



Jordan Media Institute • معهد الإعلام الأردني

The " Journalism Post-COVID-19: Freedoms and Restrictions" Symposium Amman - Jordan

Abstract

The Jordan Media Institute (JMI), in collaboration with the Agence Francaise de Cooperation Medias, held a Webinar on Sunday entitled “Journalism Post-COVID-19: Freedoms and Restrictions,” in which human rights and media professionals discussed the experiences of the press during the coronavirus crisis and their expectations of its aftermath.

During the Webinar, which took place by video call, JMI hosted the attorney Mohammad Qteishat, a former director of the Jordan Media Commission and an expert in media law. He was interviewed by Dr. Sakher Al Khasawneh, professor of Media Law and Ethics at JMI, with a number of journalists, media professionals, and civil society activists in attendance.

Qteishat said that the media landscape had witnessed “a crisis in the media and not a media of crises,” stating that the period of the crisis constituted a significant case study of the shape of press freedoms and areas of freedom of opinion and expression. The number of cybercrime cases rose markedly during the period of the lockdown, relative to the previous year, underlining the importance of educational programs that raise awareness about positive and negative practices on social media and digital media platforms and the uses of communications technologies. Among these are the media and information literacy programs that JMI has conducted and sought to

develop for years, with the goal of acquiring governmental support for it as a national initiative.

In the same context, Dr. Sakher Al Khasawneh said that the media and information literacy training was intended to refine the online behavior of social media users and prevent their implications in legal problems. Qteishat explained that the importance of this program lies in the fact that social media users are legally and ethically responsible for the content they share. Hence, they must bear in mind the consequences of what they publish or circulate, insofar as these platforms are removed from their social context and politicized.

Qteishat added that Defense Order No. 8 had not been used to restrict press freedoms during this crisis, with all trials relating to cybercrime or the provisions of existing laws. Nevertheless, he did observe a flaw, from a legislative standpoint, in the measures and frameworks governing opinion and expression.

In Qteishat's view, the numerous descriptions for the same crime, and the different degrees of punishment assigned to it by multiple pieces of legislation, are creating an imbalance in the law. They have led to a situation of "incoherence," pushing the public prosecutor to prosecute crimes according to the most severe punishment.

JMI Dean Dr. Ziad Rifai explained that discussing the media scene during this period is crucial given, on the one hand, the media's influence on society and, on the other, that it is a mirror for the latter. It is a window through which to study societal behavior and the changes therein, especially as there are now entire broadcasting stations not subject to censorship or editorial processes. Press freedoms, therefore, constitute a critical element in conveying attitudes and information.

The academic Dr. Amani Jarrar pointed to the need for journalistic material that serves the purpose of media work and addresses societal issues in-depth. In this respect, Qteishat and Al Khasawneh agreed that the current phase requires intensive, investigative journalistic activity to take up issues that have gone under-reported during the lockdown. The two experts beseeched journalists to pursue professional and responsible journalistic stories that serve the public interest and uncover the facts.

A series of questions and comments from the audience addressed expectations for what is to come after the pandemic. The human rights activist Dr. Nahla al-Momani stressed the role of the press in casting light on the degree of the state's commitment to enforcing the state of emergency to the narrowest extent and without infringing upon the political and civil rights of citizens. This accords with what is affirmed by the fourth article of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the royal decree activating the Defense Law. Al-Momani added that the press should play a role in defending the freedom of expression that is at its core inherently.

Media professional Kathy Faraj spoke to the significant administrative and editorial pressures that journalists contend within the work environment, which limits their ability to produce independent, professional content that fulfills their lofty mission.

Qteishat and Al Khasawneh concluded by emphasizing that the media is a cornerstone of the state and a measure of its strength. As such, there must be a clear policy in the area of press freedoms. This pandemic should not be a step backward, they said, but rather an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between citizens

and the government by streamlining the information that the latter has managed to provide - to an extent - during the lockdown.