INTERVIEWS

Free Expression

The Arab Digital Expression Foundation in conversation with Laura Cugusi

Doodles Workshop: A short drawing workshop for children aged 4-9 to stimulate the creative imagination and develop illustration and narrative skills, lead by comic artist Ahmed Nagy. Provided under Attribution by Creative Commons: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/

The Arab Digital Expression Foundation (ADEF) is an Arab platform that believes knowledge production and free expression contribute radically to building and strengthening engaged communities. Through an on-going process of collaboration between techies, artists, activists, youth leaders, educationalists

and others, ADEF unfolded as a hub for knowledge production and sharing, striving to develop and promote collaborative models and processes for the production and sharing of knowledge in a quest to contribute to an evolving Arab identity. Eight years after its inception, ADEF has accumulated an inspiring body of knowledge on issues and practices around digital expression, incitement of self-expression, collaboration, open-source models of development, Arabization of education practices and others. This transcript is based on a series of recorded interviews conducted by Laura Cugusi with Ranwa Yehia, Maysara Abdulhaq and Kinda Hassan in March 2014 in Cairo, Egypt.

Since 2007 ADEF, which also translates as 'add' in Arabic, has trained 360 youths aged 11 to 16 from eight different Arab countries in various forms of digital expression including cinema, sound and music, graphic design, web design, animation, sports, arts and crafts, and web 2.0 within a summer camp model. ADEF has also trained 130 Arab trainers (aged 20 to 30) from Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Sudan and Syria in digital arts and various training methodologies for the purpose of expression. Young professionals are trained on open source software in the different audio-visual media and participate in enriching discussions over online sharing and collaboration and the roles of individuals and groups.

Internally, ADEF's practice lies in knowledge production by developing tools, software and open content management systems such as Pandora, Open Street Map, Open Biblio and Wiki. They also focus on mapping and developing curricula in alternative media, social media and self expression practices for trainers, community workers and school teachers. As individual experts in different fields they collaborate on drafting laws proposals, policy papers, research papers and articles to advocate for freedom of expression and open source technology. Their outreach activities include the summer camps programme; DECA (Digital Expression Community Area – a local youth empowerment open space in Moqattam, Cairo); a localities mapping project; the development of media archives and independent artists archive; among other various knowledge dissemination and learning activities.

In an attempt to describe ADEF's activities co-founder Ali Shaath spoke of the space as both a factory and a store – where promoting and advocating open source software happens only through its in-house development. Promoting alternative education and free expression, could only happen by developing educational curricula internally and teaching them during the camps. Similarly

promoting Arabic online and open content could only be achieved through developing Arabization tools and actively contributing to Wikipedia in Arabic.

Laura Cugusi: Can you speak a bit about the genesis of ADEF?

Ranya Yehia: The whole process of founding ADEF was very organic since it was started in 2006. We knew what we wanted to do, but we didn't know how. We had five or six months of in-depth conversations with people whose views we have a lot of respect for. This network of communication was very fluid from the beginning and has been continuously expanding. We had this obsession to go deeper and deeper and collect suggestions in this context of shared values and passions – and the conversations never really stopped. We all felt strongly about this project, as it was an attempt to articulate our dreams. It was something that we all shared regardless of our diverse backgrounds. We shared personal experiences that had an impact on our individual growth and we felt a responsibility to make this happen. So we thought we had to find a way to transmit this to children.

Radio skills and social media workshop, Day one.
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LC: What has it been like operating in an organic and inclusive structure?

Maysara Abdulhaq: We are experimenting all the time with how to work with each other, and by not following a model – not even a horizontal one – for a peer-to-peer kind of relationship. Nevertheless, there is always a hidden

hierarchy that emerges spontaneously, even if roles are not fixed. ADEF is a fluid organization in the sense that it gets constantly disassembled and reconfigured.

But thinking about this, I would change the question into: does it work or not? There is no single structure that works forever and for everyone. Maybe a structure works for one task. If we apply traditional assessment systems that rely on the same logic of traditional hierarchical organizations with clear goals and performance standards, then it would be difficult to say if what we do works or not. We are well aware that too much freedom is difficult to handle. It is more difficult to be responsible and committed without someone deciding things for you.

RY: I found it quite easy to work organically because I was not an expert in any of those fields (technology, open source, education), but I used my knowledge in other fields and my experience as a journalist to create connections and mobilize resources. I was the focal point in terms of the coordination of this ongoing discussion, and I felt almost selfish that I was getting so much from this exchange. It has been a tremendous learning experience and I benefitted enormously from being exposed to such an inspiring and diverse group of people.

Every year the proposition is somehow different and we have always been committed to change. There were years in which someone said, 'why don't we do it exactly like last year, it worked so well!' But why not try different things? We realized we could use this as our experimental foundation. It is just who we are and it was natural for us to adapt the institution to our needs and not the other way around. It's still a mess by the way, to keep balancing and negotiating all these aspects internally.

Kinda Hassan: A space like DECA that is always in contact with the public cannot be un-organized: you need to be trustworthy and you need to have a schedule. I had to figure out a task distribution system because basically everybody was doing everything. An organic division of responsibility doesn't allow you to come up with an idea and have a team execute it. Information needs to be accessible to all, so we developed an online management system: logistics, media, and database of participants. If anyone falls out, the information is all there. I had to figure out many things intuitively, but I also had an urge to visualize the organic structure by mapping relationships and roles.

Continuous feedback and accessibility of data made it possible to build on and repeat successful activities and develop new ones. The problems don't lie in the fact that the organization is organic, but rather in the lack of documentation. Even challenges, halts and conflicts can be documented so we could develop strategies to make sure it does not happen again. If the knowledge and the idea both stay in the head of one person, nothing moves. Only if it spreads and is shared, can the organization and community benefit from it. That is why we love Wiki so much: we document and archive pretty much everything.[1]

LC: How did ADEF grow over time?

RY: We are working with children: there can't be a bigger responsibility. In 2011, we came to realize that accumulating all this knowledge and being able to impact only 80 kids every year is ridiculous. So we started to explore ways to expand our impact. But all this work comes back to us in so many ways that you could never expect. There is so much of that impact that we will never even know about.

Ali Shaath, facilitator for an open source audio clip editing session, following the tasks and method implemented by participants.
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That year, we acknowledged that our strongest achievement in terms of impact had been on the children who took part in camps but were not 15 anymore and thus were not eligible to participate again but they wanted to continue anyway, carving a role for themselves in a new configuration that they developed

autonomously, with our guidance. They were the ones who knew the camp better than us and anyone else. They became group leaders and this role was established as an organic response, not because of a formal assessment, but rather as the outcome of a continuous process of fine-tuning. Every year, we have six or eight more group leaders. They find it very empowering: seeing their suggestions being implemented. We were able to see that the sense of ownership grew even stronger in them. Even if we were not very convinced with their suggestions, we felt we needed to try them out.

LC: Did you develop any kind of criteria for choosing new members in the organization?

MA: During Shaath's previous business experience he had had quite an interesting relationship with his employees. He was more concerned with human and moral relationships, rather than with quantifiable profit.

Once we hired an IT expert and the relationship didn't work at all. It wasn't fruitful for him or for us. But then he quit and started organizing itinerant IT training in rural Egypt travelling with a bike. I see this as a priceless impact in our field. This is the larger goal we aim for and in the future we might collaborate again in different capacities.

People get hired not only for their specific capabilities but also for their vision, for the way in which they are personally involved in the mission, and the way these visions coincide. This way, we don't need to motivate people, as they are using ADEF to pursue their own aspirations. Of course there is a fundamental affinity of values and shared principles and goals, but this doesn't mean that there is agreement. In fact, there is a lot of conflict and the challenge is confronting that diversity of opinions through in-depth discussions. Through this constant self-reflective practice we always redraw the borders of how much we want to be involved in a certain task, project or role. Then it becomes everybody's responsibility to find an efficient way of mediating individual aspirations and collective desires and cooperating within this grey zone.

RY: Some of those that we proposed to join our team were those with whom we collaborated previously on different projects. The network and the team have grown significantly since we started. There is a core team of highly skilled and experienced members, but it is not only us who are looking for people – people also choose us and come to us on their own initiative.

We had an important realization related to freedom of expression: we found out that the issue was quite problematic with trainers, as children are freer and more comfortable with expressing themselves than the adults that are supposed to teach them. So we realized that one primary criteria of choice for trainers was selecting people who have already gone through a personal journey of self-discovery and have somehow found their voice. Someone capable of guiding young people to find a 'space' and to get that unique voice out through learning basic skills and different 'languages', or using different tools.

LC: Who is ADEF's audience?

KH: ADEF's audiences are quite differentiated: there is a group that is interested in training and technical support; a group of mainly young people who are interested in art; and a group that sees ADEF as a local networking space and just habitually come to visit, hang out, have chats and see what we are up to. You can tell they feel they belong here and consider it a safe space where they can really express themselves and discuss ideas. This is a group that we feel we can build with because of their strong connection with the place. There is also a group of semi-professionals who see ADEF as a way to develop their craft and grow professionally. They basically lead the space and use the skills of the team (sound engineers, video artists and so on) to develop their artistic forms through our facilities and technical expertise.

MA: Our relationship with the audience is quite extreme and it is informed by the way we operate. It is not just a claim of being flexible. We don't use feedback for evaluation purposes. We use it in order to learn how to work better and benefit from a fruitful relationship with our audiences; to see how things evolve and how they become as they are. The process is as important as the conclusions (which are always temporary, anyway).

RY: We diversify our activities as a response to different audiences. Our focus is the region. We are not called Arab Digital Expression by chance. What is exciting is that we don't know about the future because we work organically and we are constantly programming, thinking and changing and this is the core of our work. Don't misunderstand me – we do have strategic planning. We actually over plan, but we are ready to abandon anything that we don't consider a priority or that proves itself unsuccessful. 40 per cent of our time is not planned, so we can afford to be responsive to what happens on the ground, to tendencies and events. With the accumulation of our different experiences, we have learned how to follow our instincts by identifying what feels right and what feels urgent: this

helps us to select many long term plans as well as things that we can't go ahead with at the same time.

LC: How will the changing nature of audiences challenge, if at all, the long-term sustainability of arts institutions?

ADEF door.
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KH: All cultural organizations can afford to depend, in part, on the audience's support. It's a sort of mutual responsibility, an interdependence that measures the closeness between the organization and its public. It is a give and take system. It's not only about the amount of cash needed to implement an activity: for example, someone is making a film and using our sound engineers and our studio to record the sound of his film and in exchange he gives a filmmaking workshop twice a week to kids for two months. I think this model can be quite successful and efficient.

In the future, I see a need to expand this rich network and reinforce the regional presence. We have the capacity, the resources and the motivation for doing so and I think it's our role to facilitate regional collaborations and push systematic mutual exchange. What's missing in the Arab world is 'thinking big' and not just focusing on the local dimension. We need to think of collaborations by facilitating connections, distribution of archives and replicability of projects themselves, linking projects that are alike and expanding their scope on a regional level.

MA: One essential element of our mission (open source, distribution of knowledge) is archives and the value system that is integrated within it: openness, freedom, and accessibility. How do we change? How do we evaluate our performance?

The key is the archive. We do archives, for others, as part of our activities and fundamental projects. But we also do archives as a practice, as a tool for our own work. People share content for different reasons. Things that seem to be buried in the archive might acquire a completely different meaning and value in a different context. It will still have power, though a different kind of power. Sustainability also lies in distribution. We are looking at semantic webs. We are thinking about the possibility of synching archives, of developing technologies that allow archives to read each other's data and aggregate, categorize. The future and sustainability, even if it might sound banal, it's by changing, again, by making use and activating the archive as a learning process.

Ranwa Yehia is Iraqi Lebanese, she was born in Nigeria and grew up in Lebanon. Yehia is a journalist who has worked in several Arab countries acting as a correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, Cairo Bureau, and as regional Editor for the German news agency Deutsche Presse Agentur. With her husband Ali Shaath, and a few other activists, they founded the Arab Digital Expression Foundation (ADEF).

Kinda Hassan is an independent visual and sound artist. She completed her Master's degree in Fine Arts at ALBA (Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts) in July 2007, and has benefited from numerous scholarships and internships among them from ENSBA, AudioTakes, and Istituto Statale D'Arte. She combines visual arts and audio creations, along with her video work, which has been selected for numerous international festivals.

Since February 2008, she has been a founding member and the executive manager in Lebanon of the pan-Arab record label eka3, promoting original Arabic music in the region (www.eka3.org). Hassan has exhibited her artwork in a number of local and international festivals and art galleries, including Transmediale and Fair Play Festivals in Berlin (Yet Another Shot screening), Metropolis Cinema during 'Video Works' – Beirut (Come As I Rise screening), Al Riwaq Gallery – Bahrain (Corps de Villeexhibition), City Of Women – Slovenia (Du Religieux à la Séduction exhibition) and MEASAF –

Greece (8 days and war exhibition). During 2014, Hassan will be holding the position of Director of the Digital Expression Community Area at the Arab Digital Expression Foundation (arabdigitalexpression.org).

Maysara Abdulhaq has a computer science background and experience of working in system administration in the private sector, academic institutions and within civil society. He is a FOSS advocate interested in opening content in both human and machine readable and accessible digital venues. He describes himself as a LUG member and Wikipedia evangelist, who has been 'captivated by the extraordinary experience of engaging with young people for the last 5 years at the Arab Digital Expression Camps and the horizon of possibilities it opened in connection with both previous and later training and engagement experiments'.

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[1] See: http://deca.staging.arabdigitalexpression.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Cugusi

Laura Cugusi was born in Sardinia and lives in and out of Cairo since 2008. She studied media and social science at the University of Bologna and Santiago de Compostela. Her research focuses on irregular migration via the Mediterranean and on informal urban practices in Cairo, both of which she worked on in collaboration with the American University in Cairo and the Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research respectively. She collaborated with Mada Masr, Egypt Independent, Articolo21, FortressEurope, Cafebabel, The Exorcist (Van Abbe Museum) and *PhotoCairo5* Catalogue as a writer and photographer. Together with Lina Attalah and Nida Ghouse, she is a member of the research based art collective Take to the Sea. They have exhibited in Manifesta 8 in Murcia (2010), the Hydrarchy show at the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo (2012), the Yogyakarta Biennale (2013) and had their first solo show in Cairo at Nile Sunset Annex in 2013.