

It's all about Al Jazeera Arabic!



EVERYONE hates a free press." That was the best quote from a legendary journalist whom I admired. He was incarcerated for many years, labelled as a communist or worse, but he never wavered in his belief that a free press is the bedrock of any democracy.

Fast forward many years after his demise, and he would have been a dinosaur in the almost unrecognisable and unpredictable world of media today. People are saying the so-labelled "mainstream media" is fast becoming an alternative one.

Dissemination of news is being democratised as never before. New dynamics are changing the media companies. They have to adapt or face the consequences.

Some argue that the Internet is a seductive medium. But then the Fourth Estate is still powerful. Mainstream news is still the choice of many. There are people who still read the newspapers; news channels are still dominating the airwaves and, in fact, are more intense in ferocity and competition.

So the demand by its Arab neighbours for Qatar to close its hugely popular Al Jazeera Arabic is not at all shocking to media-watchers. When it started in 1996, AJA was something of a surprise to the Arab world: a TV station broadcast from Doha, bringing news and commentaries without fear and favour, reporting without constraint and introducing the concept of "free press" for the first time in the Arab world. It was shocking as it was an eye-opener.

Its motto, "an opinion and a counter opinion", speaks volumes of its position. It changed the media landscape entirely—thus altering the worldviews,

role of social media in framing the protest in major Arab capitals during the infamous Arab Spring.

The role of people's activism using social platforms, too, must not be forgotten. But it is important to understand the impact of technologies—in the form of social media and AJA—in fanning Arabs' discontent.

It is about a war of narratives in the Middle East. But the fact is, AJA is not all rosy and clean. It has its problems too.

It was labelled as one-sided, not objective, even bigoted. It has been criticised for allegations of bias and its penchant for allowing controversial figures to appear on the screen to boost ratings. Every country in the Arab world has a grudge against AJA.

So, understandably, AJA is getting everyone among the ruling elites nervous. It all boils down to AJA's impact and outreach. The rest, I believe, is just academic.

The closure of AJA was the sixth item, out of 13, bullet-pointed by Qatar's neighbours as demands to re-establish relations between them. For Qatar, it wasn't easy to comply. It is a Catch-22 situation for them.

For its mighty neighbours, it is payback time. Nosy AJA is destroying the social fabric of Arab societies. Close, or bear the consequences. Qatar is rich but a mere dot in the Arab sphere.

We can easily find fault with AJA. It is not perfect, but it is within such imperfections that media organisations operate. If Qatar's neighbours get their way, it will be an excuse by many more regimes in the world to demand closure of news organisations for being "unfriendly" to them.

Yes, no one likes a free press, my mentor once said.

How true!

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perspectives and even the psyche of the Arab people. The Arabs were, to say the least, jolted from their slumber by new and fresh content on TV in comparison to their state-owned channels.

AJA was a dewdrop in the Arab morning, bringing freshness, boisterousness and with it excitement and awe. It was audacious, no-holds-barred and, most of all, entertaining. Its rating went sky-high and its influence among the populace was gaining momentum every single day.

Little wonder that Fouad Ajami once wrote that AJA was "the Hollywoodisation of news"

in the Arab world. One media observer acknowledged the fact that AJA is "the best thing that has happened to the Arab world."

Suddenly, the Arab world sees something beyond their normal prism. It brings about new awareness and consciousness. In a region where people never see democracy at work, AJA opens a new discourse on freedom or what freedom entails. A blogger, Nehad Ismail, writing for *Huffpost*, opined that "the advent of Al Jazeera was like a media earthquake that opened the gates of freedom of expression and democracy."

To say that AJA was partly responsible for the "Arab Spring" is an understatement. And yes, AJA helped topple dictators from Libya to Tunisia. And the rumblings on the Arab streets and later on, mass demonstrations, were credited to the channel.

But lest we forget, the Arab societies have been changing dramatically, too, over these last many decades. Education has played a part and exposure to the outside world too has created a fertile venue for a sea change of attitude.

More critical and assertive young Arabs are emerging. And we must also not forget the

The burden of guilt

TILOTTOMA*

So much has been said and written about sexual harassment of late. Much of it attributed to sexual harassment on campuses of colleges and universities, particularly in North America, and left the voice of the abused in silence. In all these writings, less has been said about the hyper-sexualised society where we often overlook the importance of consent when it comes to sexual behaviour. Thoughts get tangled in trying to analyse on whom does the blame of such abuses lie.

The shame, stigma, fear of retribution and judgment by friends and strangers alike, all contribute to the fog that inhibits a victim's ability to process the abuse. I know this because it is precisely this fog, which has led me to share and try to articulate my own experience of sexual harassment.

My own, recent experience of being sexually harassed at a university is not unlike that of many others. Indeed, I suspect my reaction, my inability to process, focus and articulate my thoughts on the subject are shared by hundreds, perhaps thousands of other students in campuses across the world. I also suspect there are but very few women who have not been the subject of sexual harassment at colleges and universities.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of my experience is to process the culture of victim-blaming that followed my sexual harassment. Victim-blaming is both intentionally and unintentionally embedded in our society, especially where the victim is a female. As a foreign student, I recently graduated from a university in a country where the culture and environment were supposed to nurture peace and compassion. However, the "perfect utopia" turned out to be my worst nightmare.

Shortly after starting the new academic term, a friend and I accepted an invitation to lunch, where we were sexually harassed by a fellow classmate. My experience of victim-blaming came in many forms. In the form of other students insensitively asking questions like "why?". It came in the form of people sending well-intentioned messages of support, but wrongly assuming incorrect facts about the incident. Assumptions drawn largely from over-active imaginations and

nature—relationships, sexual orientation, alcohol consumption, etc.—all in an effort to prove our credibility and mental sanity.

Victim-blaming did not end with such intrusive tests. Rather, it continued to follow a trail where lawyers wanted us to prove, six months after the incident, that it did indeed happen and our stories corroborated. I assumed, albeit wrongly, that all this would lead down a path where I would find empathy and due compassion for my

single day to face people and be judged by others for an incident I did not have control over. It took me a year to realise it was not my fault that I had undergone such an experience—if it was not me or my friend it could have been someone else. A year of mistrusting my own feelings and thoughts almost made me feel like being alive without a soul.

All these feelings were attributed because as a victim you are doubted, mistrusted and subjected to having

My voice has got lost somewhere amongst the noise of people discussing my personal life, appropriating blame, trying to make sense of an incident they know little about.

Schedules are prepared, appointments made and scripts distributed detailing how you are to behave after you have been sexually harassed. They will tell you how much you are allowed to cry; how much you can, and possibly should react. You are told how much you are

process by other means. Is it any wonder why so many victims remain silent after such experiences?

Our university preached about its zero-tolerance approach to incidents of sexual harassment, yet proved to be unprepared to handle such cases. Does the "process" of victim-blaming contribute to a system where the perpetrators are given the benefit of the doubt or escape punishment; where victims have to prove their innocence?

We failed over and over again to affirm that consent is the key in engaging in sexual acts of any sort. Every individual has the right over his or her own body. Every individual has the right to say "no".

Doesn't every victim have the right to be believed? To be heard, to be treated with dignity, and to seek justice?

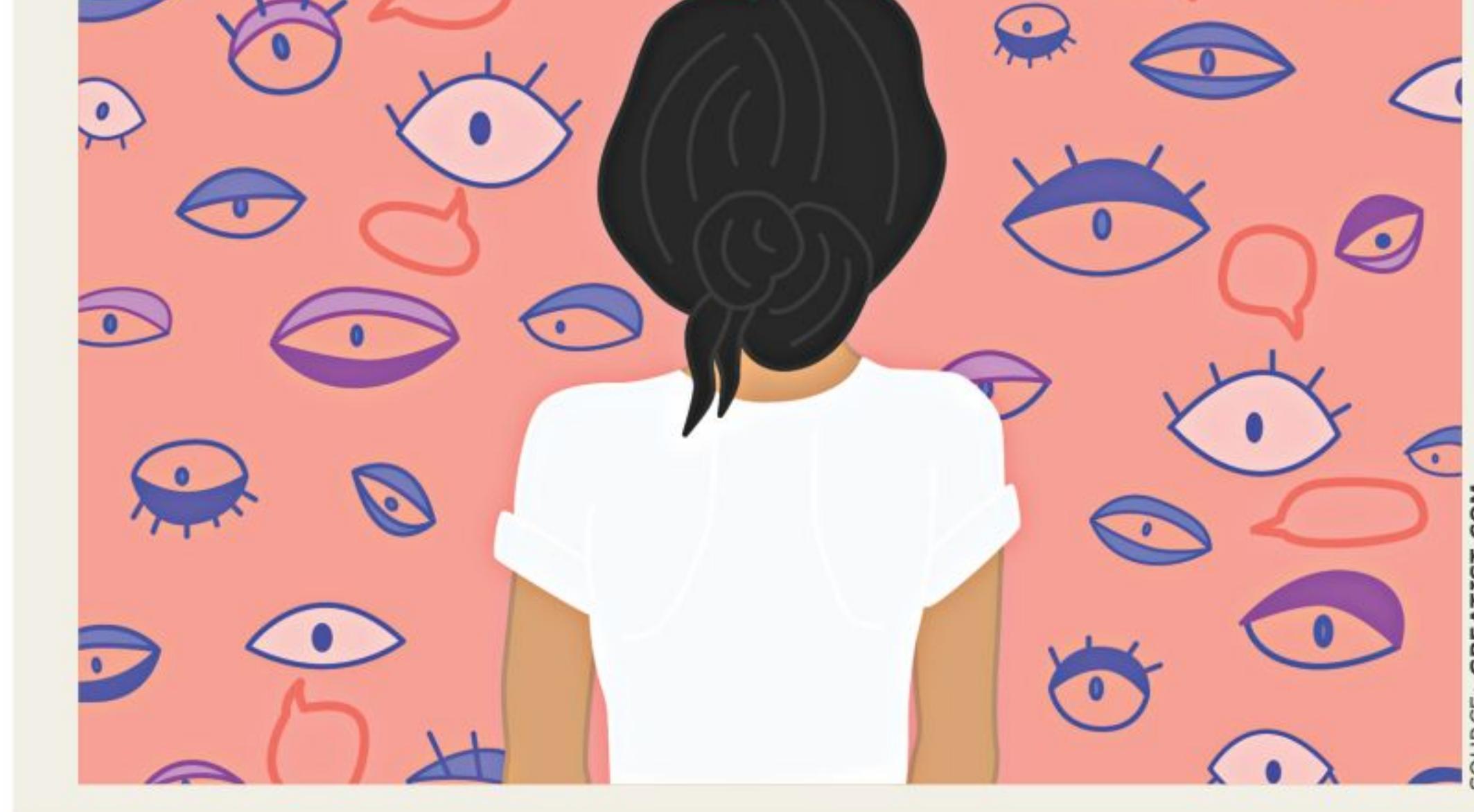
It does not matter what you wear, what your level of alcohol

consumption is, how many friends you were with, what your sexual orientation is, or how frequently you engage in sexual relationships; these are personal choices. They don't excuse unwanted attention or sexual harassment.

We need to focus on the victim: on the process of validation and on the process of healing. There needs to be a focus on improved support structures and safe, confidential spaces where there is no judgment and no guilt. Victims should get to decide the time, place and space to be heard, to communicate. My healing process started through the support of a small group who neither asked nor pressurised me to share, but supported me throughout the time by being there in silence, and bestowing love, support and care; by finding small moments to assure that with them I have a safe place to live, breathe and shine.

The writer is a graduate student.

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A WORD A DAY



HIRAETH
noun (Welsh)

Homesickness for a place you can't return to, or that never was.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Antenna alternative
- 2 Bike for two
- 3 Do a yard job
- 33 Omate vase
- 6 Some coasters
- 34 "—Believer"
- 11 "Manhattan" director
- 12 Lama's land
- 13 Warming wrap
- 14 Be penitent
- 15 Attack command
- 16 Belief, in brief
- 18 Quick bite
- 19 Tick off
- 20 Bigwig, briefly
- 21 Puppy sound
- 22 Flower part
- 24 Account
- 25 Nine-sided shape
- 27 Ray of films
- 29 Bike for two
- 30 Come into view
- 31 Be important
- 33 Software buyers
- 37 Old hand
- 38 Congo's former name
- 39 Tick off
- 40 Left at sea
- 41 Must have
- 42 Mink's cousin
- 43 T-shirt choice
- 44 Must have
- 45 Poultry buy
- 46 "King of the Trumpet"
- 47 "Three Dog Night" hit
- 48 Actor Ayres
- 49 Pep up
- 50 Envelope item
- 51 Set fire to
- 52 McCartney/Wonder hit
- 53 Disavowal
- 54 Treeless plain
- 55 "My Way" singer
- 56 Cow call
- 57 Cargo unit
- 58 Tolkien wizard
- 59 Warrior woman
- 60 Find
- 61 Bikini
- 62 Attended
- 63 Grained
- 64 "Act Lay"
- 65 "Daded Renal"
- 66 "Exile Erect Tents"
- 67 "Dosed"

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

