Cairo violence proves need for MDI course on reporting religion

Twelve people were reportedly killed and 180 wounded in clashes between Muslims and Christians in Cairo on 7 May 2011. A Coptic church in the Imbaba neighborhood was burned down after rumors, which turned out to be false, that a Christian woman was being held inside the church and prevented from converting to Islam.

It's this kind of event that eleven young journalists were trained to report on during a five-day course in Cairo, run by the Media Diversity Institute, just a week before the tragic events unfolded. The training was designed to help the participants develop their skills in reporting on religion. Three days of teaching, debate and discussion in the classroom were designed to help them explore, understand and discuss the issues and possible tensions around reporting the full range of religions and beliefs in Egypt. Some of the training focused on the ethical and practical considerations journalists face when reporting on clashes such as those that took place in Cairo on 7 May 2011.
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Participants discussed how they could handle conflicting or competing claims about the same event, the importance of fairness and accuracy, and the need for sensitivity. They also spent three hours with four speakers from a range of religious groups – including a Bahai, a Shia’a Muslim, a Coptic Priest, and an Islamic academic researcher – all of whom provided insights about the way their faith is treated by the media and how reporting can be improved.

Towards the end of the week, the journalists were divided into four teams and sent off to research and produce an article or short film on a religious theme. This would help them put some of their new skills into practice and understand some of the ethical challenges they may face when reporting on beliefs different to their own.

One team profiled a Christian nun who lives not in a convent but among ordinary people in the middle of Cairo. Another went in search of the multi-faith custodians of Cairo's ancient Jewish temples. Another shot video interviews with four people of different faiths about what they want from Egypt's new constitution.

The two trainers – Ahmed Samih, the manager of an Egyptian online radio station, and Richard Cookson, a British freelance print and TV journalist – encouraged the participants to think practically about how they could improve their own coverage, and tried to help them identify any prejudices or misunderstandings they may have about minority groups.

Yasser EL Zayat, the former editor of El Badel newspaper and currently a freelance journalist and editor, came in on the final day and spoke about the reporting of religion in the Egyptian press, and how it can be improved. Analysing the contrasting treatment of the same story by two papers, he encouraged the participants to discuss how two journalists reporting the same story could have come to such radically different presentations of the facts.

The material the journalists produced will be published or broadcast by the organizations they work for.

MDI has been working in Egypt since 2007 and has delivered a series of training courses for journalists to help journalists better reflect diversity in their reporting, improve their understanding of freedom of expression and raise journalistic standards. The course was supported by the US State Department.

For more info contact: info@media-diversity.org

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