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

BRAVE NEW MEDIA - EPISODE ONE - TRANSCRIPT

00.00

[STING: BRAVE NEW MEDIA]

[STING SETTLES INTO INTRO BED.]

00:11

MAHA TAKI

You're listening to Brave New Media -

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

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

- and we talk to

[STING BED FADES INTO EPISODE MUSIC.]

<u>01:11</u>

DIANA MOUKALLED

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

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

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

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

[MUSIC FADES.]

02:32

MAHA

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

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

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

from the rights of foreign domestic workers living in Beirut,

to the role Big Tech plays in supporting authoritarian regimes,

and the exploitation of call-centre staff in Egypt.

But Diana's ability to report freely on those kinds of stories has been hard-won.

Her story starts in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s.

03:17

DIANA

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

I was born and raised in Saudi Arabia.

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

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

[MUSIC FADES IN.]

04:06

MAHA

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

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

[MUSIC RISES.]

04:20

DIANA

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

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

And

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

<u>06:31</u>

MAHA

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

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

[DARAJ SFX RISE.]

06:51

DIANA

That time, we started seeing also the counter revolution. And the first who were to pay the

It wasn't until a few years later, in 2017, that Diana met

On that sunny day in Beirut, all three journalists decided that they

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

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

[MUSIC SLOWLY BUILDS.]

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

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

[SFX AND MUSIC FADES IN.]

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

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

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

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

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

<u>15:47</u>

MAHA

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

[MUSIC FADES IN.]

15:58

DIANA

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

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

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

[MUSIC SHIFTS.]

<u>17:04</u>

MAHA

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

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

[MUSIC FADES OUT.]

17:24

DIANA

One of our female writers,

Journalism is helping her and me. I need people like her to find the same support that I couldn't have. So it's not only her, plenty of journalists, plenty of people, plenty of voices

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

<u>21:28</u>

MAHA

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

21:34

NAOMI

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

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

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

<u>23:11</u>

MAHA

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

23:34

NAOMI

Yeah, there are, there are solutions.

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

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

24:58

MAHA

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

<u>25:01</u>

NAOMI

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

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

<u>26:42</u>

MAHA

It does

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

The series music was created by Alisdair McGregor.

The clips were provided by Daraj.