

The road to professionalism for local Arab media after the Arab Spring will undoubtedly be very long and thorny.

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The Arab Spring has transformed the scope of traditional media in North Africa and the Middle East. [Fatima El-Issawi](#) is leading an LSE research project on 'Arab Revolutions: Media Revolutions'. As part of EUROPP's coverage of the European neighbourhood, she explains how the project aims to find out what changes the Arab Spring might bring to the media in the Middle East.



The so-called Arab Spring has unleashed a flood of analysis and speculation about the possible direction of geo-political change in the region. Much has been said about the role of social media in facilitating this shift. However, very little comment has extended to institutional (mainstream) Arab media and its own place in generating change and informed public opinion. The current struggle on state-run TV in Tunisia is the best example of how this national media retains a crucial influence on local public opinion, and how it is coming to mirror the political and ideological struggles of the current transition. Tunisian national TV has recently been accused of furthering the agenda of the new secular opposition, while the latter is denouncing an attempt by the new government to manipulate state TV using the tactics of the old regime. Of course, similar conclusions cannot be generalised about other Arab transitional countries, whose transitions remain as diverse as the revolutions that enabled them.

During my first visit in Tunisia, I was struck with a sense of déjà-vu by the country's post-revolution media: an explosion of "free expression" from journalists who finally felt empowered to practise their vocation. In this chaos, media platforms were being transformed into a tool for personal vendettas, accusations and libel; to such an extent that one TV platform broadcast comments calling for the interim prime minister to be hanged.

But rather than the enthusiasm of a post-revolution era, it was the anger from crowds of young men, idling away the days in unemployment, which was more palpable on the busy streets of Tunis. The heavy burden of the country's deteriorating economic condition was and is still overshadowing the "gains" of the revolution. The political divisions and identity struggles between secularists and Islamists are transforming both the capital and rural areas into the new battlefields for ideas and ideologies. Mainstream media is becoming one of the symbols of this clash, with the two camps wrestling to see who will control the post-revolution media. It is a battle where the main losers are the journalists who, though finally free to exercise their craft, are sacrificing their gains in the service of ideologies. The road to media professionalism in Tunisia will undoubtedly be very long and thorny. The political transition is just the start.



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The Polis LSE project 'Arab Revolutions: Media Revolutions' was born from a simple, yet highly relevant question: what will the revolutions storming the Arab world bring to the local media industry? Will they serve

as catalysts for change towards a more professional, diverse and free media industry? Will state-run media, usually considered a spokesperson for regimes and the fiercest enemy of the public opinion, evolve to become a public service provider? Will political change grant national and local journalists and Arab media institutions the opportunity to finally fulfil their given function, thereby narrowing the gulf between them and their fellow journalists in the international media?

Our research project aims to fill the knowledge gap by providing current information about the media “revolutions” that have been entailed by political revolution and that are arguably one of its defining features. The project will provide original data on cultural change inside the newsrooms of four Arab countries that are undergoing political transition or modernization, namely, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain.

The project will investigate the transformations wrought by a changing political landscape on Arab media (state and private), with an emphasis on promoting democratization and informed public opinion. It will be based on extensive empirical investigation that sheds light on “media revolutions” from the perspective of newsrooms themselves, as well as how these revolutions have translated into practical, lived experiences for Arab journalists. While current research trends have focused on understanding and analyzing social media and its implications for facilitating political change, our work will focus on the less-researched traditional media, to examine how the industry is responding to the unfolding uprisings. So too, the project will attempt to gauge how these uprisings are changing the practices and values of local media outlets, and thereby, their relationships to power and the public within each state.

While acknowledging that the circumstances of media in the countries covered by the project are distinct and unique, the pilot field investigation undertaken in Tunisia may be seen as representative of the more general struggle of media industries in the region grappling with modernization and transition. My extensive interviews with a sample of local journalists demonstrated that the Tunisian “media revolution” is strongly and directly linked to the recent structural shifts in the country’s politics. Indeed, the success of the political transitional process itself is vital to protecting very fragile media reforms. The ghosts of old authoritarian practices are still looming. There is an acute need for an open debate within and between the news media and wider political community, as well as for responsible behaviours on the part of journalists in acknowledging their own role in the deterioration of the industry under the former regime. The continued defensive attitude of local journalists, now divided between those supporting the new rulers of the country and those replicating the discourse of the new opposition, may be viewed as the main barrier to self-criticism or reflection beyond the mere exchange of accusations.

The journalistic culture of dependency towards political power and clientelism has not been eradicated by media reform. On the contrary, the sudden shift of those who once praised the old regime to flattering the new rulers perpetuates the same system of manipulation inherited from the dictatorship. Journalists must be empowered to move on from these entrenched attachments. They must improve their self-awareness and understanding of the significance of their role in preserving the delicate existing freedoms through media vigilance and integrity. While training for journalists in the region is attracting huge interest from the international community, a great deal of effort is still needed. Most importantly, this training needs to be tailored to the particular needs of the local community of journalists and the specific conditions of transitional media industries. Without this focus, training will amount to little more than coffee-fuelled discussions in closed rooms, never reaching the newsrooms or practices it seeks to transform.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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