



Event dates: 3 – 9 June 2012

By Richard Cookson

You are lost at sea. It's cold and dark, and huge waves are washing over the side of your life-raft. There are 15 other people in the little boat but it's only designed for 10 and sinking fast. It's a terrible situation, but to save yourselves you are going to have to decide which five people to throw overboard...

This was the scenario that 16 journalists from across Egypt were faced with on the second day of a seven-day training course in Cairo in June 2012, organised by the Media Diversity Institute. They had all been given characters for the duration of the exercise, most of whom were from the country's minority groups. Many of them also had a skill or some equipment that would be useful for a group shipwrecked or stranded on a desert island. So one was a Nubian woman who has some matches; another a Sudanese asylum-seeker with a water desalination device...

The exercise – tried and tested by the Media Diversity Institute across the world – is designed to encourage journalists to think about the prejudices that they and society at large have about different minority groups. In the intense debate about which characters to throw overboard, the participants forget their inhibitions and air their true feelings about some of the groups involved. Often, people playing a character from one of the most marginalised or hated groups will even

offer to jump into the sea. But there's a twist: the five that are sent to their death are later picked up by a rescue boat and then have the chance to decide which five of the remaining survivors they can save...

Of course, it's entirely normal for people to have prejudices, so at the end of the exercise, the two course trainers – Abeer Saady, a prominent Egyptian journalist and the vice-chair of the Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate, and Richard Cookson, a British print and TV journalist – explained why journalists have a special responsibility to identify and question their own beliefs about all groups in society. The exercise always provides a platform for people to discuss feelings and ideas that they have often never discussed openly before. This time was no exception.

The course was designed to help participants improve their understanding of diversity in



Egypt and decide what they can do to ensure that all sections of society have the chance to contribute to public debate. During a guest panel session, they discussed media coverage of minority or marginalised groups with a young Nubian man, an artist from Siwa, a blind disability activist and a female magazine editor, who provided insights into the way their group is portrayed and how reporting can be made more accurate.

The participants were also given two sessions of safety training, to ensure that they can keep themselves safe on assignments. This covered everything from avoiding pickpockets to covering riots.

They were also shown the impact on society of poor journalism from across the world, particularly in Britain where inaccurate, prejudicial and stereotypical reporting of several minorities, such as Muslims and asylum-seekers, have profoundly affected public perception of them.

At the end of two days in the classroom, the journalists suggested ideas for features they wanted to write. Working in pairs, they investigated a wide range of issues over the next four days – from how street children in Tahrir Square view the revolution, to the treatment of people with leprosy in Cairo, and some of the problems faced by nomadic people who live on Egypt's border with Sudan. This gave them the opportunity to put some of their new skills into practice and understand some of the ethical challenges they may face when reporting on groups often ignored by much of the media. All seven articles will be published by the newspapers the participants work for.

In the coming months, the participants will have the opportunity to develop their professional skills further through mentoring by a team of experienced Egyptian journalists. This will ensure that they carry on learning and also that they have the practical support they need to continually improve their coverage in their day-jobs.

MDI has been working in Egypt since 2006 and has delivered a series of training courses to help journalists better reflect diversity in their reporting, improve their understanding of freedom of expression and raise journalistic standards.

The initiative is part of the project 'REBUILDING POST-REVOLUTION EGYPTIAN MEDIA: EMBRACING FREE EXPRESSION, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS' which aims to encourage a responsible Egyptian media, based on international standards and principles of free expression, diversity, inclusiveness, transparency and public accountability. The project is funded by SIDA.

For additional information on the training programme, please e-mail: doaa.kassem@media-diversity.org