

Op-ed

⚡ Trending

# The Voice of the Other in Yemen: Challenges to Self-Expression in Times of Conflict



Abdullah Bakash ✉ • March 7, 2021 🔥 6



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This [article summarizes](#) the findings of an extensive academic study I am conducting on self-expression during times of continued political polarization and conflict in Yemen. The survey tested the extent of participants' desire to express their views on three controversial issues related to the Yemen crisis – This study is based on the findings of a field survey of 438 respondents selected using the snowball sample method,<sup>[1]</sup> and covers the five governorates of Yemen: Amanat al-Asimah (Sana'a City), Aden, Ma'rib, al-Hodeidah and Hadhramaut. The research was conducted from 6 April to 18 May 2018.

## The theoretical framework of the study

The openness of self-expression represents a central contentious factor in one of the most important theories on public perception, the 'spiral of silence' theory, proposed by the German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle Neumann.<sup>[3]</sup> It posits that a social group

or society threatens its dissenting members with isolation or exclusion, which keeps individuals from sharing their opinions because they are inconsistent with the dominant opinion of that social group. This in turn leads to a spiral process that results in the dominance of one opinion and the silencing of another. Conversely, online communication creates a unique opportunity for the expression of opinion that challenges the dynamics of the spiral of silence. The user is free from many sequences of social hierarchy and relationships of domination and control present in traditional communication patterns. And so, expressing an opinion through the Internet allows equal access to the public sphere, as well as participation in the discussion of various issues.



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## Study findings: Five obstacles to self-expression in Yemen

The study concluded that there are five main inhibitors to self-expression in Yemen, as they pertain to the three issues mentioned

above. In general, these disincentives or obstacles are linked to a network of relationships that connect the person willing to express their views with others who may keep them from doing so, as well as with the medium through which the expression takes place and the social and political environments. These obstacles can be summarized in the following points.

## 1. The impact of anticipated hostility

People usually prefer to avoid engaging in discussions with those who hold different views on certain contentious issues. This is due to the desire to maintain personal psychological security. The expected hostility reveals a state of psychological blackmail of the other, often involving an act of aggression. According to the Camden Principles on Freedom of Expression, hostility “refers to strong and irrational feelings of contempt, hostility, and hatred toward the target group”.<sup>[4]</sup> This takes the form of three types of aggressive behavior:

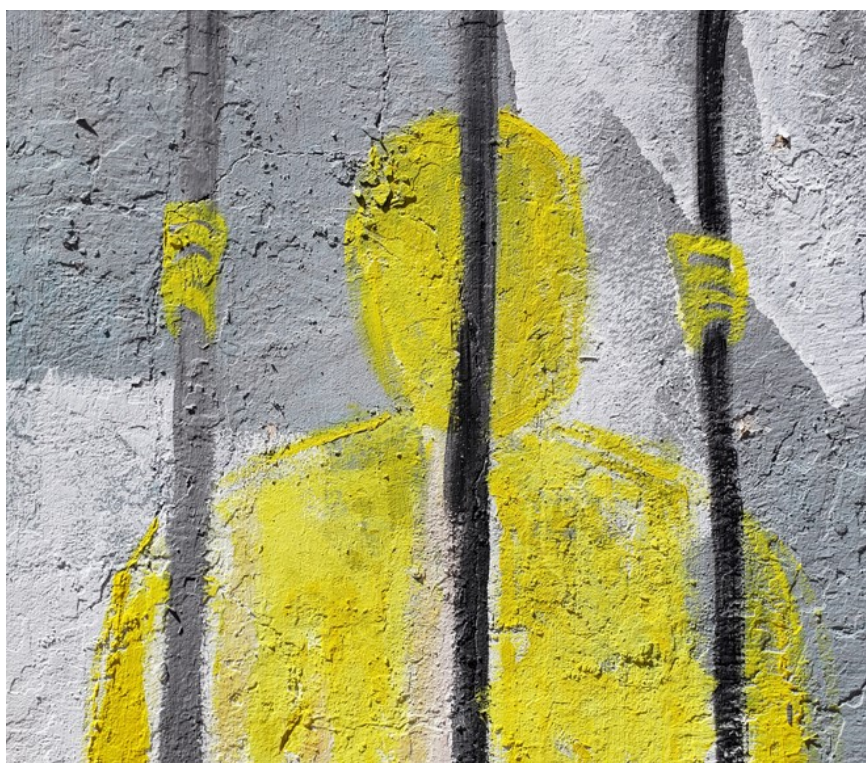
- physical aggression, such as physical assault on others or their property;
- verbal aggression, such as cursing, denigrating or stigmatizing others; and
- symbolic aggression, which is acting in a way that expresses contempt, belittlement and ridicule of the other.<sup>[5]</sup>

Our study findings reveal a rise in participants’ anticipation of hostility from those who disagree with them on the issues of the Yemen crisis. This is regardless of the nature of the communication channels, whether online or offline, which confirms the dominant society’s pursuit of social control by threatening dissenting voices with isolation. It is noteworthy that the expected rate of hostility among the participants of the study through social networks reached 53.4 per cent, surpassing offline communications, 48.9 per cent. Malaspina’s study confirms that online communication tends to be negative, and therefore can be said to be hostile for people sharing personal opinions.<sup>[6]</sup> This interesting finding indicates the



role of digital bullying in fostering user fear, driven by anxiety of censorship and other's monitoring of what is being published, and from . Sometimes virtual battles become heated following a posting or the suspension of individuals or groups, causing a rapid fallout of supporters of a party to suppress dissenting opinion. There is also cyberbullying, which seeks to corrupt public debate, and the defamation of a publication and its writers that seeks, in a sense, to terrorize users.

We have also found in the increase of cyber hostility a reflection of the state of the freedom of expression in Yemen during times of conflict. For it feeds political polarization, sectarian friction, low public morale and aggression when faced with an opposing party. This serves as a dangerous attack on the values of coexistence and civil peace in the community. At the same time, the expected heightened hostility in cyber communication channels can be seen from the perspective of the sociological dimension of the communication process. The behavior of users in the virtual space and their interaction with opposing parties is a natural extension of their offline social interactions, because the idea of dialogue and acceptance of the other stems mainly from social institutions: the family, school, university, mosque and society. And they require more influential tools than social media platforms to instill and enhance their values in members of their communities.





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## 2. Fear of isolation and its impact on the individual

An individual's anxiety during the communication process stems from their fear of exposure to criticism, or from how others view them and from any negative views they may develop towards them. They also fear abuse, harm and social exclusion. Such fear leads the individual to self-police and self-censor, so they begin to avoid expressing their views and debating topics. Our study shows an increased fear of isolation among the participants, as well as an increased concern about negative evaluations, whether in their online or offline communications. And in spite of the effectiveness of the new communication environment in reducing the fear of isolation, that nonetheless was an insufficient incentive to encourage participants to express their views on virtual platforms. Only 47 per cent of the participants expressed their willingness to write a comment on a post they disagree with, and 36 per cent agreed to share a post they supported on their personal social media platforms, while 34 per cent agreed to take part in a virtual campaign addressing issues on the Yemen crisis.

Our findings show that the participants who tested highest in the fear of isolation factor tended to lean closer towards neutrality and indecisiveness of opinion. Ignoring posts or publications with supporting viewpoints about the Yemen crisis often depends on the participant's extreme fear of social isolation. This finding concurs with a study conducted by the American PEW Center, which found that participants were less willing to talk about the Snowden case on social media than in person.<sup>[7]</sup> Palekar and his colleagues found that users of digital social networking spaces

“become less participative, less opinionated and less vocal with increasing familiarity and awareness of deterring social and organizational factors”.[8]

### 3. The effect of the network in stimulating self-censorship

However, the communication network that is formed within the framework of online social networking sites affects the nature of the user’s interactions with the published content. Gerhart and Zhang linked this to the user network on social media platforms, which is primarily a network of the user’s communications within their social environment.[9] Preconceptions about others and their expected reactions play a key role in influencing their communicative behavior and choices of what opinions to express. This is also because individuals tend to protect social harmony, even in social communication environments. Moreover, informal and silent social censorship (such as family members, peers, Facebook friends) pressurizes people to adhere to a dominant view when they share certain content.

Findings show that all the participants practiced self-censorship on social media: 34.7 per cent of them to a high degree, 56.2 per cent an average amount, and 9.1 per cent the least amount. The fear scale we used indicates that 62.6 per cent of the participants confirmed reading the comments on posts or tweets before expressing their own views on the crisis in Yemen. It also shows that 53 per cent of the participants expressed a desire not to discuss the Yemen crisis on social media platforms altogether. This data reflects participants’ varying degrees of self-censorship, as they take into consideration the dominant opinion on social media regarding a topic first before expressing their own. Others prefer to browse political posts on social media platforms without sharing their views at all, especially in times of crises and war when political polarizations intensify.

This rise in self-censorship in the Yemen communication spheres can be interpreted as a psychological response that belongs



temporally and spatially to the circumstances of security and psychological stability in society, due to the conflict situation in Yemen. The participants' high anxiety and fear is what drives them to surround themselves with a cordon of self-censorship and to police their own communicative behavior. Certain justifications may be deduced in light of the transformation of the communication environment in Yemen into a space to re-export political conflicts to the public and poison the public sphere.



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#### 4. Influencing the climate of online self-expression

Despite the multitude of options and freedoms that characterize the digital public sphere, scientific research indicates that online public opinion serves to limit the disclosure of certain views on social media. 58.9 per cent of our participants in Yemen assume that their personal views about the Yemen crisis coincide with the opinions of their friends and followers on social media, while 41.1 per cent assume their opinions contradict those in their circles. Dubois and Szwarc (2018) suggest that research participants avoid voicing their opinions in public when they suspect their opinions differ from the dominant opinion in online or offline public

environments.[10] Neubaum and Krämer (2016)[11] justify the tendency of individuals to express dissenting opinions in an offline environment more than they do on Facebook, because it has become so easy to penalize violators on social media platforms.

## 5. Concerns of negative self-presentation

Another factor that influences an individual's desire to speak out on social media is concern over self-presentation. This indicates that the amount and nature of information that people pass on to others about themselves is linked to their desire to influence others' perception of them.[12] And as long as social media has become one of the main platforms for self-expression, then the information posted on such platforms has become part of the users' digital identity. Liu and colleagues (2017)[13] conducted a study on the existence of a relationship between one's self-presentation on Facebook and the expression of one's political opinions, and found that it all depends on the purpose of self-presentation and the impression that makes. For instance, if the user presents themselves with the aim of building a positive public image in the long run, they tend to express their opinions more effectively. But if they are merely presenting themselves cautiously and with the aim of avoiding criticism, then they will avoid expressing diverse opinions. As for the study conducted by Rui et al. (2020),[14] it finds that Facebook users' social and political correctness has increased their self-presentational concerns as it pertains to share their political views on controversial issues online.



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[1] The 'snowball sample' was developed by Coleman and Goodman as a method for studying the architecture of social networks. This method is considered the most suitable for research conducted in conflict settings, due to the lack of confidence and suspicion that the researcher faces during application. This method is applied by selecting the first group of participants in each governorate, and coordinating by reaching other respondents in the first stage of the study, then requesting help from each of them in reaching a number of other subjects in the second stage of the study. And so, the sample expands as a rolling snowball until the remaining targeted subjects are reached. This method is chosen here because of the sensitivity of the topics researched, and of the nature of the troubled security conditions and the escalating crisis in the governorates of Yemen included in this study.

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[2] The term 'spiral of silence' refers to the tendency of people to remain silent when they feel that their views on an issue are inconsistent with the views of the majority, and they fear the threat of society. The term describes a situation of excessive emotional pressure that pushes people to hide their views when believed they are consisted with the views of minority groups.

[3] German researcher Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann is one of the most famous researchers in the field of politics and communication. She was born in Berlin on 19 December 1916, and died on 25 March 2010 at the age of 93. Her name is associated with the theory of the spiral of silence, which she first introduced in

two scientific papers in 1974, prior to its publication in German in a book bearing the same name as the theory in 1980, and in English in 1984. The book was later translated into 11 languages. Neumann is one of the most cited German communication researchers due to her scientific work. She obtained her Ph.D from the University of Missouri, USA, in 1940, and founded with her husband The Institute for Public Opinion Research in 1947 (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach). She held the position of professor at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz in Germany, and worked as visiting professor at the University of Chicago, USA. Reference: Elisabeth Noelle Neumann, 1984, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

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