Dhalia Kholaif

Tell me about your experience as a researcher and reporter

I have reported from the Middle East for about 16 years, I have worked for various international news outlets Including Wall street journal and Bloomberg, I have also completed a fellowship in 2018 for the Institute of Historian journalism where I focused on the counter insurgency in Sinai especially on the failure of international and local media in reporting about the situation and the citizens found themselves in the situation of doing their work and informing, trying to make Sinai a cause in a society that had forgotten it. I was the editorial director in a start up called EGAB, I also was the editor of Global Voice.

Do you have any experiences in conflict journalism?

I reported from Egypt during the revolution, I was based in Kuwait, but I was deployed there several times as correspondent for Bloomberg from the Cairo during protests and elections which were very violent but I wasn’t a war reporter.

What were your motivations when you went there to report?

I was deployed there to back up the Cairo team during the protests, but when you are working for a big corporate like Bloomberg, you are driven by the news cycle, so the interests of readers or clients is important. So the human stories are swept under the carpet and they do not get much attention, as they do not please the client and non cared. Sometimes I found a story that was very key but editors would not be interested in that. Big corporates are usually more interested in international stories. Then Egypt got the backseat, during the Arab spring as Syria and Iraq got the spotlight. I went to Egypt to report about global stories but I came back knowing that there was a lot more going on, but the news outlets did not care as the focus was elsewhere.

How did you prepare yourself to go there?

Bloomberg gave us training (hostage), prepared about the key risks and dangers, how to avoid and how to manage that. Then local and citizen journalists provided advise to be prepared about the situation. I had the training and also got stories and feedback from people already deployed.

How do you identify yourself?

I identify myself as a professional journalism, I have been doing this since 2006 and I studied it.

Did you also work in a newsroom managing citizen journalists and local reporters on the ground or did you work with them on the field?

I did both. I worked in a newsroom, but also when I was working for Global Voices I dealt with content that was provided by local journalists. Also during my reporting, there were periods of time where local and citizens journalists represented a valuable source of information, however misinformation was the word that became key in Europe, before that media actors were very crucial.

How did you decide who to work with and how did you select your sources?

That wasn’t easy, there were stages and indicators. During the revolution in Egypt, there were names that were famous as sources and it was easy to get them. I would not rely on just one positive feedback, but I had to verify it through various feedback, using our resources and different journalists. We would rely on external feedback and verify by ourselves.

You played also the role of gatekeeper, How does it work ?

My job was to refer what I saw on the ground and confront it with the news provided by other people. In addition I had to verify, however the final decision was the editor’s.

How did you get in touch with sources?

There were various ways depending on the stories and the stages.

How did you select a story that was worth to be reported?

When I got the story, I proposed to the editor and it was his decision.

Did you rely on secondary sources?

It was very common in Egypt, because there were many people reporting on the ground, and there were problems of accessibility to the places where the stories were. However, the news outlets started to rely less and less on secondary sources as they wanted to verify themselves. It is crucial to verify stories especially on social media. During the protests in Egypt the line of communication was cut off, so the news outlets had to depend on other people publishing on the internet. Another example is in other countries where journalists cannot be there to report. The context is crucial to understand how much you can rely on local journalists as a valuable source of info.

Did you work with Western and arab news journalists? Are there differencies?

I would say there is a large difference. International news agencies are more selective and picky having more interests in more topics.

What about guidelines and protocols? Do they differ ?

In my experience, there is a difference. International outlets are more diligent, they verify sources tightly and they have to be sure. It makes sense, but given the context of some countries in the middle East, it is not always ideal. Security, government and censorship affect journalism. Unfortunately a lot of the editors they do not take that into consideration and they do not have this perspective. Western outlets and international go for carefully selected news as opposed to local and regional, who have more possibility to cover more stories and they would apply the guidelines and protocol in selecting sources, but the western outlets would be much more careful.

How do you process the content provided by local reporters and citizen journalists?

When I was working with Global voices, I would rely on just one contributor who proposed its own pitch, or topic, or there would be situation where I had to ask for contributors and tell them what I needed.

What do you think about objectivity in situation of humanitarian crisis or conflict?

As a editor you make sure that the story is objective as it can be. The story must be based on facts that can be proved by the contributors, or has to include as many voices as possible, in order to confirm the story. In addition the story has to include the counter claim if a specific entity or organization is blamed for something, gibing an explanation. The story needs to have all voices in it. Objectivity is key.

What do you think about frames coming up in stories? Do you think it is possible to obtain a neutral frame?

If you are covering a conflict, how can a journalist avoid its implication in the situation. The topic of the story influence the frame emerging from it. However at the same time It can be reported objectively.

Do you think that the cultural background or the lexical choices of the journalist reporting could influence the objectivity of the story?

It is not just culture. There are a lot of factors. A lot of journalists can report something without making sure that all the voices are reported. It is also the experience that plays a central role. This is something that could be fixed by the editor. Journalists has to make sure that all the voices are accounted. Working with editors who do not have experience in the Middle East can be very difficult. Local journalists should be given more voice about what stories to report on and how as they have that kind of knowledge. They should be working with the editor in order to be sure that the story is reported objectively without leaving out any voices. However even local journalists might not have the proper news judgement as it is a skill that must be developed. A western journalist might also not have the knowledge to report a specific story. Sometimes the best way is for a western journalist to work with a local reporter to integrate their skills and get both point of views. Also a western editor and a local journalist might be a great team, in order to provide a richer story from a different angle and the journalist might look up at the editor and get more help in order to report objectively and get detached from the story, as it is very easy for local journalists to get involved emotionally in a story. They can fill in where the other is not so strong, however in most scenarios it is not possible as the western editor would dismiss the reporter and rely on a correspondent.

I am working on a project on a project with EGAB in order to prepare local journalists to report on stories and get published on international outlets, providing guidance to help them report stories from their countries in order to be published on international news platforms. It is a growing project. We provided guidance and help to many journalists who were then able to work with international outlets. Our trainees are mostly from Middle East and Africa. We provide them the tools to get authentic and local stories, and if they can do that then they have the possibility to work with international outlets. It is also cheaper for them to hire a local journalist or stringer to work with them from a specific part of the world. We work with journalists who do not have training, we provide them the skills and make them available. Locals know the stories and know the area without fixers and stringers. They know the people and the area.

What kind of training do you provide them?

Journalists express the interests to work with us, they send pictures and sample features. We go through them, they can be unexperienced or experienced in local press, which has a different perspective from international outlets. We correct the pitch, provide guidance to build a story, contact sources and tell them how to build a pitch with global focus. We then contact our network of editors who work for global outlets and we tell them the story of the journalist, promote the pitch providing graphics and photo. If the story is commissioned, we do the initial round of editing of the stories and then we pass upon to the global agency. They do have the initial experience needed. We do both help the journalist meet the standard and do the editors’job. We also give them training, and guidelines.