Charting the New Media Landscape

**Dialogue Snapshot Report
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the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Dialogue Summary

The way we receive information—whether it is the news, data about our surroundings, commercial information, or simply personal communication—has drastically changed with the permeation of internet and digital technologies into our daily lives. The rise of social media platforms has radically altered how we consume information and news throughout the world, for better or worse. Conversely, the new methods with which news and information are packaged— such as blogs, vlogs, podcasts, and more—have created alternative pathways for free speech in environments where the conventional media landscape has become increasingly selective, censored, or even oppressive. Citizens began using their personal devices to spread and curate information; interconnectedness through social media became a method of mobilization. However, these new pathways also meant that information was spreading virally in an unchecked fashion. Disinformation became a powerful tool used by state and non-state actors, public and private entities alike.

This new media landscape is more entropic and crowded, but more accessible, both to the supply side of information and news (journalists), and the demand side (audiences). Despite research showing that television remains the preferred medium of news/information for Middle Eastern societies,[1] there is an undeniable paradigm shift in how societies receive their information/news, and how journalists produce it. To understand some of these new methods and share experiences across countries, the Hollings Center convened a dialogue in Tunis in December 2019. The dialogue covered issues such as new business models for media outlets, diversity in newsrooms, new modes of storytelling, trust in the media, disinformation and misinformation, and the trajectory of the journalism profession.

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[1]"Media Use in the Middle East, 2019: A Seven-Nation Survey," Northwestern University in Qatar, http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2019/chapter/media-use-by-platform/.

Charting the New Media Landscape

What is "New" about New Media?

With the evolving media scene, news outlets need to answer three important questions: How do we keep a loyal audience? How do we keep audience trust? And how do we sustain a successful business model? Based on research that the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) has conducted in 149 countries,[2] the new newsroom is hybrid, small, and uses new business models. Hybrid newsrooms combine digital (social media, newsletters, online videos) and legacy formats. Journalists use the digital formats to engage directly with the audience. Newsrooms now rely on smaller teams of journalists, which might be cost-effective for the organization, but it puts a lot of pressure on journalists who must develop technology, data, and digital security skills to keep up with the industry. Finally, the economic model of newsrooms is changing: newspapers are no longer relying on advertising, but are using a combination of memberships, online subscriptions, grants, and alternative advertising models.

Covering news now often requires posting on multiple platforms. Choosing which platforms and understanding each audience is critical to the modern journalist. Image source: Shutterstock.

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2 International Center for Journalists, "The State of Technology in Global Newsrooms," , 2019, https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/2019%20Final%20Report.pdf.

Smaller newsrooms force journalists to do more with limited time and resources. Journalists must become a one-person-band tasked with everything from reporting to visual production, audience engagement, and fact-checking. Although some journalists are demanding more training in areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, data journalism, etc., newsrooms must establish priorities so journalists can develop specializations and will not be overburdened by aspects of the job that can be delegated in the news production process. One participant stressed that she has to deliver two to three stories a day, and when she participates in a training it becomes a burden on her time, no matter how much she feels she needs the training. This led participants to discuss the tremendous value of learning on the job, whether from peers or senior colleagues. Therefore, participants agreed that there is value in preserving the newsroom as a physical space, and that there is value in that gathering of junior and senior journalists.

> **"The global network of journalists, whether in your community, country, or internationally, is a great resource."**

One participant who successfully ran a convergence project in one of the leading newspapers in Turkey shared his experience with hybrid newsrooms. His challenge was that the digital and print newsrooms were completely separate, with two different generations running each. By implementing transparent communication horizontally and vertically, and by training all journalists in storytelling and video journalism, he was able to oversee this hybridization process.

Participants discussed at length the use of social media for news production. Most were concerned that social media as a tool is not used effectively, and that media outlets "have clung onto social media to get to the news." The pace of certain social media platforms like Twitter have pushed journalists to keep producing copious amounts of content with thin substance. A participant was concerned that no matter the reputation of social platforms, journalists have to be present on them. And often, that presence requires negative or sensational tone to gain attention. "We have to be always angry on Facebook. This is how we can have impact," she said. Other participants stated that social media is a necessary tool that journalists need to be engaged with, and despite its shortcomings, it provided an unprecedented public communication and self-expression platform, especially in the Middle East and North Africa.

On the question of whether new media platforms have enabled ordinary citizens to do the job of journalists, participants were skeptical. According to field research that a Turkish participant conducted among youth, young people are more interested in becoming "influencers" or "phenomena" rather than using social media as a tool to disseminate information for the public good. "New media is used for individual reasons rather than collective reasons," she added.

> **"Social media is essential for me and what we do at the Center, but to use it as a reporting tool is a disservice to journalists.."**

How are universities responding to the new challenges and demands of the evolving media landscape? Participants shared distinct experiences and

examples from the Middle East region. Despite the surging quantity of journalism degrees throughout the Arab world, the quality of journalism programs is questionable. Some participants complained that students of journalism are given a lot of theory, but minimal—if any—practice. Turkey, on the other hand, is seeing a reduction in the number of journalism degrees in higher education. Private universities are closing their journalism departments—or have never had any —because of the declining popularity of journalism as a profession, undoubtedly a consequence of the status of journalists in that country. A participant claimed that the changing ownership structure of media companies also plays a role in the journalism profession falling out of favor. In the past, main media outlets used to be owned by journalists; but in the past two decades, media has become part of a series of businesses for affluent families or has come under the proprietorship of government-affiliated groups. Under these circumstances, freedom of expression for journalists has serious limits, making it less appealing for qualified people to pursue journalism as a profession.

New Business Models

Technological innovation, audience fragmentation, and participatory culture caused disruptions in the production, distribution, and consumption mechanisms of media companies. Declining readership, changing ownership structures, and general sociopolitical turbulence have necessitated media to diversify revenue streams because traditional advertising and subscription have become less viable to keep those companies afloat. Some tried-and-true models have been paywalls, sharewalls, crowdfunding, micropayments, and using personal data for customized audience experience. If "new media" has a "new audience profile," that audience is interested in information that is exclusive, scarce, and tailored. In addition to using new methods to monetize content, companies are also redefining their core business to prioritize reach, loyalty, and audience engagement in order to ensure sustainability.

Some journalists and media organizations have tried seeking international funding from sources that support free, independent journalism, but faced multiple challenges with this model. First, journalists are expected to engage with potential funders as part of their job, which makes their burden heavier. Second, when funders set goals serving their own mission, those may not necessarily overlap with good journalism principles. As a participant noted, "project-based anything—not just journalism—is problematic," because the pitching of the project might take time away from the actual job as well as cause unintended biases in reporting. Third, reliance on international donor funding creates dependencies, which in turn is an impediment to high-quality journalism.

> **"News doesn't earn enough money. We need to create a striking model to convince people it is necessary to pay for quality news."**

In an environment where journalism for public good is losing to sensational news, and the media landscape has become much polarized, public service broadcasting—the equivalents of National Public Radio (NPR) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)—has an important role to play. Unfortunately, government funding for public broadcasters in some countries has meant pro-government broadcasting; some participants also argued that the quality of journalism in these companies is low because there is little investment in developing journalists'

skills in digital media and storytelling. A participant mentioned his recent visits to nonprofit journalism outlets in the United States and asked whether that model could work in the Middle East.

New Modes of Storytelling

The speed, reach, and variety of methods and channels available to today's journalists were unimaginable merely three decades ago. However, this should not overshadow the reality that journalism in many countries is lacking diversity—for instance, in the United States, racial and ethnic minorities make up only 23 percent of the workforce in newsrooms,[3] and women still make up only 31 percent of the newswire bylines.[4] Participants from the Middle East complemented this point with data from their own countries and agreed that women and minorities are lacking both in leadership positions and as experts quoted in news coverage, but also as subjects of the news. This means that despite the variety in formats it uses, media around the world has been quite monotonous in who gets to tell stories and who stories are about.

An investigative journalist from the United States shared tips on creating good stories with a wide reach. He suggested "chunking up" a story to repurpose the different pieces of information contained within that story for different audiences. "I know that a 20-something year-old won't read a long story, but they will look at illustrations and videos," he said. He added that the days of exclusive news has ended, and that stories need to be shared with outlets that would be best suited to make use of that information.

> **"In the U.S., journalism has become a bit of a luxury sport where you can't stay in the profession unless you have outside support. This makes me question how stories are told and how newsrooms are shaped."**

Participants agreed the reason why reporting needs to involve characters and plotlines today is to invoke empathy in the audience. Breaking apathy, especially when it comes to certain social issues, is a challenge for journalists. "If I feel outraged as a journalist, I want the audience to feel outraged, too. You do not need a huge audience, but you need an audience who makes noise," said a participant. In response, another participant said "outrage is not the path to empathy, it is the path to resentment. It would be interesting to investigate new psychologies to get us to empathy." Yet another participant warned that using striking audiovisual elements in a story to invoke empathy in the audience might veer into "infotainment." By the same token, using images of violence, war, and death raises questions about journalism ethics. A participant complained that even under the same media company, there were different ethical standards for its channels broadcasting in different

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[3] Elizabeth Grieco, "Newsroom Employees Are Less Diverse Than U.S. Workers Overall," Pew Research Center Fact Tank, November 2, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/02/newsroom-employees-are-less-diverse-than-u-s-workers-overall/.

[4] Women's Media Center, "The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2019," https://tools.womensmediacenter.com/page/-/WMCStatusofWomeninUSMedia2019.pdf.

countries. The rules for the U.S. channel, she argued, were much stricter in regulating gratuitous use of graphic images.

The discussion on responsible journalism brought to the fore the concept of "peace journalism." Participants seemed to converge around the premise that journalists ought to use their platform to advocate for peace, justice, and equality. Some raised the question of objectivity and impartiality: how are journalists to be objective if they are acting in pursuit of a mission? A journalist claimed that the business model for new media is based on *not* being objective, to be able to give one's audience what they demand. Another participant noted that based on her research, framing a story through a conflict lens, even if the story has no conflict-news-value made it more likely to be read. "It is not much to ask of journalists to refrain from dramatization," she added, emphasizing that this would not detract from objectivity, but is just responsible journalism practice.

> **"When editors make choices on what and how to report, they can determine whether the society will respond nonviolently to conflict. One of the missions of journalism is supporting a peace environment around the world by not glorifying violence or martyrdom."**

New Information Pathways, New Pitfalls

If a "lie can travel around the world and back again while the truth is lacing up its boots," is it futile to prevent disinformation? Participants discussed the role and responsibility of social media platforms, governments, civil society, and journalists themselves in the dissemination and prevention of disinformation. In the U.S. context, social media regulation is unlikely to happen, because most platforms are headquartered there, and are demanding that the government take pressure off of them. By privileging content that is sensational and emotional (regardless of its truth value), platforms are distracting users from their underlying business model, which is to monetize personal data. One of the most popular social media platforms is changing its algorithms to drive more traffic to personal conversations, where it is much more difficult to track the spread of disinformation. The same platform, a participant familiar with it noted, is not investing in human capital in non-English speaking countries, which exacerbates the content moderation problem.

Reflecting on a participant's account of the successful implementation of Jordan's media and information literacy program,[5] participants agreed that countries that have dealt successfully with disinformation such as Finland and Sweden have had widespread media literacy programs alongside strong punitive measures. However, with a fragmented audience with different information and language needs, and with piecemeal programs that do not have uniform metrics for measuring impact, progress is slow. Some participants grieved that education systems are failing to teach critical thinking skills and awareness of confirmation bias to young students, and in the Middle East and North Africa context, there is a shortage of liberal arts education. Another participant questioned how much education can change when young people, according to her

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[5] A nationwide media and information literacy program by UNESCO, funded by the European Union was implemented by the Jordan Media Institute between 2016–2018.

research, do not care about politics or facts, but rather are after the feeling of being known and seen, which social media offers them extensively.

But disinformation does not spread exclusively through the new pathways of social platforms. Journalists themselves are sometimes knowingly or unknowingly complicit. Numerous examples exist of foreign governments channeling journalists to discredit other governments, meddle in elections, or manipulate public opinion in some way. A recent piece in *Foreign Policy* said, "whether or not they like it, today journalists are part of national security."[6] Journalists holding their own institutions to account is undoubtedly crucial, but sometimes it ends up serving adversaries.

In this ecosystem, journalists are even more responsible for bringing the facts to the fore in order to formulate a well-informed public opinion. Yet, trust in the media is declining for a host of different reasons. One of those reasons is polarization, which creates divisions within the media and different spheres of reality, which in turn exacerbates existing social tensions and erodes trust in the media. Another source of skepticism toward media is the pace at which news around the world happens and has to be reported, in which haste in reporting leads to more mistakes. The emergence and rising prominence of fact-checking entities is an important development in response to the growing distrust.

Despite the challenges, the new media landscape can offer many riches to journalists and audiences alike. A journalist with more than 50 years' experience reporting from different parts of the world said that a decade ago, nobody in the United States could have imagined a non-profit newsroom winning Pulitzer Prizes, or that media and information literacy education would be so widely demanded. Collaboration among journalists and newsrooms was rare, but today it is inevitable. Data, which one participant dubbed "the spine of the best journalism" is at journalists' fingertips. Most importantly, the story is not confined by the medium, and by virtue of using different modes of getting the message across—print, audiovisual, social media appearance, etc.—stories are able to meet with wider audiences.

The New Journalist
Journalism is changing at a rapid rate because the speed of technology means that the way people get their news is constantly evolving. Journalists must do much more than their core job of going out to report a story and running it at their media outlet. Journalists need to write a story for the web page, update it, take photos, shoot videos, add audio, tweet, react to responses from readers, and repeat all of these for the next story. The shifting culture of news consumption requires that journalists work on shifting attitudes of audiences, funders, social media platforms, media owners, and governments. Being spread too thin and being overburdened by the multiplicity and pace of news outlets are thus significant challenges. Equally challenging is the lack or insufficiency of support networks for journalists. "When our friend was captured by ISIS

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[6] Elisabeth Braw, "Loose Lips Sink Democracies?" *Foreign Policy*, November 19, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/19/russia-using-west-reporting-against-here-how-to-respond/.

Journalist in Istanbul, Taksim Square. Photo Source: <u>Shutterstock.</u>

and executed, security became a larger issue. You do not have the institutions to support you in these times," a participant stated. She further noted that journalists suffer significant emotional toll but lack access to psychological support. Despite increasing awareness about the potentially traumatizing effect of the profession, the training and support provided in the newsrooms is insufficient.

Perhaps the most noteworthy issue is that journalism is a profession in which one puts their life on the line. This is not only true for war and conflict reporting, but also for exercising this profession in countries where there are severe limitations on the freedom of expression. Journalists are persecuted, censored, and jailed, not only in non-democratic countries, but also in democratic ones. As a participant aptly put it, "throughout the world there is a lapse of reason," which targets journalism, but which will be overcome, for the most part, by the efforts of journalists carrying quality information to the public.

The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia, and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey.

To learn more about the Hollings Center's mission, history and funding:
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