

3. Amal, Berlin! Arab media, Berlin-style

Fig. 3.1: Team Amal, Berlin!



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Amal, Berlin! is an online platform providing local news in Arabic, Dari/Farsi, and Ukrainian. It serves the growing community of newcomers to the city. The intention behind Amal is to help the media landscape adapt to the needs of the changing population of the German capital.

This chapter is about a new journalistic experience – which is why we have chosen to draft it in a new style. Instead of dividing the topic into two parts, each written by one of us, we've decided to compose it as a dialogue or, shall we say, a mosaic. This is our way of reflecting on how we work and see our project Amal, Berlin!

Amal, Berlin! consists of a team of journalists from the Middle East, Ukraine, and Germany. We started our work in 2016. In 2017 we then launched our local news website, amalberlin.de, and began posting our news on Facebook. Two years later, in 2019,

we founded another similar platform in Hamburg called amalhamburg.de. In 2022, when the war in Ukraine made millions of Ukrainians leave their country, we opened a new section in our Amal team. Amal in Ukraine went online in August 2022, and in January 2023, Frankfurt am Main became the third German city with an Amal newsroom. Six journalists report for the Arabic, Dari/Farsi, and Ukrainian communities in the Rhein-Main-Region. All in all, 25 journalists in exile are working for Amal, plus management and admin staff.

We are proud to be a part of this book and of Arab Berlin. Our work is as new as the Arab Berlin phenomenon. In other words, although Arab people have always lived in Berlin, it is new to celebrate such a thing. And that is what we celebrate!

Julia Gerlach and Abdolrahman Omaren are the two authors of the present chapter. Julia Gerlach (J.G.) has worked as a journalist covering the Arab World outside and inside Berlin ever since she finished her studies in Political Science and Islamic Science at the FU. She began working for ZDF TV and covered the Middle East as a correspondent for several German newspapers from 2008 to 2015. Having moved back from Cairo to Berlin in September 2015, she found Berlin much changed from the city she had left more than a decade earlier: with more Arabs living in the city and many more on their way there, especially from Syria, Berlin had turned into an Arab capital. Among the newcomers in 2015 were many journalists looking for jobs. There was an obvious need for their professional skills, as many newcomers had problems getting information and finding their way in the new country. Misinformation, rumors, and fake news were in rampant circulation.

J.G.: Let me start from the beginning. It was in the autumn of 2015, and my sister Conny and I were sitting at her kitchen table, talking. That was where the idea of Amal was born. We wanted to bring two needs together: to create a news platform to serve the community of newcomers, and to create jobs for the journalists in exile here. We chose Arabic and Farsi as our languages since the majority of the newcomers were from the Middle East – either from Arabic countries or from Afghanistan and Iran. Soon Oscar Tiefenthal, the director of the Evangelische Journalistenschule (EJS), was on board. He supported the idea from the beginning and was willing to host the project on the premises of the school. Our next step proved more difficult: we needed funds. But the Protestant Church (EKD) stepped in, and, by the summer of 2016, we were ready to recruit the founding members of the project. At the time there were quite a few projects for journalists in exile, so we were not alone in inviting and choosing the potential members of the team; the journalists themselves were choosing us from a variety of different offers and options. One of our colleagues told us later that he was hesitant to join Amal, as he was not sure if this

would be just another project starting and closing again in no time. Luckily for us, he took his chances, and he is still with us after five years.

In September 2016, we started with a workshop. All members of the founding team had already worked as journalists in their home countries, so there was not much need to provide journalistic training. In a three-month workshop, we discussed how to work as a journalist in Berlin: Where to get information? Whom to call to get an interview with a politician? What laws to know about? How about copyright? We also worked a lot on soft skills like how, and how not, to talk with Germans, etc. And so, at the end of the initial phase, the founding team had developed the principles of the Amal project together – and so Amalberlin.de was launched in March 2017.

Abdolrahman Omaren (A.O.), the second author of this chapter, graduated from Damascus University with a BA in media communications in 2005, after which he worked for several Arab newspapers and TV channels. Since 2014, he has lived in exile in Berlin, and since 2016 has been the editor-in-chief of the Arabic pages of Amal, in charge of choosing the topics and editing the articles and news. He is the soul of the Arabic editorial board.

A.O.: The Amal, Berlin! platform was an opportunity for me to work as a journalist in my mother tongue, as it is for my fellow journalists on the team. This work depends mainly on language, and mastering one's language is the essence of such work. Words are our means of expression and communication with our Arab readers. Unfortunately, even if Berlin is a very big and diverse city, its press institutions have very limited diversity. Obviously, language plays a crucial role in that. It's very difficult to find a job in one of the news organizations if you are not 100 percent fluent in German, and there are not many media outlets in other languages. The Arab community in Germany has not succeeded in establishing newspapers in their own language, unlike other communities, such as the Turkish or Russian communities. I think that even if people master a language other than their mother tongue, they still need to read in their mother tongue from time to time because language conveys, not only news but also emotions.

Finding information in Arabic has always been difficult in Berlin. Moreover, the number of Arabic media outlets has been very limited. In other European capitals such as Paris and London, Arab news media have a long tradition. However, Amal, Berlin! cannot be compared to newspapers such as Al-Sharq, al-Awsat or Al-Arab, which are known for diaspora journalism. That is reporting that follows the news of the Middle East and addresses Arab readers in their home countries. By contrast, our platform addresses the Arab community in Berlin and the whole of Germany, while we do not direct our content to Arabs residing in their home countries. So, we

are not an Arabic news website in Germany; instead, we are a German website that speaks Arabic.

J.G.: This is one of the most important principles of our work: We are a local news platform. This means that we report on what is going on in Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, and Germany. This is where we are and where we can get information and make sure that what we write is correct. We leave the reporting on other places like Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran to other media agencies that have reporters there. There are quite a few websites reporting in Arabic on the Arab world and in Dari on Afghanistan, for example. Amal's unique selling point is that we are one of very few media outlets reporting in Arabic, Ukrainian, and Dari/Farsi on what is going on in our cities.

It is also important to stress that we are a journalistic news platform and not just another information outlet. We don't explain to our readers how Germany works; we report on what is going on and let the readers make up their minds about what to think of the different topics. This makes us very different from the news portals set up by the government to tell people what rules they have to follow. We don't explain what democracy is, but instead, report on a regular basis on what the federal government does and how politicians debate policies in the Bundestag. We believe that our readers are smart enough to draw their own conclusions on how democracy works and what it is about. This eye-level principle is very important for our work.

A.O.: Every morning, we read the local newspapers and search for topics of interest to the Arab readers residing in Germany as parts of German society; this means that our news is diverse and covers more than just migration. We report the news that matters to society as a whole. The tales of the city, the funny and the sorrowful, the strange and the rare, the serious and the surprising – everything! Recently we have obviously reported a lot about COVID-19. Our topics often involve the lives of newcomers, with their achievements or attempts to integrate into the new community. For example, one story involved Zina Al-Kurdi, a pupil who achieved the highest high-school average in Berlin and was honored by the municipality for her diligence. Another featured a bus driver, Ahmed, who found a job in his desired profession.

In terms of politics, apart from writing news, we conducted a big media campaign before the recent elections in Germany. Our objective was to prepare information for the ca. 80.000 new voters from the Middle East to help them make their own choice on election day. We produced some animated videos explaining the German political system and conducted interviews with members of all parties in the Bundestag. We talked about their political visions. Even the AfD was present in our media campaign, although it is a xenophobic party. Media neutrality in Germany allows all politicians to speak and leaves the voters to choose. An important part of the campaign was a series of discussion sessions with people who had just obtained

their German citizenship and were about to vote for the first time in a German election and experts that were streamed live on Facebook.

Fig. 3.2: A screenshot of Amal, Berlin!



J.G.: We believe that it is important to know what is going on in the city in order to be able to participate and become a part of society. In this regard, we understand our work to be “journalism plus”. We report the news with the objective of helping people to integrate into the new society. This is also why we get funding from civil society organizations. In the beginning, we started with funding from the church. Since 2019 our sources of funding have diversified, and we now receive money from foundations like Körber-Stiftung, Crespo-Foundation, and Schöpflin Stiftung, who

see us mostly as an integration project, as well as several Landeskirchen (i.e., the regional bodies of the Protestant church). We belong to the Gemeinschaftswerk der Evangelischen Publizistik gGmbH, which is also part of the Protestant church.

My work as a correspondent reporting from Cairo was a completely different experience in terms of my relationship with readers. As a correspondent, you are very far away, and you hardly ever get feedback. If you are lucky, you might get an angry letter from one of your readers if they think that you were too harsh on one of the heads of state; or some readers may complain about your spelling. You might get one or two letters in a month. Amal is completely different. We post a story on Facebook and get feedback immediately. People tell you what they think, and we very often engage in long discussions. That's an important part of our work, and we believe that it is important that people can discuss the news and what is going on around them. Sometimes the topics are delicate – for example, news on the so-called Arab clans or everything related to the conflict in Palestine/Israel.

A.O.: Speaking of social media, journalistic work has become even more difficult. Journalists and professional journalistic platforms are competing with content producers without a journalistic background. The trust of the general public in the news media is declining. For us that means that we need to convince our readers again and again, that we must try our best to provide them with accurate information, and that they can trust us. The press in its traditional form faces great challenges from the creators of entertainment content. There are now dozens of Arabic-speaking people who have channels on websites such as TikTok spreading news and information extensively without any journalistic or specialized background. Unfortunately, in order to get more followers and views, they sometimes exaggerate and lie. Apart from that, they do not respect the intellectual property rights of others, and steal content and republish it on their accounts, which deprives the original content owners from reaching followers and interacting with their audience. The impact of social media on the press in general, and the Arab press in particular, should be the subject of an in-depth study. Solutions must be provided to confront piracy and false content.

J.G.: It might be interesting to mention that lately, we have witnessed some changes in the way people are commenting on topics related to the Israel-Palestine-Situation and anything related to antisemitism. In the summer of 2021, we had some severe and very harsh discussions about the situation in Gaza, and many people posted statements on their Facebook pages proclaiming their solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Soon the discussion changed, and comments on our page were toned down a lot. We noticed that posts on topics that might have provoked a long discussion before were now being passed over without many comments. When we noticed this change, we looked for the reasons: Was it because we were writing the posts differently, in a way that somehow wasn't provoking our readers? Were people simply tired

of the heated discussions? Was this a reflection on the controversies over journalist Niema al Hassan and politician Sarah-Lee Heinrich? Niema al Hassan, a German TV and print-media journalist, had been accused of promoting antisemitism after making critical comments on the Near-East conflict. And Sarah-Lee Heinrich, a German Green party politician, had been accused of harboring homophobic views based on the social media posts she had made years ago when she was young. The internal processes in the Arabic Section of Deutsche Welle may also have played a role. For many Arab social media users, it was a shock to learn that DW as an employer was looking through the FB accounts of the employees and that some of the journalists had been fired because of posts that they had liked or shared many years back. As a consequence, it seems that people may have become more hesitant to post at all, and more cautious about what and how to comment on social media.

A.O.: At Amal, Berlin! we deal with topics that one does not find in the traditional Arab media. As we live in a European capital, and in a part of the world that respects human rights, it was necessary to emphasize religious tolerance in our topics and respect the freedom of people in their sexual orientation. Recently we met Christian Hermann, the homosexual imam, who told us about his spiritual journey and how he was able to align and live his sexual and religious orientations at the same time. This isn't the first time we've tackled issues related to homosexuality, though we know that many of our readers may not like it. However, it is a part of the city we live in, and we've become a part of that city too. There should be no barriers to talking with and getting to know each other. I believe that the dialogue we provide through our platform contributes in one way or another to converging viewpoints, giving an opportunity to hear other voices and see the world from multiple perspectives and in many colors.

There are dozens of pages on Facebook that publish news in Arabic, but most of them lack reliability and professional fact-checking. One never knows who runs those pages, what their publishing standards are, and whether they make sure that the information they publish is correct. By spreading rumors, intentionally or unintentionally, they may contribute to harming to some of their followers and make them afraid of integrating into their new communities. Social media has made it possible for anyone who owns a smartphone to post content with ease, regardless of whether it is true or offensive to others. Therefore, the presence of Arabic language platforms belonging to authentic and well-known institutions is very important. This protects readers from being deceived by false and harmful news. In one case, when we published news about a government decision to change the residential laws for migrants, one of the readers commented: "Now I believe the news because you published it. I read it elsewhere, but I did not believe it, we know you and trust what you publish."

J.G.: When we started *Amal* in Hamburg, we faced severe criticism from some parts of the German public. Several readers of *Hamburger Abendblatt* wrote letters and comments saying that *Amal* was a project preventing integration, as we provide people the opportunity to be informed without having to learn German. Those people would then not have the incentive to work towards their German certificates. The COVID-19 pandemic brought change into this debate: Now it seems common sense that it is important that everybody knows what is going on, even if their German is not good enough to read a German newspaper.

Many of the newcomers of 2015 are now fluent in German and about to become German citizens. We still believe that we should continue to report in their mother tongue because there will always be new people coming to Germany from Middle Eastern counties who need to know what is going on even before they are good enough in German to follow the national media.

We also think that the German media landscape is still a little too monotonous and needs some colorful sprinkles to make it more interesting. In 2015 there was a trend in German media to publish special issues in Arabic to welcome the newly arrived refugees from Syria. Diversity was celebrated. In this context, *Amal, Berlin!* is more than a way to get information about Berlin and news reporting on current affairs in Germany across to the new arrivals. We also would like to see *Amal* as a small contribution to changing the German media landscape as such. It's time to make it more like the rapidly changing society it belongs to.