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The Role of the Media in Peacebuilding in Yemen

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Introduction

This Brief focuses on the contributions of Yemeni media to six core areas central to supporting sustainable peace: the economy, politics, culture and society, security and justice, education and the environment. It is part of a wider project that encourages Yemeni-international research cooperation on peace requirements in Yemen, which CARPO is implementing on behalf of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and commissioned by

Executive Summary

The media holds an important role in contributing to or mediating in conflict, framing societal issues, constructing the historic record and furthering narratives. Yemen's media landscape requires substantial support and reform in order to make a constructive contribution to peacebuilding. The increased political capture of the Yemeni media since 2014 has reinforced diverging political discourses and has contributed to polarization across society and to political fragmentation. Content of newspapers, television and online platforms has further eroded journalistic standards through the circulation of articles and news with biased angles, ungrounded "facts" and ethical disregard. Practitioners face steep challenges in composing professional stories. Journalists are subject to harassment, intimidation, abduction and violence. The destruction of infrastructure, currency devaluation and delays in salary payment also inhibit media operations. Yet, journalists remain hopeful of the prospect of media reform and are eager to detail the prerequisites for proactive change. Encouraging the development of independent news outlets, independent funding and capacity-building activities could enable the media to contribute to mutual understanding, de-escalation and the requirements for peace.

the German Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development (BMZ).[1]

The greatest challenges that media in Yemen face today are the consequences of the economic crisis and political polarization, as well as the high risks associated with media work. The economic crisis affects media workers on an individual level, as well as the media generally on an organizational level. Journalists, as the rest of the population, are primarily concerned with securing the livelihood of their families, with quality media work of lower priority. The loss of advertising as a potentially independent source of revenue brought to media organizations a greater dependence on political financiers. Thus, political polarization is reflected in the current media landscape, with independent Yemeni media being extremely rare. Lastly, the high security risks associated with reporting result in frequent self-censorship, while ensuring only media work that favors one or another conflict party.

Literature on the Yemeni media landscape is rare. Next to some journalistic discussions on the development of the Yemeni media, most literature focuses on security risks that journalists face, or merely provide general information about the media landscape. This Brief thus significantly contributes to the debate on the Yemeni media landscapes by exploring in detail the various capacities and challenges of and to the Yemeni media as they work to become a constructive contributor to peace requirements in Yemen. The definition

this paper applies for the term 'media' is a rather traditional one, excluding social media. For this project, the Yemen Polling Center (YPC) interviewed 17 Yemeni journalists (incl. one woman) working for local newspapers, television channels and online publications. The journalists are based in various cities across Yemen, as well as Cairo, Riyadh and Istanbul.

A Short History of the Media in Yemen

Before the current war, the Yemeni media landscape evolved through different stages: the media was never free in any of these stages, nor did Yemen ever experience truly independent, non-partisan media. Modern forms of mass media first found its way to Yemen after the Ottomans introduced the country's first printing press in 1872. Starting in the early twentieth century, state-run newspapers developed in the northern Yemeni Imamate and, later in 1937, also in the British colony of southern Yemen. In the 1930s and 40s, those in opposition to the British rulers and the Imamate found newspapers and later radio to be effective mediums to spread their message. Ideas of a regional reformist movement, via contact with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, spread to Yemen where intellectuals used media to forge a Yemeni reform movement. Both the republican revolution in the North in 1962 and the Southern independence of 1967 were the result of the Yemeni reform movement's activities. These

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1 For a more complete discussion of the six areas and their centrality for sustainable peacebuilding in Yemen, see CARPO Report 06 *Understanding Peace Requirements in Yemen: Needs and Roles for Civil Society, Women, Youth, the Media and the Private Sector*, in which Mareike Transfeld and Marie-Christine Heinze outline the conceptual framework for this paper. The Report, published in March 2019, is available at *https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/carpo_policy_report_06_2019.pdf* (22.10.2019).

independence efforts resulted in two states, both with a restricted media landscape that in effect only permitted state-run media.

It was only after the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, when the country embarked on its democracy experiment, that political party newspapers were allowed, although TV and radio remained under state control. Despite the new opening, the legal framework, composed of the Press and Media Law as well as the Criminal Code, heavily restricted what media could report on. The Ministry of Information could withdraw or withhold media licenses of outlets critical of the regime. Around 2005, opposition against President Ali Abdullah Saleh increased, both within the regime and from other political parties. This led to a diversification of the media, as some businesses began to support seemingly independent news outlets. Parallel to this, President Saleh increased repression mechanisms.[2] In 2009 and 2010, the government quietly moved to establish a legal structure aimed at further restricting news coverage: The Supreme Judicial Council established the Specialized Press and Publications Court in 2009, and thus violated the Yemeni constitution.[3]

Although the legal framework itself did not change, the uprising against Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011 facilitated the proliferation of media. There was a noticeable rise in the number of news websites, television channels and newspapers,[4] while social media facilitated communication and interaction among protesters. In interviews conducted by YPC in August 2019, Yemeni journalists described 2011 as a breakthrough in widening the margins of freedom of expression. The reporting process evolved to engage average citizens as reporters and informants. Nevertheless, journalists faced many challenges in this period, including verbal, virtual and physical attacks, death threats, kidnapping and murder; and not only from the regime, but also by the opposition and various non-state actors.

The Role of the Media During the Conflict

The fragmentation of the Yemeni state during the war years has resulted in a geographically distributed media whose political affiliations fall along boundaries demarcated by the frontlines of the conflict. These impasses, fraught with conflict and checkpoints, effectively contain journalists to areas where controlling powers attempt to impose a narrative homogeneity that furthers their own agendas. At the same time, enclaving prevents journalists from accessing areas under the sway of opposing forces, severely limiting the scope of coverage. Many journalists lamented that the lack of accurate representation of all sides of the conflict contributes

2   Transfeld, Mareike & Hafez Albukari (2015): 'Jemen, Medien als Politische Waffe', in: C. Richter and A. al-Difraoui (eds.): *Handbuch Arabische Medien*, Konstanz, pp. 331-40.

3   Arabic People (12.05.2009): 'مجلس القضاء اليمني يقر إنشاء محكمة متخصصة في قضايا الصحافة [The Yemeni Judicial Council approves the establishment of a court specialized in press cases], in: *Arabic People*. Available at *http://arabic.people.com.cn/31662/6655818.html* (13.11.2019); also see Article 148 of the Yemeni Constitution, which states that "exceptional courts shall in no case be established".

4   Al-Danani, Abdul Malik (2016): 'مقروئية الصحف الورقية في ظل منافسة الصحافة الإلكترونية (دراسة ميدانية للصحف اليومية اليمنية) [Readability of the Newspapers in the Light of the Competition of Electronic Journalism: A Field Study of the Yemeni Daily Newspapers]. Available at *https://www.iasj.net/iasj?func=fulltext&ald=117534* (13.11.2019).

to polarization, thus further entrenching political and sectarian differences and impeding efforts towards a peaceful settlement. Journalists interviewed by YPC argued that the media space has been adversely affected by increasing restrictions, including those imposed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. These restrictions include, for example, approvals (mainly from Saudi Arabia and Egypt) for the launch of satellite channels and stricter censorship regulations.

As a consequence of the violence and repression, media organizations either relocated within Yemen or to foreign countries. Different authorities control the various Yemeni territories, which led to the geographic compartmentalization of the Yemeni media. Various restrictions on media and the interests of the foreign host countries or local authorities in the various regions prevent balanced and independent media reporting and instead contribute to a polarized discourse. Once the Houthis seized the capital and large swaths of the northwest of the country, they quickly moved to control all media outlets within their area of influence. Journalists and media workers viewed as noncompliant with the Houthi narratives were detained, executed or forced to flee. Women journalists were no exception: 25 female journalists were dismissed from the Saba news agency,[5] while others have been exposed to threats, violence, and (attempted) murder. Many of the journalists based in the Yemeni capital either left the country or moved to other areas in

Yemen, while newspapers ceased publication. Many Islah-affiliated newspapers, such as *al-Sahwa,* were particularly affected. The Houthis, together with their partners among the Saleh-loyalists and the General People's Congress (GPC), shaped a media landscape in northwestern Yemen, characterized by state and non-state media strictly following a pro-Houthi and pro-Saleh line and reporting against "Saudi aggression". After Ali Abdullah Saleh left the alliance with the Houthis and then was murdered in December 2017, the GPC-owned media also suffered a crackdown, just as other media had endured earlier. Key websites that reported in favor of the Saleh family and the GPC, such as *almethaq.net* and *baraqesh.net,* ceased their work in 2017 and 2019, respectively.

Many of the news outlets forced to shut down in Sana'a reopened in Marib, where they received some support from the Yemeni and Saudi governments. The internationally recognized government of Yemen simply cloned the state-run media channels taken over by the Houthis, and operated them from within their territory. In essence, the Houthi and Marib media entities compete for the recognition of legitimacy, both claiming to represent the Yemeni state.[6]

In Aden, a third epicenter for media emerged within Yemen. While Aden in comparison to Sana'a appeared free in terms of media restrictions, this region gradually came under the control of the Southern Transitional

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5   SEMC (2017): 'دراسة تقييمية للأداء المهني لوسائل الأعلام المرئية اليمنية' [An assessment of the professional performance of Yemeni visual media]. Available at: *http://economicmedia.net/?p=826* (03.12.2019).

6   A similar trend arose with regard to other media parties that found themselves increasingly fragmented and marginalized. For instance, the television channel of the General People's Congress (GPC), *Yemen Today,* was duplicated with one that broadcasts from Sana'a and another that broadcasts from Cairo, each representing a different faction of the party.

Council (STC), which began to carve out a strictly Southern nationalist media space. The STC was established in 2017 by leaders of the Southern Movement, calling for an independent state in the South. The STC does not only run its own media outlets (including *st-caden.net* and several affiliated websites such as *aden24* and *al-Omana*), but also censors or represses other Aden-based media that do not comply with the STC's political positions. The *Akhbar al-Youm* print and online newspaper, supposedly run by Vice President and Islah-affiliate Ali Muhsin, was forced into suspension following repeated attacks by militants of the STC-affiliated Security Belt.

Regional polarization in some parts of Yemen, especially in the South, has further restricted journalists' ability to report on national-level dynamics. A journalist who is originally from Sana'a will find it extremely difficult to report on or from Aden. This is not due to lack of local understanding, but rather growing regionalist sentiments that push to narrow the scope of the nationalist perspective in the media and promote strictly localized media outputs. Parties to the conflict control these narratives by limiting the access of journalists from areas outside their territory. This includes journalists from competing governorates. For instance, a reporter from Shabwa will not have the same access as a journalist from al-Dhali' when covering activities of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) due to perceived affiliation to the government by the former.

Nearly all parties in the conflict were blamed for acts of media repression: the Houthi forces were noted most frequently, but YPC

interview partners also implicated almost every other conflict actor as having carried out press violations. In roughly descending order, journalists identified the Southern Transitional Council (STC), forces backed by the UAE and KSA, and extremist groups such as al-Qa'ida as contributing to an environment of repression. Since May 2017, Saudi coalition forces have moreover restricted foreign journalists' travel to Houthi controlled areas.

The collapse of state justice institutions during the war has also severely impacted the media sector.[7] One experienced journalist said that the main threat to occupational safety was the lack of accountability and the fact that those who assault journalists are seldom brought to justice. Another journalist lamented that "even the laws that existed before were not sufficient, but better than the nothing we have now", and called for imposition of international law in order to protect journalists and freedom of speech in the absence of a functioning judiciary system. Arbitrary detention, harassment, persecution, abduction and assassination were all common concerns among journalists operating in Yemen. When working in areas under the control of state or sub-state actors, journalists reported coercion to present the news from the perspective of that group. Finally, the Journalist Syndicate, which had previously served as a centralized platform for discussions among journalists concerning standardization of practices and professionalism, has ceased to function properly. With Yemeni journalists now dispersed throughout the world, no new communication mechanism has come in place to circumvent physical distances.

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7 Human Rights Watch (2019): *Yemen Events of 2018.* Available at: *https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/yemen* (06.02.2020).

Due to the desolate media situation, many journalists have begun to publish their material directly on Facebook, which coincides with many Yemenis now preferring social media over the traditional print, television and online media. Most of the journalists interviewed for this report, who write via online outlets, attested that social media serves as a primary medium for their content. One journalist noted that social media activity accounted for 80 percent of his employer's site's viewership, the *Peace Media Network*. In order of importance, they cited Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp as channels of distribution for their online content, with some interviewees judging that social media access broadened their overall viewership. Many journalists felt that the rise of social media activity did not affect their own news or story content in any way. A subset, however, believed that information popularized on social media, outside of the editorial process of a newsroom, facilitated the viral circulation of falsehoods and disinformation across the population.

Contributions from the Media to Peace Requirements in Yemen

The significant evolution of the Yemeni media landscape precipitated by the 2011 uprising, the Houthi takeover in 2014/15 and the subsequent internationalized war have directly impacted the Yemeni media not only in terms of freedom of expression but also its operational capacity. Due to both the current limitations on individual journalists and the major changes to the whole media industry,

with news organizations dominated by parties to the conflict, Yemeni media outlets struggle to contribute to the conditions necessary for peace.

A major obstacle preventing the media from being a constructive actor in peacebuilding is a widespread lack of professionalism. This lack is the result of weak educational and training structures for media workers, partisan funding structures that result in the political affiliation of media outlets, and the weakness of institutions that support media independence.[8] There is no code of conduct for Yemeni journalists to follow; the publishing of unsubstantiated news is common practice. While many news programs and articles do offer basic information on an issue in focus, they fail to provide the viewers with comprehensive and contextualized content. Journalists do not rely on credible sources; accurate triangulated facts and the use of multiple sources are very rare.[9] As a result, almost all media outputs exclusively promote a single opinion, rather than highlight a variety of viewpoints. This journalistic misconduct could be prevented with more thorough fact-checking and information verification, processes that could be more widely utilized with the assistance of internationally-funded training schemes.

Economy

The relationship between media and the economy is two-sided. On one hand, the media industry and journalists are, as part of the wider economy, affected by the severe

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8   SEMC (2017).

9   Ibid.

economic crisis in the country. Due to numerous factors throughout the war, the devaluation of the Yemeni riyal, the erosion of public reserves and other economic pressures have contributed to a stark financial crisis in the country that affects and stifles the media. Many journalists, including those that work for news outlets subsidized by parties to the conflict, complained that they are underpaid, overworked and ill-equipped.

On the other hand, reporting on economic conditions is a responsibility of the media. The current reporting in itself frequently contributes to general economic decline due to a lack of professionalism. The publishing of unsubstantiated rumors as fact fuels market fears, curtails economic activity and dissuades investment. The increase in amateur online news outlets and media polarization has resulted in a more competitive media environment and mounting pressure to publish stories and sensationalized news as quickly as possible. This has resulted in reduced journalistic quality. For example, in 2018 the publishing of forged documents, claiming that the currency exchange rate would be pegged against the dollar, led to a decrease in the supply of foreign currencies and then negatively impacted banking operations in foreign exchange markets. Traders on the black market then exploited the increased demand for foreign currency, taking advantage of fears of currency shortages.[10] Although there is a potential for media to contribute positively to the development of the job market and so help alleviate the economic suffering, Yemeni media does not presently have a constructive role in this regard. Before the war, the media frequently published job advertisements; this has ceased completely, as well as an absence of reporting on developments or requirements of the job market.

Media in democratic systems nominally function as a watchdog for authorities in an effort to enhance financial and economic transparency. According to Transparency International, Yemen ranks 177 of 180 countries in the corruption perception index.[11] Generally, in-depth investigative reports on the (war) economy are lacking in the Yemeni media. This is mainly due to a lack of capacity in investigative journalism, but it is also related to security risks.

Reporting on corruption or the war economy is a red line that puts those in the media at risk in Yemen. Journalists in the country are hesitant to write detailed reports, as they fear for their security; journalists who are safely abroad do not have the required access to information and detailed documentation to report effectively. A journalist spoke of his three-day imprisonment, as authorities pressured him to provide the name of the source that leaked reports on state corruption. Another journalist, after filing a report on corruption, was briefly abducted, harassed on social media, and received threats that eventually forced him to flee the country.

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10 Yemen Economist (21.11.2018): ‘شائعات ووثائق مزورة ترفع الريال اليمني وتهبط بسعر الدولار في اليمن وسط مضاربات لتجار السوق السوداء في غياب الرقابة’ [Rumors and fake documents raise the Yemeni rial and fall in the dollar price in Yemen amid speculation for black market traders in absence of control], in: *Yemen Economist.* Available at *https://www.yemeneconomist.com/180254/dollar-prices-today-rial-yemeni-novmb* (25.11.2019).

11 Transparency International (2019): *Corruption Perceptions Index.* Available at: *https://www.transparency.org/country/YEM* (22.02.2020).

Yemeni media do not have a watchdog capacity, as no mechanisms for systematic monitoring of economic or financial developments are in place. Still, some media reports on corruption have had an impact. For example, in September 2019 a report on the Yemeni Ambassador to Egypt, Muhammad Marim,[12] stealing merit-based scholarships meant for high school graduates led to change. The Ministry of Higher Education swiftly resolved the matter by forming an investigation committee and re-awarding the scholarships to the original candidates. As well, Yemeni journalists uncovered the looting of humanitarian aid by the Houthis, which led to the World Food Program suspending its activities for some time.[13] Other actors have communicated the need for social responsibility in the private sector. As has been highlighted by the 'Private Sector Team' in this project, such media channels include *Al-Saaeda TV* channel, *Yemen FM* and *Tairamanah FM* radio channels.[14]

Politics

Of all the media's spheres of influence, its impact on political discourse, framing and the narrative construction is perhaps the strongest. Due to its fragmentation along political lines, the Yemeni media has played a central role in furthering polarization during the war. The media is currently not able to fulfill many of its functions that normally contribute to peace requirements in the realm of politics. The reasons for this inability include the media's lack of independence, professionalism and funding. As well, the landscape of political institutions has changed, decreasing the authorities' reliance on the media.

At present, Yemeni media is pre-occupied with reporting on the details of the conflict, such as fighting on the war fronts, or writing of reports that accuse the opposing side in the conflict. There are only a few, very limited discussions on potential forms for the Yemeni state or its constitution. Thus, the Yemeni media is not providing visions for a future Yemeni state that stir broader dialogue and prepare conflict parties and society for peace talks. There are also no mechanisms in place to help monitor the behavior of state entities and increase accountability. Specialized groups such as the Association for Parliamentary Journalists or the Yemen Parliament Watch, which previously monitored the activities of the parliament, are no longer functioning, due to the war personally affecting the lives of these journalists, as well as the inactivity of the parliament itself. One journalist stated that authorities no longer feel responsible for the needs of all Yemenis, but prefer to fund their own media entities; thus, overall media pressure on the government has become less effective. Still, there are media reports on the lack of government service provision, including water and waste management, and its impact on the population; but journalists were not able to give examples of improved government service delivery due to media coverage and pressure.

12 Al-Harf 28 (23.09.2019): 'سفير اليمن بالقاهرة يستولي على منح الطلاب المبتعثين ومغردون يطالبون بتغييره' [Yemen 's ambassador in Cairo seizes grants of scholarship students and Twitter verse demanding change], in: *Al-Harf*. Available at *http://www.alharf28.com/p-29622* (13.11.2019).

13 Al-Arabi al-Jadeed (24.06.2019): 'يمنيون في مهبّ الجوع... برنامج الأغذية العالمي يعلّق مساعداته' [Yemenis in hunger ... WFP suspends aid], in: *Al-Arabi al-Jadeed*. Available at *https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/d46418d4-1aaa-4181-adcf-74210d8587aa* (13.11.2019).

14 Tarek Barakat, Ali al-Jarbani and Laurent Bonnefoy (forthcoming): *The Role of the Private Sector in Peacebuilding in Yemen*, CARPO Brief.

When Yemeni peace talks do take place, Yemeni media provides intense live coverage and analysis. The influence of media coverage on the process itself remains limited, however, according to those interviewed by YPC. One journalist noted that while the media could exert some pressure on the parties to make or not make concessions, their influence on the conflict parties has been generally limited. Another stressed that those in the media were principally in favor of peace. During the Stockholm consultations in December 2018, during which the parties did not meet face-to-face, negotiators used the media to send messages to the other side, as well as manage the expectations of the Yemeni public by playing down reports of imminent agreements.

Culture and Society

Articles providing updates on military and political developments are popular in Yemeni media, and journalists interviewed by YPC agreed that the use of sectarian language in political reporting has increased since the beginning of the war. The media then carries this language to the wider society and thus furthers polarization. But the interviewed journalists also noted that stories of individual and shared suffering, alongside the resilience of Yemeni people in the face of conflict and adversity, often comprise the most viral readership content. Indeed, some new media spaces focus on cultural and civil society and highlight resilience and creativity shown in the face of grave challenges.

The negative impact of Yemeni media on society outweighs the positive. Financial, capacity and social restrictions prevent the media from fulfilling its potential to contribute to peace. For instance, although media could be an ideal platform to discuss the trauma of war and possible treatments at community level, rarely do journalists report on the psychological impact of the war on families and individuals, nor how to deal with such trauma. One journalist stated that such issues are left for specialized international organizations. Through its reporting on Yemen's shared heritage and its current destruction during the war, the media could contribute to unifying Yemenis around a common identity. Instead, articles on the destruction of historic sites frequently adopt accusatory tones, assign blame to opposing sides and deepen social and political rifts.

The destruction of Yemen's cultural heritage in the context of the war and reduced participation in traditional practices have prompted a wave of nostalgia among segments of Yemeni society. Several youth-led media initiatives have sprung out of this nostalgia and the desire to read of Yemen's culture and resilience. These include *Yemen Archive*, which since 2017 has collected Yemeni literature, history, and political biographies.[15] The online magazine *al-Madaniya*[16] is a youth-led media initiative that focuses purely on cultural reporting, with the goal to create a space to represent different regions of Yemen and portray women as active members of society. *Yemen Used to Be*[17] is a social media initiative

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15 See the website of *Yemen Archive* at *http://yemen-tv.net/index.php* (25.11.2019).

16 See the website of *al-Madaniya* at *almadaniyamag.com* (19.02.2020).

17 See the Instagram account of *Yemen Used to Be* at *https://www.instagram.com/yemenusedtobe/?hl=en* (19.02.2020).

that promotes short historic videos, allowing a glimpse into Yemen's cultural past. Together, such initiatives are starting to carve out a media space promoting a unifying, rather than polarizing, narrative.

Security and Justice

To some extent, the security and justice paradigm presents a chicken and egg problem for the media. A functioning media can be an important contributor to accountability and transparency of the security sector; at the same time, impartial security forces and an effective judicial system are necessary to enable and protect an independent media. In Yemen, all of these protective sectors are either crippled or controlled by powers that have a stake in the conflict. International support, in the form of funding and capacity building, is needed to enable the media to accurately report on the functioning of security and justice actors.

At present, the media report on crime and security issues in a sensationalist manner, without contextual information such as causes and consequences of the crimes, or the details of the cases processed by justice institutions. Such reporting does not shed light on the capacity gaps of Yemeni law enforcement and justice institutions nor draw attention to abuses of power. Thus, current media coverage does not contribute constructively to the peace requirements in the justice and security sector as laid out in *CARPO Report 06*. Also, the Yemeni media does not report

on common security threats and the types of violence ordinary people face, nor raise awareness on how to better address such threats. Although media could be an effective platform for raising awareness on security related issues, such responsibilities are often relegated to civil society organizations (CSOs). Other topics, such as transitional justice, were discussed during the 2012 to 2014 transitional period, but disappeared from the press once the war began.

Education

The educational sector has become a field of conflict; at the core, however, are political issues unrelated to education itself. The political bickering between various parties over the educational sector spills into the media, with both sides using reportage on education to smear the other side.

The alleged alteration of the school curricula by the Houthis and the imposition of Houthi teachers in public schools in the areas under their control is a reoccurring media subject.[18] Opponents view these developments as a forced imposition of Houthi cultural, social and religious values, and as a means to influence children to become loyal Houthi followers. Various media under the Hadi government have highlighted this development: in 2017, the Hadi government accused UNICEF of printing the textbooks modified by and in favor of the Houthis.[19] As a result of the media backlash, UNICEF halted the printing of the material. This issue surfaced again in

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18 Al-Hekmah (07.04.2018): "تفاصيل" .شاهد بالصورة ... مليشيا الحوثي تفرض مناهج طائفية جديدة ... ومعلمني من سلالتها في مدارس التحفيظ بصنعاء [See with photo .. Houthi militia imposes new sectarian curricula, and teachers of its lineage in Qur'an schools in Sana'a] in: *Al-Hekmah*. Available at: *https://www.al-hekmah.net/news11015.html* (19.01.2020).

19 Al-Jazeera (07.04.2017): 'اتهامات لليونيسيف بدعم مناهج الحوثيني الطائفية' [Accusations of UNICEF of supporting the Houthi sectarian curricula], in: *Al-Jazeera*. Available at *https://bit.ly/2OpB8Sh* (20.09.2019).

the media in October 2019 when the Qatar Charity supported the printing of textbooks in Houthi-controlled areas. This crisis added to an already existing rift in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with the involvement of Qatar viewed as an affront against Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as the Hadi government they support. The angry reaction from the Hadi-government's Ministry of Education and other media criticism forced the Qatar Charity to issue a statement stating it would only print math and science textbooks and refrain from producing any controversial material.[20]

Yemeni media frequently reports on the consequences of the war for education, such as classes being forced to meet in the open, under trees or other makeshift classrooms, due to the destruction of school buildings. According to our research, such reports have motivated communities to create better conditions for students and teachers. The media has also highlighted teachers' strikes and violations against teachers by various authorities. Such reporting sheds light on the work of organizations that try to resolve the payment of teachers' salaries. The lack of payment caused teacher strikes in several regions in September 2017, including Hadhramawt, Aden and Houthi-controlled areas.[21] Journalists also frequently highlight schools used as recruitment grounds by the various parties to the conflict. Although such reports often have accusatory undertones, the media nevertheless clearly position themselves against this common practice.

Environment

The war has dominated the Yemeni news cycle, resulting in a scarcity of reports on other topics, with environmental news among the most neglected. While the media did cover the cyclones that hit Yemeni coastal areas in late 2015 and again in October 2018, reporting on water scarcity and the resulting conflicts is negligible. Many environmental issues cut across demographic and political social boundaries and are relevant to every person, but overall the media hesitates to increase environmental coverage and raise awareness.

There are however a few exceptions: The "Hulm Akhdhar" [Green Dream][22] platform, established in 2012, was the first Yemeni website tackling environmental issues. The website's content covers the effects of climate change on Yemen, water scarcity, pollution, the environmental impacts of war, the surge of renewable energies and solar power consumption in post-war Yemen, and sustainable development. One story that garnered much attention and mobilized the population was the killing of endangered species in Yemen, with more than 18 documented cases between 2014 and 2018. In spite of its singular environmental focus, the website has not escaped accusations of political affiliation and bias.

Despite the severe water scarcity in Yemen, awareness of water conservation techniques remains low and wasteful flood irrigation continues to be widely implemented. The

20 Al-'Arab (13.10.2019): 'قطر الخيرية تصدر بيانا بشأن دعمها لمجال التعليم في اليمن' [Qatar Charity issues a statement regarding its support to the education sector in Yemen], in *al-'Arab.* Available at: *https://bit.ly/31kLiZT* (19.11.2020).

21 Al-Arabi (12.09.2018): 'معلمو حضرموت يبدؤون الإضراب الشامل' [Hadhramawt teachers begin a mass strike], in: *Al-Arabi.* Available at: *https://al-arabi.com/Read/26051* (19.01.2020).

22 See the website of *Hulm Akhdhar* at *http://holmakhdar.org/* (20.02.2020).

Small and Micro Enterprise Promotion Service (SMEPS) has supported farmers across the country with environmentally sound irrigation systems, with a special focus on supporting coffee framers, fishermen and handcrafters with training to lessen their environmental footprint. The organization has a forward-thinking public relations strategy, uses Twitter and Facebook to engage in multiple awareness campaigns, and thus carries the issues of conservation into media discussions.

Cooperation and Conflict Between the Media and Other Actors

Despite the prominent role of women and youth in the 2011 Yemeni uprising and the ensuing transitional period, including their active participation in the 2013 National Dialogue Conference (NDC), Yemeni media has continued to treat both groups as marginal and irrelevant. *Women* are treated as a minority group rather than an integral part of the society. Media focus only on a few women, such as the Nobel Peace Laureate Tawakkul Karman, and neglect the wide diversity of Yemeni women in their varied status and political positions. As has been highlighted by the 'Women Team' in this project, Yemeni media reinforces gender stereotypes in their portrayal of women, by focusing on themes such as women and child health, cooking, gossip or trivia, while shaming women who are politically active.[23]

The media's intense focus on politics and aspects related to the war have pushed topics related to women and youth aside, even though the impact of the war has relevance for all.[19] *Youth* are assumed by the media to be apolitical, and so focus their youth content on talented youth and social media. Although treated in a marginal manner in Yemeni media, several journalists highlighted that youth will play an increasingly important role in the media sector due to their specialization in photography, and their creative and artistic abilities. This potential is exemplified in numerous youth-led media projects, such as *al-Madaniya Magazine*, the *#SupportYemen*[24] initiative or *Manasati30*.[25] It is still rare that young Yemenis are promoted within major media organizations, however, and most currently remain in lower positions.

In interviews conducted by YPC, journalists spoke of large and increasing investments from the *private sector* that have contributed to the flourishing of the media scene following the 2011 uprisings. However, this changed with the onset of war in 2014/15 due to capital drain from Yemen and the extreme polarization in the media outlets. The latter inhibited large investments from businesses, due to fear of being labeled as supporters of a party. Although not a central theme, some Yemeni media organizations have addressed the topic of extortion and political takeover of private sector companies. The private sector could re-direct its publicity and

23 Iman al-Gawfi, Bilkis Zabara and Stacey Philbrick Yadav (27.02.2020): *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Yemen,* CARPO/GDRSC Brief 14, p. 13. Available at *https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/carpo_brief_14.pdf* (29.02.2020).

24 *#SupportYemen* is a non-profit arts collective established in 2011 and comprised of Yemeni men and women, activists and professionals in filmmaking, photography, research, website design and writing. Available at: *https://supportyemen.org/* (21.02.2020).

25 *Manasati30* is a project of RNW Media that provides a free space for Yemeni youth between the ages of 15 to 30 to exchange views. The project also organizes events and debates, seeking to provide a free platform for youth. Available at: *https://manasati30.com/* (21.02.2020).

investments towards independent media outlets to promote and increase the reach of objective media performance. *Al-Saeedah TV* is a good example of the private sector pouring funds into a channel that promotes the values of peace and co-existence.

Cooperation between the media and *civil society* is limited to media outlets highlighting reports by various organizations such as Rights Radar, the Association of the Prisoners and Detainees Mothers and the Rasd Organization. Political calculations of publishers influence these reports; wrongdoing by their opposition is highlighted while their sponsor's own misconduct is ignored. Mwatana for Human Rights in Yemen is a case in point: the organization has often come under fire by certain media outlets for its "biased approach" in conducting research and disproportionate reporting on violations, which led to the organization's chairwoman and its executive director facing brief detention and questioning by the coalition forces.[26] Both temporarily left the country. Given the political associations of most media organizations, many CSOs are hesitant to work with any media, as they do not want to be associated with any party to the conflict. Yet, civil society organizations are best positioned to help Yemeni media increase its capacity in investigative research and professionalism. The journalists interviewed were aware of many activities organized by CSOs that focus on building capacity in digital security, data journalism, conflict sensitive journalism, or occupational safety. Individual journalists also work with CSOs in public relations, content promotion or research.

Meeting the Needs of Media in Peacebuilding

News organizations in Yemen face steep challenges. Journalists are severely restricted in their coverage by many factors, from a lack of adequate financing to outright repression. Due to polarization and political capture, the Yemeni media also faces a credibility gap that undermines the value of its reports. Addressing these weaknesses and empowering the media to serve as a lever of accountability is crucial to protecting the public from abuses of power. At the same time, a functioning legal system is necessary to ensure the protection of journalists and editors. As has been suggested in YPC's in-depth interviews, Yemen's media scene needs higher editorial standards and more stringent cross-checking processes in order to minimize the dissemination of hyperbole and speculative news. Laying the groundwork for such a transformation may also require the broader financial stabilization of the media industry. Financial limitations prevent media outlets from allocating their human resources to long-term, investigative projects on cases of corruption and abuses of power. Concurrently, industry-wide changes, such as respect for copyright and greater transparency, are needed to develop autonomous funding structures that would bolster independent media.

To contribute effectively to the peace requirements in the sectors discussed above, the Yemeni media sector requires specialized training. Journalists lack the expertise required to professionally report on economics,

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26 GCHR (19.06.2018): المطار' قي مواطنة منظمة قادة الفقيه الرشيد وعبد المتوكل رضية 'احتجاز [Radhia Al-Mutawakel and Abdul-Rasheed al-Faqih, leaders of Mwatana organization, detained at the airport], in: *GCHR*. Available at: *https://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1888* (19.01.2020).

education, the environment, security and justice, and even politics. At the same time, the public's reliance on social media as a main source for news has adversely affected the professionalism and the very profession of journalism. As social media activists are neither trained nor paid to do wartime reporting, the reliance on and salaries of trained journalists are undermined.

Recommendations

In order to reform the Yemeni media landscape, boost the principles of integrity and neutrality, and create a media environment that is more conducive to peace, the international community (including international NGOs) and Yemen's CSOs need to join forces towards achieving the following:

Increase the scale of journalism support programming.

Support programs for Yemeni journalist must aim at making a substantial contribution in terms of professionalization, journalistic ethics, objectivity, standardization of sourcing, and fact-checking procedures. Training should also support specialization of journalists to increase their capacity to engage in a critical and investigative manner with the subjects of their reporting. Finally, support projects must help to ensure Yemeni journalists are better equipped to operate in a hostile media environment. This can be done on an individual level through media cooperation, through training trainers within civil society, and lastly through large-scale educational projects within universities and institutes.

Support stronger relationships between Yemeni media and the private sector.

A perquisite of the sustainability of independent media is independent funding. At the same time, the private sector is only interested to invest in advertising with independent media. International media support organizations should bridge the current gap between the private sector and the media by supporting new and existing independent media platforms, while ensuring they are embedded in a network of politically neutral private sector companies.

Support independent media platforms through independent funding structures.

The most crucial element lacking in Yemen's media landscape are independent media outlets that encourage messages of peace, rather than the current narratives that fuel the cycle of conflict. Journalists see external financing as a fundamental prerequisite to the initial establishment of independent media. However, as also emphasized by the 'Private Sector Team' in this project, foreign interventions should encourage the diversification of funding streams for media organizations.[27] The private sector can assist in developing independent media by establishing and/or funding of media channels to maintain independence, without relying on politically affiliated funding.

Support youth and women in media organizations.

While youth and women play an important role within various types of media companies, they do not hold decision-making positions.

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27 See Tarek Barakat, Ali al-Jarbani and Laurent Bonnefoy (forthcoming).

International organizations and local society should prioritize youth and women-led media organizations, and others that have inclusive decision-making processes. Donors can make an inclusive organizational structure a perquisite for cooperation and funding. Finally, as the CARPO/GDRSC Brief *Women's Role in Peacebuilding in Yemen*[28] resulting out of this project has highlighted, there is a need for higher journalistic standards against libel, slander and gendered forms of incitement, as well as for an independent media to encourage the development of gender-integrated forums where men and women can express themselves safely.

Increase international intervention for the reduction of violations of media freedom.

The international community should step up pressure on all parties to the conflict to reduce violations of media freedom, including the harassment, intimidation, arbitrary detention and assault of journalists. Diplomatic efforts should also work with all sides to mediate the free movement of journalists between frontlines and across checkpoints. International actors should increase their advocacy for the immediate release of detained journalists, especially those subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

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28 Iman al-Gawfi, Bilkis Zabara and Stacey Philbrick Yadav (27.02.2020), p. 14.

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About the Project

This project, which is implemented on behalf of GIZ and by commission of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), seeks to develop the capacities of Yemeni and international researchers and organizations in researching and advising on peacebuilding in Yemen. Within its framework, a *CARPO Report* on peace requirements in Yemen, as well as five policy briefs, each resulting from a Yemeni-international research partnership, on the role of the following actors in peacebuilding in Yemen, are being developed and published: civil society, women, youth, media and the private sector. For more information, please visit our *website*.

About CARPO

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policymaking and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers.
Website: carpo-bonn.org
Facebook / Twitter: @CARPObonn

About YPC

The Yemen Polling Center (YPC) was founded in 2004 by Hafez Albukari, a Yemeni journalist based in Sana'a. The need for independent research and polling in a country under authoritarian rule motivated the establishment of the organization. YPC aims to impact local and international policymaking with the goal to improve the living conditions of the Yemeni people. With its research and advocacy activities, YPC works towards a closer integration of public opinion into the policy-making process. While upholding the principles of the Human Rights Charta, YPC's strategy is to advocate for good governance reforms based on sound research and to support the creation of communication channels between citizens and state institutions. By seeking out and sharing positive stories and best-practices, YPC does not only aspire to put local communities into the position to help themselves, but also to put Yemeni civil society activities into the spotlight.
Website: yemenpolling.org
Facebook / Twitter: @yemenpolling