Australian Media Traditions conference, Yeppoon, Queensland, June 13-16, 2001.

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