



Coaching in Syria: mixing war and wedding ceremonies

Wednesday, January 18, 2017

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“The first day I thought, I can't make it. I wasn't sure. I thought: I can train but, not these people.” Mona Abdelmaksoud is the senior coach for the reporters that work for Free Press Unlimited's partner organisations in Syria. The first time she trained Syrian journalists in February 2015 she was weary. She was used to teaching at a university, but not in a situation of war.

Written by Nava Maria Verboom

“I didn't know anyone and had doubts that I could cope with people who just came from war. They have witnessed a lot of difficult situations. Most of them either lost a family member or friend, or face a direct threat to death themselves. Imagine one has just lost a close friend or family member and you would like to talk to him about training and journalism. Some of them suffer from trauma, others have a problem trusting strangers. It is a challenging environment to deal with.” And training is all about gaining trust.

“I had to chase the trainees in order to have them send me articles for correction, they were not used to having someone be involved in their writing.”

“In the beginning most of them were activists. Trying to shift them to be a journalist is very hard. They saw the world as cruel, unfair, and unsafe, and media as only a means for propaganda and support to the status-quo.”

She decided not to approach them as journalists, but as fellow human beings. “People do not have a background in media, but they have a cause: the fight for freedom.” Everything changed. “You have to try to feel what they feel, sympathize, realize how deeply they are affected. You should show them the importance of their roles as journalists, in serving their case, and their people. Providing the truth and showing other sides of the story could change Syrian people's lives and how the world views them and their situation. Believe in what they do and how important that is was the key.”

By the end of the year she had received many articles from participants. “They were actually now chasing *me* for feedback.”

“Now the funny thing is, I, as it turns out, am not only a coach in profession, but also in life. Sometimes they ask me for my experience in marriage issues. I have already attended two

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weddings.”

According to Mona, coaching is a life experience: gaining the trust of trainees is among the most challenging, but rewarding experiences. But the challenge helped the reporters and Mona grow. She provided a coaching style which the journalists could rely on, continuously supporting them in writing better stories. She managed to gain their trust through understanding their cause and reality. Free Press Unlimited decided to put emphasis on continuity, through a learning program where coaching plays a big role.

“The trainees always report on war, and stories of war quickly become uninteresting to read,” explains Mona. During one of the trainings she focused on how to produce a story which is interesting for readers. The training took place during the time there were a lot of barrel bombs in Aleppo. “I tried to convince the trainees that it is important to give a human angle to a story. That is, to write a human story, and not a war story.”

They took her advice. One trainee wrote an article about a wedding, which ended in wedding guests helping people who had been wounded by the barrels. “The trainee had managed to show facts, but attach emotions to it as well. Mixing war and wedding ceremonies. Fear, joy, relief. These kind of stories really reach the people.”

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