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contact us: newsdesk@thenational.ae
Dubai 04-444-4759 or Abu Dhabi 02-414-5307

Dubai Debates: the word is out there

It's simply smart people sitting around and talking – but the buzz is built on social media, and the sessions end up being posted on YouTube. This week's second staging of Dubai's update on town-hall meetings had the Arab Spring as subject ... and subtext. **Martin Croucher explains**

DUBAI // Twitter and Facebook undoubtedly played a major role in the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring. Now social media is being used for a far more restrained – even old-fashioned – kind of event: town hall-style debates.

With a constellation of star academics and bloggers, the Dubai Debates discuss the compelling issues of the day, and take place before an audience. Then they are transmitted on YouTube.

Belabbes Benkredda, an Algerian-German founder of the Dubai Debates organisation, said he drew inspiration from how opinions were circulated on Twitter and Facebook during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings.

"A hashtag ended up leading to a revolution in Egypt," he said. "That got us thinking about the power of social media and how its relevance has amplified so quickly over the last few months in the region."

The Dubai forum has already been compared with the Doha Debates

"I wanted to start a debating forum that harnesses that power. At present, the dialogue is mostly happening through text and there isn't a video element to it.

"One thing we hoped to achieve was to put a face to all these people who are shaping that global public discourse."

The second debate organised by Mr Benkredda was held on Tuesday night at the Kempinski Hotel in Dubai, on the subject *After the Arab Awakening: Opportunities and Challenges for a New Arab World*.

It included such high-profile speakers as Shadi Hamid, the director of research at the Brookings Doha Centre, Dalia Mogahed, the director of the new Gallup Center in Abu Dhabi, and Tarek Yousef, the founding dean of the Dubai School of Government.

"It's an important component that a place such as Dubai should have," Dr Yousef said. "Hopefully, the debates will become a more supported and visible institution in Dubai."

The moderator was Matt Duffy, an assistant professor of communication at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, who said he was "thrilled" to take part.

"There's an inherent value in public discourse that benefits a society," he said. "Being able to discuss things openly and have disagreements, but have that be OK, that's a huge benefit for any society."

Mr Benkredda observed that "perhaps more than democracy, the Arab Spring is about governance ...



Tarek Yousef, right, the founding dean of the Dubai School of Government, holds forth at Tuesday's debate as Abdel Bari Atwan, the editor-in-chief of Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper, listens. Charles Crowell for The National

people are sick of bad governance.

"As far as that is concerned, the UAE is actually an example of good governance. For us, the UAE isn't really that much of a topic. We really want to focus on the areas where there are challenges, and where the uprisings are."

Tuesday's event, which was booked up with about 200 guests, was much bigger than the first debate, in February. Even so, the videos that were taken at the time have been widely circulated on the net.

"There were only about 10 people in the audience at the first event,

but the videos together have had around 8,000 hits on YouTube," said Mr Benkredda. Speakers at that debate included Mahmoud Salem, the Egyptian blogger who galvanised public opinion during the revolution at Tahrir Square.

Mr Benkredda is an employee of

the Dubai public relations firm Bridge Media, which helped to launch the forum. However, the long-term plan is that Dubai Debates be launched as a business in order to ensure independence.

This week's debate was sponsored and co-organised by the Abu Dhabi office of the German think-tank Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, which is linked to Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Party.

Thomas Birringer, the head of the regional programme for the think-tank, said the debate would be viewed as research material.

"With the events surrounding the Arab Spring, it's important for us to know how people think and what's going on and to compare this with the view from Europe," he said.

In its short history, the Dubai forum has already been compared with the Doha Debates, which are televised eight times a year on BBC World News.

CNN acted as a media partner for this week's debate in Dubai and there are hopes that the forum will be televised in future.

Mr Benkredda noted that the tone of the Dubai and Doha forums differed markedly.

"Ours is for a younger generation, it's for social media multipliers," he said.

"They follow a concept that is two or three hundred years old. Our concept would not have been possible even two or three years ago."

✉ mcroucher@thenational.ae