

Overwhelming shock – that’s what I felt upon entering Yemen’s media landscape in November last year to edit a publication that claims to be among the country’s scarce “independent” newspapers.

In reality, there is no independent media in Yemen. Its political landscape has not allowed for much critical debate or dissent under the leadership of President Ali Abdullah Saleh who has been in power since 1978.

Based on first-hand experience, journalists in Yemen fall into two categories: pro- or anti-government. There is very little middle ground for a conversation between the two ideologies.

When an anti-government uprising started in Yemen in mid-January – as part of a regional wave to oust long-standing Arab leaders – a more assertive media appeared. Voices were projecting strongly their support for either opposition or government leaders.

By the end of January I ended my short-term contract with the “independent” newspaper and was offered a job to work on a newspaper that was taking less political risks. Its editorial red line was to avoid publishing reports that criticised President Saleh. It wanted to avoid run-ins with the government but failed to adequately serve its reading public.

Both newsrooms gave me insight into the ongoing media wars. I had maintained contact with journalists from the “independent” newspaper while editing at the low-risk newspaper. Journalists at the “independent” newspaper could condemn the Yemeni government more openly for its shortcomings – of which there are many. Its reporters also give prominence to opposition party leaders and

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seldom obtain comment from government sources. Their assumption was often: “The government won’t speak to us.”

Stranger still was discovering that foreign reporters – very often inexperienced and with no formal journalism ethical or academic background – had also taken on the role of activist-journalists in some cases. One scene in particular reminds me of the faults of assigning foreign correspondents with no experience but who merely get lucky because they are in the right place at the right time.

Yemen was not issuing journalist visas to foreign correspondents who wanted to enter the country to report on the anti-government uprisings. In the local newsrooms were inexperienced journalists who had contacts with media in their countries, including England and the United States, and they were ready to offer black-and-white news reports devoid of the complexities of the socio-political situation.

One of the younger foreign reporters – a fresh Middle Eastern studies graduate on a first job – often exclaimed slogans in the “independent” newspaper’s newsroom that President Saleh should step down.

This reporter ended up working for major English language news outlets, ran with the rumour mill and this resulted in unchecked and unbalanced reporting. It was always bad government versus good opposition. As if opposition politicians were even clean to begin with. Yemen is complex, politicians are imperfect everywhere.

It was strange to see the “independent” newsroom’s journalists so fiercely hateful of their government while seeing no problem with supporting opposition politicians. I wondered

when the rule to keep politicians at arm’s length became applicable only to government officials. The result of course was unbalanced reporting.

Unfair reporting was also perpetuated at the newspaper that was more supportive of President Saleh. The government voice was always given prominence, especially on the front page. Ironically, most of the journalists at this newspaper wanted regime change and also hoped for an end to government corruption but they could not publish those sentiments. They needed their small salaries to keep life going.

They resorted though to blogging and writing on social media websites about how aggrieved they really felt about the political and resultant socio-economic instability.

This was pure activism as opposed to fair and balanced journalism. That’s acceptable though as they were not writing in their capacity as journalists but more as concerned citizens with an opinion and a platform. Their reporting on the situation for foreign media also reflected a less inhibited voice.

Overall, there was very little shift in the manner in which pro- and anti-government media reported on the political turmoil and tension as it progressed. Propaganda wars continued as usual. This is a direct consequence of the hostility towards any form of political dissent in Yemen. Everyone knows the team they’re on and they keep it that way.

In the early days of the protests, most work environments were less prone to political debates. But as the economy pushed people out of work, those who were still at work became more vocal about their stand.

At this stage I was at the pro-government newspaper and journalists who did not support the government were regularly attending anti-government rallies. They also started ensuring that opposition voices were reported. I found that they had become braver but still knew that they should not cross a certain red line. President Saleh would not be criticised.

I also participated in a two-week United Nations Development Programme workshop for Yemeni media leaders during my time in the country. Insight gained about Yemen’s media – via conversations and debates – was worrying. It signalled that journalism as we would like to have it in more outspoken parts of the world is non-existent in Yemen.

Yes, the country’s media is more free compared to other Arab countries where independent journalism gets a much tougher time. Sure, in Yemen there are anti-government newspapers but censorship shuts many of these down. Journalists have also not been faced with extreme attacks as in Libya and Syria during the wave of uprisings.

Yemen’s media landscape, along with its political mess, needs an overhaul if it is to be anywhere near international journalistic standards. I had long given up on the idea of unbiased journalism in general because we all know that bias creeps into our work from the moment we draw up our news diary.

Our world view and by default our reporting is not going to be untainted by what we have read, heard or observed in our realities. So I used the term “neutral journalism” to try to get across the concept to my colleagues at both newspapers. I used to change headlines, introductions, and even whole stories because they were not “neutral and we could be accused of being biased”. I won small battles. The big fight to save professional journalism from its inexistence in Yemen continues.



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