

Media and conflict in Yemen

JOURNALIST OR ACTIVIST? YOUNG YEMENIS LEARN ABOUT THE BASICS OF CONFLICT-SENSITIVE MEDIA COVERAGE

Yemen remains in a state of unrest. Non-governmental organisations and independent journalists struggle to provide help in Yemen, being increasingly hindered by aggressive behaviour of various conflict parties. Having been once an example and model for national dialogue and reconciliation, today's Yemen is facing an uncertain future.

Against this background, the Regional Office Gulf States in cooperation with the Yemen Polling Center organised a three-day workshop in Amman on conflict-sensitive reporting for committed Yemeni journalists and activists currently based all around the world.

Since the rise of the Houthi rebels and the subsequent escalation of the conflict through Saudi Arabia's military intervention in March 2015, media reports on the Yemen conflict focus mostly on combat operations, air strikes as well as daily victim notifications. The country once regarded as a role model for its national dialogue of reconciliation between various conflict parties and its state transition after the downfall of former President Ali Abdallah Saleh, is nowadays facing an uncertain future.

Although more than 21 million out of 27 million Yemenis are currently depending on lifeline international humanitarian aid, non-governmental organisations and independent journalists are significantly impeded in their work through the aggressive proceedings of conflicting parties. For this reason, numerous journalists had to escape their homeland and flee into exile. Instead of focusing on the central goals of media coverage, ensuring more or less objective reporting and autonomous fact verification, most of the remaining media participate in the continuance of numerous conflict nar-

atives. In this way, media has in turn become an instrument of securing individual stakeholders' power in Yemen.

During the workshop, journalists and activists thus addressed the role of conflict-sensitive reporting. The participants took up the opportunity to extend their knowledge in regard to which major and important role media can play both in the escalation as well as in the resolution and settlement of conflicts. The workshop participants learned through interactive exercises about the necessary tools and requisite knowledge to make a constructive, direct contribution for de-escalating the conflict cycle and initiating conflict resolution methods in their country.

Experienced journalist and workshop leader Mr Jan Keulen, who reported from numerous crises regions in the course of his career such as the Lebanese civil war, offered his assistance and support to the young trainees. Looking at the current reporting on Yemen, one can see that truth is the very first victim of any conflict or war, he stated introducing the participants to the subject. Mutual recriminations, rumours and propaganda often distributed across media channels from different conflict sides remain largely uncommented and fuel the spiral of violence even further. Consequently, it is most important to talk about what professional media relations are all about: firstly, journalists are only obliged

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to the truth, and secondly, they need to ensure their work's accuracy and check all available sources for their correctness before the report's disclosure, explained Keulen.

Nevertheless, one thing is certain: a journalist can never be perfectly objective. Therefore, it is particularly important to keep certain standards and journalistic methods in mind and to allow all sides of an argument to have their say. Metaphorically speaking, these principles are the roots that nourish and promote the tree of good journalism, elaborated Mr Keulen. Furthermore, there has to be clarity about target audiences, so that the tree can bear fruit. However, these fruits – a metaphor for the constructive contribution to society that good journalism as a 'watchdog' provides – would in turn be threatened by and suffer from a number of factors, which need to be combated.

Moreover, reporting in times of crisis confronts journalists with particular challenges, as the workshop trainees started to note through a multitude of different exercises. Whereas nobody has to learn about how to facilitate war and devastation, many journalists are not aware of the fact that cautious action and media activities can promote de-escalation, and more importantly lasting peace. In particular, one has to stress the importance of specific approaches to and opportunities of 'peace journalism': rapporteurs and correspondents need to be aware of and constantly reflect on the key role of their news in conflict dynamics. In general, journalists are well advised to be cautious about the potentially destructive consequences of their words. This holds true even for trivial decisions such as the publishing of a photograph that shows people the cruel impact of senseless violence.

At the same time, the aforementioned arguments cannot be allowed to imply self-censorship by all means. It is rather necessary to verify facts critically and to report about all relevant incidents as well as developments in an appropriate and well-balanced manner. From his own personal experience, Mr Keulen refers however to the fact that this may not always be easy. With the exception of a few public broadcasters, most of the media are businesses, which therefore have to follow certain market rules aiming at making sufficient profit. Unfortunately, profitable sales can only be generated through mostly negative-sensational reporting nowadays.

Nevertheless, independent journalism can bring about change in Yemen's fragmented, ideologically charged media landscape. Moreover, it could give the silent majority of Yemeni citizens, who reject the conflict, a voice to create space for narratives against the hopelessness of the war. Therefore, the workshop attendees were advised to emphasis on commonalities and common grounds instead of focusing on the same differences inherent among various groups when writing their media contributions. Additionally, it is imperative to secure a feeling of collective identity and to counteract on escalatory rhetoric, the trainer pointed out. Through the conduct of excellent research and the use of reliable facts, independent journalism can restore faith and trust among people. Furthermore, it gives them as well as the international community an understanding of the underlying root causes of the conflict. That is why participants also spoke about the importance of expressing concrete proposals for solutions at the local level and the significance of transporting empathy for victims on both sides to eliminate the breeding ground for conflict and violence in their reports. Despite all these helpful pieces of advice on the constructive role of the media, Mr Keulen certainly couldn't

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offer a patent remedy for all the difficult and courageous choices the young workshop participants will have to face in the future when reporting on the Yemen conflict. In a nutshell, the former conflict and foreign correspondent emphasised that the best piece of advice he can ultimately give to the young Yemeni reporters, is to listen to their inner voice as well as to rely and trust upon their own reason and judgement alone.

This workshop was the second collaboration between the KAS Regional Office Gulf States and the Yemen Polling Center, which despite difficult circumstances is to be continued in the future.