

## **Bringing *The Road To The World* : Multiplatform and Mobile Reporting in Za'atari Village**

Jordan

International House NYC

Noor Ibrahim, Jordan, Columbia Journalism School

Hannah Long-Higgins, USA, Columbia Journalism School

[www.theroadrefugeemedia.com](http://www.theroadrefugeemedia.com)

### **Section I**

Our project goals were threefold: we wanted to equip Syrian refugee journalists in the Zaatari refugee camp with the basic digital literacy skills necessary to advance the digital components of their monthly magazine publication called *The Road*. Secondly, we wanted to provide the journalists with the equipment and gear needed to do more digital journalism within the refugee camp, and thirdly we hoped to boost the magazine's online presence through a series of website renovations and social media campaigns.

No other fundraising campaigns contributed to the completion of this project. Rather, we maximized the funds provided from the Davis Project for Peace Initiative.

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, we met with Hada Sarhan and Cyril Cappai at the Japanese Emergency NGO (JEN) office in Amman. Our project would not have been possible without their partnership, as Sarhan, a former Jordanian journalist, is the editor-in-chief of *The Road* magazine and spearheaded the foundation and development of the magazine in Zaatari. We spent three total weeks in Jordan and spent the better part of the second two weeks commuting back and forth on a daily basis from Amman to Zaatari with Hada and other JEN staff.

Our time in the camp was spent teaching three-hour workshops to a group of about fifteen young Syrian refugee journalists. We began by teaching reporting and journalism basics because we wanted to help them take their work to the next level. Much of the magazine, when we arrived, was built on personal narratives about life in the camp. While this is important, we also wanted to equip them with interviewing, fact verification, and observational skills to make their writing more substantiated in high quality reporting. We assigned each reporter a beat and treated Zaatari like any other city – some covered health care, others covered gender and religion. We taught them how to find stories, how to develop pitches, and, after those basic skills were mastered, how to capture stories visually with digital cameras.

Our time outside Zaatari was spent planning these workshops, researching and gathering equipment, and working on a long-term social media plan, rebranding effort, and website re-design. We understood that, in order for our project to be sustainable and exist beyond us, we needed to implement long-range plans and get the digital and social sides of the magazine to a point where the refugees and JEN staff could take things over once we'd left.

The majority of the difficulties we faced had to do with our bank account and project funds, which were unavailable for a period of several days right around the time that we needed to purchase equipment for the digital workshops. Being in Jordan meant we were completely reliant on these funds to even leave Noor's family's home where we were staying, and we spent much of our energy during that second week trying to work out the issues with the bank. We also faced timing challenges because we were implementing the entirety of our project during Ramadan. This meant that our hours spent in the camp were shorter and more limited than they would have been during any other month. We had to work quickly, intentionally, plan ahead, and make sure we weren't pushing the refugee journalists too hard. Many of them had additional work, school, and of course were fasting in addition to completing our workshops.

Were it not for the kindness of Noor's family, we would likely not have been able to implement this project on the ground. We were able to save money on lodging, food, and transportation. We used our money as wisely as possible, even working out a discount with the store where we purchased a new laptop computer for the refugees. And yet, we still wish we had been able to purchase more equipment, or at least a higher quality computer, for the magazine staff to use in the camp.

My (Hannah)'s lack of Arabic language ability was, at times, very challenging. This put the bulk of verbal communication on Noor's shoulders, who then had to translate everything when we were in the camp. But we worked out a good rhythm and several staff members were able to speak some English. Overall I would say our project went very smoothly. The first week of workshops went exceptionally well. Our eager young journalists showed up every day and were eager to learn. It was more difficult to teach photography basics because we were working in a canvas tent in the heat of summer with limited access to electricity. At one point we all crowded into a blazing hot caravan and projected photos onto the wall for a photojournalism lesson, but it was physically brutal. We also ran out of time to teach the video journalism basics we had hoped to teach, and part of this was due to the fact that it's very challenging to teach video to fifteen people with only two computers and a very limited time span.

Our plan to incorporate digital improvements on multiple platforms worked very well. The website now looks professional and we hope readers and viewers of the magazine content will take the work seriously and follow along regularly. Not only will the refugee journalists we worked with hopefully continue to benefit from the skills they learned, but the rest of the 80-something volunteer journalists who work on the magazine will benefit from the new equipment and knowledge acquired by their colleagues. We worked with JEN to dream big about future plans. There is hope that JEN will be able to establish similar magazines in refugee camps all over the world. Eventually, "The Road Refugee Media" will be a global journalism brand, run entirely by refugees. On a micro level, we helped Sarhan and Cappai develop a short-range plan for re-structuring their staff at the magazine. We noted that it is nearly impossible for 100 people to produce a magazine every month and all benefit from the process. Moving forward, Sarhan will have different levels of engagement. She'll have five to ten top-tier journalists who are doing the bulk of the reporting. These journalists will each have understudies, and a journalist will only be allowed to participate if he or she shows up consistently and does the work. The hope is that, in focusing training and resources on fewer refugees at a time, that eventually the work will be stronger and a few people will be able to make careers for themselves in journalism outside Zaatari. Given all of this planning and implementation, we absolutely feel there is a future for our project.

Section II: To us, peace is the never-ending process of seeking social justice, and it's a process that begins with stories. Our project allows some of the world's most vulnerable people to share the stories of their displaced community on a global platform so that foreign media outlets aren't just deciding what the narrative will be. Our project seeks to change the paradigm of refugee coverage. This model – refugees reporting on refugees – is already contributing to peace because important narratives are being shared on a local and global scale. It contributes to peace long-term, because these refugee journalists will return to Syria one day and work as journalists and storytellers to help rebuild their country. They'll be equipped and ready to do so after their careers in Zaatari.

This project helped me to understand peace, social change, and journalism on both micro and macro scales. Our project was not just about the workshops and equipment; it was also about building relationships. I now have friends who live in Zaatari, and I think about them everyday. The world has been made smaller because we now have colleagues in journalism who happen to be refugees living in a refugee camp. The project has changed my perception of time. For most people living in Zaatari, there is no sense of when they'll be able to return home. Each day stretches out into the unknown. And yet, they press on, rebuilding their lives and learning new skills. The experience showed me that, sometimes, the best "aid" comes in the form of building relationships. Ultimately, the relationships we were able to build in Zaatari and with JEN are what make our project a true success – and one that will sustain.

