

Press Release

Special session of NU-Q Qatar Media Industries Forum at Qumra

To meet demand for regional content, ‘create, collaborate and ensure local relevance,’ industry experts say

Doha, Qatar – 10 March, 2015: Creating content for the Arab world might not have a one-size-fits-all formula, but industry experts at a special session of the Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q) Qatar Media Industries Forum held at Qumra, a new event by the Doha Film Institute, offered a practical ‘to-do’ list to meeting the demand for regional content.

Their recommendations can be summed up in five key tasks, which are relevant as much for emerging entertainment content creators as for industry stakeholders. These are: create more content, collaborate to improve quality, polish your storytelling, ensure local relevance and build alternative spaces for content appreciation.

Addressing the audience, Fatma Al Remaihi, CEO of the Doha Film Institute, said: “The entertainment industries in the Arab region are at various stages of development – some countries have established healthy local industries while others, like Qatar, are still in their infancy. We believe that it is vital to understand the beliefs and opinions of people in the region in order to accurately inform all those who play a part in paving the way ahead. That is why we partnered with Northwestern University in Qatar last year to undertake the Entertainment Media Use Survey, a first of its kind study for our region.”

She added: “Part of our role as a film institute – and one of many cultural organisations in the region playing a part in the development of our film and media industries – is to contribute to the bank of knowledge available to policy makers, media professionals, cultural organisations and content producers to help them make informed decisions for the future. By coming together through gatherings like Qumra, we are able to continue the dialogue around content for and about the Arab world. I thank our colleagues at NU-Q for their ongoing partnership and commitment to the development of the film and media industries.”

Welcoming the audience, Mary Dedinsky, Director of the Journalism Program and Associate Professor in Residence at NU-Q, said: “A core part of our mission is to produce research that provides a better understanding of the region’s media consumers, creators, and the industry as a whole. A good example of that research is the study discussed at our panel.”

Introducing the session, the moderator Joe Khalil, Associate Professor in Residence at NU-Q, highlighted the key findings of a six-nation survey across the Middle East and North Africa region on ‘Entertainment Media Use in the Middle East’ conducted by NU-Q and the Doha Film

Institute. “There is enough evidence that Arabs increasingly want to see and hear people who look like them and sound like them,” he said.

Citing the survey, Mr. Khalil pointed out that “two-thirds of the respondents prefer to watch films that portray their own culture and would like more entertainment to be based on their culture and history,” and sought the expert view on why the industry falls short in meeting the people’s aspirations.

“People aren’t putting up [content],” observed Khalifa Al-Haroon, Founder of the iLoveQatar Network. “They are not making it; maybe they do not have the confidence.” His advice, therefore, was to just “put it up” and the people would watch. His own experience of creating YouTube content about “Qatari culture for expats in English” has gained over 1 million hits with just 38 episodes. But the key, he said, “is to create locally relevant content.”

The view was reiterated by Mohammed Makki, Director and Showrunner of the “Takki” series, who said, “Takki succeeded because it is simple and relatable to the people. Today’s audience is smart and to reach them, do not seek what they want but start from inside. Write where it hurts; what is bad for the heart is good for art.”

Mr. Makki also attributed his success in finding an “alternative space” to take his content to the people. “I realized I was passionate about films but in Saudi sadly there are no cinemas. YouTube was booming and I simply connected the dots.”

Creating alternative spaces, indeed, is what Hania Mroue, Director of Metropolis Cinema, does. About ten years ago, realizing the demand for indie and arthouse films, Metropolis was set up as an alternative venue. But it is a long road to take, she explained. “When we started, we were very happy to have 500 admissions for the films we showed; today it is five to seven thousand, and it will grow. Not every festival film works in a commercial cinema but it is important to create alternative spaces.”

To applause from the audience, she added: “The industry should also accept responsibility for shaping demand, and not simply cater only to what the audience wants. When we keep showing festival films, even if we accept losses in the beginning, we can change the local demand.”

Fadi Ismail, General Manager of O3 Productions (MBCGroup), pointed out that television still continues to be the mass media leader, and in this space, dramas and films dominate. He said that there is a profusion of local content and “the worst Arabic drama series will get higher ratings than the best US series,” but the challenge lies in the quality of the productions.

Selim El Azar, Chief Executive Officer of Qatar-based distributor Gulf Film, said that ultimately it all comes down to “storytelling.” He explained that despite speaking one language, the Arab entertainment market is fragmented led by cultural sensitivities and viewer preference for the dialect used. What works in one market, therefore, does not have acceptance in another.

“We do not dub movies; all we provide are subtitles. But I can say that even other language films do well if the story is good.” A good story can thus serve as the bridge to travel across the Arab world.

Mr. Ismail said that the region faces a deficit in creative storytelling because there is less collaboration. “The US series work because of the sophistication of the writing. Collaboration, therefore, is the most important thing. The content creation industry in the Arab world is chaotic and the practical way for storytelling to develop is through writing rooms.”

Now in its sixth edition, NU-Q Qatar Media Industries Forum is a bi-annual gathering of industry leaders. On April 15, NU-Q will release findings from the 2015 edition of their annual media use survey, which will place special emphasis on news, information, and social media.

Concluding on Wednesday, March 11, Qumra hosts more than 100 leading film industry professionals who came together for a series of bespoke mentorship labs, master classes, meetings and film screenings, to nurture regional talent. In all, 29 projects in various stages of production were chosen to participate in the intensive industry programme designed to take them to the next stage.

-ENDS-

About Qumra:

Qumra is an initiative that seeks to provide mentorship, nurturing and hands-on development for filmmakers from Qatar and around the world, alongside a series of screenings for Doha audiences featuring films by international masters and recipients of support from the Institute.

** The Arabic term ‘qumra’ is popularly said to be the origin of the word ‘camera’, and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.*

About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

Doha Film Institute

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