

## Global Epistemologies: Concepts, Methodologies, and Data Systems

# Beyond "Academia": Disseminating Knowledge in the Arab World

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## Global Perspectives

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In recent years, the rise of the knowledge economy has paved the way for a change in the dynamics of knowledge production. This has been translated into two contradictory trends: (1) the commodification of knowledge production and (2) connecting social sciences to society, necessitating that academics go beyond their traditional role of teaching and research to engage wider publics in contemporary critical debates. Based on a survey of grantees of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences, this article considers the case of Arab social researchers by looking at their research outcomes beyond "academia," identifying the forms of dissemination of their research and how they engage in dialogue with the public. Compared to previous research done on this topic, the findings demonstrate considerable engagement of their research, which is contributing to the reconciliation of knowledge production and use. Changes are seen not only in the scope of engagement but also in the use of different styles of expressions and deployment of topics. The survey and the interviews allow us to understand the challenges the researchers face, whether these are structural (political, institutional, and socioeconomic) or cultural.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rise of the knowledge economy has paved the way for a change in the dynamics of knowledge production. This has been translated into two contradictory trends: (1) the commodification of knowledge production (e.g., benchmarking research input) and (2) connecting science to society, necessitating that academics go beyond the traditional role of teaching and research and disseminate knowledge to the public(s) engaging them in contemporary critical debates. The Arab world has more problems with knowledge use than with knowledge production (ACSS 2015; Hanafi and Arvanitis 2016). Without translating academic research into policy and public awareness, research will be read only by the few people who constitute an elite that is disconnected from society, and thus the research will not have a real social impact.

These two trends were accompanied by discussions on developing a third mission of the university that involves contributing to the community, not only by simplifying and reformulating complex issues for the public but also by carrying out strategic interventions. The debate incrementally pushed the traditional call for academics to leave the ivory tower for more diversified paths, where knowledge is trans-

lated, exchanged, and used for/with the public and reciprocally informs research. This research contributes to this debate by looking at the forms that academics employ to engage in dialogue with the public.

Theoretically, we will engage with the recent development of science communication and sociology. We are particularly interested in how both those disciplines forge concepts such as public sociology that strikes up a dialogic relation between social scientists and the public in which their agendas are brought to the table, each being adjusted to the other (Burawoy 2005). This "conversation" necessitates engaging the public(s) and, as a result, using multiple forms for that purpose.

Based on a survey of grantees of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS), this paper will examine the different dissemination forms used by academics from the Arab world to invigorate this dialogue while contextualizing the challenges that impede it. This raises the following questions: How do academics intervene and engage with the public? What are the forms of engagement that those academics employ? What issues do they write about, and what issues do they omit? What role do they believe they have, and how do they strategize to fashion this role? What are the obstacles that impede them from engaging the publics

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and fulfilling the role they assume? Who are the actors/facilitators that help them in this engagement, and how?

This paper is based on a survey and divided into three parts. First, it discusses the methodology used to account for the specificity of the researched sample. Second, it looks at the different forms of engagement that foster dialogue, contextualizing their (un)use while looking at their styles of expression. Finally, it will explore the limitations that encumber academics from realizing the role they imagine having.

As we will see, the findings demonstrate considerable engagement of academics’ research, which contributes to the reconciliation of knowledge production and use, compared to previous research done on the topic. Some academics are doing more “organic public” social sciences (i.e., engaging in initiatives that emerge from civic society) than “traditional public” social sciences (i.e., making their scientific knowledge available). Changes are seen not only in the scope of engagement but also in the use of different styles of expression and deployment of topics.

The survey and the interviews allow us to understand the challenges they face, whether these are structural (political, institutional, and socioeconomic) or cultural.

First, we will engage with the development of some trends within science communication and spell out our fieldwork methodology.

#### SCIENCE COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC SOCIAL SCIENCES

Science communication can be considered an umbrella term, defined as “organised, explicit, and intended actions that aim to communicate scientific knowledge, methodology, processes or practices in settings where non-scientists are a recognized part of the audience” (Horst, Davies, and Irwin 2016, 884). According to Bailey (2018), science communication involves many stakeholders: groups within the scientific community, including those in academia and industry; the scientific community and the media; the scientific community and the public; the scientific community and the government, or others in positions of power and/or authority or others who influence policy; industry and the public; the media (including museums and science centers) and the public; and the government and the public.

Michèle Leduc (2017) demonstrates the complexity of science communication: first, it becomes one of the significant tasks of the researchers to communicate directly to the public; it also involves not only communicating scientific knowledge but also debating technology, a debate that is not without a relationship to power and interests.

Over time, there are models and phases of science communication. Based on her research in the United Kingdom (which, from our perspective, reflects the situation in many other countries), Bailey (2018) summarizes those models as follows: the first model is the “deficit” of knowledge, as there is anxiety around the lack of public knowledge of basic scientific facts that one could find in the 1980s; the second model is public understanding of science (PUS), which assumes a deficiency in the public and sufficiency in science. PUS adopted a “one-way, top-down communication

process, in which scientists—with all the required information—filled the knowledge vacuum in the scientifically illiterate general public as they saw fit.” The final model is talking to a diverse public: public engagement with science and technology (PEST), where the public has an interest in science, but that interest is accompanied by low trust, knocked by epidemics like COVID-19 and the “rapid advance of areas such as biotechnology and IT.” PEST includes not only an “understanding of science” (education and a general public appreciation of scientific ideas) but also an “awareness of science.” “Awareness” is concerned with encouraging the individual’s or the community’s need to know—with creating an affective change that favors science on the part of that individual or community. While hard to measure, the best science communicators can engender and nurture that change. By so doing, they create a community that is as comfortable with its “ownership” of science as it is comfortable with its “ownership” of art” (Bryant 2003, 361). Public engagement is, in fact, “intentional and meaningful interactions that provide opportunities for mutual learning between scientists and members of the public” and is generally considered to be (or aims to be) a two-way dialogical process between science and society (Nisbet and Markowitz 2015).

With more thought for the social sciences (the subject of this article), we use the seminal four-dimensional typology elaborated by Michael Burawoy for sociology, applying it more broadly to all of the social sciences. Burawoy distinguishes between four types of sociology: two (professional and critical sociology) are relevant to academic audiences, and the other two (public and policy sociology) pertain to a wider audience. Professional sociology consists of “multiple intersecting research programs, each with their assumptions, exemplars, defining questions, conceptual apparatuses and evolving theories” (Burawoy 2005, 10). Critical sociology examines the foundations—both the explicit and the implicit, both normative and descriptive—of the research programs of professional sociology. Public sociology “brings sociology into a conversation with the publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in the conversation. It entails, therefore, a double conversation” (Burawoy 2005, 8) and reciprocal relationships, in which meaningful dialogue fosters mutual education that not only strengthens such publics but also enriches sociological work itself and helps it in setting the research agendas. Community participation in the design of research proposals and lectures and workshops with different stakeholders for the dissemination of the research results are forms through which social scientists can interact with the public and determine the relevance of future topics of study, both for the needs of society and for the public. Finally, policy sociology’s purpose is to provide solutions to problems that are presented to society, or to legitimate solutions that have already been reached. Some clients (international organizations, ministries, etc.) often request specific studies for their intervention, with a narrow contract (Burawoy 2005, 9).

While all four types of social science are equally represented and being debated in Europe (e.g., Pierre Bour-

dieu, Alain Touraine, and Michel Wieviorka) and to some extent in North America (e.g., Michael Burawoy, Herbert Gans, and David Riesman), this is not the case in the Arab world. The lack of dialogue regarding this issue in the Arab East was noted in the first decade of this century (Hanafi 2011) from the ratio between published articles, newspaper articles, and unpublished reports in 203 CVs of social scientists in the Arab East. Research shows that scholars often specialize in one type of social science and there is no debate between these individuals.

In this article, we will investigate whether the direction of Arab scholars in social sciences is closer to the deficit, PUS, or PEST models and whether we now have more engagement in the public social sciences.

## METHODOLOGY

To understand the social scholar's engagement with the publics, we decided to choose the beneficiaries of a very important research organization that changed the social research landscape in the Arab world, the Arab Council for the Social Sciences, since 2018. The ACSS is a regional, independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening social science research and knowledge production in the Arab region. By supporting researchers and academic/research institutions, the ACSS aims to contribute to the creation, dissemination, validation, and use of social science research and to enrich public debate about the challenges facing Arab societies. Thus, it aims to enhance the role of social science in Arab public life and inform public policy in the region.<sup>1</sup>

The methodology involved two phases:

1. Surveying 401 grantees of the ACSS in 2021–22. The semistructured questions investigated the grantees' multiple dissemination forms of engagement with the public, taking into consideration the time frame and the frequency of this contribution over a period of twelve months. The recruitment for this study was based on a preapproval obtained through replying to an email from the ACSS where 401 grantees were administered an online survey. The response rate was 90 replies out of 401. The rest of the surveyed non-respondents were filled by us through an extensive search on the web and use of the files that ACSS provided.
2. Interviewing 16 grantees from those who originally agreed to participate in the second phase to identify the difficulties of publishing and going beyond academic publications. The interviews lasted around one hour each and focused on the challenges experienced by academics in going beyond academic publication.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1. Gender of Grantees**

Gender	N	%
Female	212	53
Male	189	47
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2. Distribution of Grantees' Programs**

Program	Count of Program
Small Grants Program	143
Research Grants Program	119
AFAC-ACSS Research on the Arts Program	51
New Paradigms Factory	34
Post-Doc Fellowship Program	21
Early Career Fellows Program	18
ACSS-FMSH Short-Term Postdoctoral Mobility Fellowship	14
Bassem Chit Fellow	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>401</b>

The study relied on a sample of 401 grantees, 53 percent of whom are females and 47 percent are males (see [table 1](#)). The grantees were part of different programs (mainly Small Grants Program [143] and Research Grants Program [119]) over seven different cycles from 2013 to 2021 (see [table 2](#)). The sample included grantees of different nationalities from the Arab world, mostly Egyptian (21.4 percent), Moroccan (20.7 percent), Palestinian (14.2 percent), and Lebanese (12.6 percent), while other nationalities constituted less than 10 percent each (see [table 3](#)). The grantees do not necessarily reside in their country of origin, but most do and disseminate their research in their countries. The majority of the grantees have earned their PhDs (57 percent) or are PhD candidates (5.5 percent); less than a third (30 percent) have master's degrees or are master's candidates (see [table 4](#)). The grantees' fields of study fall mainly in the social sciences and particularly in sociology (24 percent), geography (7.3 percent), anthropology (6.7 percent), and political science (5.8 percent). They also involve law, architecture, development studies, urban studies, media, and the arts (see [table 5](#)). The grantees occupy different positions, mainly assistant professors (19 percent), associate professors (7 percent), full professors (16.4 percent), lecturers (16.4 percent), and researchers (16.4 percent) (see [table 6](#)).

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.theacss.org/pages/mission>.

<sup>2</sup> Participation in the research provided the participants with visibility in the Portal for Social Impact of Scientific Research in/on the Arab World (Athar).

**Table 3. Distribution of Grantees' Nationalities**

Citizenship	N	%
Egyptian	86	21.4
Moroccan	83	20.7
Palestinian	57	14.2
Lebanese	51	12.7
Algerian	36	9.0
Tunisian	26	6.5
Jordanian	17	4.2
Sudanese	8	2.0
Syrian	8	2.0
Yemeni	6	1.5
Iraqi	5	1.2
British	2	0.5
Bahraini	3	0.7
Others	13	3.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 4. Distribution of Grantees' Highest Degrees**

Degree	N	%
PhD	228	56.9
PhD Candidate	22	5.5
Master's	118	29.4
Master's Candidate	2	0.5
Bachelor	11	2.7
N/A	20	5.0
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100.0</b>

There are some limitations to our study, particularly regarding the extent of these grantees' representation of Arab social researchers. We would argue that they represent, to a certain extent, those who are active in knowledge production. In fact, the ACSS is known for its rigorous process of selecting grantees.<sup>3</sup> So this sample is more skewed in favor of those who excel in research. In addition, one should be aware that the sweeping majority of the graduates from social sciences majors are working as public officers or employed with NGOs and private sectors and are not interested in producing research, even among those who are graduates from prestigious universities such as the American University of Beirut.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 5. Distribution of Grantees' Field of Study**

Field of Study	No.	%
Sociology	79	23.9
Geography	24	7.3
Anthropology	22	6.7
Political Science	19	5.8
Architecture & Town Planning	18	5.5
Economics	17	5.2
Law	14	4.2
Development Studies	12	3.6
Gender Studies	12	3.6
Media & Communication	9	2.7
History	8	2.4
Education	6	1.8
Literature	6	1.8
Psychology	5	1.5
Public Health	4	1.2
Cultural Studies	4	1.2
Musicology	4	1.2
International Affairs	4	1.2
Public Law	3	0.9
Arts / Fine Arts	3	0.9
Business, Management & Administration	3	0.9
Other	54	16.4
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 6. Distribution of Grantees' Position**

Position	No.	%
Professor	43	16.4
Associate Professor	18	6.9
Assistant Professor	50	19.1
Lecturer	43	16.4
Post-Doc Fellow	11	4.2
Researcher	43	16.4
PhD Candidate	8	3.1
Consultant	6	2.3
Administrator	13	5.0
Other	27	10.3
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>3</sup> This comes from the experience of Sari Hanafi as an evaluator of some grants. This is in addition to being a member of the ACSS executive committee and vice president of the board (2015–2016).

<sup>4</sup> Based on tracer studies that were conducted by the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies in 2014.

## FORMS OF WRITING AND CHARACTERISTICS

Interactive knowledge production is a complex and dynamic process that requires multiple dissemination forms to be used and potentially embedded in the framework of the social sciences, anchoring the disciplines while strengthening the publics.

Public science thus has four levels: first, privileging the method of intervention<sup>5</sup> and action research; second, speaking and writing for the public exclusively about the researcher's discipline; third, speaking and writing about the discipline and how it relates to the social, cultural, and political world around it; finally, speaking, writing, and taking a stand for something far larger than the discipline from which the researcher originated (Lightman 2008). Here we should admit the public researcher's normative stance without necessarily uncritically espousing a cause (Marezouki 2004; Wiewiorka 2000).

Those four levels will be looked at consecutively. The sample at hand is formed of different levels of established academics and practitioners who are from different disciplines. Participants were asked about engagement using op-eds, interviews, social media, media outlets (specifically, television and radio), and policy briefs.

### OP-EDS

Opposite the editorial page pieces (op-eds) as a form of dissemination provide a direct conversation with the public. Through op-eds, researchers engage the public in discussions by rationalizing an issue (or at least making a debate more reasonable) and connecting it to their work. Having done that, they bring the public into the conversation, influencing the broader public discourse. Academic contribution by the sample constitutes 27 percent writing op-eds (110), while the rest of the grantees (73 percent) do not write op-eds (291 grantees).<sup>6</sup> This contribution depends on the frequency and relevance of the topic to the research of academics. Twelve percent of the sample write only one op-ed over a period of twelve months; 5 percent, 3 percent, and 6 percent write, respectively, two, three, or four or more op-eds.

Among those who write op-eds, half of them (55) write op-eds that are related to their research. Those who write op-eds are mainly from Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, and Algeria (see [table 7](#)) and are mostly grantees from the fields of sociology, political science, and anthropology.

Finally, and interestingly, female scholars in the sample tend to write op-eds slightly more than males, with a ratio of 28 percent compared to 26 percent (see [table 8](#)).

**Table 7. Geographic Distribution of Grantees**

Geographic Distribution	No.
Lebanon	28
Egypt	23
Morocco	13
Palestine	10
Tunisia	7
Algeria	7
US	6
UK	3
Iraq	2
Sudan	2
Jordan	2
France	1
Somalia	1
Switzerland	1
Syria	1
Germany	1
Greece	1
Kuwait/Bahrain	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>110</b>

**Table 8. Distribution of Op-ed Writers by Gender and Ratio Compared to Total No. of the Sample**

Gender of Op-Ed Writers	No.	Total N	Ratio %
Female	60	212	28
Male	50	189	26
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>27</b>

### POLICY BRIEFS

Policy briefs range from summarizing a study to offering an interventionist action to the nonspecialized publics. This aims to make research more relevant and to push for contextualized understanding of the issue for an informed and feasible implementation. The output of the policy briefs includes not only offering an informed solution but also sensibilizing the affinities of publics to understand the rationale behind decision-making. Ten percent (39 grantees) write policy briefs, while the rest do not. Among those who write policy briefs, only 23 grantees disseminate an average of one policy brief over a period of twelve months, and this is mainly among sociologists and economists located in

<sup>5</sup> See one form of it, called sociological method, that was developed by Alain Touraine (1981).

<sup>6</sup> All figures referring to our survey are based on responses of the informants and also on double-checking using internet searches where possible.

**Table 9. Gender of Civil Society Workshop Participants**

Gender	No.	%	Total N	Ratio
Female	87	54.03727	212	25.5
Male	74	45.96273	189	24.3
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>24.9</b>

**Table 10. Participation in Interviews by Gender**

Participation in Interviews	Male	Female	Total
Occasionally (1)	42	41	83
Sometimes (2)	22	9	31
Often (3)	6	4	10
Regularly (4 or more)	2	4	6
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>130</b>

Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Morocco. While these policy briefs are a good way of disseminating research to policymakers and civil sociology activists, they often don't go further in generating a dialogue.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY WORKSHOPS AND/OR LECTURES

This type of dissemination was reported to be the most common form, with 40 percent (161 grantees) employing it. Predominantly 20 percent (83 grantees) participate in one workshop or lecture, 9 percent (38 grantees) in two, 5 percent (22 grantees) in four or more, and 4 percent (17 grantees) in three over a period of twelve months. Gender-wise, more females than males participate (a ratio of 25.5 percent vs. 24.83 percent) (see [table 9](#)).

This is mainly related to the challenges discussed later in the paper. The authoritarian regimes in the Arab world push academics to work in nongovernmental channels. Academics find this form of participation less risky and an opportunity to connect with different publics that are brought together. In addition, civil society itself is fragmented, which attracts academics who align with a specific cause.

#### INTERVIEWS

Some 67 percent (269 grantees) never participated in newspaper or magazine interviews; 21 percent (83 grantees) participated once, while 8 percent (31 grantees) participated twice, 2 percent (10 grantees) participated three times, and 1 percent (6 grantees) participated four or more times over a period of twelve months. Gender-wise, male participants were interviewed more than female ones, particularly those who declare that "sometimes" they are interviewed (see [table 10](#)). When they participate, 25 percent (100 grantees) reported that the interviews engage their research. The majority of the interviews discussed the stories of the researchers and their projects.

#### SOCIAL MEDIA

Forty-two percent (169 grantees) use social media for knowledge dissemination, while the rest (58 percent) do not. This use included Facebook and Twitter, mainly, and took the form of posting links to their studies/conferences or writing short excerpts. The surveys reported that there were few interactive discussions between them and the audience they followed. It was extremely rare to find an engaged audience. Gender-wise, male grantees were more active than female ones (ratios of 28 percent vs. 21.8 percent) (see [table 11](#)).

#### TV/RADIO

Only 8 percent (31 grantees) disseminate their research using TV and radio, while 92 percent (370) do not. In this regard, among those who appear on TV or radio, only 23 grantees appear once every twelve months, from which 18 disseminate their research. These are mainly from Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, and Palestine.

#### ART NEXUS

A small number of grantees in the sample report their use of blogs, documentaries, neighborhood meetings, personal websites (Mabrouk Boutagouga-Anas Ghrab), YouTube videos (Munira Khayyat), and training sessions to disseminate their research to the public. Others are using art practices (documentaries, films, exhibitions, TED talks). The Artistic Practice-Research-Teaching (ART) Nexus has recently captured a way of translating research for different audiences. In this nexus, the audience plays an equally important role as the researcher in interacting with the art practice. This endeavor took the form of initiatives of art projects where researchers engage critically with contemporary issues. Public Works, for instance, is a multidisciplinary research and design studio that aims at engaging with urban and public issues in Lebanon. Forty-one grantees are engaged directly or indirectly in art practices,



**Table 11. Participation in Social Media by Gender**

Gender	No.	%	Total N	Ratio
Male	91	53.8	189	28.5
Female	78	46.2	212	21.8
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>24.9</b>

whether through initiatives like Public Works, symposiums (Mohamad Wesam Ibraheem al Asali), art exhibitions (Monica Basbous, Touda Bouanani, and others), and so on.

## STYLES OF EXPRESSIONS AND TOPICS

In this section, we look at the different styles of expressions used in op-eds, policy briefs, and interviews.

When we look at op-eds, we find that 27 percent of grantees use this form (and a smaller percentage, only 10 percent, write policy briefs); 112 grantees write op-eds, of whom half write about topics that relate to their research. Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanitis (2016, chap. 10) identify three styles of expression when looking at the content of the op-eds that are analogous to those in the sample. Those are reflective style, provocative style, and “citizen” style. The reflective comprises analytical and reflexive components providing arguments to explain and rethink a phenomenon. The second style provides analytical accounts and defies mainstream common sense by engaging the public in new paths of reflection and creative imagination. The third style is when academics write as citizens with no disciplinary referencing. Those base their articles on the expression of emotions or opinions without factual backing.

Concerning the topic, the majority of the op-eds pertain to political or religious matters that occur mainly at the local level and more broadly at the national level.

When we look at policy briefs, we find that grantees who engage with such writing form needed approximately 1.7 years after their master’s or PhD to undertake the first one. Policy briefs seem, for the majority, to be a summary of the research output, with technical language, and no visuals or infographics necessary for engaging with nonspecialized audiences. Three styles have been identified: informative, sensibilizing, and persuasive.

In the first style, the informative, the policy brief aims to summarize a study by providing a synthesis of research that answers a question or discusses a generic issue like religiosity and religious rituals in a specific society, or contemporary trends, and so on. It offers an overview of a trend, aiming to analyze it by giving simple and relevant examples. The references pertain to social science theories as

they are tailored to unspecialized general audiences. The informative style aims to read the context rather than offering an interventionist strategy. Thus, no recommendations are provided. For example, in his policy brief *Youth and the Transformation of Religious Values, Trends and Practices*, Rachid Jarmouni surveys the attitude of students toward cheating, a practice students encounter on a daily basis, to make inferences about their religious values.<sup>7</sup>

In the second style, the sensibilizing, the policy brief aims to sensibilize the audience concerning an issue that constitutes a concern to the public like domestic violence, gender based-violence, and cybercrimes. In this type, the policy brief gives background about the issue, starting mainly with a captivating statement or statistics. The examples given are recent and relevant to the public and mostly known via social media. The policy brief uses those cases to sensibilize and rationalize the audience concerning a topic while infiltrating theoretical background and history about the topic. Marian Mecky in her policy brief *Riding the Cyber Wave: How Feminist Activism Develops Strategies against Gender-Based Violence* looks at how online activism constitutes an effective tool for feminist and women’s organizations that face material constraints. For that reason, her policy brief gives an overview of the development of feminism and then narrows the topic down to online feminist activism around gender-based violence in Egypt. Cases from Egypt are analyzed and looked at. Mecky ends with recommendations.<sup>8</sup>

The third style is persuasive and interventionist—in the sense of going a step beyond reading the context and offering an outlook on the situation—and tends to call for a strategy. This style aims to offer a series of recommendations, and the policy briefs depend on different visuals, graphics, infographics, tables, and so on building for that aim. The author employing this style sets the tone from the start, highlighting priorities before offering the results that pave the way for the tailored recommendations. This style aims to create evidence-based policy while tailoring the recommendations to a specific audience. A sense of urgency is established from the beginning of the piece.

*Labour Market Inclusion: How Are Dom Youth Faring?*,<sup>9</sup> by Ghia Osseiran, is an example of this style, where the author starts with a sense of urgency concerning the Dom youth

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.maghress.com/attajdid/108687>.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/riding-the-cyber-wave-how-feminist-activism-develops-strategies-against-gender-based-violence>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://lebanesestudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/DOM-Policy-Brief-Nov-2021.pdf>.

and the need for a response and moves to strategize and offer recommendations. Another example is *The Care Economy in Tunisia*,<sup>10</sup> where the author starts by giving background to guide the audience using different visuals.

When we look at interviews, we find that experts engage in interviews in three ways. The first type of engagement aims to get the opinion of an expert on a topic related to their research. It is usually an excerpt of one paragraph in an article about their opinion, and it can extend to brief historical background. The second type of engagement is an interview about the work of the researcher in detail, such as “Al-Wakili: Salafi Religiosity Is Creeping in Morocco through the Intrusion of Shar’i Ruqyah.” The third type of interview is solely dedicated to the opinion and views of a researcher about a specific topic, such as “Algerian Researcher Mabrouk Boutagouga Presents a Set of Visions and Proposals for the Development of the Book Industry in the Arab World” or “The Lebanese Uprising Continues: An Interview with Rima Majed.”

## CHALLENGES OF ENGAGEMENT AND IMAGINED ROLE

Essential to the understanding of the complexity of the dialogue are the interplaying factors and dimensions that impede the academics as well as members of the public from engaging. In this section, we will discuss the different dimensions that complexify the dynamics necessary for research dissemination and fostering of dialogue in the Arab world. Taking into consideration the highly fragmented nature of the Arab world and the resulting power dynamics and elite formations, it is hard to separate those factors. The factors can be grouped into mainly structural factors (political, institutional, and socioeconomic) in the context of the commodification of the academic world and universities, where knowledge becomes a fictitious commodity (Burawoy 2015).

### POLITICAL FACTORS

Political factors pertain to the prevalence of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world that impede the engagement of any applied research if not coming from the official side or based on cooperation with an official one, and this is particularly important compared to other regions in the world. Grantees surfaced a fear of writing in their language and about topics related to the public interest, especially political topics, out of fear of regimes that monitor their activity.

They expressed this fear even when they do not reside in their country of origin but write on topics relevant to the audience and participate in resistant forms of engagement. They are prone to be stopped at airports when visiting their countries, something that has happened to many

researchers in the last decade. The topics that the interviewees claimed to be rejected or monitored include but are not restricted to revolutions in authoritarian states, gender in relation to religion, domestic violence, Islamic movements, and geographies of crime. A grantee expressed: “I personally was subjected to intimidations as a result of political or social writings (related to domestic violence, honor and violence).” Another considered that despite everything being related to religion, it is hard to convince people when the research is related to Islamic movements.

Political interference is manifested in the tightening on civil society, in some cases, by the regime. In Tunisia, for instance, an assistant professor expressed that before 2011, the network for disseminating research was always a private one, but after 2011, “there were civil society forums that made a big difference, especially the Tunisian left has well-known associations for research dissemination which encouraged young people to present their work.”

Grantees also expressed the feeling of empty participation when disseminating research outside academia, due to the monoculturalism that results when the corrupt and fragmented media allow only certain academics to appear on TV/radio and write in press outlets. Those usually have agendas and interests that coincide with the political orientation of the channels. Those agendas have different power dynamics that dictate the content and level of participation. For nonaffiliated scholars, there are policies and guidelines on what they can say and what those channels will air. This also comes at the price of deleting and altering parts of their speech or disseminating forms that conform to their agendas in recorded sessions. Another challenge is the setting of the program/channel that by itself does not allow discussion; instead, it allows only a presentation that confirms what they are trying to promote. A grantee expressed that “after several experiences on television, I decided not to appear unless it was live broadcasting. When there is a recording, they cut, modify and change it, and this is a problem that exists in the print press as well. They do the interview and then write an article in which the words are distorted, so we must re-read the article and correct it.”

Other issues are specific to political regimes in each country.

In Palestine, for instance, mobility is curtailed, which impedes participation in conferences and workshops. “I did not participate in any conference in the West Bank because of my inability to reach it. I need a permit and approvals from the occupation. It is not easy,” an interviewee expressed. Another added that she stopped using Facebook due to the sensitivity of topics related to Palestine and her fear of the regime. She now uses Instagram and Twitter for that purpose.

In Egypt, an interviewee expressed that the regime monitors publications outside academia, especially op-eds,

10 See [https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field Office Arab States/Attachments/Publications/2020/12/Arabic\\_UNW\\_ERF\\_PolicyBriefs\\_Tunisia.pdf](https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2020/12/Arabic_UNW_ERF_PolicyBriefs_Tunisia.pdf).



which makes it especially hard to publish. “There are 60,000 journalists and academics in prison, including those who were imprisoned at the airport and people who have been in prison for years because of their research. I visit Egypt a lot ... so I try to maintain a safe space for me,” the grantee expressed. Academics who reside in other countries have better chances to write freely (e.g., Khaled Fahmi).

A grantee expressed that conducting research on the revolution is almost impossible: “Writing about the topic is hard, I usually write using a pseudonym or a different language.” She added, “There is a sensibility and problem related to the formulation of the idea to reach the audience too. This affects knowledge production.” The use of some platforms constitutes a problem because the user’s face is revealed. Twitter and Instagram are the best options because users resort to pseudonyms/other accounts. Another grantee argued that influencing the political decision is not possible directly, but it can be possible through society. “It is hard to develop a mechanism for that [from research to decision] ... the decision is always in the hands of the few.”

In Algeria, an interviewee considered that the most critical problem is that academic freedom is curtailed. “You can’t say everything you want frankly. There is a kind of deliberate marginalization of academics,” he expressed. Authoritarian regimes curtail freedoms, restrict participation, monitor topics, and restrict platforms.

In Tunisia, an interviewee considered that the rift between the researchers, the publics, and the government is influencing the translation of research and its dissemination to the public. This rift manifests in a corrupted system that favors the “same names for almost five years, those names were the same. We can get from this the level of corruption found in funding research projects. With all that, the findings of some research can be manipulated in order not to challenge the state authority,” that interviewee expressed.

Other grantees expressed that the problem is not the surveillance as much as the absence of a political will for change among those in power, which questions the usefulness of writing for a nonacademic end. In Lebanon, for instance, the usefulness of going beyond academia for specific publics was questioned, especially with the absence of a political will.

The majority of interviewees considered Lebanon to be pioneering in possessing open platforms such as Megaphone to engage the public and to have a network between different institutions. However, this openness was facing a corrupt political regime. “Our problem is not solutions and policies, nor the presentation of ideas. Our problem is the lack of the political will, the lack of the political will for change among those in power. Therefore, it seems like a waste of time and effort trying to convince this class. Thus, working on society and societal change at this stage is more important,” a grantee argues.

Grantees discussed the fragmented nature of elites in the Arab world forming categories that do communicate and exist outside the imaginary of the other. They expressed the complete separation between academics, the public, and politics, which led them to call for new plat-

forms for communication. “Knowledge is produced by some elites and also consumed by elites, but not by the public ... the public knows nothing about the produced knowledge,” a grantee expressed.

Scientific communities in the Arab world are believed by grantees to be weak and scattered. This is translated into crises of trust and accountability that aim to reproduce bureaucracies for capitalist aims. “There is a lack of cooperation and coordination between society, political society, the university, and the research centers. The cooperation can be created by a coordination mechanism,” a grantee stated. Another expressed that his work is mostly outside the university, attempting to find new platforms to disseminate anthropology to create associations important for the scientific community. “The scientific associations in the Arab world are weak and fragmented,” he added.

#### INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

The grantees reported experiencing administrative bottlenecks in academic institutions that require them to publish academically as part of their academic promotion and qualification. Efforts made beyond the university are unacknowledged, necessitating a compromise by researchers who must manage their academic publications and aspirations and publishing beyond “academia.”

Another factor concerns the absence of platforms that allow engagement with the public without having a political agenda and/or social networks to ensure access. Those platforms are not widely available either inside the university camps or in civil society. A grantee expressed that if the university does not procure a space to publish academically and internally, then how would it secure a space to go beyond? Another considered that the scarcity of platforms was further accentuated by the interests of the platforms in specific topics. For instance, one interviewee expressed that “in the urban field, there is no specialized newspaper/magazine interested in it. There are only newspapers that are interested in the political perspective. Therefore, writing from any other angle is not important and will not be published. In addition, if an article is published that contradicts the policy of governments, it may lead to problems.”

Civil society organizations that are thought to allow access have agendas and topic preferences. Grantees expressed that the “trendy” topics do not resonate with their interests. Some of those platforms do not accept a publication unless academics are within a specific party or institution and have social networks that allow them access. “Some of the magazines do not accept to publish anything unless you are a member of a specific party or institution,” a grantee expressed.

In other cases, policymakers guide topic preferences to align with what they want to work on. “There is a kind of trending topics you should publish on and make a change in the related policies. You must work from top to bottom, meaning the decision has to come from above and affects people from below,” a grantee expressed. Another considered that the national institutions create a specific ambience, theoretically framed, and researchers are obliged to follow it for approved proposals.

In other cases—in Tunisia, for instance—the state was blamed for being incapable of securing data despite its existence in the hands of some researchers, which is reflected later in the dissemination to specific publics: “this is crucial proof of the rupture/lack of cooperation ... this means, they did not allow access to data, therefore they will not hear you or discuss your research,” an interviewee claimed.

The relationship between academia and civil society was also considered a complex one. In an interview, the informant expressed that young researchers usually work with civil society and publish on their platforms to have the opportunity to be known and to move step by step to academia. “At least this allows them to stand out and become known on the academic level so step by step they turn to academic research,” a grantee expressed.

Even when there is an opportunity to publish, some feel not well trained to write for the larger public(s). To overcome this obstacle, they are expected to acquire those skills from nonofficial venues while learning how to use nonspecialized language.

Language was discussed as a barrier that separates the local from the global and embeds academics in one setting. This is what Sari Hanafi (2011) labels as “publish locally and perish globally vs. publish globally and perish locally.” In other cases, it is the opposite scenario, where the researcher uses another language due to the absence of “real and scientific instead of clientelist requirements/standards for publications,” a grantee expressed. Adding to that, a grantee considers that clientelism drives researchers to write in a language other than Arabic. In one case, an interviewee translated her article to Turkish because of the scarcity of opportunities to disseminate her research in Arabic. The use of another language “saved” researchers and allowed them to overcome political regime restrictions by publishing in an international language. “After the 2000s, the scientific journals opened for discourse about Palestine, especially also post-Black Lives Matter, that contradicts the Israeli discourse,” a grantee expressed.

On another note, grantees expressed the difficulty of writing in a different language, something that they consider necessary, due to weakness in the public educational system. That leads them to work on improving their language skills, but it never develops sufficiently to meet international standards.

## SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

Academics reported that socioeconomic factors impede publishing beyond academia. Those are related to their dilemma: follow a safe and traditional path that leads to academic and scientific success, or a risky path that does not always prove successful but puts them in a dialogical relationship with the public.

Another factor is the absence of support and funding to have a team working on research to distribute tasks so the main investigator would have time to participate in other tasks instead of doing many tasks at the same time. Many grantees focused on those logistical and economic challenges. Those include funding to travel to participate in workshops and conferences.

Finally, some grantees characterized the audience as being ineligible and uninterested in following and reading about research even in a nonacademic manner: “people do not read, they only check the titles,” due to their preoccupation with other priorities that result from the economic hardships of the Arab world. The general public “faces greater challenges than what is being published. There is no interest from the public, and this is not related to them, but [is] because there are more urgent and current life challenges,” an interviewee expressed. The public was further seen to be divided into subgroups, each needing a specific approach to be dealt with.

There is also a sort of enhancing professionalism related to the character of professional academics, in terms of their socialized ego having specific symbolic capital that needs to be preserved by detaching themselves from the public. A minority of academics considered that public engagement does not pertain to their imagined role as academics who “should” only study phenomena and publish for a specialized audience rather than pushing for intervention. “An academic shouldn’t come out with recommendations. It is not my job ... the researcher is like an artist who draws a painting, he does not give recommendations,” a grantee expressed.

## CONCLUSION

This article has provided insights into the research dissemination scene in the Arab world, looking at the different forms used by academics to translate their knowledge and create a dialogue with the public. With the use of public activities of research, it remains necessary to defy the trends of compartmentalization and fragmentation along the process of knowledge production and use. Epistemological pluralism and democratization of knowledge need solidarity development from the scientific community to break down the barriers that fragment research. This can be approached by supporting intermediary or brokers’ institutions and spaces where academics, policymakers, and the public(s) can collaborate, translate their research, and develop their reflexivity.

The publics in the Arab world are heterogeneous and disconnected from each other. This rupture between policymakers, activists, researchers, government organizations, and the lay public complexifies the models persisting in the Arab world. For policymakers and government organizations, the issue is not in the deficiency of knowledge as much as in the application of research and in moving beyond the findings to create a dialogue. Michel Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe (2011) have long insisted that the low impact of research is not necessarily due to the need for more research but to the need for more consultation between researchers and laypersons that can be organized in the form of hybrid forums.

The form of research dissemination of ACSS grantees remains significant but with little dialogical relationship with the public. Thus, it is closer to deficit and PUS models (in communication science), as there is a level of top-bottom explanation, yet there is no sufficiency in science. This

manifests in political and administrative challenges that increase the gap between the different publics. While interviews with many of the grantees demonstrate their awareness of the importance of moving toward the public engagement with science and technology (PEST) model, they do not trust policymakers.

Yet they are progressing toward public understanding of science (PUS) and PEST in the sense that their awareness of the predicaments and challenges they face with dissemination and their efforts in going beyond academia show the preliminary conversation between them from within academia. That can be the first step toward a PEST between them and the various publics. Most of the grantees expressed that despite the challenges, they look for alternative platforms or are members of civil society organizations where they employ at least one form of dissemination beyond academia.

In their chapter titled “The Demise of Public Social Science: Writing Op-Eds in Lebanese Newspapers,” Hanafi and Arvanitis (2016, chap. 10) show by a representative sample that academics contribute little to writing op-eds, which justifies their title. What is new with the ACSS grantees’ sample, compared to the work of Hanafi and Arvanitis, is four points:

- They diversify their outlets from classical newspapers (e.g., *Masr al-Yawm*, *Hespress*) to blogs (e.g., Mo’minoun without borders, Issam Fares Institute’s blog, OpenDemocracy).
- Demographically, more women and young researchers are contributing op-eds and blog posts, and some of them are doing more “organic public” social sciences, in the sense of Burawoy (i.e., engaging in initiatives that emerge from civic society), than “traditional public” social sciences (i.e., making their scientific knowledge available).
- More (half of them) are writing on a topic related to their research, using reflective and provocative styles; fewer of them are writing as citizens—that is, on topics not directly related to their research.
- Some of the grantees are activists at the same time. Reading their work, we did not feel that their activism was at the expense of the depth of their scholarship.

In terms of challenges, we have reduced the three factors we mentioned (political, institutional, and socioeconomic) to two issues: the lack of academic freedom in the Arab world and academics’ feeling that the public lacks interest in engaging with scientific expertise. We may find such challenges throughout the Global South, but they are particularly strong in the Arab world.

The most striking evidence of the lack of academic freedom is probably the way freedoms are studied in universities. Much literature written in the Arab world on this topic

is based on polls surveying the opinion of faculty members regarding freedom, resulting in statistical measures that conceal more than reveal their tragic current situation of lack of academic freedom (see Buhaimeed 2007). These studies often lack real examples, common sense, systematic observation, and an ethnographic approach.<sup>11</sup> Rare are the statements that reveal the lack of academic freedom, but we can find some. Press articles, the reports of human rights organizations, and selected autobiographies (Abdulla 2014; Ibrahim 2013) appear to be the only sound reference for describing and analyzing the state of academic freedom.

In Saudi Arabia, Ahmed Al-Issa (2010), a former president of a Saudi university, diagnoses an “irrevocable divorce” between the university and the currents of thought and culture. According to him, “the university’s administrators and officials in the Ministry of Higher Education are reluctant to give the universities an opportunity to take part in social debates or the liberty to deal with sensitive issues. They prevented the universities from taking a stand on any case.” This is clearly visible in the analysis we conducted on the topics treated in two Saudi academic journals in social sciences. Ultimately, the lack of academic freedoms prevents creativity, even if some courageous scholars are defying censorship. The university cannot be turned into a center stimulating renewal and innovation.

In the Middle Ages, the European university was established as an extraterritorial space of exception, meaning it was exempted from state laws. It had the freedom to criticize the community, including the ecclesiastical authority. It did not lose contact with society and its needs, and it has maintained this status until today. The issues at stake are more salient for Arab universities to create such a space.

For the general public, some grantees highlight the lack of interest of this public to engage in conversation with researchers. The dialogical relationship will not be effective if understood to be only an end-production conversation rather than an actual communication from the first step.

Rare are the cases where interviewees demonstrate such dialogue. One of these few voices was an innovative methodology where people and the lay public participated in the making of a film that recounts their stories. They spent six to seven hours filming, and the data collectors were from within the community. What we are suggesting is an actual conversation that necessitates an actual acknowledgment from both sides that they need to move toward a more aware society. The reliance of academics on social media, op-eds, and mostly workshops and conferences proves that this involvement and understanding of each other is in the process of development on both sides.

Looking at the Arab world, it seems that redefining research activity by focusing on knowledge translation and use for local relevance can reduce political risk by making the public at large an ally in facing the arbitrary decision-

11 This positivist trend was also criticized by Thomas Piketty in his famous book *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (2014): to understand unequal distribution and inheritance in nineteenth-century France and England, he considers Honoré de Balzac and Jane Austen the best references, comparable to Karl Marx and the economists of the time.

making process of the authoritarian state. Our findings concur with what is called knowledge production mode 2.0 (Gibbons et al. 1994), where attention is paid not only to scientific robustness but also to social robustness. In the words of Helga Nowotny: “There is no one way as to how to organize public debates. Once it is recognised, however, that the outcome will be qualitatively improved, as well as the political risk reduced, if scientific knowledge and technical expertise are made socially more robust, we can work on finding the most efficient means of achieving it” (Nowotny and Leroy 2009, 56). However, this will not be an easy task if the various publics will not engage in conversation.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

We state that no competing interests exist.

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