Is it really possible to be neutral when reporting from a war zone, or witnessing a popular uprising ruthlessly repressed by superior force? How do you approach writing or speaking of or filming barrel bombs dropped from military helicopters on residential areas, or the damage wrought by chlorine gas cylinders exploding in a market place or school playground, as is happening all over Syria? To remain unmoved by blood and guts strewn across the street requires an emotional restraint which is sub- or superhuman. A journalist is neither.

The themes of objectivity, neutrality and accuracy were discussed the Media Ethics Conference, organised by the International Communication Forum in association with Next Century Foundation, in London, May 2014. The conference was well attended by media personalities, editors, journalists and political activists. The main topics of debate were media ethics, incitement, and government interference. Nehad Ismael was there for Great North News Services.

Whilst most mainstream media is cautious, the digital social media is not. In Western democracies, print media in the main self-censors. So long as it doesn't libel or slander, it can print what it pleases. The Internet and the social media are now part of almost everyone's life, and the proliferation of websites and blogs has created new, tricky problems. The digital media is barely regulated, despite efforts by governments to control "controversial" content. Broadcast media, however, have been the subject of tough regulations for many years. Radio and television services are required to be licensed, and their output is monitored.

Most responsible media adheres to a set of media ethics. We all recognise the importance of media to governments, as a channel to convey information about policies and decisions. But the media, like any industry, has to operate within the law. Governments create regulatory frameworks to allow the media to do its work while protecting the national interest and national security. The most diehard supporters of free speech don't want to the media to be the instigator of incitement, racism and violence.

The question of objectivity and even-handedness dominated the conference, and was its most contentious theme. How do we define objectivity? Is it working in accordance with a code of rules and ethics? Is there such a thing? Can you be totally neutral in every situation? How can we report tragic events like a drowning, or an airplane crash, without succumbing to the heightened emotion and drama? How can you report massacres in Syria neutrally ? Does even-handedness require you to present the regime's defence of the indefensible ? In general, the media (in democracies at least) tries to be objective in reporting the news. It is often

criticised for getting it wrong, or if the story appears to be biased. Editors insist that they strive to be objective, but in reality does objectivity exist?

The historian Howard Zinn observed: "You can't be neutral on a moving train". If we listen to two different reporters covering the same story, we will hear two different versions. Each will have his own unique approach and interpretation.

Pat Lancaster, Editor-in-Chief of Middle East Magazine, said: "Journalists have responsibility to protect themselves, and editors have responsibility to protect journalists...Look at the whole picture with even-handedness and responsibility", citing examples of the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Other issues discussed such as reporting unpalatable news and the battle for the 'truth', as my truth may not be the same as your truth.

Princess Basma bint Saud, Chair of GURA and Global United Lanterns, suggested that journalists should seek the truth, but pay close attention to how to write their findings and convey it to the reader: "This is the responsibility of the journalist." Veteran BBC correspondent and former MP Martin Bell said: "When covering the news you have to have a sense of right and wrong. Be aware of the consequences of what you are doing."

Panellist Pamela Jenner, an outspoken freelance journalist who works in local and provincial newspapers, dissected a scenario which many journalists recognised, particularly those working for the provincial press and the national tabloids. Jenner explained how journalists are put under enormous pressure by editors to get a good story - the more sensational the better - even if that meant sacrificing the facts.

News stories break and are broken on Twitter, with one or two tweets building rapidly to an avalanche, hundreds, maybe thousands all carrying the same headline. The mainstream media wakes up and covers the story after most of the world has heard of it. (Whether many read beyond the Twitter banner to the detail is the subject for another conference). Whether covering massacres, natural disasters, or political issues, journalists are expected to follow certain rules about accuracy and objectivity. But we don't have a universally accepted code of principles and standards for journalists to adhere to when reporting the news.

As media becomes increasingly complex, multi-platform, wide-reaching and instantaneous, with an almost unimaginable array of tools including Twitter, SMS, video, and images, the need for basic professional standards is urgent. Neutrality and objectivity are elusive and subjective, yet remain essential to responsible reportage.

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