

Re-thinking Media: Responsible Reporting on Humanitarian Crises

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forum TRT WORLD
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CONFERENCE REPORT

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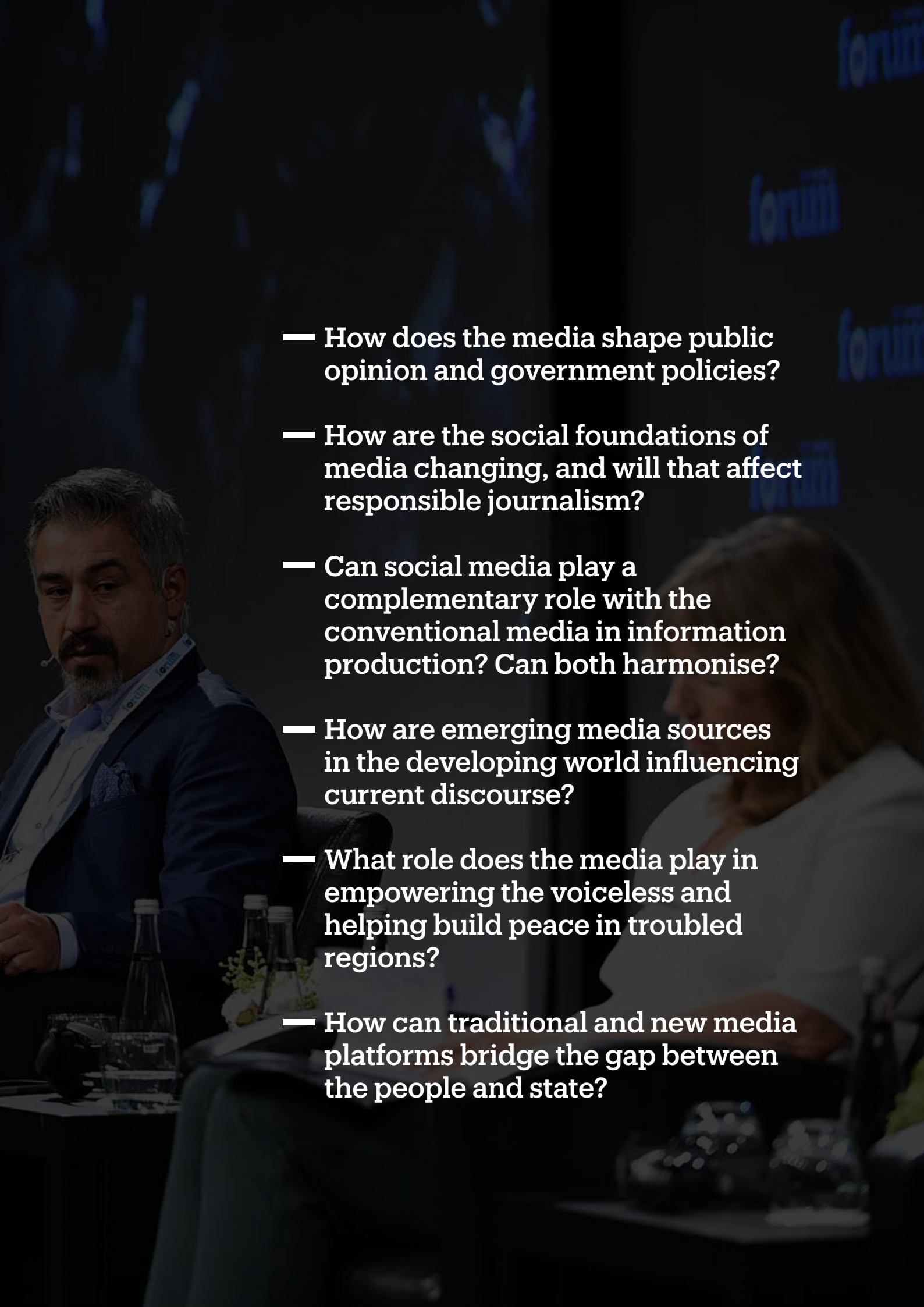
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Re-thinking Media: Responsible Reporting on Humanitarian Crises

This is a report on a public session titled “Re-thinking Media: Responsible Reporting on Humanitarian Crises”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2017. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of speakers and participants present at the TRT World Forum 2017, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.



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- How does the media shape public opinion and government policies?
 - How are the social foundations of media changing, and will that affect responsible journalism?
 - Can social media play a complementary role with the conventional media in information production? Can both harmonise?
 - How are emerging media sources in the developing world influencing current discourse?
 - What role does the media play in empowering the voiceless and helping build peace in troubled regions?
 - How can traditional and new media platforms bridge the gap between the people and state?

Summary

The media depicts and produces narratives of global events in a traditional way while experiencing one of the greatest transformations in history. The intensity, magnitude and speed urged the panellists to question and re-think media's ethical codes and the way it shapes public opinions as well as government policies. Session three analysed the importance of editorial guidelines and what it means to be objective. The panellists questioned whether reporters or journalists could ever, truly, refrain themselves from the story they are pitching.

Panellists' recounted incidents where they often found themselves torn between their professional role as detached observers and their engagement as activists and the dangers associated with getting too involved. They asked the obvious question, that is, if a reporter was to take sides, did that negate objectivity, or did it imply partiality? Resul Serdar Ataş stated that the attempt of journalists to be 'objective' could cause them to veer away from righteousness. He emphasised that media should make a clear difference between objectiveness and fairness by building new functional ethical codes in traditional journalism. Sarah Helm argued that journalists should hold fast to the Geneva Conventions and other forms of international humanitarian laws as guidelines when it comes to objectivity. Throughout her speech she emphasised the importance of investigative journalism and that more investment should be placed on this. Nicole Johnston shared her personal experiences in the media and how her reporting from conflict zones affected the idea of 'responsible journalism.' She explained how the lines between journalism and advocacy can get blurred or entirely erased when telling a story and questioned the constant dilemma of how to cover a conflict in a responsible way without damaging or impeding the dignity of the people that is reported on. According to Rodney Dixon, media images can help find peaceful solutions to ongoing conflicts by attracting global attention, giving concrete evidence and creating International courts. Simon Marks observes how government policies can affect different broadcast organisations in competing for international news space.

Overall the session discussed 'responsible journalism' and how the term 'objectivity' needs to be rephrased in relation to reporting on war zones. Secondly, panellists discussed the role and impact of emerging new technology in giving a voice to the voiceless. With the advent of social media, ordinary people can now broadcast what is happening on their devices with the same clout and authority as seasoned reporters and journalists. But 'do ordinary people know how to operate objectively and pose the right questions?' Thirdly, panellists debated as to whether international news media organisations have become too reliant on NGOs to receive information from areas of conflict. Operating in this realm, speakers pushed forward the failure of credibility in the media due to manipulative journalism.

Moderator, correspondent and presenter at TRT World, Alican Ayanlar, commenced the discussion for “Re-thinking Media: Responsible Reporting on Humanitarian Crises session”



Report on Re-thinking Media: Responsible Reporting on Humanitarian Crises

The media is a tool that depicts and often produces narratives of global events. It is constantly going through transformative changes and has been since its inception. The speed, magnitude and intensity are so vast that at times journalists are unable to adhere to the moral codes of journalistic conduct.

The media has been created to keep checks and balances on power. As a result it has become a sign of true democracy, a medium to communicate with the entire world. As we live in a competitive and polarised world, the media has become a victim in a transformed mechanism because of vast changes in the international arena. The changes that blurred journalists and ordinary citizens challenge the foundations of media ethics. The media's coverage of the Arab Uprisings, Turkey's failed coup, and elections in the West show how it can increasingly transmute itself from a conveyor to a policy-influencer. Understanding the liminal position of the media and its future in an era dominated by uncertainty requires continuous scrutinisation of its conceptual and institutional foundations. With the transformation of media ecology, modes of information and codes of communication play a leading role in human affairs. Journalists share the journalistic sphere with Tweeters, Bloggers, and YouTubers. However, with the emergence of new possibilities from analog to digital, old practices are being questioned. The intensity, magnitude and speed it is delivered has urged the panellists of the session to question and re-think media's ethical codes and norms, deeply engaging in discussions on the term "objectivity", government policies and its effects on broadcast networks, and empowering "the voiceless".

The Term “Objectivity”



Journalistic codes are linked to a traditional conception of media that attempt an accustomed balancing act, weighing up the ethical obligations of fairness, accuracy and objectivity against up-to-date and competitive reporting. The term objectivity - considerable notion within the discussion of journalistic professionalism - in itself requires careful inquisition. The competition by new media entities that have high speed and ubiquitous phenomenon partially challenges journalistic ethics and specifically the term objectivity. Just a generation ago, access to information for the majority of the world's population consisted of reading local newspapers as well as listening to radio channels or television stations. Today billions of people have access to all of the world's information whether they are at home, at the office or on the go. As a result of this change, the economic, historical and societal ramifications of this massive change that we are seeing in media have become visible.

Within this context, the session panel discussed responsible reporting on humanitarian crises around the globe. Speakers analysed the importance of editorial guidelines as well as what it means to be objective. One of the speakers, Resul Serdar Ataş shared his personal experience after the Bosnian War. He was blamed for not being objective and even considered a biased journalist while

commemorating the death of dozens, who were brutally tortured and killed in the prisoners' camp, in the town of Visegard while Bosnia was under siege. He stated that the attempt of journalists to be 'objective' could cause them to veer away from righteousness. By bringing the term objectivity to light, journalists are in many cases avoiding the truth. Journalists have recounted incidents where they often found themselves torn between their professional role as detached observers and their engagement as activists and the dangers associated with getting too involved. Therefore this raised the question - if a reporter was to take sides, did that negate objectivity, or did it imply partiality?

According to Nicole Johnston, the lines between journalism and advocacy can be blurred and entirely erased when telling a story. Furthermore, Nicole questioned the constant predicament of how to cover a conflict in a responsible way without damaging and impeding the dignity of the people that are reported. Journalists in conflict areas, reporting in humanitarian crisis, are looking through several elements before taking shots of horrible images of people in the extraordinary situation, whilst trying to ensure that they are not going to make the situation worse for them by sticking a camera in their faces.

These kinds of dilemmas that reporters are constantly faced with and whether they could ever, truly, remove themselves from the story, is the main struggle in media ethics. According to Simon Marks, to be objective you do not necessarily have to remove yourself entirely from the story. This is because sometimes if you do, you fall into the trap of then not being considered objective. Sarah Helm noted that objectivity is tightly linked to international conventions. She argued that journalists should hold to the Geneva Conventions and other forms of international humanitarian laws as guidelines when it comes to objectivity. The challenge for today's media can be summarised into one question, that being: What are the ethics in a world of multi-media, global journalism?

The revolution as well as the fast transformation of media tools, requires us to rethink these assumptions. The tension between traditional journalism and online journalism has created new inquiries where immediacy, accuracy, transparency and partiality in story telling have been challenged.



TRT World Correspondent, Nicole Johnston, shared her personal experiences in the media - particularly her experience in conflict zones.

Government Policies and Their Effect on Broadcast Networks



Throughout the respective history of media and broadcast networks, radio, television and internet have played crucial roles in shaping public and international/political ideals/norms. Through the media, citizens learn how government policies will affect them, by acting as main conduit for the flow of information between those who want to influence policy and policymakers. Ongoing debate arose in the session over the media's role in politics. As we live in a multipolar world where we have a whole array of different broadcast organisations out there competing for eyeballs in the international news space, new media organisations, and the citizen journalism that exists. Simon Marks observed how government policies could affect different broadcast organisations in competing for international news space. Giving examples from his own experiences, by providing news for a number of different broadcast networks, he explains how the audience in the United States finds itself battling against a slightly American dominated view of the world news that washes up from time to time far away from American shores.

Rodney Dixon, another speaker at the panel, provides a law based perspective and stresses that it is essential for journalists to keep a very close eye on the evidence and images that they are gathering as they can later be used as evidence. According to him, media images can help find peaceful solutions to ongoing conflicts by attracting global attention, giving concrete evidence and creating international courts. Perhaps, the world would not have a new set of international courts without all of the media attention that came particularly in the Yugoslav conflict. More specifically the depiction of a group of Bosnian men who were in custody in a concentration camp behind barbed wire, followed by the Rwandan Genocide in which over 800,000 people lost their lives. This most definitely grabbed the attention of the world and forced Europe to build courts, such as International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, for that situation as

well. The need for responsible journalism in that context becomes even more acutely important. Journalists are booked as lawyers and thus they need reliability and credibility before putting the information out there.

Sarah Helm however argues that video footage and coverage is not enough evidence against the criminals. She strongly emphasised on the concept of “investigative journalism”. The quality of the reporter/ journalists can be evaluated by the ability to ask questions to those who make bureaucratic decisions and say “why?” There are so many questions that have not been asked rigorously and properly by people who are trained and by those who know how to ask them. She laid an array of questions to the audience, asking how many British journalists questioned Tony Blair, his government, the British intelligence services, and indeed intelligence services around the world on: “Why they are so sure that Saddam Hussein has Weapons of Mass Destruction? (WMD)” It was not only a huge political failure, but also a journalistic failure, which was easily accepted and ignored.

One of the fundamental roles of the media in a liberal democracy is to critically analyse governmental affairs, ensuring that the public can hold the government accountable. However, the systematic control of media systems worldwide is diminishing the ability of citizens to meaningfully participate in policymaking processes governing the media. According to Resul Serdar Atas, international newsrooms do not reflect the thoughts of the society. Mostly, very much ideologically motivated groups or individuals are dominating newsrooms. While they are reporting, those ideological, psychological filters are actually determining their priorities. In this context, the U.S case was brought up as an example. During President Nixon’s presidential campaign, the credibility of the media in the U.S. has decreased to an historical low of 42%. Last year during the presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, the credibility has dropped to 36%. Huge media conglomerates fulfill the role of being political actors by limiting investigative journalists’ ability to investigate the government and represent all points of view, which causes 64% of people not believing in the international media. Such evaluations have led some panellists to posit that the media has a powerful monolithic influence on all policy processes. While we also have to take into consideration, that it plays an insignificant role in policymaking proceedings. All participants agreed that in time where media is so diverse and manipulative, it is necessary to build new functional, ethical codes.



Director of News & Programmes at TRT Al Arabia, Resul Serdar Ataş, emphasised that there is a clear difference between objectivity and fairness in journalism.



President and Chief Correspondent at Feature Story News, Simon Marks, stated that removing yourself from an entire story does not necessarily make you objective.

Empowering the Voiceless

A media revolution is transforming, fundamentally and irrevocably. The internet encourages a new form of journalism that are immediate and connected. With every revolution, new possibilities emerge while old practices are threatened. Moving towards a mixed news media, massive transformation of technological equipment allows people around the globe to use social media to gather information and create a “brand” for themselves by starting their own blog, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook page, or Twitter account. With the digitalisation of the media, technology now allows people to engage in journalism and reporting of many kinds, actually distorts the identity of journalists and the idea of what constitutes

traditional journalism. Reports and images circulate the globe with amazing speed via social media pages as listed above, by also giving voice to the 'voiceless'. The panellists shared specific case studies from different countries and analysed the overall landscape to explore ways to make the media more inclusive for marginalised people across the world.

There are new issues raised by the rise of new image technology. These images include both photographs and videos. Citizens have new and easy ways to capture and transmit images via wireless technology. Simon Marks states that people's ability to put compelling testimony straight into the public domain about humanitarian crises that are unfolding is unparalleled in human history. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees put out a drone video taken from the air above the Myanmar Bangladeshi border, that later on spread all over YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. This video, which shows a human tide of thousands of people walking down a road and getting out of Myanmar, provides extraordinarily valuable evidence of what is actually happening on the ground. He emphasised that the 'voiceless' have smartphones and that gives as much power as journalists have. New media encourages people to express their opinion and share their thoughts candidly and freely. Ease of capture, ease of transmission, and ease of spread gives us fast access to actual events from the first-person point of view, diving deeply to the story. However, contrary to that idea, Sarah Helm claimed that even though ordinary people now have a voice, they do not actually know how to operate as journalists do. Citizens do not know how to seek out presidents, prime ministers, war criminals. They do not know how to gain access to them and analyse the information.

Rodney Dixon however sees this sort of material taken directly from the 'voiceless' as concrete and real time physical evidence. Forensic evidence, which is being used as the first step in an investigation, is seen as the missing pieces in historic crimes. One issue is whether newsrooms can trust the easily obtained images of citizens and citizen journalists. Who is the sender and how do we know that the proposed image is really of the event in question? Marking an important point here rooted, grounded, verified, independent journalism clearly requires verification. News agency networks are now beginning to invest substantial amounts of money in order to verify that what we are seeing on the drone footage or any other video is actually what took place.



Prospective Comments

The central question is; to what extent does existing media ethics fit today's and tomorrow's media? One that is fast, manipulative, and "always on", a media that allows journalism of citizens and professionals. Overall, the session discusses "responsible journalism" and how the term objectivity needs to be rephrased in relation to reporting on war zones.

Panellists agreed that as new media has emerged, the only thing that is left for traditional journalists is a platform of accurate, credible, in-depth, investigative journalism.

Journalists with investigative capabilities, research skills, knowledge of how institutions work, and with highly developed skills will always be respected within their field. Within this sphere they also hold to journalistic ethical norms which consist of a commitment to accuracy, verification and truth.

Panellists debated as to whether international news media organisations have become too reliant on NGOs to receive information from the areas of conflict. Operating in this realm, speakers pushed forward the failure of the credibility in the media due to manipulative journalism.

Journalist and Author, Sarah Helm, underlined the general population is unaware of how journalists operate.



