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Pan-Arab Culture: Questions for the Future
Where is Arab Culture going to?

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Pan-Arab Culture: Questions for the Future

Where is Arab Culture going to?

A profound controversy currently prevails the international arena regarding the future of culture. In virtually every country, discussions of this issue prelude with the role intellectuals should play, move to the question as to whether they are actually an important group, and end up at the point of the role of culture in building intricacies of society and the country. Let us first determine who a cultured intellectual is: any individual who works in any of the fields of producing or disseminating knowledge. Not so long ago, many used to face problems in obtaining information, and hence those who were able to store more information in their memory and who were able to link it together so as to provide a consistent, sequential vision were considered the ideal intellectuals. However, after the information explosion in the age of the Internet, those who are able to produce knowledge are considered more important. The famous wisdom “knowledge is power” shows that in order to achieve hegemony over others, a state of producing knowledge rather than merely possessing it is the only guaranteed means of surviving and continuity, in an age where political, economic, scientific, and cultural struggles are at a peak. Hence, we can comprehend the coinage of the term “digital gap”; a gap that is widening almost every day at a time when those who produce digital knowledge never cease to raise continuous problems, including the subjugation of digital networks to strict control, and never cease to erect new impediments; such as intellectual property rights and charging excessively high prices on software packages, which deprive those who cannot afford to purchase them from the ability to possess modern knowledge.

This is an indication to the fact that the workers in the field of knowledge production must take possession of high levels of information and must store the information in data banks for being called to order. The transformation of governments and institutions into e-governments calls for the establishment of centers aimed at the interpretation of the changes that occur in the communities as a result of these transformations, and hence the layer of intellectuals trying to interpret or infer the transformations taking place in communities ranging

from the integration of all devices and tools for communication in one device, the “iPad” (which offers the features of such devices as television, radio, newspaper, books, and Internet services), to the unity of individuals with this device, and the establishment of virtual communities that far from reality. The interpretation of societal shifts and technological changes is the philosophy of a new doctrine that saves humanity from drowning in the digital world and even from considering it the only truth in life.

Therefore, we will not discuss here the role of institutions or ministries of culture in the making of the future of Arab culture; as these institutions are still extremely apart from the industry, and intellectuals routinely join the institutions of cultural work in order to gain fame or to head up cultural magazines or scientific journals.

Thus, here we have several parameters; namely:

- The power of knowledge.
- The knowledge industry.
- The producers of knowledge.

The power of knowledge is what determines today the power of any state or community, and the knowledge industry is the tool of the state to attain the goal of knowledge acquisition. Today’s knowledge makers are no longer those traditional intellectuals, but they are rather divided into the following sects:

- Creative individuals.
- Governmental institutions; such as ministries of culture and cultural institutions that played during the past fifty years the prime role in the knowledge industry and at which knowledge creators have become employed.
- The civil society, whether in the form of institutions; such as the Arab Thought Foundation, which enjoys the support of a group of Arabic public figures, or in the form of individuals such as the Algerian Cultural Magazine which managed to take out Algerian culture for the first time from its narrow national frame to the greater pan-Arab realm through the efforts of volunteer Algerian intellectuals, or the website of the Egyptian

House of Books (Dar al Kotob) which has become a reality thanks to the efforts of a group of youngsters.

Here I would like to put forth such an important issue as the issue of historical periodicals:

Historical periodicals are one of the major arteries of information, and a tool to identify new developments in historical studies. The current state of Arabic historical periodicals is in need of a comprehensive review, in terms of content, design, and circulation.

The journal of the Egyptian Society for Historical Studies is considered the oldest of all Arabic historical periodicals that are still published today, and it has maintained for years its academic level high, to the extent that it had become internationally considered as one of the best periodicals of history in Arabic, and it has exclusively published several novel historical studies in its field. However, it has always obviously overlooked two important branches which are the history of history and the philosophy of history. Perhaps it is the over keenness of those who run it on its traditionalism that makes it avoid discussing such novel files. But we still have to admit that it has helped present us with historians from several Arab countries; as its rigorous scientific evaluation guidelines applied to the researches it receives, whatever the name or fame of the author of the research, have always meant that the quality of the content is the only criterion for publication.

Next come the two magazines of the Union of Arab Historians, which is in fact two unions, one in Baghdad and one in Cairo, and the Journals of both unions sometimes publish serious topics and some other times publish duplicates. Both journals rarely feature debates on historical issues, but the journal of the Baghdad union had taken in the reign of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq a pan-Arab national dimension, whereas the journal of the Cairo union was affected by both the Saudi magazine "Al Dara" and the Journal of the Egyptian Society for Historical Studies.

Scattered in almost all parts of the Arab World are many historical magazines, perhaps the most successful of which is one called "The Magazine of the History of Arabs and the World", which is published in Beirut, and is deemed a medial magazine as it is neither purely academic nor merely a

simplified historical magazine, and hence it has managed to attract a wide base of readers and its issues are well read, though its distribution and circulation are limited, something that negatively affects its proliferation, and accordingly its old issues have become scarcer and more valuable, and even their prices have remarkably increased at the stalls of sellers of old books. The Journal of Modern Egypt, published by the Egyptian National Library, stands as a good example for specialized historical magazines, but the fact that is specialized in the history of contemporary Egypt makes its importance limited to the range of those interested in its discipline. Last but not least, although the Saudi magazine “Al Dara” has achieved widespread proliferation among those interested in history for a long time, one can easily conclude that its being overly self-confined to the affairs of the Arab Gulf and its history has made it simply another specialized magazine.

Yet in the field of historical studies, we cannot ignore the Annals of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Kuwait, which focus each issue on a specific theme, as these annals have not only been characterized in their studies by historical novelty, but also by the depth of the subject matter and by the robustness of the analysis of the issues raised. To mention but a few examples, these annals have addressed the opening of Rhodes, Arab *fotouh* (openings) of Al-Send and special topics on the history of Mamlukes, as well as the history of the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Andalusian eras, and even a mix between history and civilization, etc.

An exceptional deviation from the nature of Arab historical periodicals has taken place with the issuance of the first refereed digital historical Arab periodical, one called “Kan” (Arabic word for “was”), the first issue of which was published in September 2008, being a quarterly magazine, with many readers on the web ranging not only from Morocco to the Arabian Gulf, but also in Europe and the Americas. “Kan” is characterized by the diversity of its subjects, including research, studies and book reviews, and theses and reports on scientific meetings. It is still published regularly to the day, and among the factors that helped it achieve its widespread presence is its reliance on the importance of communicating with a wide audience via e-mail and bloggers, and it has a members’ group set up on Facebook to spread the news of those Arab historians in contact with it. It even jumped a quantum leap when it

started publishing topics in English, and so far it had published for more than 120 researchers from the Arab universities of Mousel, Tikrit, Telmesan, Mou'ta, Zagazig, Balqaa, Oujda, Cairo, and Ain Shams, as well as researchers from various other Arab institutions. Another factor that has contributed to its high distribution is its giving of free e-books, especially newly issued ones, with its issues.

A daring publishing style can be considered the hallmark of this digital magazine, a trait that is attributed to the fact that those who run it are young people who can exit the framework of traditional studies, mimicking the styles of the schools of Abdullah Laroui in Morocco and Khaled Fahmy in Egypt. Thus, we notice that combining history and anthropology, research in the philosophy of history, or jumping to research the future of historical studies are characteristics that set "Kan" magazine apart from the others. This makes us pose a question of whether or not the Arab historical periodicals will witness in the upcoming years such successful changes as those that contributed to the success of the endeavor of the digital "Kan" periodical.

A Model Issue of the "Kan" Historical Magazine: Under the title "Individual Interpretation of History" came the prelude of issue no. 11 of the magazine; where the issue featured a number of articles and studies for professors and researchers from the Arab World:

- Dr. Mohamed AlMazkory AlMa'tauy (Ottunma University, Spain) in a study entitled "Neo-liberalism, Globalization and Culture: An Analysis of the Historical discourse of the Ego towards the Other".
- Dr. Alaa Zuhair Abdel-Gawad AlRawashdah (Balkaa Applied Sciences University) in an article entitled "Neural Theory: A Contemporary Reading in the Introduction of Ibn Khaldun (Averroes)".
- Professor Budalial Twatih (University of Istanbul) in a study entitled "The Vision of Authority Men and Society of the Craftsmen and Artisans in Andalusia: The Two Eras of Emirate and Caliphate".
- Mr. Omar Bakr Muhamed Qutb (Minia University) in an article entitled "Biasah: The Land of Andalusian Saffron".
- Dr. AlHussein Ammari (Moroccan Association for Historical Research) in a study entitled "The Thresholds of the Contribution of African Studies

- in Writing the History of Modern Morocco: Preliminary Reading and Observations”.
- Mr. Wa'ez Naweewa (University of the Valley) in an article entitled “How Entrenched the Mahdaweyah of Bin Tumart is in the Various Strata of AlMowahhady Society”.
 - Professor Dr. Mohamed Saleh Shanti (University of Gedara) in a study entitled “Employment of Heritage in the Formation of the Arabic Fictional Language and Narrative Environment: The Novel (Toba and Sleye) by Maha Al-Faisal as a Model”.
 - Professor Amna bin Mansour (University of Talmesani) in an article entitled “The Role of Andalusian Poetry in Defense of Religion”.
 - Mr. Mohammed Bou Shquef (University of Abu Bakr Belkaid) in a study entitled “The School and Educational System in Mainland Morocco during the 8th/9th Hijri Centuries”.
 - Mr. Anwar Mahmoud Zanati (Ain Shams University) in an article under the title “Scientist Indexes of Morocco and Andalusia: An Analytical Study.”
 - Mr. Nour AlDin bin Abdullah (University of Zian Ashour - Djelfa) in a study on “Factors Influencing the Formation of AlKorrarah’s Architecture: Environmental - Religious”.
 - Dr. Bashar Mohamed Khalif (Syria) in a new article under the title “Kingdom of Mary Amorite 1920 to 1760 BCE”.
 - Mrs. Shelby Scheherazade (University Mohammed Khidhar - Biskra) in an article entitled “The French Interest in the Algerian Sahara”.
 - Professor Khaldiya Mudawi (University of the Camp) in a report on the “International Symposium on the Relations of the Arabian Gulf with the Greek and Byzantine Worlds”.
 - Dr. Khaled Azab (Bibliotheca Alexandria) in a report on “Private Museum Collections in the Arab World”.
 - The collective file of the issue by Professor Dr. Emad Ahmed AlGawahry (University of Qadisiyah) under the title “Visions of the Renaissance in the Arab Thought: A Critical Review of their Intricacies”.

- The issue ends with an article by the researcher Asmaa Salah (Ain Shams University) on the history of art under the title “Freedom is Leading the People”.

Despite its short age, the digital historical periodical of “Kan” has achieved more success than many university periodicals, in spite of the limited resources available to it. It was helped by that network of historians who write for free, stretching from Morocco to Kuwait.

Likewise, similar individual efforts have successfully yielded two important Arab journals, but they are paper journals rather than digital ones, something that makes their distribution and impact limited. However, I would like to introduce their experience:

“Madarat Gharbeya” (Western Orbits)

With the publication of the magazine “Madarat Gharbeya” in Beirut, Arabic magazines have witnessed an important shift towards a better understanding of the West. For many years, the interest in the West was limited to the translation of some published books, or the stealing of some of the production of the West and attributing it to the translator. But this magazine offers Western thought and trends through the availing of an objective and scientific medium that allows readers, students, and intellectuals in the Arab World to identify the evolution of Western societies, to understand their cultural transformations, and to understand what impacts these changes have on the thought trends in the world.

In the Arab World in particular, the magazine also tends to pay special attention to issues of regional and international levels, through monitoring the main directions of the movement of events, and analyzing the geo-strategic complications that impinge upon the relationships between the East and the West. The magazine also delves into acquainting the Arab reader with the achievements of the Western scientific progress, and in particular the information revolution, with an emphasis on the absorption of the mechanisms of communication in the various fields of knowledge.

Moreover, “Madarat” undertakes translations and arabizations of periodic booklets and brochures that tackle issues, researches and articles of a strategic

nature, in the context of common interest and in agreement and cooperation with institutions and centers of studies and research that work in Europe and North America. “Madarat” is a unique endeavor undertaken by individuals who are aware of the importance of its mission, rather than by official institutions.

The aforementioned is the quick profile of the magazine and its philosophy, and if there was a perception from us of its importance, this is due to the seriousness of eight of its issues I have personally followed. However, the first point to be counted in its negative side is its limited distribution. Despite its importance, the magazine’s distribution is substantially limited, and without the help of my random search on the Internet, I would have never come up to its site (www.madarat.net), a coming up that was followed by my request from my friend Dr. Radwan AlSayed to fetch me one of its issues from Beirut. The second disadvantage is the exclusivity of the posts and contributions in it to Lebanese translators and writers, and perhaps this is what will make the magazine lose the merit of diversity. The third drawback is the absence of Eastern European and Scandinavian topics from the magazine, though one ought to mention that “Madarat” is not the only publication to commit this mistake, but all cultural Arabic magazines also do. We are still fascinated with the cultures of Germany, Britain, France, the Netherlands, Greece, and Italy, and are restricting ourselves to a narrow frame we cannot get out of till now.

However, the magazine does have several merits, including its addressing of perilous, controversial issues that open readers’ minds on what is going on in the West; such as European views and policies towards the Middle East, and hence the magazine has provided us with an elaborate analysis by Kristen Warlick; an American specialist in European affairs, foreign affairs and defense, that was advanced to the Research Department of the US Congress, and that highlights the American vision of European stance on the Middle East, and in particular the growth of the role of European foreign policy towards a multitude of issues which have become the subject of controversy and disagreement between both parties, as Europe seeks to play a role commensurate with its capacity as a financial donor, as well as its geopolitical interests associated with its proximity to areas of tension in the Middle East. The analysis reveals insights that are undoubtedly important to Arab policymakers.

On the magazine's pages, Jean-Pierre Ocafre, a researcher at the French University of Rennes, has also uncovered to us the US dominates Europe in a manner that may seem incomprehensible for us in the Arab world; as the European Union's Constitution adopts a strict compliance to the rules of the WTO and the NATO pact, which implies subordination to a foreign power and gives rise to a radical reduction of the sovereignty of Europe on its territory, especially with the presence of US military bases on European soil even after the end of the Cold War, as well as large US spy networks in Europe.

The issues of the magazine and its detailed collective files, including "Islam in the Sight of the West", "Minorities in their Closed Castles", "America: The Bewitched Empire", "The Saga of Democracy", "Iraq: The War of Geography and History", and "Judaism: The Mind and Soul of the West", are all undoubtedly important references for us to understand what is going on around us. Such valuable magazines as "Madarat", despite their limited numbers, come to be the perfect compensation and relief for us among a surrounding full of weak superficial magazines, cultural gangs' magazines, and magazines that have become recession-stricken.

"Amkena" (Places)

"Amkena" is a new idea that was born in Alexandria in 1999. Being of Alexandrian origin made it not receive as much attention to be noted here as that received by many other Cairo-based cultural magazines. Many are the cultural magazines published either privately funded or by formal institutions, but most of them ultimately disappear without establishing their new visions. "Amkena" lays the foundation for an integrated vision based on the portrayal of depictions of change through time and place in the cultural life, in a lucid graceful style. It is concerned with those writings that deal with place or location: its culture, its history, the people who made that history, whether voluntarily or by virtue of their mere presence, and the artistic confidentiality of this place or location, which stemmed from normal practices that per se were not intended to have an artistic sense yet they have now become art by virtue of the new circumstances that make us re-order our sense of art. What matters most is that these writings must entail a literary analysis of these points that have been mentioned or of other points that can be infinite in our attempt to get to better know the place dimension, and maybe its style is characterized

by a degree of flexibility that allows it to change forms; that is to say that the stylistic approach supported by personal awareness is the magazine's outlet port to generating a special conception in performance and a unique orientation in literature and art without relying on previous forms of expression. Perhaps there is a sense or intuition suggesting that the entry door of a life story or narrative is itself a desire not to put a tragic end; the story's timeline still rolls over. Perhaps in the intricacies of the story itself dwell the conditions necessary to engage in a dialect with life, conditions that were previously neglected in the form of narrative, and in the lives of characters themselves. It is a story of the old tale; an autobiography of life with all its details, components and materials. Previously, the story was especially narrated for the sake of the hero or the prime character; their self, their obsessions. But now the context within which the hero may live has changed; besides society and social relationships, there is now also some room for nature which has long been overlooked, or a new relationship with nature, we mean; for this absent component to redeem the importance of existential confusion that is genuine of each individual separately, and to give him or her the right to the interpretation of their life.

Certainly, an anthropological research has become interspersed with creativity now, and there are many reasons for it, including the desire to open new horizons for the experience of the human being of the city; to accommodate different experiments and patterns, including the multiplicity of the sources of knowledge, skepticism regarding what has been accomplished, and the desire to defend the privacy of the elements of the culture in which we live. A dual movement, both to the inside and the outside. Perhaps anthropology had its colonial origins. But this discipline now has another facet that has grown beyond the reason behind its first appearance; one that resembles a trip pursuing an understanding of your culture and the cultures of others. Now anything that disappears from our memory will probably not come back again, and is lost forever. However, cinema, theater, art, writing, and the desire for knowledge, have all formed the other place in which we see ourselves and our dreams. The important point now is that we maintain that we have a story. In application to this magazine's view of places, let us monitor its visualization of Alexandria's famous San Stefano Hotel and what it has become, in a descriptive masterpiece that carries profound mental and cultural dimensions, presented by Hala Halim whose depiction of the

Hotel's history never fails to account for the shifts of Egyptian society since the time of the family of Muhammad Ali to the present age. The Hotel was built in 1886 and demolished in 1998. Being a witness to all the contemporary changes in Egypt's political life, this Hotel was set up to accommodate celebrities in politics, literature and culture in Egypt and the world; such as Umm Kulthum, Taha Hussein, Mustafa Pasha ElNahas, Anwar ElSadat, famous British novelist Forster, and many others. The shift towards Arab nationalism has led in the year 1964 to the founding of the Palestine Hotel in Alexandria to compete with San Stefano, as a sign of the shift from the capitalism of the visitors of this latter hotel to a new political spirit. Due to the link of the Palestine Hotel in Alexandria to the Arab Summit in 1964, the peace talks in the seventies between Egypt and Israel were held at the San Stefano Hotel. Because privatization was the characterizing feature of the Egyptian economy in nineties, the decade witnessed the demolition of the hotel to be replaced by a giant building whose model made the writer wish it not to be called San Stefano. The magazine does not leave folk tales alone, we see it emphasized among the facets of the place it covers in its cultural subject matter; as folk tales focus in a condensed manner on the concept that was adopted by the story and try to advance it and install it within the group that they target, that being the primary goal of the process of narration; this concept that is basically associated with the values agreed upon by the group is the direct intention of the story, without winding, rotation, or opacity. When the story advances towards a certain notion; such as "honesty", "origin", or "family relations" (brother and sister), it provides the ramification, whether reward or punishment, and we can simply glimpse the very extreme two ends within the framework or continuum of folk tales.

Additionally, a magazine such as the Kuwaiti magazine "Alam AlFikr" (The World of Thought) may be considered the upper mediator of the top general standard Arab cultural journals; such as AlArabi and AlHelal which continuously discover the new generations of thinkers and scientists in many areas. It was the first to introduce, in the early seventies, to Arab scientists and intellectuals the role that would be played by computers in the future of the world, and it also addressed sensitive topics such as nuclear power and desertification, and even in the field of human studies it

rendered a myriad of services to science and culture the Arab World when its chief editor was Dr. Ahmad Abu-Zeid and then his successor Dr. Ossama Amin AlKhouli. When the role of this magazine became relatively less active, Arab culture and thought lost an important tributary of science in the Arab Region.

Cultural Magazines

Decades after its inauguration, the Kuwaiti AlArabi magazine still occupies the throne of Arabic cultural magazines. From the moment it was born, it had a definite Arabian character and it provided great services to Arab culture. Today we face a new situation which is the emergence of digital cultural magazines such as the “Thaqafa” (Culture) magazine of Algeria. For many years, we have been complaining about the isolation of Algerian intellectuals from the affairs of Arab World, but the digital world has allowed us to clearly view Algerian culture, and through an effort of the cultural civil community and without high cost, this journal has placed an end to the monopoly of the Algerian Ministry of Culture of cultural publications, and moreover we can now see what we might call “the independent intellectual”.

But unfortunately, there is a kind of Arab magazines we lose every year. For instance, magazines such as “Alam AlFikr” of Kuwait, “AlMawrid” of Iraq, “Fosoul”, “Arabic Manuscripts” and several other magazines that publish only seriously profound content, and which have discovered for us many thinkers, philosophers, and creative persons, have been facing real trouble in recent years, either as a result of the disappearance of the founding pioneers generation (as is the case of “Alam AlFikr”) or as a result of the lack of money needed for finance and distribution purposes in spite of the high quality of the journals (as is the case of “Arabic Manuscripts” which is issued by the Institute of Arabic Manuscripts), or because of successive wars (as is the case of the Iraqi magazine “AlMawrid”).

If these magazines are declining, then how can we talk about discovering a new class of thinkers, philosophers, scientists and high-level intellectuals who can either provide new insights to or criticism of the current situation or future prospects? These magazines are considered:

- The field for the discovery of these thinkers.

- The realm to create new visions.
- A suitable atmosphere for joining between ideas and insights.
- A contributor to the current global culture.
- An adoption-oriented view of the future.

The cost of these journals is borne by states and governmental institutions or by research centers. The experience of “Alam AlFikr”, in which the Kuwaiti government provided all the potential needed for the establishment of a Kuwaiti journal for intellectual knowledge creation in the Arab World, is worth repeating.

Do We Really have a Publishing Industry?

Raising the issues of publishing in the Arab World seems strange in the eyes of some and looked down upon by others, but the bitter truth that might shock the reader is that we do not have a publishing industry in the Arab World, but we have publishers of books, and we have bodies and houses that live on republishing an old legacy or on the ongoing financial support of the State, or that feed on publishing university books, or take advantage of a handful of the remaining of bright Arab names in the world of writing without discovering new generations.

The matter of fact that we must confront is, honestly, that there are only a few publishers who genuinely deserve to hold this status or title, while the others are publishers who publish without advance plans and without awareness of what they publish and why they publish, with over emphasis on financial gain, which once declined, they rush to complain about the recession facing their industry, because their merchandise is not demanded by the public. Let us take as example a publishing house that publishes what is known as Islamic books, then once this category stagnates it turns suddenly and without prior notice to publish books on ornamental beauty, body slimming, cookery and how to fix automobiles. You can even see one of the competent bodies in the field of publishing books that publishes in the form of a book, for complimentary reasons, a collection of articles for a famous male or female journalist that were not read by anybody when they had been published for the first time, for a handful of funds, so that the journalist would become a horn of propaganda

for that publishing body. Moreover, we can witness a major disaster when a great deal of money is wasted on the publishing of encyclopedias which content is entirely outdated, causing those who buy it to fall in a trap of changed information and dates that are no longer valid. We can also see a publishing house begging from an Arab Gulf state to print publications promoting its policies. Therefore, we need not feel astonished when we find a writer exposed to an embarrassing situation by an author who is reluctant to publish his book, or when a publisher asks a writer to share in the costs of printing. After knowing all this, do you, dear reader, still doubt that we do not really have a publishing industry?

This question actually needs a real answer to diagnose the current situation in the Arab World and to provide solutions to the deterioration and continuous dramatic worsening of this situation day after day.

Claiming that solely one body is faulty in this matter means wrongly reducing the problem to one party and the absolution of all other parties from their responsibilities in creating this disastrous situation. All parties, indeed, are responsible, and we should know who these parties really are, as follow:

Official books bodies, the Arab Publishers Union, the Union of Arab Writers, newspapers and the media, colleges of fine and applied arts, public and private publishing houses, chambers of the printing industry and presses, ministries of finance, and ministries of industry (for their claimed responsibility for the paper industry).

Truth be told, there are amidst of this dark nightmare and this painful truth some publication experiences that deserve to be paid tribute to, because criticism just for the sake of criticism is useless, and thus we are obliged to conduct the duty of highlighting any positive experiences around. In the Egyptian General Authority of Books, the series titled "The History of Egyptians" has succeeded in bridging such a big gap in Egyptian history, and has introduced young historians to the Arab and Egyptian cultural arena, until it became an indispensable reference for any researcher, especially with its low selling prices, and what has made us refer to it here as an exception is that there is a clear scientific approach in its selection of subjects, regardless of who the author is.

There is also the National Project for Translation which was undertaken by the Supreme Council of Culture in Egypt; a project that would lead to higher diversity of the languages translated from/into Arabic. The diversity of the topics translated and the high concern for seriousness in everything published have made this project occupy a prominent place on the Arab cultural scene. The project has succeeded in introducing a new generation of young translators who will surely have a significant impact in the coming years, and an observer who follows the project will find that it is evolving year after year. The project has published many books during the past two years, some of them in applied sciences and not just in the field of humanities.

The experience of the National Council for Culture, Arts and the Letters in Kuwait, whether in the form of the wonderful series titled “Alam AlMa’refah” (The World of Knowledge) which is considered the best among all the series of books published in the Arab World, or in the form of the series titled “Rawae’a AlAdab AlAlamy” (Masterpieces of World Literature) which had begun with publishing only great drama works, as well as the keenness of publishing officials in Kuwait on selecting for publication only high quality content, all helped make the different Kuwaiti published series highly credible.

The book industry is a complex process as a whole; a process that obliges any publishing house to operate according to the mechanisms of the industry in a disciplined and sound manner. There is the stage of defining the scope of the publishing house, whether a specialist publisher, a general publisher, or a publisher that publishes both specialized and general topics together, the latter being a feature that characterizes the world’s major publishing houses.

This first stage is followed by identifying the role of the publishing adviser, who in the Arab World is a rare coin, and who is supposed to be an intellectual and a reader familiar with the recent trends of publishing and to have experience in all phases of the book industry, in order to be able to properly assess the writings submitted to him. His role here is not the role of a receiver, but rather the role of a resident requesting amendments to the material presented to him, and he directs the author to make his material more interesting and readable, or more robust scientific material. Afterwards, he directs the book designer, and then he identifies the books’ target audience and the number of copies that

should be printed. In order to make the author succumb to the opinion of the publishing adviser and the amendments and additions or shortcuts he requires, the rights of the author must be guaranteed. Unfortunately, intellectual property rights are often wasted and not respected in Egypt and the Arab World. The role of the publishing adviser in giant publishing houses may even exceed all that to include asking one author or several authors to write in specific topics considered by him or her to be most popular or most badly missed by the current publishing movement. In many cases, he may approach specific writers in order to execute through them a publishing plan that he deems able to achieve reasonable profit for which he works. Such proficient advisors, besides well-studied books on marketing plans, are what help achieve sales of books by the millions in the United States, Europe and Japan; the publisher in such context views the publishing process as an integrated, seamless industry, and we can even see some publishers in the West paying part of the copyright revenues of their book in advance because they wish to publish books still in the preparation stage by certain authors.

This leads to the relationship between the publisher and the author in the Arab World. We always talk about the publisher's copyrights, but we always forget the rights of the author; the person who actually exerted all the effort and time needed to innovate the book but who, oddly enough, does not receive the equivalent fair compensation in money. Some publishers strive to convince authors that the mere fact of publishing their work is a gain for the author, or even force some authors to pay them in order to get their work published. Hence, a law that preserves the rights of the author ought to be passed, exactly as the law that governs the rights of singers and composers was passed. Such a law will be a real beginning for the advancement of the industry of books, and it will establish a specific contractual relationship in which the rights of both parties, the publisher and the author, are protected by law, and in which the author is obliged to disclose his or her real sales volume. Respecting the rights of the author will make him respect his or her target audience, and will grant us the right to hold him accountable for what he publishes and creates.

Here we can see that the role of the Arab Writers Union is absent. It does not play a role in the protection of authors, and more yet there is a strange fact we must admit which is that half of the members of the Union are not

actually book authors, but are persons who joined it through favoritism and nepotism practices with the registration committee. There also exists, in this same context, an erroneous notion of making the Union's membership limited to authors and script writers, while the membership of creative writers in all other areas, who already have popular books and many readers, is rejected by the Union or is accepted but only as associate memberships. No wonder they stopped paying their annual subscription fees to the Union. So, we have the right to ask: When will the Union start defending authors? And would the union, amidst the current successive changes, ever be the effective last resort for authors who wish to retrieve their rights from publishers? Will the Union seek to recruit more authors for its membership? Will it rectify its role and the notion behind this role? The answers to all these questions will surely unfold in the coming period. Additionally, there is the challenge posed by the writers in the digital world who exist through sites dedicated to the publishing of Arab novels and short stories or articles. Would these writers be considered eligible for the Arab Union's membership and, subsequently, for the rights resulting from such membership?

All the aforementioned leads us to classify the books published in the Arab World, as follows:

- Publications intended to meet the needs of specific readers, also known as service books; such as publications that deal with the medical treatment of diseases in a simple manner, or books for décor, fashion, and computer software.
- Publications printed to be used by university students, which represent the prime source of income for a substantial percentage of Arab and Egyptian publishers.
- Publications for the general dissemination of culture, science, and literature, which represent the least percentage category among all types of Arab publications, unlike the rest of the world. These include political publications such as biographies and books that analyze political events.
- In addition to the above, standing the monthly or weekly series, most notable of which in Egypt are "Iqra'a", "Tareekh AlMesreyeen", AlHelal monthly book, AlYoum monthly book, and the late "AlMaktaba AlThaqafeya".

At this point, there is an issue that I would like to raise here in the form of a question: Are books a means of fun and entertainment or a means of acculturation and teaching? Most publishers have not realized yet that there is a fierce competition facing books, therefore they do not pay much attention to the output quality and design of most books and as a result, they confine their design aesthetics care to catalogs and art and children books, ignoring the form and design of ordinary book itself, thus the latter does not become an attractive commodity able to draw attention.

There is a book for the elite and a book for the general readership, and a luxurious book edition and a popular book edition. The matter of fact is that most publishing houses do not know of such classifications, because they think their role is confined to getting the books published and they do not employ specialists who conduct marketing researches for books or who dig into desires of readers. For instance, the graphical book that is looked at and read by the family in the evening, known as the “coffee table book”, is currently not available in the Arab book market. Moreover, Arab economic institutions do not support the book industry; for instance, banks and private companies do not put books on the lists of their season gifts to their clients as the norm followed in the West. On the other hand, the newspaper pages and TV programs specialized in offering book reviews are generally either simply factual rather than analytical or tend to be of a complimentary nature, as well as the fact that the spirit of criticism has always been far from book reviews, and it is noteworthy that such critical spirit is needed to reveal to the reader why the book is considered distinct from others and why the journalist has read it on behalf of the reader.

Posing questions and trying to answer them are what it takes to create a state of interest in any book, and the practice of publishing entire books in the press prior to their official publication contributes a lot to their success and sales on launch. This phenomenon is absent from the Arab press practices.

In addition to the above, public libraries do not have clear and specific policies for the acquisition of books nor do they have programs to provide help to publishers in setting their future programs. And more yet, the relationship between the paper book and the digital book remains a hot topic full of questions, one that needs a separate discussion.

Is the Age of Libraries Over?

The Library has always been deemed a symbol indicative of the rise and advancement of nations, a warehouse of their knowledge and treasures, and a place to embrace intellectuals, thinkers, writers and scientists, being an incubator for spawning new generations of them. That is why nations have been so keen on having their national libraries, other libraries specialized in specific sciences, and yet others to disseminate culture in cities and villages. However, in the era of the Internet and with the advent of digital libraries, many questions ought to be raised about what these libraries are and what they should be doing. Does the heavy flood of information and knowledge threaten the cultural identity of societies? Has the era of traditional libraries come to an end?

Digital libraries can be defined as a collection of information subject to methodological administration, designed to provide knowledge services, through the storing of information in digital formats, management of information, and then making it available via a network of computers. It is important here to distinguish between the stream of information to the computer of any person in his house, and the management of information across the Internet. The former means randomness and the latter means that there are those who organize this information, audit it, and scrutinize it before it becomes of credibility to those who receive it.

Hence, it is urgent to emphasize that there is a race that has started in the world today about a new type of configuration tools of human knowledge not through paper, but over the Internet, and those who will have a real, well-managed presence will actually have a future in world culture in the coming years. Does this mean that the mere concept of the library is now debatable?

There is no doubt that answering the last question with a “yes” would be logical. There are some radical changes now taking place, which led some to form an International Federation of Digital Libraries (DLF), as opposed to the International Federation of [Traditional] Libraries (IFLA), the former including university libraries in the United States, the British Library, the University of Oxford library, and Bibliotheca Alexandria, and they all seek through strict criteria to create a virtual library community that serves as a

receptacle of human knowledge over the Internet, while the latter represents the community of traditional libraries that is based on the concept of national libraries that store, catalog, and conserve national publications and other receptacles of knowledge. The difference between both federations is vast and is comparable to the difference between paper and computers; the former is limited in spread compared to the latter, and the latter can be found in each house and is renewed every second. The second is a stream that flows and gets renewed, and the first paper is a single, non-coherent receptacle; each group of papers it comprises represents independent writings, images, forms, tables, or statistics, but in the second type there is a correlation between texts, images, forms, table, as well as movies, and accordingly here you can change the material and improve it continuously, and the reader can interact with the material and criticize it. The difference here is that between the stagnation of knowledge carried by paper and the dynamic interaction with the presented knowledge over the Internet.

Over the Internet and its unlimited potentials, the reader no longer needs to buy paper books nor to browse encyclopedias to reach information, and the author is no longer in need for the publisher of the traditional to publish his book, but he has a greater potential to publish his book, and so we now hear of writers and poets who are publishing their writings across different digital media. Then, what makes a role for digital libraries if the reader is independent from them and the author does not need such libraries? The process of organizing information that is carried out by information professionals, who distinguish the wheat from the chaff and the serious from the absurd, as well as their role which we imagine of preserving cultural identity on the Internet, is extremely important and needs libraries to be the incubator actors in it so as to disseminate information, whether in the form of digital books, websites, portal gateways, or other forms of digital media. With the same token, we cannot say that with the explosive flow of information, the era of the library has ended. Even more, there is a new concept for the library that will undoubtedly be dependent primarily on the digital transmission of information.

If digital libraries are different from traditional ones in many perspectives, it should not be forgotten that the common factor between both of them is the human element that produces knowledge for its own use. In between the producer and the consumer of knowledge is an intermediary that takes the

form of a library, whether traditional or digital. This medium is always in need for an explorer or a reconnoiter, and this explorer is actually a person or entity that conducts the process of revealing and digging into the veins of stored content to fetch the requested data, whatever the type of medium. Certainly, the most successful scout of global research today is Google.

The Internet has changed the concepts of time and place, and it secured us with opportunities that were never foreseen a few years ago. With its aid, we can locate vast volumes of stored knowledge in all areas; the Internet comprises tens of billions of pages that are searchable and detectable within one second or less. This benefit of the Internet, however, is dependent on the search engine (the electronic search tool) that one uses to identify the available material and to display the most relevant of it to the researcher, as it is unreasonable to imagine a researcher trying to find what he wants among billions of search hits without a guide. Hence, the search engine used has become a primary mechanism in our age, and even such a mechanism has become more important than any other element within the global digital information network, and it is doubtless that the most important search engine on the scene right now is Google. Moreover, Google has not only offered its search engine for use by hundreds of millions of surfers roaming across the Internet, but it has also entered into partnership with major academic libraries to digitize millions of books, so as to allow the researcher to use Google's search engine to find the books he wants. This initiative has caused controversy worldwide, and particularly in the United States; where Google began struggling with publishers, as well as in Europe, which has become very agitated from the control of the search engine Google on the digital space because Europe sees that this means more control of American culture and the English language over global culture, as if the world has become mono-cultural in cyberspace, stressing the dominance of one particular culture. The European culture, alongside with Asian and Arab cultures, have become out of context over that space. Perhaps this is what made Jean-Noel Jeanneney, former Director of the National Library of France, write a book entitled "Google...When You Challenge Europe", in which he raised the following issues:

- First, the hegemony of Google will lead to the selection of material offered solely in English and not in others languages. If Google locates thousands of pages, it offers them in an order of priorities that is governed by its

“philosophy of popularity”; that is, the page that has been viewed by the largest number of surfers will be displayed first; resulting in more users to read the same page over and over again, thus supporting its top position in the subsequent search carried out by another researcher.

- Second, the focus of Google on one paragraph per page leads to the breaking down of the cultural content of the work, and is not the best way to familiarize readers with the book or article.
- Third, as we are individuals who are interested in the promotion of our own culture, we must emphasize that researchers around the world should have access to our culture in our own language. However, the Google engine is an obstacle in front of this end because it gives priority to cultural output in English.
- Fourth, we must also offer our cultural product in a cultural context that is different from mere scattered paragraphs excerpted from contrasting pages. The masterpiece books of our culture should not be blurred for the sake of what is popular despite being superficial.

The summary conclusion of Jeanneney’s proposition is that a European digital library should be put into effect so as to provide culture in various European languages, and that Europe should invest in the production of search engines that are comparable in terms of efficiency to Google in order to serve those readers and researchers interested in exploring European culture.

That is why it is also mandatory that we consider the idea of creating an Arabic search engine and building an Arabic digital library, because if Arabs are not strongly present in cyberspace they literally will not have a cultural future, and if there is a current European controversy regarding this issue, then it is equally important for us to raise the same issue in the Arab World. So, are there considerable pan-Arab efforts in this realm?

Sites such as AlWarraq and the Arabic digital library launched by Bibliotheca Alexandria represent the first serious pan-Arab attempts to establish a digital library on the Internet, but several problematic issues confront these attempts, including:

- The non-availability of integrated databases for Arabic publications from the 19th century till present.

- The lack of clarity of intellectual property rights for both publishers and authors.
- The escalation in the use of the Internet by members of the age group from 18 to 40 years without integrating that use in the research operations within universities or within university courses.

Bibliotheca Alexandrina has adopted a number of projects that pursue creating a foothold for Arabs in the digital world. In cooperation with the Carnegie Mellon Libraries, as well as with parties from India and China, the Library of Alexandria is conducting the project of establishing the “One Million Books Digital Library” project on the Internet, which is planned to be the largest project worldwide in this area after the project of Google Books. The share of Arab culture in this project of Bibliotheca Alexandrina is initially estimated to be two hundred thousand books and will double in the case of doubling the project. Yet, there is an obstacle to the success of the Library of Alexandria’s project, which is the relatively small size of what has been printed in the Arab World since the proliferation of printing in the 19th century, and the small percent of this volume that is allowed to be uploaded on the digital library without legal hindrances, basically because the target volume of 200,000 books requires participation of and contribution from all Arab cultural institutions by giving for free their publications.

For Arabs to have a foothold in this cyberspace, “Memory of Modern Egypt” has been launched, a project which was carried out by a team of young people at the Bibliotheca. Over the long haul, the project will comprise three levels:

- A level for the average user, who is looking for revised historical text accompanied by materials and documentaries to help him see the event or character in a more profound manner; such as documentary films or television footage that comprehensively display an event, or the comments of newspapers on the event, or even the stamps and coins that were issued on the occasion of the event.
- A level for specialist researchers; where the researcher can retrieve more details and historical backgrounds, as well as rare documents, whether official or personal. Moreover, the project allows researchers to express their opinions and to correct the information contained therein, in case there are errors.

- A level for children, through cartoons that explain history in a delightful and entertaining manner for children. This level will be the final stage in the implementation of the project, and from my point of view it is the most difficult.

It is quite sure that the articles of the “Memory of Modern Egypt” Project will not be confined to the stage of being published on the Internet, but will extend to infinity, as it is possible to add new material on a continuous basis, and even it can be developed.

In my imagination, the timeline that is the browsing focus for this project starts with the year 1805 and ends with the year 1981, hand in hand with the various topics that are not based on the political dimension which we are used to, but may extend to include NGOs, sports clubs, public figures, public facilities, cities, social life, and the economy and economic institutions, until we arrive at attempts of probing more and more into the daily life of Egyptians over virtually the last two hundred years. We should not forget giant projects like the Aswan Dam and the Suez Canal; or smaller ones as the small industries that appeared in Egypt in the second decade of the twentieth century. Thus, through this extensive timeline the visitor of the project will be able to access whatever s/he wants from multiple entry points.

This project that preserves the history of Egypt is a model that can be applied in all Arab countries; to be an exception from the norms of the sweeping tide of globalization, emphasizing the identity of each Arab state separately. Let us hope that all we have cited above so far is merely one part of the currently ongoing Arab endeavors.

Paper made the recording of information a very easy task; printing made it possible to consider reading a daily habit; and the computer has made the world live an information flow revolution. So, has the era of libraries witnessed its end? Are we still in need for those large buildings to keep books?

These two questions confront us with nothing but more challenges. The process of publishing books will not cease to exist; simply because man’s viewing of rare books is highly similar to the desire to acquire old paintings and to visit museums and monuments. We can even say that publishing rare

old books; such as the early editions of the plays of Shakespeare on the site the British Library; has made readers insatiable about dealing with these editions directly. Therefore, we can say that if the digital library will provide valuable anecdotes in the form of rare images and books that do not have copyrights, the traditional library will retain the function of keeping the published books, the demand for which will be rising. Experience has shown that the invention of any new medium does not deny nor stop the older medium of knowledge from existing, and we can even say that it urges the older medium to develop itself in different forms and functions. Additionally, libraries will become incubators for thought and makers of culture. Instead of being recipients of cultural and intellectual output, they will be the tool of producing thought and culture. Thus, we find that Bibliotheca Alexandria allocated a compartment within its strategic plan to include research centers that produce such thought and an incubator for the new generations of intellectuals. These research centers include:

- The Center for Patterns, Fonts, and Literature, which teaches all types of inscriptions and writings in the world, and is a tool to study different cultures and origins.
- The Manuscripts Center, which aims to collect original manuscripts, to index and maintain them in a scientific manner, to obtain photographed microfilms and digital images of font collections from around the world, and to provide references for scientific research in the different areas of heritage, as well as to conduct scientific exchanges in the different fields of heritage. In addition to all that, it targets scientific exchange with the corresponding centers in other countries, and the dissemination of scientific heritage, particularly with regard to the history of science and the contributions of both Arabic and Islamic civilizations to the heritage of humanity. It organizes specialized training courses in the different areas of heritage such as cataloging manuscripts, scrutinizing them to check their genuineness, and disseminating them, as well as achieving coordination between the global centers specialized in heritage and manuscripts and holding seminars in this area.
- The Center for Special Studies and Programs, which aims to fund young scientists in Egypt who are close to obtaining a doctorate degree and whose researches are conducted, broadly speaking, in the field of science

and technology. It also aims at promoting science, education, and public awareness through the weaving of an effective scientific communications program that includes international conferences, high-level meetings, lectures, workshops and exhibitions targeted at specialists and non-specialists. The Center also works as a facilitator for the advancement of science in Egypt, through obtaining and analyzing national scientific and technical information resources and working as a hub for creating and supporting an international network of cooperation, while continuing to act basically as a scientific center. It also motivates talented students at Egyptian schools and universities to take advantage of their talents and strives to raise the participation of groups that are considered minorities (such as women and researchers in small provinces) to participate in modern scientific and technical research.

The functions of the following centers within Bibliotheca Alexandria also comprise the role of being an arena for dialogue and cultural exchange, whether locally, regionally or internationally:

- The Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Center (Alex Med); which is a tool of communication between the Library of Alexandria and the Mediterranean countries, whether with their peoples or with their institutions, both formal and informal.
- The Dialogue Forum, which is a tool for intellectual and cultural dialogue and a forum through which participants can discuss all new ideas and opinions.
- The BA Unit for Futuristic Studies; a unit that was created in order to pave the road for the first time in front of this kind of studies in the Arab world, and which made among its first concerns such topics as the sociology of religion, the future of Arab societies, the future of Arab economies, and shifts in international power, as well as some others topics.

The role of the Library of Alexandria even exceeds all the above by being host to the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue (Anna Lindh) that is a subsidiary of the European Union.

Accordingly, we can claim that the relationship of the Bibliotheca with the local, regional, and international community is an interactive relationship, and

that it is no longer a building that provides shelving for books only, but rather it has become a tool for acculturation and dialogue. So, is this the role of libraries in the future?

There is no doubt that the answer to this question depends currently on the successive changes in the function of libraries and on the different experiences in this area, especially the experience of the Library of Alexandria.

Scientific Culture

Humanity has recently entered a world dominated by science, after the human species have lived since ever on this planet under the mercy of unpredictable forces. Despite the fact that such a world has not disappeared completely from sight, the natural world seems today more predictable and controllable than any time in the past, and thus it became safer for us to live in than it was for our ancestors.

What is Science? The Scientific Method

If science has such an enormous impact on human history, it is natural to ask what science is exactly, and in what specific ways does science differ from other aspects of human activity.

Science, like any other human activity, cannot be assessed and classified into organized patterns, but the scientific method is characterized by two features in its study of the universe, both of which explain why science is different from other human activities. Those two features are: observation and testing.

First: Observation

If one wishes to know something about the world, one should watch it and see how it works; we live the technological culture of the 21st century, something that makes it easy for us to forget almost along the entire human history, the previous simple saying was considered wrong. There had been previous ages in which one's insisting on emphasizing this issue and on declaring his or her belief in it was a possible reason for their perilous destruction. The approaches that opposed the exploration of the real nature of the world have always prevailed, until the marvelous success of science to remove parts of this curriculum from the dominant conceptual framework.

The idea that scientific knowledge starts with observation is a wisdom that should enjoy sovereignty, but unfortunately this understanding was coupled with some misconceptions. The most common misunderstanding is that scientists, as they observe the world, presumably behave according to an open mentality and with full discretion, after having disentangled themselves from all prior conceptions regarding the topics they are trying to probe. Often this idea turns into something like a false argument frequently spelled by the lips of philosophers who wish to highlight the concept of the social structure of science. The scientific observation is “laden with theory”, and that what makes the world a good place is not that the scientist begins his work and his research with zero potential expectations, but it is that when results do not match expectations that the world becomes convinced with what nature says, and thus instead of ignoring the results or trying to suppress them to match his expectations, the scientist has to change his idea of what is imagined and his awaited results. Historical development informs us that observations are always followed by periods of intense mental activity during which the regularity of parameters is disclosed; to be a basis for developing new theories to further characterize the special scientific view of the world.

Observation as a process leads eventually to something very special. The nature of the human brain implies that when we find aspects of regularity in the world around us, we attribute the manifestations of this regularity to a known reason, whether we say that it is the result of spiritual acts or the work of a natural law. We create a depiction of the universe in which there is a cause for the regularity we have seen, and this process is simply the process of creating a theory. All theories were not identical when first created, as some of them are much better than others in terms of interpreting what we see. For example, Tycho Brahe developed a theory based on his standards. According to this theory, the sun revolves in an orbit around the Earth, but all the other planets revolve in an orbit around the sun. His theory ultimately failed to properly explain data, and this made researchers abandon it. We should note here that this process of sorting ideas and dropping some of them, based on their suitability for the interpretation of observations, is what brings us to the second important facet of science, testing.

Second: Testing

The most important aspect in the scientific process is the comparison that does not calm down and does not stop between the predictions of our theories and what actually happens in nature. This sets aside distinguished from any other area of human activity, as science submits only to the verdict of an external reference or benchmark that is unbiased, one which is extremely rigorous and strict in its impartiality. If the experiment or the observation does not confirm the theoretical predictions, the theory is dismissed and that is the end of it.

This aspect of science is the most difficult to grasp by non-scientists, and that is why the problem here relates to issues of non-bias and objectivity, two issues frequently debated in the culture of postmodernism.

The disputes regarding any theory are the best tool to interpret the data at hand. These differences may persist for decades. But in the end, everyone agrees that the data available to us is what should ultimately resolve the debate. Scientists have the ability to reach the conclusion that as a result of the debates ongoing between them, they should better focus their attention on the patterns of issues that can be answered in the light of observation. However, at the same time they must give up their search for answers to more profound questions. Ken Bolding expressed this view very well when he said: “Science is the process of replacement of unimportant questions with important questions that cannot be answered.”

When we talk about the manner by which the bastions of science in the twenty-first century will confront these issues, we find that this state of uncertainty is of paramount importance; mainly because it contradicts one of the images in the imagination of many people about science. We know that many people think that science has answers and they always are correct; so it is difficult for many to accept, and then to understand, that there are periods of uncertainty in the history of the development of any idea.

Another feature of the scientific method is that it may be our way to arrive at more realistic approaches of truth, but it cannot produce—and is not designed to produce—the “absolute right”, and the reason for this is quite simple: If the system is based on observation, then it makes sense to remain always exposed to

the possibility that tomorrow another observation may get uncovered causing us to throw a principle that has long been established.

Is Science Part of Culture?

The answer to this question depends on what one means with the term “culture”. If we understand culture, in its most complete form, as the social and physical network in which all human beings live, then science would be without doubt some part of culture, as it can be seen as the ability to understand the natural world and to deal with it and in particular with the members of our same species.

But in all cases, the word “culture” is used in a much more limited sense. It is often used in the sense that refers to “high culture”, which is comprised of all the knowledge needed by the average person in a community, in order to have a sound presence and a viewpoint, and in order to be accepted by the clan of intellectuals.

Indeed, we cannot talk about science and culture without referring to the pioneer Charles Percy Snow, who gave the highly famous and invaluable “Read” lecture at the University of Cambridge in 1959, which was given the title “Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution”, which he published later in a book under the same title. He adopted the basic premise that the two cultures, scientific and literary, originated and evolved so that they deny each other, and he used arguments from literary patterns to condemn literary culture for what he viewed as moving deliberately in ignorance of one of the most powerful forces shaping society. He presented his vision as follows: “I have frequently attended events whose attendants describe themselves—in the standards of traditional culture—as owners of high culture, and they overtly and vitally expressed their skepticism about the illiteracy of scientists. Their talk provoked me once or twice, and then I asked the participants if anyone of them would tell me about the second law of thermodynamics. I got a frustrating and discouraging answer, as it was also negative. All this was despite the fact that I asked them nothing more than when I ask you to answer the scientific equivalent of a question as lucid as have you read something for Shakespeare?”

Needless to say, this vision sparked controversy hitting the central symbols of the English literature, including a gruesome attack far from all considerations of reason and logic.

Thus, the best way to bridge the gap between the two cultures is by making sure that all students, including university students, have studied the basic framework for primitive scientific knowledge. Only then will science occupy its rightful and appropriate place as an integral part of our culture.

Scientific Culture

When we address the concept of scientific culture and primary knowledge, we can define it as follows: “Scientific culture is the framework of knowledge necessary for one to understand what it takes about the natural universe around us, so that they can deal with the cases brought before them on the horizon of our lives, whether in newspapers or elsewhere.”

This definition is based on special considerations related to the manner in which the average citizen makes use of science. As he is in need to know enough economics to read an article about tax legislation and enough of law to read a newspaper report about a case before the Supreme Court, he also needs to know the meaning of embryonic stem cells research, for example, so that he can form an opinion based on information from various ethical issues surrounding it. This is what makes us consider science an essential part of the culture in which we live, and some basic understanding of science could add more to the aesthetic experience of the world around us.

The notion of the change of the minimum needed level of basic cultural knowledge with the change of time and place is usually raised to support the claim that it is impossible to specify the actual content of the minimum needed level of the basic cultural knowledge, even if we accept the fact of its existence. Thanks to history, now we can claim having a long record of the evolution of primary cultural knowledge, and it is basically obvious that it changes at a rate that is hardly less than 1% per year, and thus the pursuit of basic cultural knowledge is not as difficult as observing the inevitable changes taking place in a normal dictionary.

Basic cultural knowledge really changes with time and with place, but it changes in ways and means that we are able to predict and control.

It should be noted that the core division to all these arguments is that the pattern of knowledge required for average citizens is completely different from that required for the normal living of scientists or engineers; as it does not include the ability to exercise science or the ability to process mathematical equations, but it could be argued that it is founded on a general understanding of the basic principles that operate the world. This means that those who are scientifically intellectualized, that is to say those who possess the primal extent of scientific knowledge, will effectively know that energy cannot perish or develop, but can transform from one form to another, from solar radiation to electrical current, for instance. However, they are not necessarily able to analyze the appropriateness of a special blend of semiconductors for the construction of a photovoltaic cell; a cell capable of producing voltage when exposed to radiant energy. It is not necessary for them also to be able to calculate the number of cells needed to replace a conventional power plant.

Moreover, with the acceleration of the complexity of science itself, and with the increasing overlapping of the studies it offers, the traditional approaches to the education of science become more and more inappropriate. There is a new standard with respect to the standard rule (the development and testing of hypothesis, and the drawing of a conclusion) of teaching the scientific method, that will prepare students to deal, later, with the latest report issued by an intergovernmental panel on climate change. Thus, the concept of primal knowledge is not only a new way to address the issue of teaching science to the general public, but is also the only way that we can follow to prepare students for the world they will find themselves in.

Means of Eradicating Scientific Illiteracy

The eradication of scientific illiteracy is merely one brick in a larger structure that we call cultural literacy, which means being aware of the basic knowledge of culture. This brick, however, has the issues and problems of its own. Eradicating scientific illiteracy entails availing the level of scientific knowledge that scholars at any time and place presume is owned by other people.

Let us assume that tomorrow's newspapers will include an article on Mexico City, and it does not say that Mexico City is the capital of Mexico, a country to the southern border of the United States, because the writer assumes that readers are already aware of this piece of information, and accordingly the writer did not bother himself to tell readers something about that. This in turn means that if readers are not aware of this information then this is certainly not good news for them because they will not be able to fully grasp the article.

Here we can say that all knowledge that is presumed by others to be possessed by us is called basic cultural knowledge, and it is very important to realize that what we are talking about herein is nothing but a pure life-related empirical fact. Whether we accept this assumption or not, we ought to admit it is a lived reality nowadays, and anyone who lacks the most basic blocks of this system of knowledge will not be able to understand some elements of the debate—perhaps the important elements—which is going on community-wide.

Basic cultural knowledge is not merely a set of facts. It is a jarring mix of things, facts, ideas, links and depictions, and it came to be put in analogy with a kind of composite elements that together make up the body of knowledge; where new ideas and concepts unite and integrate.

Thinking of basic cultural knowledge (and the sub-primary knowledge of basic scientific knowledge) as something like the code of building for the system of education is, indeed, a good idea. If you reckon the code of building in a community, you will find long lists of rules and laws. For example, if you want a certain sized window in a given wall, then the timber bar above it should be of the same size. If you want an electrical socket in a particular position specifically, it must be connected to wires in a certain way. This means that the construction code sets the minimum standard for buildings, and we cannot build any structures in the community without it.

It is not possible for any individual to pass the educational system without having collected the elements of knowledge that are determined by the basic cultural principles. But just as people can construct buildings that exceed building codes, we see no reason to stop learning when you have already met

the basic cultural knowledge requirements. According to this scheme, basic knowledge becomes the cultural base for all the upcoming learning processes of the individual.

In this regard, we can further clarify the importance of cultural knowledge through the perspective of E. Don Hersh in the following text: “First you have to stack things in piles. You may have more than one pile. It depends on the number of piles that you have to equip. Then you must prepare your equipment. Before doing all this, you can never claim that almost everything is fine.”

The first reading of the former text leads the individual to mental confusion. What exactly is that man talking about?! His whole statements seem meaningless. But if you put a title for the former text of “The Process of Preparing Clothes for Laundry”, you suddenly get to understand it. This sudden understanding by the reader emphasizes the importance of basic cultural knowledge more than any other argument.

There is a great deal of research in the psychology of education that supports the idea that people learn better when they are able to appropriate new information with knowledge. It is actually this feature of the human mind which Hirsch sought to restore to his memory while he was in the process of narrating the intricacies of his discovery of basic cultural knowledge; he was looking for the role of what he called “good grammar” when he gave selected groups of students pieces of text written in good English. However, he was surprised at a government university when he found that none of the students did achieve a very good score with the texts, regardless of how well the English language for any of them was. Let us say, based on the previous example, that the students did not know anything about the basic elements, making it difficult for them to understand the paragraph that he asked them to read.

The Reality of Scientific Culture in the Arab World

The alienation of science in the Arab World and the alienation of the future or its being outside of our control are together the main reason that made others go ahead of us in the process of evolution. We suffer from several chronic cultural diseases that can be summarized in a number of key points:

- The lack of funding for scientific research and development, and it is enough to say that what is being allocated in Arab countries for research and

development (R&D) purposes is no more than 0.5% of GDP. Moreover, the nature of scientific research is now very complex, as well as it now represents a global partnering process that is emphasized by organic relationships between academies, universities, individual scientists, conferences and journals.

- The high rate of illiteracy in many Arab societies and the prevalence of cultural illiteracy, scientific illiteracy, and computer illiteracy, which means the absence of the citizen as an active participant capable of understanding the issues of humanity and society and the nature of the universe around us.
- The absence of the value of the knowledge adventure and the desire to discover the unknown, as well as the freedom of raising questions and of researching, and the right to differ. Our societies do not believe in the fact that diversity enriches thought and promotes civilization. Accepting all these values is a process that should be instilled in citizens through the processes of socialization and educational upbringing in schools to create a general atmosphere.
- The emigration of scientific researchers abroad; where they find for themselves wider opportunities to express their abilities instead of the life of alienation at home.
- The lack of policy for science and for community education that is able to facilitate integration with the global network of scientific and technological achievements and to boost the possession of the self-determination ability and the will to do.
- The much less than perfect role of Arab television stations in the education of society, as it has become a common practice to promote the superficiality of societies through the establishing of affluently-financed TV stations that feature entertainment and movies at the expense of the production that pursues the dissemination of knowledge and science; such as documentary movies and scientific programs. A few good attempts are out there in this framework, such as the case of the Arabization of National Geographic TV in Abu Dhabi.

The current deteriorated realities of culture in the Arab World require from us to frankly hold ourselves accountable and to evaluate the different dimensions

of our cultural scene, as well as a special review of and an attempt to reform the positions of our institutions of culture, the media, scientific research, school education, and higher education. Particularly, we must allow all differing voices to express themselves freely and we must pay excessive attention, in particular, to the reform of our universities and to the helping of universities redeem their confidentiality and autonomy, after university professors have lost their status.

That is why I recommend the following:

- Emphasizing the rise of the civil society role in cultural life in the coming years, especially after the Internet has secured a vast number of new areas of creativity for intellectuals to change.
- The necessity of restructuring the Arab Organization for Culture, Arts, and Sciences in order to have, beside the Council of Arab Ministers of Culture and Education, another council composed of intellectuals and cultural institutions that can participate in its administration. Obviously, it is very important also to support its budget.
- Reinforcing the role of pocket books such as the “Alam AlMarifah” series in Kuwait and the Egyptian groups of book series of “AlMaktaba AlThaqafeya”, “Iqr’a”, and AlHelal Book, because of the positive impact such books have on Arab culture.
- Reconsidering the Arab culture framework in order to help it move from randomness to creativity and the ability to discover talents and to reinforce cultural awareness.
- Intellectuals are expected to appear and be discovered away from capital cities. The centrality of the cultures of such capital cities as Cairo and Damascus is prone to come to an end, and we will be witnessing attempts of literary writers and thinkers from outside these centers to evolve and achieve success, mainly via the help of the Internet.
- The Arab World has long missed thought centers and centers for futuristic studies, but these types of centers will witness a radical transformation during the coming years. The hegemony of science, culture, and preset strategic visions and plans on decision makers around the world will force the latter to believe in the power of knowledge as a means of existence in a world that does not adopt other tools for life and survival except for knowledge.