

# EMBRACING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

*Dr Joe Khalil, Associate Professor in Residence, Communication Program, Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q), a partner university of Qatar Foundation, is an expert on Arab media. He is particularly interested in the role of young people in the region to influence and have a voice in current events in this increasingly interconnected era of social media – and how this will shape the future development of this region. He previously worked for more than 15 years as a director, executive producer, and consultant with major Arab TV channels. Dr Khalil is also a recipient of research fellowship from the London School of Economics and a grantee of the Arab Council for Social Sciences.*

**Q Is it difficult to engage with students when teaching in today's fast-moving media landscape?**

**A** No, it isn't. Students are eager to know the history, theory, and practice of media. My relationship with the students is amazing, because I teach media studies and production, so I'm engaged with them conceptually and practically. I am always inspired by what they're doing and what they are thinking. My area of research is in the field of youth, and their relationship with the media. I can't think of a better place in the world to focus on this topic than in the Middle East. What seems to be slightly different in this region, and what is worth paying attention to, is the speed with which things are changing for young people. The uptake of technology and media practices is remarkable. At the same time, it's fascinating how rap music and graffiti, for example, are becoming part of young people's self-expressive tools. It's this kind of environment and technological infrastructure that is helping students to leapfrog previous generations and access material in an unprecedented manner. My engagement within this field and in my classes explores the motivations behind these developments and how students approach media. Their engagement, coupled with how quickly the media landscape can change, keeps me very involved. People may change the tools used, but the need for self-expression is still there. The content may shift from year to year but the eagerness for students to go out and tell their story remains.

**Q Has your research focus area changed to keep up with the speed of technological change within the media?**

**A** My research is concerned with why and how young people used various forms of media to express themselves. When I started my research in 2005, I was interested in the use of SMS cellphone text messaging. Since then, I've witnessed how young people began to use what were then considered emerging media platforms, such as YouTube, to present personalized material outside the boundaries of regular broadcast media. These questions led an NU-Q course I designed: 'Alternative Media in the Middle East'. In this class we survey different ways that alternative media play a role in the broader Middle East. This past summer I was proud to see two students present related research at an international conference, both of which stemmed from the class. The way I describe the class is that it's putting a name to something that students are already doing for themselves, intuitively. We study the various ways that people try to express themselves, for example how

certain cultures have used online media to present and preserve their language and heritage. We go through various ways of analyzing and understanding these tools, and their impact in a historical context. Using the analytical frameworks that we discuss in class, the students then apply them to their own environment. Such applications are leading to fascinating results including conference papers, publications, and documentaries.

**Q Can you tell us why you decided to design your NU-Q class, and why you felt that the university provided an open environment to encourage self-expression among your students?**

**A** During my five years at NUQ, I've designed or co-designed 10 classes with conceptual, analytical, and practical outcomes. As someone who has worked and taught in the region, I have my finger on the pulse. My courses respond to the university's needs, the students' interests, and my teaching abilities. The classes, I've developed become an open environment for understanding a broad range of topics from global media's impact on local cultures to the relationship between urban landscape and media. These experiences extend beyond the classroom. For example, students from my television program development class are now collaborating with colleagues from the television directing class to develop an online YouTube channel for untapped performing talents in Doha. What started as a class assignment has developed into a collaborative peer-to-peer project. Of course, these activities would not have been feasible without the university's leadership and support.

**Q What kind of legacy do you want to leave at NU-Q in your teaching and student engagement within the field of media production?**

**A** I still have a lot to accomplish before talking about any legacy. For now I'm very much rewarded when I hear feedback about the kind of productions my students are involved in, and the kind of research they are presenting. 'Legacy' is a big word, especially in terms of one's ownership of their legacy – as you know, teaching like media is a collaborative work. I believe that you put your research out there and allow others to interpret it for themselves. In the final outcome of my research, I want to showcase what young people in this region stand for, and how they represent themselves.