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12. Yemen: Unsettled Media for an Unsettled Country

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Throughout history, successive governments in Yemen have realized the importance of the media. Consequently, they have tightened the grip on the media by imposing a monopoly on ownership and by selecting editors-in-chief and other leading positions to ensure complete media control. Thus, media have functioned as a voice for the government rather than a voice for the public. A slight change has occurred since the Yemeni unification in 1990 in terms of allowing limited ownership and freedom of expression. However, as a result of the long monopoly and mismanagement, media in Yemen are facing huge challenges at the levels of infrastructure, technology, regulation, freedom of expression, training, and professionalism.

Background

Located in the southernmost portion of the Arabian Peninsula, the Republic of Yemen is bordered by Saudi Arabia to the north, the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden to the south, the Sultanate of Oman to the east, and the Red Sea to the west. In 2019, the population exceeded 29 million, with a growth rate estimated at more than 3% per year.

Yemen was for a long time divided in two parts. Before 1962, northern Yemen was under the rule of the Zaydi Imamate from 898 to 1962 until a revolution erupted in September 1962. Southern Yemen was under British colonial administration from 1839 to 1967 until another revolution began on 14 October 1967 (Varisco, 2017). In 1990, the two

Yemens—the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen or South Yemen and the Arab Republic of Yemen or North Yemen—unified and became one country under the name of the Republic of Yemen.

Yemen is a traditional society that has entered the era of modernization only recently, where tribes and clans stand out as active in and determinant of social structure (Al-Salahi, 2012, p. 14). The tribes have had a significant impact on Yemen and its social structure since ancient times. Under the modern state structure, the tribes still play a pivotal role in Yemen's political life (Rabe'e, 2012, p. 28). Tribal leaders and clans are the basis of state authority in rural areas (Al-Mawla, 2011, p. 121).

Most of Yemen remains religiously divided, with the Shi'a Zaydi school dominant in the north, and the Sunni Shafi'i School most common in the south and along the Red Sea Coast (Varisco, 2017). Sunnis represent about 70% of the population and Zaydis about 30%. There are also two minorities, one of which is an Ismaili sect that is classified as part of the Shi'ites, and the other is Jews, most of whom emigrated to Israel in the late 1940s as part of an organized plan to evacuate them from Yemen (Al-Salahi, 2012, p. 15). Some of the remaining Jews have migrated to Israel recently due to conflict and threats, mainly from the Houthis. The current state constitution defines Yemen as an Arab, Islamic state, and Islamic Shar'ia law is the basis for all legislation. The Arabic language is the official and dominant language in society and all aspects of life, as well as in the educational system.

According to the Yemeni Constitution, the political system of Yemen is based on political and party pluralism. The authorities are divided into three independent entities: the executive authority, represented by the President of the Republic and the Council of Ministers, the legislative authority, and the judiciary. However, actual practice reflects that full control of the executive lies in the hands of the president, as opposed to the other ministers (Al-Salahi, 2012, p. 16).

The Yemeni economy in the two Yemens, both before and after unification, is a rent-based economy. This type of economy has led to the fragility of the state, a lack of power and legitimacy, encouragement of non-official groups to rebel against the state, and a lack of stability on the economic, political, and social levels (Al-Fakih, 2012, p. 31).

Many factors have led to enduring political conflict, which has been ongoing over the last three decades: corruption, marginalized democracy, and a lack of political reform, as well as a failure to embrace the collective stance needed to build a modern state. This includes, but is not limited to, the secessionist movement in the south and the Houthi movement in the north, which culminated after the Arab uprisings in 2011. One year into the uprising, then-president Ali Abdallah Saleh stepped down after more than three decades in power and left a political vacuum in the country. Yemen's political elite acceded to the Gulf initiative in November 2011, which established a caretaker transitional government. The agreement, which was signed in Riyadh on 23 November 2011, stipulated a two-year transitional period and created a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) as a forum to solve the country's political problems (Schmitz, 2014). The Conference, which lasted for almost one year, concluded with agreement on most of the controversial and critical issues as well as a future road map. Thus, Yemen was referred to as one of the success stories of the Arab uprisings. Yet, within months, a rebel group, the Houthis, took over the Amran governorate and other important military camps and facilities. Motivated by popular frustrations over deteriorating living circumstances and lack of political reforms (Clausen, 2015), the Houthi forces and forces loyal to former president Saleh took control of Yemen's capital, Sana'a and much of the country on 21 September 2014. Consequently, the Yemeni state nearly collapsed (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

In March 2015, after Saleh's successor, President Abed Rabbo Mansur Hadi, who had fled to Saudi Arabia, appealed for international intervention, Saudi Arabia hastily assembled an international coalition and launched a military offensive aimed at restoring Hadi's rule and evicting the Houthi fighters from the capital and other major cities. Since then, the war has caused the deaths of thousands of Yemenis, including civilians as well as combatants, and has significantly damaged the country's infrastructure as well as its social fabric (Sharp, 2019).

Historical Developments

The media in Yemen have been through different historical developments. These can be classified into four major phases: 1) the British and Ottoman

occupation, 2) revolutionary times and independence, 3) separation until 1990, and 4) the period after unification in 1990.

During the first phase, in 1872, the Ottomans introduced the first print media to Northern Yemen for official use, the *Yemen* newsletter, which was the first publication in Yemen in the Turkish language. In 1879, *Sana'a*, a weekly newspaper, was published as the first newspaper in the Arabian Peninsula in the Turkish language and later on in Arabic and Turkish languages (Al-Zain, 1995, pp. 17–32). The *Al-Iman* newspaper was published in 1926 and the *Al-Hekma Al-Yamaniya* magazine in 1938 (Al-Zain, 1995, pp. 60–69).

In Southern Yemen, *Aden* weekly newspaper was the first official newspaper, which was published from 1929. *Sawt Al-Jazeera Aden* was published in 1939, followed by other newspapers. The purpose of these publications was to clarify Britain's position on World War II and to highlight the victories of the Allied Forces against Germany. These publications also aimed to publish news of the colonial administration in Aden and its decisions. By 1960, the number of daily and weekly newspapers and magazines in Aden had increased to 34 publications issued by the government, parties, and syndicates (Mutahar, 2004, p. 68). These journalistic activities indicate that all competing parties in North and South Yemen, including the Imamate, the opposition, and the British colonizers, had recognized the importance of print journalism in the conflict.

South Yemen was first introduced to radio broadcasting in 1940 when the British occupation authority established a small radio station, *Voice of the Island*, in Aden. This station broadcast on short wave, targeting Yemenis and residents of Aden and announcing military victories of Britain and the Allied countries against Germany and its Axis allies. It also broadcast instructions to citizens on how to protect themselves against air strikes during World War II (Basaleem, 2003, p. 65). *Radio Aden* was established in 1954 as the first radio station to provide regular services in the region in the morning and evening periods. It broadcast programs for six hours per day and 10 hours on weekends (Mutahar, 2004, pp. 81–82).

In North Yemen, an American delegation came to Sana'a in 1946 to discuss with Imam Yahya the oil extraction in Yemen. They brought a 13-watt wireless device with them, which they gave to the Imam.

This device was then used for radio broadcasting. The radio station broadcast its programs every Thursday and Friday for one hour and 15 minutes only, with content limited to readings from the Holy Qur'an, Imam news, religious speeches, and military marches played by copper machines (Al-Soswa, 1998, p. 17).

The real birth of the Yemeni radio news came after the revolution of 26 September 1962, where radio played an important role in defending the revolution and the Republican system. After that point, broadcast transmission increased to cover the entire day and devoted two hours for broadcasting in the English language.

In the South, *Aden TV* began broadcasting on 11 September 1964, during the British occupation of Southern Yemen. The broadcast duration ranged from two to four hours daily and covered the city of Aden (Al-Fakih, 2000, p. 3). The second phase, during the 1960s, directly involved the popular struggle of the Yemeni people. Press publications reached a total of 19 newspapers and magazines. Their positions ranged from those who supported the armed revolt against the colonizer, to those who were pro-occupation, and to others who were in between. However, most of these newspapers were pro-revolutionary and supported the armed struggle against British colonialism (Mutahar, 2004, p. 70).

During the third phase, the separation of South Yemen, and after the end of British colonialism in 1967 and the establishment of the Socialist Party of Yemen, almost all newspapers in the south were suspended. During the period from 1970 to 1985, only two newspapers were published, *Defa'a Al-Sha'ab* and *Al-Rayah*, which was issued by the military in 1980.

In North Yemen after the 1962 revolution, three official newspapers appeared: *Al-Thawra*, *Al-Gomhoriah*, and *Al-Akhbar*. *Al-Thawra* was the first newspaper for the newborn republic. Despite the different names of those newspapers during that period, their content was almost identical in terms of addressing various issues related to the revolution and the fledgling republic, as well as questioning the past period in all its forms and manifestations. They were operated based on an informally unified framework to help in nation-building (Mutahar, 2004, p. 67).

According to the Ministry of Information, the total publications in North Yemen reached 46 (daily, weekly, and monthly) during the

period from 1962 to 1978. This is considered the phase in which modern journalism was established in Yemen.

Aden News Agency was established in 1970 in South Yemen to collect and disseminate news, while in North Yemen, *Saba'a Yemeni News* was set up. They later merged into one news agency, the *Yemeni News Agency* (*Saba'a*), after 1990, which is the main source of news for Yemeni official media inside the country, as well as for media institutions abroad. Also, *Sana'a TV* began broadcasting on 24 September 1975, transmitting from a studio of 100 square meters with little equipment.

Yemen General Corporation for Radio & Television was reorganized in May 1990 after the reunification through a merger of one corporation that was established in Sana'a in 1976 with another that was established in Aden in 1986. The headquarters are located in Sana'a. It comprises *Yemen Satellite Channel* and *First Channel* in Sana'a, *Second Channel* in Aden, *Public Radio Program* in Sana'a, and *Second Radio Program* in Aden as well as local radio stations in several governorates.

After 1990, Yemeni media have witnessed remarkable developments in terms of quantity, quality, and the level of form and content as well as the legislative aspect. The number of newspapers and magazines were doubled as more licenses were granted. However, only 191 of the 497 licensed newspapers have continued to be published on regular and semi-regular bases (Abdulwase'e, 2009). In addition, television transmission via the *ArabSat* satellite started in 1996.

The widening margin of freedom granted to the media has enabled partisan and non-partisan newspapers to appear, allowing all political, partisan, and civil society organizations to express themselves through print media, including nongovernment newspapers (42), party newspapers (22), governmental newspapers (19), nongovernment magazines (22), party magazines (3), and 42 governmental and official magazines (Basaleem, 2003, pp. 175–81).

This new free atmosphere and the evolution of satellite television broadcasting technology have allowed private television channels to appear as well. By the end of 2012, there were 13 television satellite channels: four of them are state-run channels and the rest are private. Two of the government channels are for general programming, *Al-Yemen* and *Aden*, and the others are specialized channels, such as *Sheba*, a youth and sports channel, and *Al-Iman*, a religious channel, both launched in

2008. *Al-Saeeda TV* was the first Yemeni private channel launched from Cairo in 2007, and it then moved its operation to Sana'a. In 2009, three channels were launched: *Suhail*, an opposition channel from inside the country; *Al-Aqeek* (Onex), which shut down after one year for financial reasons; and *Aden Live*, an opposition channel from abroad. Three more non-governmental channels were launched in 2011. These included *Yemen Today* (partisan channel), *A'azal* (belonging to one tribe leader), and *Yemen Shabab*, a youth and revolutionary channel as well as the *Belqees* channel, another youth and revolutionary channel owned by female Nobel Prize winner Tawakkol Karman. The channel used to broadcast from Yemen until 2015, when it was moved to Istanbul after being attacked by the Houthis. In 2012, two new channels were launched: *Al-Maseerah* (belonging to the Houthi Movement) and *Al-Sahat* (launched from Beirut in July) (Al-Shami, 2013, pp. 443–51).

Moreover, two new channels affiliated with Houthis have launched and are operating from Sana'a. They are *Al-Hawia TV*, which officially launched on 15 April 2018, and *Al-Lahda TV*, which launched in July 2018. In early 2020, *Al-Mahriah TV* was launched from Istanbul as the most recent channel broadcasting from outside the country.

Political System and Legal Framework

The Yemeni Constitution guarantees freedom of opinion and expression to all citizens. According to Article 42, every citizen has the right to participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the country. The state shall guarantee freedom of thought and expression of opinion in speech, writing, and photography within the limits of the law. It also guarantees citizens the right to organize themselves in different manners. The state shall also guarantee freedom for the political, trade, cultural, scientific, and social organizations.

Law No. 25 on the Press and Publication, which was issued in 1990, has governed the Yemeni press up to this date. According to Article 33 of this law, the right to own and publish newspapers and magazines is guaranteed by the Constitution to all citizens, licensed political parties, individuals, public companies, popular organizations, ministries and government, as well as corporations. In the chapter on the rights and duties of journalists, Article 13 confirms that a "journalist may not be

interrogated on opinions which he has expressed or published, and which may not be used to inflict harm on him/her provided what he/she published is not contrary to the law."

Despite the abovementioned constitutional guarantees, Law No. 25 imposes several restrictions on the freedom of information and allows the imprisonment of journalists. Article 103 contains a list of restrictions that journalists must take into consideration. This list includes prohibits the following:

a) Criticism of the head of state, or attribution to him of declarations or pictures unless the declarations were made or the pictures taken during a public speech.

b) Anything which leads to the spread of ideas contrary to the principles of the Yemeni Revolution, is prejudicial to national unity or distorts the image of Yemeni, Arab or Islamic heritage.

c) Anything that undermines public morals or prejudices the dignity of individuals or the freedom of the individual by smears and defamation.

Article 104 of the law emphasizes that anyone who violates this "shall be subject to a fine not exceeding ten thousand riyals or a period of imprisonment not exceeding one year." Moreover, they shall be tried before the Public Prosecutor's Office for Press and Publications, which was founded in 1993. The law also includes other punishments, such as the closure of newspapers or suspension of their work, confiscation of copies, and the prevention of journalistic practice (Article 19, 2008, p. 6).

Under this law, several violations against journalists were committed. These included, but were not limited to, the imprisonment of journalists, seizure of licenses, creation of copies of websites, threats to journalists, break-ins at media organizations' premises, murders and assaults of journalists, and confiscation of their equipment. Therefore, this law has been subject to much criticism throughout the last years from different actors, including individual journalists, the Journalists' Syndicate, civil society organizations, lawyers, and lawmakers. They have called for changes or at least amendments to it. In an attempt to regulate online journalism, which had started to play a role in influencing public opinion, as well as to respond to demands to allow forces other than the government to own broadcast channels, in 2010 the Ministry of Information proposed a new law for organizing broadcast and online

media. This law was however very controversial due to its extreme restrictions and conditions for owning and launching media outlets. For instance, the proposed new law would require those who wished to obtain a license to establish a television channel to pay YER 30 million (around USD 135,000 at the time) and YER 20 million (USD 90,000) to establish a radio station or online websites. In addition, the same amount would have to be paid every two years for a renewal of the license. The fees for owning a multimedia service via mobile phone was to be set at 10 million riyals. However, the political conflicts in the years after the law was proposed hindered the process of finalizing and endorsing it by parliament. Consequently, Press Law No. 25 from 1990 still governs media in Yemen.

The government's constant attempts to legislate mass media reflect the importance it attributes to the media and its desire to control it. This has led it to adopt legal articles that reflect the interests of the ruling authority, not those of the press or journalists, and guarantee the authority complete control of the media. Consequently, this has led to a long conflict between the government, on one hand, and individual journalists, the Journalists' Syndicate, and civil society, including NGOs, on the other. It is worth mentioning that in October 2017, the Minister of Information under the *de facto* authority issued a bylaw for the regulation of online journalism.

It is noteworthy that the youth uprising in 2011 had pushed for more media freedom, including on the state-run television channels, in terms of providing space for different voices, particularly for opposition and anti-government voices. Following the uprising, talk show programs on the *Al-Yemen*, *Sheba*, and *Al-Iman* channels were dedicated to debating about protests, including the reasons that triggered them and their consequences. For several weeks, those channels hosted young people from the pro- and anti-government groups to openly debate on those issues. However, this approach lasted for only a short period of time, and those channels eventually returned to presenting a one-sided discourse.

After the Houthis took over Sana'a in September 2014, the media landscape in Yemen dramatically changed. They took control of all the state-run media, including television channels, radio stations, and print and online newspapers as well as *Yemeni News Agency* (*Saba'a*) and its website: *Saba'a Net*. They also closed down non-governmental

media, including television channels, print and online websites, and community radio stations. Moreover, they attacked media premises belonging to opposition media organizations, confiscated their property, and imprisoned many journalists. According to Human Rights Watch, a group of local journalists has been detained in Sana'a for more than three years (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Thirty-five journalists have died in Yemen since 2011, and eight of them were killed in 2018. In addition, 53 kidnapping or arrest cases of journalists have been recorded since 2011, mostly perpetrated by the Houthis and the related government. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Yemeni Journalists' Syndicate (YJS) reported that 135 cases of press freedom violations were registered from January to the end of September 2018. Moreover, the Yemeni media have become polarized along political and sectarian lines and have been viewed by the warring factions as the enemy (IFJ, 2018).

The Houthis also shut down offices of pan-Arab television channels such as *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* as well as other Arab channels, and they placed the Internet and mobile phones under censorship and surveillance.

The division of the country between the Houthi-controlled areas and the Saudi-UAE coalition-controlled areas has created two parallel media landscapes in Yemen that reflect the political situation. There are two versions of each medium, including *Yemen TV*, *Saba'a Net*, and the *Al-Thawra* website. One operates from Riyadh and the other from Sana'a, and each of them reflects the position of the individual controller. Moreover, some non-governmental television channels have migrated abroad. *Suhail TV* operates from Riyadh, and *Yemen Shabab* from Amman and Istanbul. *Belqees TV* operates from Istanbul, *Al-Sahat TV* from Beirut, and *Yemen Today TV* from Cairo.

The main media victims after the Houthis took control over Sana'a were community radio stations. According to Al-Moushaki, director of *Yemen Times* radio station and chair of the Yemeni Network for Community Radio, the situation for community radio stations deteriorated after 2015 due to economic problems resulting from the war. In addition, the premises of many stations were raided, and their property was looted. Some others had been suspended, and some turned to commercial entertainment models (Al-Reifi, 2019). Around mid-2016, community radio stations began to gradually reappear in

the Sana'a, Hadramout, and Aden governorates, but with a new focus, concentrating on entertainment, social, and religious programs, and avoiding political issues. Currently, a few of them deal with political issues, but their coverage must be in line with the position of the *de facto* authority in Sana'a. This has enabled them to gain more advertisement revenue, especially with the disappearance of most print and online newspapers. On the one hand, these stations have represented a new venue for advertisers, and a source of profit for owners, on the other (Al-Reifi, 2019).

Economy and Ownership Patterns

Despite the many changes in the media landscape in Yemen over the last decades, the business models of the media remain almost the same. Since the Houthis took over Sana'a in 2014—and as the *de facto* authority—they have directly controlled governmental broadcast, print, and online media and financed them from the public treasury as a means of propagating their revolutionary discourse and political, social, religious, and economic interests. They also monitor all other types of media and means of communication. Houthis have blocked several websites, especially those belonging to their opponents. Blocked websites also include external websites like *Aljazeera.net*. According to a recent report, Yemen has the most significant share of Internet shutdowns in the Middle East (KeepetON, 2019).

An increase in the deployment of network control devices on YemenNet, the ISP controlled by Houthi forces, has also been observed (Insikt Group, 2019). On the other hand, the internationally recognized government has continued to finance copies of the same media operating from Riyadh. Moreover, the partisan and non-governmental media have continued to operate from abroad, mainly from Istanbul, Amman, Riyadh, and Beirut.

While the main political entities still seem to invest in television, printed newspapers have a very limited reach, and are therefore not invested in heavily. The print media landscape in Yemen can be classified into three basic types of funding. The first is the official one, which lacks many conditions of vitality, freedom, and the ability to keep abreast of global changes in professionalism and technology. The second

is the partisan one, depends on the financial situation of parties in the public landscape, and yet their press reflects their miserable situation. The third is the nongovernmental press, that is, the press owned by private individuals (Abdulwarith, 2009). Al-Akbari (2005) concluded in her study that the Yemeni press, whether governmental, partisan, or privately-owned, is of minor interest to the public, and its impact is weak. The highest number of copies comes from the governmental newspaper *Al-Thawrah*, and this ranged from 5,000—12,000 copies during the period from 2013— to 2017.

Community and private radio stations may be the only exception to these long-standing media economic models. They have doubled in number since 2011, from less than a handful of radio stations to more than 30 stations. Before 2011, the government monopolized FM radio signals and granted them only to governmental radio stations. After the youth uprising in 2011, this monopoly was broken, and accordingly, community radio stations started to appear. *Yemen FM* radio, which belongs to the General People's Congress (GPC), was the first of these stations to be launched (in 2011).

As a result of the political vacuum that Yemen was experiencing at that time, other new FM radio stations were also launched. The *Yemen Times* newspaper, which was the first Yemeni English-language newspaper, used this opportunity to launch *Radio Yemen Times*, which was the second station after *Yemen FM*, followed by *Sawt Al-Yemen*. The period from 2011 to 2014 was significant for community radio stations in Yemen. Their discourse was varied and critical. They tackled issues ranging from the political to the social. The financial sources of these stations were not particularly clear as, similarly to other Yemeni media, their financial budgets were not declared. However, advertisements may have represented the main source of income. Others, such as *Nas FM*, received support from businesspersons.

As a result, there are now around eight community radio stations in Sana'a, and three in Hadramout. Some of them are general, and others are specialized. However, in Aden, there is only one community radio station, *Lana FM* radio (Studies & Economic Media Center, 2018, p. 11).

There are, moreover, 21 private radio stations. Fifteen of them are in Sana'a. They are either privately-owned by individuals or supported by political parties or religious groups. They include *Yemen FM*, *Iram*

FM, *Yemen Music*, *Grand FM*, *Radio Yemen Times*, *Yemen Voice*, and others. In Hadramout, there are five private FM radio stations, while in Aden, there is only one.

Technological developments—which have reduced the cost of radio broadcasting devices, such as transmitters and other equipment—have enabled the launch of small FM radio stations covering small, local areas. This fact, along with the granting of licenses by the *de facto* authority in Sana'a, has allowed these radio stations to flourish. However, a recent study on Yemeni radio stations concluded that the role of these stations in Yemen remains weak when it comes to essential issues. It revealed that social issues and basic services, such as electricity, water, road networks, and security problems, are represented in only a small percentage of radio coverage, accounting for just 20%, whereas entertainment, music, sports, and politics account for 80% of radio programming (Studies & Economic Media Center, 2018, p. 15).

Technology and Infrastructure

Over the past decades, the Yemeni government has exerted significant effort to keep up with technological developments, but often lagged behind other Arab states. This included shifting to a color television system in 1980 and expanding transmission to cover almost 70% of the total area of the country, and the whole country by 1996 via the *ArabSat* satellite. In 2001, Internet broadcasting was started through *ArabSat* (Mutahar, 2004, p. 80). However, the technological infrastructure is still modest. According to a recent report, the percentage of Internet users in Yemen is the lowest in the region, while prices are the most expensive in the world (Studies & Economic Media Center, 2018, p. 8). Internet users in Yemen were estimated to be more than 7 million in 2018, which amounted to around 27% of the population. However, while television transmission via Internet is very common in the neighboring countries, this is not so in Yemen due to its limited Internet speed and high prices. This kind of transmission seems still to be far off in the future.

In the era of media convergence, the country is still lagging behind. Many print newspapers have an online version as well as accounts on social media. However, videos and podcasts are notably still absent from

these platforms. Some websites rely on uploaded videos from other Arab and international media outlets, like *Al-Jazeera*, *BBC*, and *YouTube*. This is due to the slow Internet speed and lack of resources and trained persons for producing such materials. This type of convergence has deeply affected print media circulation. However, official newspapers are still surviving. This is due to indirect financial support from the government through subsidy and advertisements. All ministries and other governmental institutions are obliged to subscribe to these newspapers, as well as to post advertisments in them.

Mobile users in Yemen amount to around 55% of the total population. Four main companies provide mobile services. One is a government company, which is *Yemen Mobile*, and the three others are private companies: *Sabafon*, *MTN*, and *Y Telecom*. At this point, 3G is the most common network used. Internet users in Yemen have significantly increased over the last decades, from 15,000 in 2000 to more than 7.9 million in 2019. Internet penetration in Yemen is now around 27%.

The number of social media network users in Yemen is growing rapidly. They increased by 19% from April 2019 to January 2020. The total number of users was 2.5 million in January 2020. Social media penetration in Yemen stood at 8.5% in January 2020 (Kemp, 2020). Smartphones play a significant role in the growth of social media as the majority of users have mobile phones, especially in rural and remote areas, and can thus access these platforms.

Facebook ranks as the top social network in Yemen. More than 8% of the population are using this network (NapoleonCat, 2020). According to Statcounter GlobalStats (2020), *Facebook* represents 85% of social media users in Yemen, followed by *YouTube* with 11% and *Twitter* with 3%. Other social media networks, such as *Instagram* and *Telegram*, are used by 1% or less of social media users.

Challenges

Yemeni media face several challenges, mainly with regard to legal, technological, economic and social aspects. In an attempt to keep the media under control, the Yemeni government has resisted legislation proposals to partially relinquish its control of the media. However, the law governing the media was implemented in 1990 and has become

seriously outdated. In 2010, the Ministry of Information proposed a new law for audiovisual media that raised a lot of controversy. In respect to the technological factors, the fast-paced development in communications technology and multimedia communication represents a main challenge that Yemen in its current state of war cannot possibly meet.

Social media play an important role in all aspects of the daily life of Yemeni people, particularly young people. This role goes beyond facilitating social interaction between people in a very traditional and conservative society, such as Yemen, to a full-fledged medium of communication by all means. Social media have gained special importance since the Houthis' coup in 2014 that has led to blocking many online journalism websites and shutting down several newspapers, radio stations, and television channels. In such circumstances, these media have become the alternative media for the public to share information, publish news, and discuss and express opinions about several issues. Activists and journalists in particular heavily utilize social media for launching humanitarian relief and political campaigns as well as publishing breaking news. Thus, social media have become important players for influencing public opinion and enhancing awareness on political, social, and cultural levels.

Outlook

The future of Yemeni media will be determined by the future of the country itself after the current war ends. This war has produced many changes including a polarized media landscape. New players have forced themselves on to the political scene in the north (mainly the Houthis), as well as in the south (the Southern Transitional Council). Even the long-ruling party, the GPC, which controlled the country for more than three decades, has split into two divisions, one inside the country and the other abroad. However, the role of the media will remain essential for all actors and political players as a driving force for social and political changes as well as mobilization. The best media model for Yemeni media is to be independent from the ruling authority's control and to become a real public media that serves the interest of the people, not the ruling power. From a legislative perspective, in a

country like Yemen, the best approach to regulate media is to have partnership among all stakeholders, journalists represented by Yemeni Journalists' Syndicate and other syndicates, academia, and experts. Joint efforts like this might lead to media laws that would achieve a minimum degree of consent on how media should operate in such a complex society. From a technology perspective, media in Yemen need to create a conducive environment for private investments that encourage the private sector to invest in the media industry and work in a competitive manner. Finally, freedom is the main pillar of the media: without freedom, the country will go nowhere, not only in the field of media but also in all aspects of life.

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