verbalising shock – that’s what I felt upon entering Yemen’s media landscape in November last year
to edit a publication that claims to be among the country’s scarce “independent”
newspapers. In reality, there is no independent media in Yemen. Its political landscape
has not allowed for much critical debate or dissent under the leadership of President
Ali Abdullah Saleh who has been in power since 1978.

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

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

By the end of January I ended my short-term contract
with the “independent” newspaper and was offered a job
to work on a newspaper that was taking less political risks. Its editorial red line was to avoid publishing reports that
concerned citizens with an opinion and a platform. Their
old and new colleagues had become braver but still knew that they
should not cross a certain red line. President Saleh would
found that they had become braver but still knew that they

This reporter ended up working for
major English language news outlets, ran
with the rumour mill and this resulted in
unchecked and unbalanced reporting. It
also gave prominence to opposition party leaders and
seldom obtain comment from government sources. Their
assumption was often: “The government won’t speak to us.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anton Hammerl/Africa Media Online