

Movie Script Yemen:

“Traditional Media and Journalism under Crisis. Citizen Journalism as an Alternative?”

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Introduction

Prof. Abdulrahman Alshami: “Unfortunately, the environment is now considered one of the most hostile (orig.: enimiest) environments when it comes to journalistic work.”

Ahmed Al-Mekhlafi: “Media sources that I use: I use almost every media source but I don’t trust any media.”

Noah Alsarea: “The international media does not care about Yemen because there are more interesting topics like Syria, the Gulf States and Iran.”

Prof. Abdulrahman Alshami: “Media values or media professionalism is very weak in that country.”

Ghamdan Alkhameri: “How can you expect from anyone or any journalist to bring a truth while he doesn’t have any food to feed his children?”

The conflict in Yemen

Yemen is a country at war. Like many other Arab countries, Yemen experienced mass protests in 2011 in the context of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ which led to the resignation of longtime President Ali Abdallah Saleh who was succeeded by Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. However in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Yemen experienced a grave destabilization. The ‘Houthi movement’, which was based in the Northern, Zaidi Shia dominated provinces of Yemen advanced from its Northern Heartland of Saada province and ultimately seized the capital of Yemen, Sana’a, in 2014.

Fearing a further expansion of the Shia dominated Houthi movement, Saudi Arabia and eight other majority Sunni Muslim countries launched a military campaign on Houthi controlled provinces, including air strikes, a ground offensive and a naval blockade. At the same time jihadist military groups in Yemen strived.

The war has had a devastating effect on the country with numerous civilian deaths as well as the destruction of civilian and health infrastructure and has left 17 of the 27 million Yemeni citizens ‘food insecure’ with 500 000 children at risk of death by starvation.

Traditional media under crisis

The Yemeni conflict has also had an effect on its respective media landscape. While the Arab Spring and the emergence of a plurality of political groups brought about a thriving in Yemen’s media landscape, media outlets were soon used as a means to impose political ideologies and attack opponents.

Prof. Abdulrahman Alshami: “For sure, first of all as you know the media is a very important tool for any part. What we call the governmental media: It’s not public media in all Arab countries, including Yemen. It’s the government media supporting or financed by the government. So the first thing to do for anyone who has taken power is to control the media and this is what Al-Houthi has done so far. They control, they took over all the government media which is television channels, newspaper channels and the news agencies. So they hired the people affiliated to them and who support them. They changed all the leaders or all the officials of those media - newspaper, television channel, radio – and you hear only one voice.”

With the advance of Houthi forces and a subsequent military campaign by the Saudi led coalition, the situation for journalists in Yemen deteriorated. Journalists are hereby at risk of threats, violence and death by both sides of the conflict. As a consequence many news outlets have left Yemen and are now operating from neighboring countries.

Prof. Abdulrahman Alshami: “So you have different types of media. The governmental media operating from inside is the same as the one operating from the outside with different voices. Some reflect the Al-Houthi movement’s discourse and the other reflect the legitimate government’s discourse. The foreign media correspondence is down – all of them. Al-Jazeera: They confiscated their properties, they shut down.

Ahmed Al-Mekhlafi: “I think, all of the people or most of the people who believe in media, they are just victims because what happens ‘under the table’ - we don’t see it.”

Sam Hizam: “In the beginning of 2011, this is the time, when I started to read more newspaper online. This was making so much stress for me, because there are a lot of details and a lot of things that they are exaggerating about things. Sometimes I decided to stop reading newspapers.”

Ghamdan Alkhameri: “My main source for information about the conflict in Yemen is WhatsApp. I am a participant in many groups in WhatsApp. So if I need any information, I almost have people and friends from different cities in Yemen.”

All in all, objective coverage of the conflict in Yemen can hardly be found and the journalistic profession in Yemen lacks professionalism and ethical standards. Since many parts of Yemen are inaccessible to both domestic and foreign journalists, the media has to rely on information obtained from local professional journalists or citizen journalists.

The role of citizen journalism

Prof. Abdulrahman Alshami: “The only alternative right now for those people is social media and they still have some other websites, operating from outside. Despite of the slowness of the Internet this is the only outlet that is available for the people. People have to adapt themselves to what is available for them. Texting on the social media: You don’t need the high-speed Internet as you need it for watching videos.”

Noah Alsarea: “I get the news from the Internet and only from the Internet. I don’t use TV or radio. I get the news only from the Internet. I read the news almost on a daily basis via Facebook or via news websites like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya or some other local Yemeni websites to get the local news. I check all the news, but not only from one side, but from multiple sources.”

Prof. Abdulrahman Alshami: “The social media, particularly Facebook in Yemen when it comes to social media, is very popular. It is still a voice for the people inside the country to express their grievances, their suffering, their issue, even their daily life activities: For instance, people in the academia or government employees or the famine that we are experiencing in Yemen due to the conflict and circumstances or the diseases of cholera.”

Sam Hizam: “There are sources in Facebook which I really trust. There are some friends, physicians, some well-known people. I keep following them to know more.”

Prof. Abdulrahman Alshami: “Social media has become the voice for every part of the society, but it’s still polarized as the traditional media. Usually there is a positive and a negative part for the social media, but I believe: The positive part in such circumstances is beyond the negative part. In general, the social media channels support a lot the freedom of expression, but at the same time they create a very weak environment or a very supportive environment for unprofessional journalism.”

Yemen’s traditional media has experienced a displacement as well as an instrumentalization by the officially recognized government as well as Houthi forces. Subsequently the degree of trust towards the established media by the Yemeni people has seen a sharp decline. As a consequence social media, particularly Facebook, but also the interpersonal communication via mobile applications like WhatsApp has gained importance. This new media serves as a platform which provides citizens with vital information about Yemen’s conflict and allows them to share information themselves. But what potentials lie within the new media and citizen journalism concerning Yemen’s conflict?

Outlook

Prof. Abdulrahman Alshami: “The future of the media is related to the political issue: How the political issue, what kind of settlement we’ll have in the future. So this will affect the media’s future. Unfortunately, it’s very difficult to predict but mostly we’ll have some kind of the media that we used to have – very polarized governmental media and party’s media. “

Khaled Al-Mughalles: “Personally, I am not optimistic that Yemeni people and journalists can shape a better future for Yemen.”

Ahmed Al-Mekhlafi: “I think, educated people, they will be very skeptical, when they read anything. It will not be easy to manipulate them but because most people in Yemen are uneducated, that’s why they are becoming easy victims of these bloggers or of this citizen journalism.”

Sam Hizam: “I think the future of Yemen will be shaped by the Yemeni citizens under some conditions. They should improve the educational system. They should be aware of the community they have and they should defeat ignorance.”

Ghamdan Alkhameri: “I am optimistic in this point and I think that the awareness will be increased. And I hope those people will change the way of writing and reporting and they will be honest in conveying the truth or the news to the people. In this situation, I think we are going to read from them and the security situation will be improved, if there is credibility between citizen journalists and normal people.”
