



Media in turmoil:  
**An assessment  
of the media sector  
in Yemen**

Assessment

January 2012



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# 1 Introduction and background of media assessment mission

In light of the recent instability and the unpredictability of the situation in Yemen, International Media Support (IMS) carried out a mission to the country in December 2011. The aim of the mission was to assess the overall situation of Yemeni media and their needs and challenges in the period ahead. This report presents the findings of the IMS media assessment mission to Yemen.

The members of the mission were charged with the following tasks:

- Assess the general political situation as well as the conditions for media to operate and inform the population;
- Consult with Yemeni and international media representatives and partners; Assess the potential for media reform work;
- Gather information in preparation of possible meeting of stakeholders;
- Assess the possibility for support in the run-up to elections scheduled for February 2012, including monitoring and coverage training.
- Assess IMS' Yemen programme with a view to adjusting it in line with political developments and needs in the sector, as well as possible efforts by international partners;

The mission was conducted from 3-7 December 2011 by Michael Irving Jensen, Head of the IMS Department for Middle East and North Africa, Andreas Sugar, IMS Yemen Programme Manager, and Jason Lambert, Commercial Director of Brand X. The mission members engaged with a wide range of media representatives and international media support partners in the country's capital Sana'a in the north and Aden in the south in the course of the mission.

Annex 2 provides a list of those organisations and individuals with whom the mission met. Is not an exhaustive list of relevant media outlets in Yemen, but rather a record of those partners who were available at the time of the mission.

Change Square, Sana'a.  
Photo: Antti Kuusi/IMS



## 2 Political and social context

In a year of major changes in the Arab world, Yemen has witnessed its share of turmoil in 2011. In addition to the long-standing tension and fragmentation along regional and tribal lines, the past year has seen unrest and mass protests against the 33-year rule of President Saleh, including an attack on his compound in June 2011.

On 23 November 2011, the President signed a transitional agreement in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. Among other things, the agreement stipulates that: 1) Vice-President Hadi will form a power-sharing government within 14 days and the opposition coalition will nominate a prime minister; 2) the VP will head a temporary security council and try to negotiate a demilitarisation of the capital; 3) President Saleh must relinquish full control in early February 2012, and Vice President Hadi will be elected president as a consensus candidate agreed by all sides; 4) Vice President Hadi will oversee a national dialogue on constitutional reform; 5) President Saleh and his allies will have immunity from prosecution.

The last point has angered protesters and led to further clashes in Sana'a and Taizz. Most of the partners and media specialists with whom the mission met in Yemen hope that the agreement will lead to real transition. However, many are doubtful since the Riyadh deal excludes a number of important players, including the youth movement in Change Square, who are clearly disappointed or outright dissatisfied with the agreement, the Houthi rebels, the southern movement, and Al Qaeda. One media actor deemed that the transition could go either way, describing the situation as "a landmine that could either explode or be detonated."

It is also widely believed that, if the current regime senses a lack of international support for or interest in the process, it may decide to renege on its commitments of the November agreement. There is widespread agreement that the Houthi and southern issues will only be addressed after a successful transition process.



Photo: Andreas Sugar/IMS

The prospect of presidential elections in February 2012 is in itself not likely to lead to major change, since the government and opposition (the Joint Meeting Parties) have agreed to nominate Vice President Hadi as their candidate for the transitional period; he is unlikely to face any serious opposition from smaller parties. Meanwhile, former President Saleh has returned to Sana'a and continues to exert his influence on the politics of the country. Hadi is not considered a strong leader by anyone, but is merely a consensus figure. At the same time, it is hoped that his (likely) election as president will, once and for all, bring an end to the rule of Saleh.

A central part of the agreement – the demilitarisation of the cities – will prove very difficult, especially in Sana'a which remains tense and heavily militarised. Signs of urban warfare are ubiquitous with checkpoints throughout the city, defensive barricades, scores of armed personnel, and closed-down shops in central parts of the city. In addition to the Republican Guard and other pro-Saleh forces on one side and the forces loyal to dissident General Ali Mohsen on the other, there are a number of tribal and other factions present, supporting one or the other of the two major sides. Fighting, including heavy shelling, occurs almost on a daily basis. According to many observers, the possibility of the hostilities developing into a full-fledged civil war can still not be ruled out.

The movement in Change Square deserves separate mention. Stronghold of the revolution, the "Square" is made of more than 1,000 tents occupying several streets in the centre of the capital. Some of the occupiers have set up semi-permanent structures signalling that they intend to stay as long as it takes to change the old political system. The area is controlled by anti-Saleh forces, thus providing a safe haven for a wide array of opposition groups representing different political affiliations and special interests.

The atmosphere in Change Square is positive and mostly optimistic and the people are welcoming and pleased to convey their messages to visiting foreigners (apparently not a common sight). YemenPAC, an association of anti-corruption parliamentarians, has been training youth activists in how to work and react during unrest; previously, there had been some confusion about both the rights and responsibilities of protesters. A code of conduct leaflet had been produced in 40,000 copies and disseminated in Change Square.

The dynamics in the south of the country are very different from those in the capital. Although the 2011 uprising in Yemen originated in Aden, the port city in the south is now relatively calm and unaffected by the instability in Sana'a, Taizz and other parts of the country. Sentiments of secession are widespread, however, as has been the case on and off since unification in 1990.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in large parts of the country remains dire, as millions of people are facing chronic deprivation made worse by continuing violence, with some of the world's highest malnutrition rates, a breakdown of basic services, and a threatening health crisis. Humanitarian needs in Yemen are projected to deteriorate over the next year, while longer-term prospects for rebuilding and development are complicated by extremely high levels of unemployment, poverty and illiteracy.

### 3 Yemeni media landscape

The situation of media and journalists has been worsening in parallel with the political and security developments. Many independent and opposition media outlets have experienced direct attacks, with several journalists killed and injured. According to various sources on the ground, 588 violations against media workers were reported between February and December 2011. Of these, 289 were physical. Confiscation and destruction of newspapers is a daily occurrence, and acute lack of gasoline, electricity and printing paper is also making publishing and distribution increasingly difficult. Online media have also been targeted, with some websites closed down permanently. All media workers are experiencing restrictions on their freedom of movement. International journalists have virtually been banned from entering the country; hence external coverage of developments in Yemen is sparse.

Altogether, the media in Yemen, especially in Sana'a, seem to be in a very serious – even existential – crisis. They are under severe pressure both physically and financially. While trying to navigate the dangerous political environment, journalists are also struggling to survive on increasingly meagre salaries. Many of the beleaguered outlets, some of which have had to relocate because of direct attacks against their premises, will be forced to completely rethink or even close down their operations. In this challenging situation, the lack of basic skills among editors and journalists is becoming ever more pronounced. Although the media has played an important role in furthering and amplifying the calls for political change, the conflict has had a negative impact on the tone and independence of the media. Reporting is often emotional and lacks journalistic objectivity.

The various branches of media differ in their views on the priorities of the sector, with some outlets (especially print) stressing that the current situation demands urgent support for their physical survival. Many others, however, highlight the lack of professional skills within the sector, noting the need for training in a number of areas including conflict sensitive and investigative reporting, ethics, business management and photography. Some outlets require help to carry out much-needed maintenance of equipment (especially from Europe).

The tense situation has also challenged the relative solidarity within the media sector, as competition for audiences has created an environment in which the ethics of good journalism are stretched and even challenged. It appears that codes of conduct in a number of areas and within the different branches of the media might help create some sense of governance and common guidelines for the profession.

Given the severity of the situation and the multiplicity of challenges, media representatives agreed with IMS to draw up a list of common needs and issues of all branches of the sector. The finalized and signed document would provide a useful tool for bringing attention to the seriousness of the situation and urging international partners to engage and provide assistance.

The media outlets in Aden are much smaller than in Sana'a and mainly cater to a southern audience. Consequently, they are marginalised in terms of influence on the national media scene. At the same time, they feel pressured by both the government and the opposition even if they wish to remain



independent. Media in the south are also afraid of or threatened by three additional sides: al-Qaeda, extreme members of the Southern Movement, and by the Islah party. Many southerners are concerned about the rise of Islah and its conservative policies since the south is generally considered more liberal than the north, not least with regard to the rights of women.

Overall, however, media workers are under less physical pressure than their peers in the north, since the effects of the turmoil in Sana'a are minimal in Aden. Indeed, some journalists feel that they have more journalistic freedom than previously, attributing it to the fact that the government has been weakened by the unrest. Nevertheless, an outlet as the previously large and influential newspaper Al-Ayyam remains inoperative, as it was closed down in May 2009 when the government accused it of supporting separatism.

While the needs of southern media appear less urgent at the time of writing than those in Sana'a, they do need support, not least to improve professional skills through training, especially for youth and those reporting from conflict areas.

A general point that strikes the external observer is the huge number of media outlets in Yemen, many of which may be too small to be viable in the long run. Recognizing this fact themselves, media outlets have on occasion discussed the possible formation of coalitions or networks that could bring together and strengthen smaller organisations. However, initiatives have so far proved futile, primarily due to political divisions or disagreement about who would lead the efforts.

### **3.1 Media unions**

The Yemen Journalists Syndicate (YJS) is the only major association of media workers in Yemen, with headquarters in Sana'a and branches and committees in other parts of the country. The YJS has emerged from the unrest reasonably unscathed, and its representatives believe that the sector as a whole has remained relatively unified during the events of 2011, not least because most journalists have supported the uprising. Although the YJS has lost government subsidies and key leaders have had to resign or even go into hiding, its membership of 2,400 remains strong. The YJS could, however, become even stronger if it reached out to all branches of the business, not only the print journalists. Apparently, YJS is already working on an internal by-law to allow membership for online media.

YJS representatives are moderately optimistic about the transition period, which they believe will provide an opportunity to promote reform of media laws (e.g. regulation of online media and legislation on telecommunications and audio-visual media).

A major issue in relation to the YJS is the highly centralised nature of the organisation. The Aden branch feels overlooked and side-lined in decision-making and in other processes by the Sana'a headquarters. Some journalists in the south also expressed their concern to IMS mission members that the YJS in Sana'a is pro-Islah and has become overly politically involved in the revolution when it ought to remain neutral.

The YJS would clearly benefit from coaching and assistance with restructuring and improving of internal communication, consultation, coordination and information-sharing within the organisation. Training and twinning are other areas of possible support.



## 3.2 Print media

The branch most affected by the unrest is probably print media. In addition to the problems facing the sector as a whole, print media have experienced enormous challenges to the printing and distributing of newspapers. In addition to the scarcity of printing paper and other essentials, newspapers have been confiscated and sometimes burnt when having to cross through the many checkpoints in Sana'a and elsewhere. These obstacles in reaching their readers have naturally also had a negative impact on advertisement revenue. As a result, many print media have sought to diversify their business by turning to online publishing, including radio.

The needs of print media are thus urgent and primarily physical; for many it is a matter of survival. At the same time, and because of the efforts to move into new areas (which require new skills and expertise), print outlets need training in a number of areas, including technical skills to establish and manage websites. But they should continue to play on their strengths, not least the tradition of offering more in-depth journalism. Contrary to common belief, the editor of Al-Ayyam believes that there is economic potential in investigative reporting – “if it is good, it sells.”



Photo: Andreas Sugar/IMS

### 3.3 Online media

Despite the low internet penetration in Yemen (estimates range between 3 and 7 per cent), there is quite a large number of online media outlets. The majority, though, are very small and probably not sustainable in the long run. As is the case for other media, many online outlets rely heavily on the financial support of donors, which at times seek to influence editorial content.

Larger websites, such as Mareb Press and Al-Masdar Online, have developed into serious and influential news outlets with significant audiences. They operate with a small core staff that select and revise the content provided by freelance correspondents based all over the country. However, since these stringers are rarely professional journalists, they are slow to produce content which often requires heavy editing.

Time will show whether the weakening of the regime will result in less obstruction of online media. For the time being, hacking and blocking of websites remains a problem that, if addressed, adds to the running costs. Some sites are looking for new ways to circumvent the obstacles and reach their audiences, e.g. by uploading their content to Facebook pages.

With external assistance, including from IMS, some outlets have been able to significantly increase their advertisement revenue – an avenue that has the potential to be developed even further. At the same time, online media need to think of creative and alternative sources of income, for example by joining forces and charging joint subscriptions for agencies and governments outside the country. Some websites are exploring new ways to improve their content, including increased use of video and photo material. Such material also has the potential to provide another source of income. However, due to the general lack of respect for copyright in Yemen, the more professional sites are afraid that good photos may be copied without any consequences for the culprits.

The needs of online media range from support to secure hosting to assistance in making sites more user-friendly. Clearly, online outlets would also benefit from training (substantive as well as technical), twinning programmes and other efforts to professionalise staff, especially the freelance correspondents.

A phenomenon which is particularly visible among online media is the use of very graphic content. Apart from the ethical questions related to the publication of photos of severely mutilated people, including children, it may discourage advertisers, particularly foreign, that do not wish to be associated with such content.



Suhail TV representatives.  
Photo: Andreas Sugar/IMS

### 3.4 Broadcast media

Since the government does not have the capability to block satellite TV, a couple of stations have emerged over recent years as an alternative to state TV. The content is mainly Yemeni, but the target audience is broader, including the Arabian Peninsula and the diaspora in Europe. Broadcasting is cumbersome, however. A station like Suhail TV broadcasts from London via internet upload through Germany and slow internet connections make live transmission weak. Thus, most of its 24/7 programming consists of recorded content and programmes bought from elsewhere.

While the satellite stations consider themselves independent, they are not commercial and therefore rely heavily on donors, e.g. the local mobile network operator Sabafon. Suhail TV openly supports the protesters, and recently moved to the relative safety of Change Square following an armed attack on its previous studio. Not surprisingly, much of its airtime is dedicated to the protests and the opposition movement.

Although the satellite stations are run by dynamic and professional people, they would benefit from training in a number of areas, including visual design, editing, photography, and ethics, as well as technical and/or material support to improve the ability to broadcast effectively.

So far, FM radio has been reserved for state-controlled media. However, this may change if the transition leads to media reform and an end to state monopoly on broadcast media. Yemen Times has already submitted an application for an FM licence and is hopeful that it will be granted in the not too distant future.

## 4 Recommendations

While the official political rhetoric in Yemen now focuses on the transition process, the overall context in which IMS and other media development organisations will need to operate in the near and medium future continues to be one of conflict. The situation remains too unpredictable to treat Yemen as a country entering a political transition.

The list of recommendations and observations below is intended as an identification of the needs and actions aimed at the immediate survival and increased domestic penetration of professional, independent news media. Any action, however, should be considered in the context of a longer-term process of professionalisation and growing sustainability of independent media.

### 4.1 Overall recommendations

- Given the state of crisis of the media in Yemen, it would be *important to convene a stakeholder meeting as soon as possible*. Such a meeting would help to 1) draw attention to the situation; 2) offer an opportunity to divide the tasks among international partners; and 3) strengthen the relationship of Yemeni stakeholders.
- Continued engagement in Yemen should consider *how to balance short-term needs and a long-term strategy*. The unpredictability of the political and security situation means that activities will need to be carefully calibrated to allow for modifications and changes according to the changing circumstances on the ground.
- It appears that there is *not much point in devoting resources to provide support for media monitoring and training in the run-up to elections*. Since the result of the vote is more or less predetermined, the role of the media will be minimal. It would therefore not be worth to use funds and time on the event, especially when the needs are so great in other areas.
- There is *significant need for training of journalists and media workers in all branches and at all levels* (from editors-in-chief to stringers on the ground). Courses are required in a number of areas including safety, conflict sensitive and investigative journalism, ethics, and video/photo in conflict situations, business management, online and new media.
- Provided that the GCC agreement is implemented and leads to a real transition process, *media reform will be key*. International pressure, guidance and technical advice will be required in order to further the drafting and adoption of relevant media legislation.
- In addition to training, *twinning projects* would be relevant for print, broadcast and online media alike.
- Most of the media content is produced by and aimed at the population in the urban centres. However, the majority of Yemenis live in rural areas. Efforts should be made to *support news dissemination to the rural areas/far reaches of Yemen*.

- An easy and relatively low-cost area of support might be the *provision of assistance in the drafting of codes of conduct* for various branches of the media. While such codes do not carry any legal force, they may help establish a culture of appropriate conduct among media, not least with regard to copyright, graphic content, etc.

## 4.2 Print media

- Many of the *most pressing problems of the print media are physical* (e.g. lack of fuel and electricity). Consideration should be given to whether there are ways to help mitigate these challenges, for example by supporting efforts to create an alliance for joint distribution of newspapers.

## 4.3 Broadcast media

- It appears that the new *satellite TV stations* reach a broad audience and will only continue to increase their scope in the future. However, they *need help to professionalise their staff*, both in substantive and technical terms.
- The potential for independent radio in Yemen exists, not least as a means to reach isolated and illiterate segments of the population. If the state monopoly on FM radio comes to an end, it is an area that deserves external support. In the meantime, *assistance should be directed to online radio projects*.

## 4.4 Online and new media

- It would be worth exploring the possibility of providing a service to *aggregate news headlines and distribute them by email or SMS* to subscribers. This would allow blocked websites' headlines reach subscribers. Similarly, there are possibilities in assisting blocked media to *pass full-text content to Facebook*.
- *Satellite TV stations could be supported by investigating their online reach*. Currently, their content seems to be available online only on a few video sharing websites.
- Online media should be urged to revisit the *idea of forming an Electronic Media Association*, setting the entry level fairly high in terms of reach, content and professional standards. If cooperation has economic benefits, it may result in a natural consolidation of the electronic media landscape in Yemen.
- There is a need to explore the *idea of subscription and syndication models being applied to Yemeni media, either individually or collectively*. The subscription model might be targeted at non-domestic media and public sector especially, based on the fact that a typical independent Yemeni news website attracts 60-75 per cent of its traffic from outside the country.

# Annexes

## Annex 1: Abbreviations

Frequently used

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IMS	International Media Support
YemenPAC	Yemen Parliamentarians Against Corruption
YJS	Yemen Journalists Syndicate

## Annex 2: List of meetings with media and organisations

### Sana'a

Akhbar Alyum (newspaper)  
Al-Masdar Online (news website)  
Al-Nidaa (newspaper)  
Al-Shahed (newspaper)  
Al-Saeeda TV (satellite TV)  
Center for Training and Protecting Journalist Freedoms  
International Federation of Journalists (project team and safety trainer)  
Mareb Press (news website)  
Newsyemen (news website)  
Responsive Governance Program  
Sahwa (newspaper)  
Shabab TV (satellite TV)  
Suhail TV (satellite TV)  
Yemen Journalists Syndicate  
Yemen Parliamentarians Against Corruption (YemenPAC)  
Yemen Times (newspaper)  
Yemenat (news website)

### Aden

Adenalghad (news website)  
Adenlife (news website)  
Akhbar Aden (newspaper)  
Al-Ayyam (newspaper)  
Altajdeed (news website)  
International Federation of Journalists (safety trainer)  
Yemen Journalists Syndicate (Aden branch)







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