



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



**Internews**  
Local voices. Global change.



**Rooted  
in Trust**

# ROOTED IN TRUST

**NATIONAL FRAGMENTATION: MARGINALIZATION,  
DISPLACEMENT, AND DISINFORMATION IN YEMEN**

*An Information Ecosystem Assessment by Internews*

**YEMEN – JUNE 2023**



# CONTENTS

---

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>SECTIONAL SUMMARY</b>                     | <b>03</b> |
| Executive summary                            | 03        |
| 1. Research scope and methodology            | 03        |
| 2. Country Profile                           | 03        |
| 3. Information Supply: Information Providers |           |
| Landscape Review                             | 04        |
| 4. Information Demand                        | 04        |
| 5. Information Dynamics                      | 04        |
| 6. Humanitarian Response & Information       | 05        |
| 7. Recommendations                           | 06        |
| Humanitarian Groups                          | 06        |
| Donors                                       | 06        |
| Local Community Leaders                      | 06        |
| Government                                   | 06        |

---





# SECTIONAL SUMMARY

This Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) is divided in seven sections, each of which provide context, background, and details on how information is produced, consumed, and shared in Yemen by the population. After a review of the data, this report provides a list of recommendations for improving Yemen's information ecosystem and the gaps in information that allow mis/ disinformation to spread.

Provided below is a brief synopsis of key details from the Executive Summary to the seven main sections of the IEA. The IEA addendum highlighting Internews' research and data is not summarized here.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Executive Summary outlines the methods used for collecting data, the governorates Internews' partners worked in, and it also provides a broad overview of the results.

Specifically, this section details the many contradictions found in the data. The collective data from Internews and other reliable sources are replete with contradictions on how information is produced, consumed, and shared throughout Yemen. For instance, Internews' data shows that Yemen's media outlets regularly promote misinformation through traditional and digital information sources. However, while survey respondents acknowledged and identified media misinformation as a problem, a majority of those surveyed still described national media as credible. Other contradictions include a majority of respondents' recognition that health education courses provided the most reliable information on COVID-19 and other diseases. Yet while the majority of respondents overwhelmingly asserted that they follow COVID-19 guidelines, they also note that everyone else does not follow them. Contradictions also extended to individual information sharing practices. For example, a majority of individuals noted that friends and family were not reliable sources of information.

However, most individuals also claimed that much of their information is gained through sharing information with friends and family. The primary goal of this report is thus to draw attention to these contradictions and use qualitative data to bring nuance and understanding to these information practices. This approach will then be used to inform our recommendations for improving Yemen's information ecosystem.

## 1. RESEARCH SCOPE & METHODOLOGY:

This section outlines the data, topics, and communities that we have researched and the research techniques we employed. Our analysis incorporates all Yemenis; however, we pay particular attention to vulnerable communities living in some of the most challenging circumstances within the country. These include internally displaced people (IDPs) and the *Muhammasheen*; the country's largest racial minority group.

Our assessment is based on data collected from five different governorates with marginalized and displaced communities, affected by COVID-19 – Marib, Taiz, Hadramout, Aden, and Lahij. Additional data was collected in Sana'a using KIs. Methods used for data collection include randomized sampling for surveys and purposive sampling (selection of respondents made by the researcher based on either their characteristics or their expertise) for interviews, as well as focus group discussions and direct observation.

Our research was hampered by the ongoing hostilities in Yemen. The ongoing war and the accompanying social and political turmoil detrimentally affected our team's ability to collect data from all areas in Yemen. Ongoing health crises and a culture of distrust for international organizations further contributed to our data collection limitations. As a result, our survey data exclusively comes from southern governorates, while our qualitative data contains some information from Sana'a, but is still largely focused on southern Yemen.

Our data likewise was limited by the respondents' reluctance to answer certain questions. For instance, those living in displacement camps were unwilling to elaborate on questions about how, or with whom, they maintain contact after coming to the camp. As we sought data on how individuals maintain networks and share information, this type of apprehension in answering questions speaks to the challenges we faced.

## 2. COUNTRY PROFILE

This section provides a background to Yemen's health history and provides some information about the ongoing civil war. Additionally, the section gives background information on two key vulnerable communities within Yemen: al-Muhammasheen, or the marginalized, and Internally Displaced People (IDPs).

Briefly, Al-Muhammasheen are a racial and ethnic group that are discriminated against because of their African heritage and skin color. Prejudice against them is rooted in the country's structural racism whereby Yemen's education, health, employment, and land ownership systems explicitly or implicitly deny access for this predominantly southwestern Yemeni community.

Yemen has had a long history of internal displacement due to wars, the economy, and climate related disasters. Currently, there are 4.3 million Yemenis who have been displaced due to the war. Of that number, about 40% are living in unofficial camps without adequate healthcare, fresh water, sewage, or other resources.

The current war, as well as the 1994 and 2014 wars, have led to heavy restrictions on media and journalism within the country. This makes it difficult for Yemenis – especially vulnerable communities – to acquire credible information about their country. The media in Yemen as of 2023 are being coerced by Yemeni political-military groups to promote specific political and religious ideologies on all media platforms or face similar retribution. The result of this is a national media landscape filled with dissonant, contradictory reports, blatant propaganda, and disinformation campaigns.

...

## SECTIONAL SUMMARY

...

According to Freedom House's Civil Liberties Score Index in 2022, Yemen ranked eight of sixty, with a Global Freedom Score of nine out of one hundred (Freedom House 2022). Like other media in the country, websites are heavily censored by Yemen's political-military groups, and the country's strained infrastructure often leads to regular internet and electricity outages.

### 3. INFORMATION SUPPLY: INFORMATION PROVIDERS LANDSCAPE REVIEW

Our research suffered from a lack of national demographics and statistics on media consumption in Yemen. This is especially lacking due to the recent years of civil war. Rather than provide a comparative analysis on the uses of different media formats or on the changing trends among media uses, this section instead offers an overview of each Yemeni media format. Focus centers on individual media formats and how they have changed in recent years as Yemen's political and social spheres have shifted. Formats analyzed include television, radio, newspaper, internet, and social media. Analysis also includes some historical background, but primary attention was placed on the current state of the different forms and contexts of media.

Data indicates that Yemen lacks a clear, independent media source able to report information without succumbing to the threats or influence of the country's controlling groups. National media groups are under surveillance from these groups and few foreign journalists are permitted to enter the country. As a result, Yemeni journalists live under constant threat of being abducted by political-military groups or terrorist organizations. Additionally, the journalistic freedoms in Yemen are under serious threats from political-military groups. This is especially true in cases where reporters share information on the war, on political corruption, or on any issues that run contrary to the ideologies of those in power.

As Yemen's news media is almost entirely controlled by diffe-

rent political-military groups, the news and information reported through the country's news channels and websites are largely driven by propaganda and should thus be considered mis/ disinformation.

During COVID-19, information dissemination within Yemen fractured across three distinct political-military groups. They are the De Facto Authority (DFA); the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG); and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Each of these groups were in direct conflict with one another until 2022 when the IRG and STC merged together. Currently, the DFA and the merged IRG/ STC hold different positions on the veracity of COVID-19 claims.

### 4. INFORMATION DEMAND

Our surveys indicate a gap between the credibility of information sources and the amount of information available to the people of Yemen. From most Yemenis surveyed, the media is described as reliable on many issues, but a sizeable number of individuals believe that information on diseases is being withheld or otherwise unavailable to the public. This presents itself as a contradiction in that most people believe they receive enough information, but then a large percentage also indicate that information seems to be lacking.

Respondents who stated that the media is not credible reasoned that news programs are largely shaped by politics and are thus providing skewed information. Moreover, they argue that information from the media is typically exaggerated, not the whole truth, or a blend of truth and falsehoods.

The data suggests that the gaps in information for Yemeni communities is directly tied to gaps in basic education; reliable media formats; and Yemenis' access to multiple media formats. The community leader's statement that there is no authority for Yemenis to rely on exemplifies these gaps. As the data demonstrates, the media promotes propaganda as news to Yemenis who too often lack education and – by extension

– the necessary critical thinking skills to question the news stories presented to them. Moreover, a lack of media diversity means that most Yemenis – particularly vulnerable communities – draw their information from a small collection of radio or television news programs, all of which are controlled by one political-military group in each of the country's divided regions.

### 5. INFORMATION DYNAMICS

This section examines data on Yemenis' perception of information credibility.

Most of those surveyed stated that they trusted information from health education sessions the most. This suggests that Yemenis recognize both international and national healthcare organizations as reliable authorities on diseases and pandemics. This is important because – despite the war and the many pandemics that have ravished Yemen in recent years – citizens have not lost their trust in the doctors and health organizations working in the country.

Television was a key source as well as social networking sites. This is of particular concern, as a large quantity of Yemenis view TV and social media as reliable source of information. The data indicates that many people also find TV and social media to be unreliable. This polarization of opinion creates challenges in that it is unclear why these sources are so widely divided. For instance, it is good that social media is viewed as unreliable from the perspective that many rumors and misinformation are spread through social media, much like TV. However, at the same time, these types of digital media formats have also provided the population with accurate information on the country's diseases and pandemics. Additionally, social media has proved to be effective at keeping individuals in contact with one another and as a means for spreading information quickly within and across communities. It is therefore important to help communities differentiate between useful social media resources and harmful ones.

...

## SECTIONAL SUMMARY

...

The survey indicates that the least trusted sources of information came from text messages, friends, and conversations. These sources – and family to a lesser degree – are seen as sources of rumors and misinformation. As such, their widespread dismissal as unreliable sources are a positive sign.

The majority of those surveyed acknowledged that, while they do share information with family members and friends, they nevertheless view both groups as unreliable sources on diseases and pandemics. However, Key Informant Interviews (KI) show individuals contradicting this statement by noting that they regularly engage in group chats involving family, friends, and neighbors with the sole intention of learning about, and spreading, information. Expectedly, those individuals who widely engage in these communication activities came from low-income communities, namely vulnerable groups like *al-muhammasheen* and IDPs.

The data demonstrates that family and class-based relationships are the definitive influential means for interpreting information in Yemen. The data demonstrates that the different socioeconomic groups surveyed consume, value, and share information in their own different ways.

In essence, the information shared through traditional or digital media sources is refracted through the ideological beliefs that historically emerged through the different social experiences of each community. For younger, wealthier, urban Yemenis, social media and other digital media formats are highly valued for their speed and reliance on drawing in information from multiple sources. At the other end of the spectrum, *al-Muhammasheen* and IDPs appear to rely more on information shared by word of mouth through trusted networks of family and friends.

### 6. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE & INFORMATION

This section discusses how Yemeni governments responded to COVID-19 in 2020 and in the 2021 second wave, and the

role that humanitarian groups played in during the pandemic. The country's low vaccination rates are largely the result of the war. Healthcare infrastructure was heavily damaged by bombing, while many doctors were either killed or fled the country. Similarly, many of the country's major roads were destroyed during bombing campaigns, making it difficult to effectively ship vaccines to all the governorates of the country.

Additionally, many Yemenis have also chosen not to be vaccinated, citing unfounded rumors and disinformation. Studies show that female Yemenis, from lower income families, are most likely to resist the COVID-19 vaccine, with the most popular reservation being the belief that pharmaceutical companies have manufactured the pandemic for financial gain. Social media posts in Yemen provide similar rumors, including the prevalent belief that COVID-19 vaccines are either different from the rest of the world's or have expired when they reach the country. Or that the vaccines deteriorate reproductive organs or are simply a plot to experiment new drugs and diseases on the Yemeni people.

Humanitarian groups have been working in Yemen since before the pandemic began. Many worked in the country to try to eradicate the Cholera epidemic. Additionally, international groups like the UNICEF, WHO, the Red Cross/ Red Crescent, and the UN's OCHA have been integral parts of Yemen's health system for many years. They have aided in the cholera outbreak, as well as the war, and the ongoing famine.

The current hostilities between the DFA and PLC have led to a further deterioration of the country's healthcare resources. This means that many international aid groups have been critical for offering education, medicine, food, and other necessary supplies to Yemen.

The war and the ongoing health crises in Yemen, have combined to create an environment where mis/ disinformation is a significant problem. In spite of the fact that a majority of Yemenis view their region's information sources as credible,

...





## SECTIONAL SUMMARY

there are nevertheless reports of weekly – if not daily – instances of mis/ disinformation and fake news. Generally, the most common topics of misinformation center on military activities, the peace process, or the status of basic government services. Supporting Internews’ KIs, more than 70% of respondents acknowledged that coverage of COVID-19 had become politicized in Yemen.

Outside data suggest a correlation between DFA mis/ disinformation in news media and regions where military conflicts are present, or in regions that are heavily contested. In 2021, for example, the DFA and the PLC battled for regions in the Marib government. Additionally, the governorate was increasingly becoming a destination point for displaced Yemenis coming from DFA controlled areas. The ARK survey found that during

this period, 42% of respondents reported exposure to fake news stories at least once per day (Ibid.).

### 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Humanitarian Groups:

- **Create WhatsApp Groups & Share with Media Groups:** Broadcast simplified, reliable, and trustworthy information.
- **Create Offline Media Content:** That can reach community members that do not have access to the Internet or TV.
- **Invest in Local Organizations:** Funding is needed for health and social projects.
- **Simplify Messages:** Include informative photos, videos, and voice notes to compensate for illiteracy.

- **Be Transparent:** Provide clear and accurate information to governments and local groups.

#### Donors:

- Earmark funding for media transparency projects and for greater organizational support at the local political levels. This will ensure that resources are effectively reaching some of the country’s most vital areas in need of improvement.
- Fund organizations that are equipped to work with Yemen’s unique local communities. IDPs, *al-Muhammasheen*, and rural communities require organizations with political and cultural sensitivities to support their various projects.
- Donors should stress the need for international organizations to work with and listen to local communities in Yemen.

#### Local Community Leaders:

- **Be Critical of Information:** Seek out information from multiple sources
- **Fact-Check:** Identify misinformation, expose the misinformation, and share correct information
- **Foster Positive Relationships in Your Community:** Build better communication channels within your community and with other communities.
- **Add to the Conversation:** Engage with vulnerable community members through word-of-mouth information spreading

#### Government:

- **Decentralize & Delegate:** Local leaders and MoPHs require more authority to act in times of crisis.
- **Rebuild:** Hospitals, roads, bridges, and other structures must be replaced.
- **Compromise:** Both governments are needed to rebuild the country, as are international organizations.
- **Reach to the Periphery:** Provide economic and medical safety nets for the nation’s vulnerable groups. ●





**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



**Internews**  
Local voices. Global change.



**Rooted  
in Trust**