



Egyptian Media Under Transition: In the Name of the Regime... In the Name of the People?

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Introduction

By Professor Charlie Beckett, Director, Polis, LSE

The political transition in Egypt might be considered the most complex and fast moving of the Arab post-revolution political processes. The January 25 Revolution (2011), led to the removal of Hosni Mubarak from the presidency. Further large popular protests followed just two years later (30 June 2013), this time ousting the first democratically elected president since Mubarak. The Muslim Brotherhood government led by Mohamed Morsi was overthrown in a popularly backed military coup (3 July 2013). The coup was portrayed as a national rescue operation from the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, perceived by many as highly inept at governing Egypt. For supporters of the Brotherhood, the military coup symbolises a counter-revolution and a return of the old regime. [See Appendix for a detailed summary of the sequence of political change].

There had been hopes—partly inspired by the role of social media and platforms such as satellite television in the various uprisings—that news media in Egypt might become more open and play a positive role in any moves towards greater democracy. The mainstream media that this report deals with had been shackled by state influence and clientalism under Mubarak.

Yet media reform during this complex political transition was slow, stalled by brutal political struggles. While topics such as media professionalism, fairness in the presentation of opposing viewpoints and media regulatory reform were often highly present in political debates, this did not lead to substantial

change. The blurred line between journalism and activism along with the excessive political alignment of media further contributed to a stalled reform process. The media “revolution” is yet to be launched.

Based on extensive recent interviews with participants in mainstream media in Egypt along with other stakeholders, this report seeks to give a picture of the state of Egyptian traditional mainstream media and the challenges it faces in these turbulent times. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive survey and because of the continuing upheaval, it will inevitably date. However, we believe the key issues and trends that it outlines will remain significant and that urgent attention must be given to them by anyone interested in a healthier news media in Egypt.

The paper sets out some of the historical background and much of the regulatory and legislative context, too. However, by using the contents guide you can skip those more technical passages if you wish and get to the extraordinary and complex battle for editorial ethics and political power over the media, waged by all sides in this difficult and dangerous time for Egypt. There is also a fascinating discussion of the TV talk shows and their ‘political clubs’ that are both popularising and distorting political discourse at this critical time.

This report was carried out in the heat of battle and the war between state and free journalism in Egypt continues. In a sense, this paper is an act of journalism that seeks to inspire debate as much as inform. We welcome your views and hope that the debate continues.

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

The Egyptian media revolution has not happened. The complexity of the political transition has overshadowed the debates on reforming traditional media. It is not possible to understand the challenges faced by the Egyptian traditional media post-revolution without appreciating the particularities of the Egyptian media industry as well as the nature of the political transition.

Egyptian journalists in traditional or mainstream media have not yet launched their own revolution independently from the political sphere and power struggle. The movement calling for reformed media practices and structures did not evolve into a solid and clear structure for dissecting media problems in-depth. Nor has it gone beyond the general calls for freedom of expression or the legitimate struggle for improving the working conditions of journalists. These debates have not developed into a process aiming to define professional journalism standards and how to implement these standards into media practices.

The rebirth of traditional Egyptian media requires a complex set of interventions on different levels, which have to go hand in hand with one another. Self-censorship habits are entrenched in the practices of Egyptian journalists, who largely perceive their role as servants of political masters. Even though the debate on reforming media was high on the agenda during the time of the revolution, this subservient perception did not change. Journalists were still struggling to cope with a new environment where they could operate without instructions. The deep political polarization

between pro-Islamists and pro-liberals under the Brotherhood rule transformed media into the favourite platform for political spin. The newfound liberty was translated into a chaotic expression of unfounded views and rumours.

The degradation of professional skills over decades meant traditional media was unable to benefit from the relative media openness post-revolution. Thus, it could not evolve proper investigative or critical reporting. The weak professional structures hampered the process of defining codes of ethics and professional standards, which should be implemented by the journalists themselves. The orchestration by all media platforms, state-owned and private alike, of a blunt propaganda in praise of the military in the post-Brotherhood rule questions the media's quest for independence from the power.

The crude narration of a one-sided story orchestrated by a compliant media, echoing the new regime's narratives, is not only hampering media reform but also the entire democratisation process. It is reviving the old media practices of demonising the political adversary and eliminating it by excluding it or limiting coverage to a negative reporting.

Although the internal media "revolution" is imperative for reviewing journalism practices and values, the newsrooms change will not be sufficient enough to provide an answer to the complex sets of problems of this large media industry. The liberalisation of the national media industry is solidly linked to a comprehensive review of the structures that govern media institutions. It also requires revamping the media regulatory framework by abrogating its many oppressive features. As rightly pointed out by a journalist interviewed, *"I cannot operate as an independent and professional journalist as long as I can be arrested and imprisoned for doing my job."*

Egyptian media reform requires a complex operation involving both legal reform and institutional review of media practices and professional standards.

Recommendations

A) To government and legislators

- ▶ Implement a rigorous and comprehensive regulatory reform abolishing oppressive legal provisions co-opting freedom of expression, thus enabling an effective and responsible media freedom. Media reform requires a review of all legal provisions regulating media from scratch. This requires to abolish prison sentences for journalists in offences resulting from the exercise of their profession and to introduce a clear definition of redundant legal provisions allowing limitations of freedom of expression such as the safeguard of national security. The trial of journalists before the military courts should be forbidden.
- ▶ Review all structures governing traditional media and free the media industry from the direct management of the government in order to guarantee its independence. This requires a change of the state media's institutional structure from scratch, inspired by similar international experiences.
- ▶ Provide a solution for the long standing problem of inflated structures in state media. Although this operation will encompass unpopular measures such as staff cuts, this could be balanced with providing professional training and incentives for staff whose professional capacities have been seriously diminished over the decades.
- ▶ Establish independent bodies to oversee media that are explicitly independent from the political sphere. It is imperative they have a specialised mandate, benefit from similar transitional experiences, and be led by media experts independently from government interference. These bodies should be tasked with monitoring media practices and drafting regulations. The role of these bodies should not go to the extent of direct interference in the editorial decision making of state media outlets.
- ▶ Draft laws that guarantee the transparency of private media ownership is essential, especially with the danger of misuse of these powerful media platforms for serving political agendas. Private media should provide detailed information on the source of their funding and their major financial operations.

B) To the community of journalists

- ▶ Extend the role of the Journalists' Syndicate to become a platform for an open debate on professional practices. This should be accompanied by the establishment of representative structures for broadcast media. These professional structures will act as the backbone for the process of formulating editorial policies and charters.
- ▶ Launch a comprehensive internal process leading to the adoption of codes of conduct, formulated and implemented by journalists themselves with no input from the government and within a structure allowing for a representation of different segments of media industries. It is equally crucial to develop a mechanism to monitor the implementation of such codes.
- ▶ The political alignment of journalists is the major obstacle to the development of free and professional media practices. The incapability and unwillingness of journalists to perceive their roles independently from the political sphere allows systematic political manipulation of media. Journalists need to value independent professional codes of conduct.
- ▶ To overcome self-censorship habits the underlying challenge for traditional journalists. Pluralistic media was a professional ideal defended by Egyptian journalists post-revolution. Under the rule of the Brotherhood government, media platforms witnessed a high level of diversity in views, including radical dissenting voices. Journalists should be more concerned than they are about the recent crackdown on freedoms in the name of security. Journalists should be much more resistant to the imposition of new boundaries on their coverage in the name of security.
- ▶ Journalists must draw a line between activism and journalism. Media activism contributed to raising journalists' courage to approach long-standing taboos. However, the development of activism in the name of the revolution first, and lately in the name of "patriotic duty" to fight terrorism, is hindering the development of independent, critical reporting and exacerbating the use of media for political distortion and control.

- ▶ Journalists should stand up for editorial pluralism and genuine debate. The role of journalists in shaping the political transition is reflected in an extreme polarised reporting under the Brotherhood, followed recently by simplistic propaganda in praise of the military. The lack of awareness by journalists of their responsibility in deepening the current political and social divisions is alarming.

C) To the community of international agencies and donors

- ▶ Capacity-building programmes should be conducted in partnership with internal media groups. These programmes should be adopted by journalists and media institutions in order to enable their implementation.
- ▶ A review of media practices can only be an internal process with the support of external agents. There is a strong reluctance from the Egyptian media community to accept external intervention if not tailored to the “specific” conditions of the Egyptian media industry. Imposing external models will not be efficient. It is more beneficial to discuss the particular challenges of this media industry in light of similar transitional experiences.
- ▶ Encourage the development of professional structures entrusted with not only lobbying to end abuses against media but also monitoring abuses committed by media. These structures can play a major role in the defining of media values and professionalism.

National Egyptian Media: A Coercive Regulatory Framework

Historical Background

Since independence from the United Kingdom in 1952, Egypt's media has been largely state-owned. The late President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the press (24 May 1956) thus transforming media into a tool for the regime controlled through different legal and administrative instruments.

The state-owned Egyptian media developed as an apparatus of print and broadcast organs with the main task of voicing the regime's message and asserting its regional role. The state-controlled print media is comprised of six publishing houses. These publishing houses (*al-Ahram*, *al-Hilal*, *Roz el-Youssef*, *al-Akhbar*, *al-Tahrir*, *al-Qawmiyya lil tawziee*, (The National [company] for Distribution) produce 55 daily, weekly and monthly print publications.² Its mission is defined by the Press Law as a provider of "a free national platform for all political voices and trends and key actors."³ In reality, these publications were used as a propaganda platform for the regime. Every publication is managed by a board of directors who appoint an editorial board consisting of five members and chaired by the editor-in-chief. The chairs of the two boards used to be appointed by the Shura Council, the upper chamber of the Egyptian Parliament.

2. Al-Arabiya Institute for Studies, *The Egyptian media landscape post-revolution*, 12 February 2013, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/12/265930.html> (Arabic)

3. Ibid.

According to the old constitution, the Supreme Press Council, headed by the speaker of the Shura Council himself, oversees the management of these publications. Three of these prominent publishing houses (*al-Ahram*, *al-Akhbar* and *al-Tahrir*) exercise a monopoly over publishing and distribution services, enjoying considerable financial privileges.

The broadcast sector was likewise monopolised by the state. Egypt was a pioneer in the broadcast sector in the Arab world, launching the first state-run radio service in the Middle East in 1934. The first television broadcast in Egypt was launched in 1960. The state-owned Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), established in 1970, was conceived as the control and regulatory body of all terrestrial channels.⁴ It has approximately 43,000 employees and numerous television and radio stations. According to a report by the Arabic Network of Human Rights Information, the ERTU includes 30 TV stations and nine radio networks.⁵ Six different departments manage the ERTU, the most prominent of which is the news department which operates as a central newsroom and acts as sole producer of political programming. The ERTU is governed by the 1979 Law 13, which defines its overall mandate as to fulfil the “mission statement of the audio-visual media and broadcasting services [...] in compliance with overall public policy and widely acknowledged professional standards and criteria.”⁶ A strong bureaucracy manages the ERTU: the general assembly, the board of trustees and the board of managing directors. The Minister of Information, who oversees the management of the institution and appoints its high officials, sits at the head of this structure.

4. R. Allam, “Egyptian television broadcast regulatory framework: Challenges and opportunities,” Article 19, 20 September, 2012, <http://www.article19.org/join-the-debate.php/80/view/>

5. The Arabic Network of Human Rights Information, *Maspero in the reign of t the first elected president*, 8 April 2013, <http://www.anhri.net/en/?p=12153>

6. ERTU Law, *Law No 13 of Year 1979 on the Egyptian Radio and Television Union*, 1979.

The policies of relative political and economic openness under President Sadat (1976) allowed the gradual introduction of private media, breaking the monopoly of state media enforced by President Nasser's rule. The monopoly was breached to some extent by the advent of partisan media where political parties produced print publications with a highly ideological tone. The most important move was the outbreak of the so-called independent press (2003), which was privately owned. The independent press⁷ introduced a different news format, which focused on the everyday problems and needs of ordinary citizens, as opposed to the excessive focus on governmental activities that was characteristic of the state media. The same decade witnessed the launch of private satellite TV ventures. The media state monopoly had been challenged further in recent years by diverse alternative news sources, such as satellite television channels and a range of pan-Arab newspapers that entered the market in the 1980s and the 1990s.⁸ Egypt also had a pioneering role in satellite media. It was the first Arab country to launch a satellite TV channel, the Egyptian Space Channel (ESC), on Arabsat in 1990. Egypt later asserted its regional media role by launching its own satellite, Nilesat, to support its national channels (1996). Nilesat was established as a joint public-private company operating Egyptian satellites. As of 2010 it broadcasts 600 television channels and 100 digital radio channels.⁹

The post-revolution era witnessed a boom of national media outlets, especially TV stations. Religious TV channels, finally allowed to tackle politics for the first time, flourished. This coincided with a high number of licences granted for new TV stations, although with no change in the procedure of granting these licences. These religious channels were shut down immediately after President Morsi was ousted. They were accused of spreading extremist

7. This is how private media is called as opposed to national state owned media.

8. N. Brown, "Can the colossus be salvaged? Egypt's state-owned press in a post-revolutionary environment," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22 August 2011 <http://m.ceip.org/publications/?fa=45391>

9. N. Rizk, N. & L. Atallah (2011), "Egypt's Evolving Media Landscape: Access, Public Interest and Control," in *A New Frontier, An Old Landscape*, (D. Hawton and A. Puddephat, eds.), New York: Ford Foundation, 118–136.

discourse targeting especially women's rights and the Coptic Christian community. The rule of the military backed government is witnessing an unprecedented campaign of media repression with frequent intimidation and journalists' arrests decried by media watchdogs.¹⁰

Media Regulations Pre-Revolution: An Oppressive Legal Arsenal

Egyptian media is heavily controlled by a variety of legal provisions that prevent Egyptian journalists from operating freely. In addition to the Constitutional Law and the Press Law, media is also regulated through multiple legal texts such as the Penal Code, the Journalism Regulation Law, the State Documents Law, the Party Law, the Civil Servants Law and the Intelligence Law.¹¹

Articles 47 and 48 of the pre-revolution Egyptian Constitution guaranteed freedom of expression and media freedom, respectively. However, the government could easily negate these rights through opposing laws. Historically, the most powerful control mechanism used to muzzle media and personal rights was the 1958/162 Emergency Law. It allowed for publication bans for reasons of national security or public order and tried offenders in military tribunals with limited right to appeal. The law was introduced after Sadat's assassination in 1981¹² and was lifted more than 30 years later (31 May 2012)¹³ only to be re-installed by the military-backed government for "the shortest

10. Reporters Without Borders, "Freedom of information falls prey to military crackdown," September 25, 2013, <http://en.rsf.org/egypt-freedom-of-information-falls-prey-25-09-2013,45234.html>

11. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, "Egypt," KAS, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_14951-1522-1-30.pdf?090708100317

12. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Emergency Law, Guide to Egypt's transition," <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2010/09/09/emergency-law>

13. CNN, "Egypt lifts unpopular Emergency Law," 2 June 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/05/31/world/africa/egypt-emergency-law/index.html>

possible period” in the name of combating terrorism.¹⁴ It was finally lifted on 12 November 2013 after three months of its implementation.

A) Press Regulations

When President Nasser nationalised the press in 1956, the Press Law transferred the main print publishing houses’ management to the government. The same law abolished private ownership of newspapers, required any new publication to obtain a licence from the government, and strengthened the control of the ruling party over the media.¹⁵ The law was revised during the subsequent presidency of Anwar Sadat in the early seventies.¹⁶ With the re-introduction of the multiparty system, political parties in the opposition were granted the right to publish their own newspapers. The Supreme Press Council, created in 1975, would own 49 percent of the major publishing houses’ shares. The Council lasted until 1977 and was re-established again in 1981.¹⁷ The Supreme Press Council was legally bound to give a response to an application for a newspaper licence within 40 days.¹⁸ However, one of the most common strategies to avoid granting licences was for the Supreme Press

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14. B. Daragahi, “Egypt’s interim government extends state of emergency,” *Financial Times*, 12 September 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9913f734-1bc2-11e3-94a3-00144fe-ab7de.html#axzz2oy8KOlhJ>
 15. A. Abdel Fattah, *Press Freedom in Egypt*, The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, June 2008, <http://www.anhri.net/en/reports/pressfreedom/>
 16. Y. Chiba (2009), *Media History of Modern Egypt: A Critical Review*. University Research Information Repository, http://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2433/155745/1/ssh_084.pdf
 17. H. Amin, *Report on the State of the Media in Egypt*, Arab Center for the Development of the Rule of Law and Integrity (ACRLI), 2009, http://www.arabruleoflaw.org/Files/PDF/Media/English/P2/Egypt_MediaReportP2_En.pdf
 18. T. Mendel, *Political and Media Transitions in Egypt: A Snapshot of Media Policy and Regulatory Environment*, 2011, Internews, http://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews_Egypt_MediaLawReview_Aug11.pdf

Council to never provide a reply for an application. Obtaining a newspaper licence is a “special privilege” as per Article 49 of the Press Law.¹⁹

The Press Authority Law No. 148 of 1980 acknowledged the independence of the press as a “fourth estate.” Even so, this law tightened government control by limiting media ownership to legal persons and parties.²⁰ Newspapers could be privately owned on the condition that they would “take the form of co-operatives owned exclusively by Egyptians, with no one person owning more than ten per cent of the overall capital (Article 52) [of the Press Law].”²¹ In 1995, Mubarak passed Press Law No. 93, which limited press freedom and came to be popularly called the Press Assassination Law.²² The bill labelled press freedom as a threat to democracy and it imposed lengthy prison terms together with hefty fines for journalists convicted of libel and other ill-defined publications crimes.²³ Press Law No. 96 of 1996 stipulated that journalists can be imprisoned for diverse reasons such as intrusion into citizens’ private lives, attacking religious faith or government officials’ behaviour, or accepting donations from foreign bodies.²⁴ The Press Law impeded individuals’ and groups’ rights to create new publications, limiting this right to political parties and legal persons.²⁵

Such stringent restrictions resulted in the Egyptian press flourishing outside of Egypt –weeklies were distributed inside Egypt while legally based outside the country, mainly in Cyprus.²⁶ These publications were free, in principle, to

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. A. Abdel Fattah, *Press Freedom in Egypt*.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Berenguer, R.D. (2002), *The Political Economics of Foreign-licensed Publications in Egypt: The “Cyprus Press,”* Michigan State University, , http://www.portalcomunicacion.com/bcn2002/n_eng/programme/prog_ind/papers/b/pdf/b002_beren.pdf

cover all topics. However, they remained under the control of the Ministry of Information, who could censor or halt distribution irrespective of where these publications were printed.²⁷ The result was a foreign-licensed press tolerated in exchange for certain content restrictions.²⁸

Although freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution and censorship is forbidden, there are approximately 35 articles in various laws that prescribe penalties for the media, ranging from fines to prison sentences. In addition to the restrictions imposed by press laws, the Penal Code of 1937²⁹ can be considered the government's most effective censorship tool. Prison sentences of up to five years are imposed for offences considered criminal such as criticising the president or a foreign head of state, publication of material that constitutes “an attack against the dignity and honour of individuals,” or an “outrage of the reputation of families.”³⁰ One of the most restrictive provisions is Article 179, which imposes a prison term of up to three years for insulting the president. This article was used by authorities to silence the opposition, labelling criticism against presidential politics as personal insults.

In addition to these multiple restrictions, journalists face other challenges. Most local journalists operate without official recognition—and therefore protected—as members of the profession. The Journalists Syndicate Law No. 76 of 1970 prohibits a journalist from working if he/she is not registered with the Syndicate. Similarly it is forbidden for any media outlet to hire a journalist not registered with the Syndicate.³¹ Nevertheless, a large number of journalists in Egypt are not registered given the tough conditions journalists must face to access this privilege.

27. H. Amin, *Report on the State of the Media in Egypt*.

28. Berenguer, R.D., *The Political Economics of Foreign-licensed Publications in Egypt: The “Cyprus Press.”*

29. Adopted in 1937, the Penal Code has been amended many times.

30. Freedom House, “Egypt: Freedom of the Press of 2011,” <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/egypt>

31. A. Abdel Fattah, *Press Freedom in Egypt*.

For instance, the Syndicate limits its membership to journalists who have a large breadth of published works and experience, thus putting young journalists at a disadvantage.

The promise granted by Mubarak to abolish prison terms for journalists in cases related to the exercise of their profession (2004) did not materialise. Some amendments to the Penal Code, introduced in 2006, did not abolish prison sanctions for journalists.³²

B) Broadcast Regulations

In the broadcast sector, different regulations apply to state-owned media and to independent satellite media (although the latter is not clearly regulated through any specific piece of legislation).

Created in 1970, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union state-owned broadcaster (ERTU) is overseen by the Ministry of Information and legislated by the 1979 ERTU law.³³ The ERTU chairmen report directly to the Minister of Information who chairs the General Assembly, the main body overseeing the Union. Private satellite television stations are established in and broadcast from Cairo's Media Public Free Zone in Nasr City. They respond to the quasi-governmental General Authority for Investment (GAFI) and, while they do not submit to ERTU law, must obtain a broadcasting license from GAFI. The private broadcasting sector lacks a clear regulatory framework on topics such as diversity, fairness of representation, systems for allocating frequencies and rules on election coverage.³⁴

32. Ibid.

33. T. Mendel, *Political and media transitions in Egypt: A snapshot of media policy and regulatory environment*; CIMA, *The legal enabling environment for independent media in Egypt and Tunisia*. 1 september 2011, <http://cima.ned.org/publications/legal-enabling-environment-independent-media-egypt-and-tunisia>.

34. T. Mendel, *Political and media transitions in Egypt: A snapshot of media policy and regulatory environment*.

This opaque legal framework has been used as a tool for intimidation and to put pressure on private TV stations when their broadcast is deemed as “causing trouble” politically. The licences of private broadcasters allow them to provide a general service with no authorisation to broadcast news. The private broadcasters managed to bypass these restrictions by providing news in their talk shows, at the risk of governmental reprisal for breaching their licenses. In addition, these private ventures are linked by contracts to satellite companies that distribute their signals. These satellite companies are largely under government control, thereby setting an informal tool for additional control and possible restrictions on content.³⁵

In the radio sector, the state exercises a near monopoly, restricting most of the FM frequencies to state broadcasters. The Egyptian Radio Spectrum Allocation Chart, which is responsible for the allocation of the frequency spectrum, provides most of these frequencies to ERTU stations only.

In 2008, the Egyptian government drafted a new media law, proposing the creation of a governmental agency called the National Audio-visual Broadcasting Regulation Authority.³⁶ The draft law proposed measures that would have enabled additional censorship. However, the Bill was never passed into law.³⁷

Constitutional Reforms: An Unfinished Process

The interim constitution adopted by SCAF (the Constitutional Declaration) guaranteed media freedom and freedom of expression in Articles 12 and 13. However, this freedom can be exercised only “within the law” with no clarification on possible limitations of this freedom. While Article 13 bans

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

media censorship, the article explicitly bans administrative censorship as opposed to all forms of censorship. Most importantly, this legal protection does not apply under the emergency law. This protection is also weakened by several restrictive legal provisions that contradict and negate it.

The 2012 constitution adopted by the (now dissolved) constituent assembly was generally conceived as failing to protect freedom of expression. The constitution contains both articles that seem to protect freedom of expression and others that appear to co-opt it.

The constitution provides for freedom of opinion and access to information in Articles 45, 46, 47, 48 and 49. These guarantees are, however, negated by opposing legal provisions. For example Article 31 states that “individuals may not be insulted” and Article 44 prohibits “the insulting of prophets.” This is in addition to the Penal Code which criminalises defamation and has been used frequently to prosecute critics of the government.³⁸ Indeed, Morsi’s rule witnessed an unprecedented wave of legal pursuits against journalists under Penal Code provisions.³⁹ These include prominent media figures, notably the political satirist Bassem Youssef who had to face an arrest warrant for allegedly insulting Islam and Morsi, as well as “spreading false news with the aim of disrupting public order.”⁴⁰

Article 49 of this constitution presented real progress; individuals could launch a publication by simple notification. However, the frequent allusion to restrictions in the name of national security and the possibility of closure of media outlets by court order undermined this achievement.

38. S. Magdy and N. Messieh, “Pervasive Use of Mubarak’s Legislation to Control Egypt’s Media,” *Atlantic Council*. 22 August 2012, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/pervasive-use-of-mubaraks-legislation-to-control-egypts-media>

39. *Ibid.*

40. BBC, “Egypt satirist Bassem Youssef faces arrest warrant,” 30 March 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21980343>

In anticipation of the abolishment of the Ministry of Information, the constitution provided for the formation of independent councils tasked with overseeing private and state-owned media. Articles 215 and 216 caused a controversy among journalists for their restrictive formulation, as they established two bodies to oversee state and private media. The allusion to safeguarding “society’s constructive traditions and customs” in Article 215 was denounced as a tool to prohibit coverage of certain topics in the name of Sharia.⁴¹ Some also argued that the new structure meant to oversee the state-owned media was just a revamped Supreme Press Council.

The changes introduced by the former assembly are now obsolete. A 50-member committee formed by the interim government drafted a new charter from scratch to replace the 2012 Constitution.⁴² The panel was largely composed of secularists.⁴³ The new constitution has been voted in mid-January 2014.

The interim authorities approved a draft law to abolish prison terms for insulting the president and replace them with fines. Another bill was ratified amending Law 97 (1996), giving the president the right to form a new Supreme Press Council made up of 15 members. The new council would replace the one formed by the now-dissolved Shura Council. Unlike the old make-up, the new board will be comprised of the Journalists Syndicate head as well as media professors, writers, lawmakers and prominent public figures. The new Supreme Press Council is expected to serve a four-year term.⁴⁴

41. S. Carr and M. Adam, “In the name of morals and Sharia, media freedoms may contract,” *Masress*, 29 January 2012, <http://www.masress.com/en/almasryalyoumen/1347611>

42. D. Kholaf, “Battle intensifies over Egypt’s constitution,” *Al Jazeera*, 3 September 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/201392125842364641.html>

43. H. Schneider, “New Egyptian constitution may clamp down on parties,” *Washington Post*, 27 August 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/new-egyptian-constitution-may-clamp-down-on-parties/2013/08/27/bf3168b2-0f2d-11e3-a2b3-5e107edf9897_story.html

44. Ahram Online, “Egypt interim president appoints new board for Supreme Press Council,” 5 August 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/78366/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-interim-president-appoints-new-board-for-Sup.aspx>

The new constitution guarantees media freedom and freedom of thought and opinion. It introduces the opportunity for natural and legal persons to own media outlets. Print publications can be launched by simple notification. The constitution recognises the obligation of public bodies to disclose information and documents. However, the lack of clarity on possible cases of non-disclosure threatens to limit this essential right.

The new draft abolishes censorship on media outlets as well as the repressive sanctions against journalists in cases of offences resulting from the exercise of their profession. However, the draft stipulates for exceptional cases allowing censorship on media “in war time and general mobilisation”. Repressive sentences may be taken against journalists in the cases of “crimes of incitement to violence, discrimination among citizens or attacks on individuals’ honor”. Sanctions in these cases will be determined “by the law”, leading possibly to restrictive practices. It is important to recall that the current Penal code provisions criminalise “insult” and defamation, provisions frequently used to prosecute and silence critics.

The new constitution recognises the “independence” of state media with no clarification on how this independence would be ensured. It establishes three independent councils to oversee the media sector. The Higher Council for Media Organization is entrusted with regulating the content of print, audio-visual and online media outlets. The council is responsible for guaranteeing media independence, plurality and neutrality. It is responsible for monitoring the sources of funding form media outlets and ensuring media organizations abide by professional standards and “the requirements of national security”.

The National Authority for Press is entrusted with managing and developing print state while the National Authority for Media is responsible for managing state broadcast media. The formation of these councils is left to “the law” with no further indications. The power granted to these councils over regulating print content contradicts international trends of self-regulation for print media.

The allusion to the obligation to respect the requirements of national security using vague wording paves the way for possible political control. Furthermore, the provision which allows for the prosecution of individuals before the military judiciary could lead to military trials of journalists. The article 204 of the constitution permits prosecution before military courts for “crimes that represent a direct assault on ... the documents of the armed forces and their military secrets.”⁴⁵

According to Rajai Mirghani of the national news agency, “*there is a major problem in the lack of clarity on the definition of a +direct assault+ thus allowing an arbitrary interpretation of the article. However, it still represents a positive step compared to the old legal provisions which allow for the prosecution of journalists in the case of any coverage of issues related to the armed forces with no prior permission from the military.*”⁴⁶

The new constitution guarantees the independence of the new bodies with regulatory powers over the media. However, the success of these bodies is solidly linked to its structure: Who will be represented in these councils and how? How will these bodies be funded? What kind of relationship will they have with the political powers? What will their prerogatives be and how will these prerogatives be implemented? The debates on the establishment of these new bodies still lack a clear vision of their structure.

There is a crucial need for clarity in the definition of the structure on these new bodies as well as redundant legal provisions historically used to further political control and manipulation. The trial of journalists before military courts should not be allowed under any circumstances.

45. See the full draft Constitution 2013 and the 2012 Constitution, http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/final_constitution_-2_dec_2013-arabic-_signed.pdf; <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-draft-constitution-translated>

46. Interview with author, December 2013.

It is important to note the new article 31 which was added to the draft constitution, and considers cyber space to be “an essential part of the economy and the national security”, potentially justifying its control under the excuses of protecting the national security and economic interests. The new article is thus a serious attempt against the freedom to access and exchange information.⁴⁷

47, See the website of the Panel of fifty with detailed information on the new constitution, <http://sharek.dostour.eg/>

State Media: From Propaganda to Propaganda

Historical Overview: A Snapshot

The state-owned media apparatus in Egypt was created and developed with the mission of promulgating the regime's messages, enhancing its image and asserting its leadership in the Arab world.⁴⁸ The state media apparatus was, and still is, solidly linked to the political regime. The Ministry of Information is one of the most powerful tools of the regime. After being abolished post-revolution in February 2011,⁴⁹ the Ministry was re-instated by SCAF on 12 July 2011. Osama Heikal, a former military correspondent, was named as the new Minister of Information and was later replaced by Major General Ahmed Anis, who had been close to the Mubarak regime. The Brotherhood government (August 2012) appointed Salah Abdel Maksood as the last Minister of Information in preparation for the Ministry's abolishment. He was removed from his position with the ousting of the Brotherhood government but soon replaced by Doreya Sharaf El-Din, who was appointed by the military-backed government.

48. S. Magdy and N. Messieh, "Pervasive Use of Mubarak's Legislation to Control Egypt's Media," *Atlantic Council*

49. Committee to Protect Journalists, "Egypt's reinstatement of Information Ministry is a setback," 12 July 2012, <http://cpj.org/2011/07/egypts-reinstatement-of-information-ministry-is-ma.php>

Together, the ownership system and institutional structure of the state media consolidated a conception of the media's role as a platform to convey the government's message. For Osama Saraya, the former editor-in-chief of al-Ahram newspaper under Mubarak, "*the main function of state media was to embellish the face of the regime, not to monitor it. It was impossible to imagine another role for it.*"⁵⁰ Abdallah Kamal, the former editor-in-chief of the *Roz el Youssef* newspaper—well-known for launching smear campaigns against dissidents—explains the rampant politicking in media production:

*"I was working in politics. This is common even in Western media. There was no real political life and media was replacing the lacking political parties so it was overwhelmed by politics."*⁵¹

There are no accurate figures on the number of employees in the state media sector. It is estimated there are over 70,000 staff in this inflated structure, most of which are technical and administrative. The state TV and Radio Union employs around 43,000 staff, 7,000 of which are security.⁵² The state broadcast sector is indebted to the government by an estimated 13.5 billion Egyptian pounds (around 2 billion US dollars).⁵³ *Al-Ahram* publishing house alone is estimated to employ over 14,000 staff.⁵⁴ Asked about his plans to deal with the inflated number of staff in Maspero, the former Minister of Information in the Brotherhood government argued for caution:

*"It is not time to take drastic measures. We could use incentives for people to resign such as encouraging early retirements with generous financial compensation. The solution can only be by consensus."*⁵⁵

50. Interview with author, June 2012.

51. Ibid.

52. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, *Maspero In The Reign Of The First Elected President: Violations And Undesired Reforms*, April 2013, <http://www.anhri.net/?p=74883>

53. Ibid.

54. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, *The Liberalization Of State Media*, 9 October 2012, <http://www.anhri.net/?p=60501> (Arabic).

55. Interview with author, March 2013.

Restructuring this bloated sector is a major topic of post-revolution debate. However, the adoption of drastic measures was avoided partly because of socio-economic conditions; mass cuts would create an unemployment wave among state media journalists and thereby a large dissident movement. Recent attempts to grant the state media independence from the political agenda have failed. Various ideas were discussed regarding the ambitious plan to transform the state media into a provider of quality public service, following the example of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).⁵⁶ A potential idea was to open up the ownership scheme of this media sector to their journalists and to the Egyptian people through a share-holding system managed by independent bodies.

The institutional reform of the state media from an extremely central system to a decentralised one would be another major challenge. The reform could grant various services autonomy from the central departments/bodies managing these media outlets. For instance, the ERTU is managed by six central departments, the most prominent of which is the news department. By operating as a central newsroom and acting as a sole producer of political programming, the news department channels information to all state broadcasting outlets. This monopoly was breached with the launch of Nile TV station in 1993, conceived as a 24-hour rolling satellite news station with services in Arabic, French, English and Hebrew. The TV channel was first conceived as independent from the news central department, with the wave of relative media openness in the latest years of the Mubarak regime. According to former station director Sameh Rajai, the modern TV station managed to introduce “*a new culture*”⁵⁷ in state media practices; old-fashioned agenda-setting, such as reporting on presidential activities first, was ignored. However, the station lost its independence—and relative openness—when it was returned to the hegemony of the powerful news department. In the print

56. Several demonstrations called for an independent editorial policy for state media. See articles, <http://www1.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=1019150&>, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/state-tv-news-staff-launches-protests-demand-independence>

57. Interview with author, March 2013.

sector, the prominent state publishing houses are managed by an equally centralised system.

The consistent manipulation of this state media for decades coupled with the regression of its professional standards lead to the erosion of public trust. This is exemplified by the *Al Ahrām* newspaper scandal, where an altered photo taken at the launch of the latest Middle East peace talks was published. The edited photo shows Mubarak walking ahead of other participant leaders⁵⁸ while, in reality, he was second or third among this crowd. Asked about this manipulation, Osama Saraya, then-editor in chief of *al-Ahrām*, argued that it did not happen under his directives and was the result of poor journalistic skills.⁵⁹

If state-run media was already an unreliable source of news before the revolution, its preposterous broadcasting of a “peaceful Egypt” during the uprisings further undermined its credibility.⁶⁰ Some media went to the extent of describing protesters as agents of “foreign hands” or even “prostitutes.” This biased reporting continued after the revolution. A prominent example is the coverage of the Coptic demonstrations that were brutally repressed by state security on 9 October 2011.⁶¹ Before the horrific photos showing demonstrators crushed by tanks were made public, television presenter Rasha Magdy called on Egyptians to rally in the streets to defend soldiers from “violent protesters.” Commenting on this coverage, the (former) head of the News Department Ibrahim Sayyad simply said: *“This was not incitement to violence. The presenter was politically emotional. We admit this is a mistake. The presenter*

58. J. Shenker and S. Haroon, “Hosni Mubarak left red faced over doctored red carpet photo.” *The Guardian*, 16 September 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/16/mubarak-doctored-red-carpet-picture>

59. Interview with author, March 2013.

60. A. Hauslohner, “The most powerful weapon of Egypt’s ruling Generals: State TV,” *Time World*, 29 February 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2107910,00.html#ixzz1xQA8Y6l>.

61. N.H. Rashwan, “Maspero survivors finally testify: Army shot at unarmed demonstrators without provocation,” *Ahrām Online*, <http://english.ahram.org/~-/NewsContentP/1/24102/Egypt/Maspero-survivors-testify-army-shot-at-unarmed-dem.aspx>

was investigated and she is back to work now."⁶² According to Sayyad, the state TV did not show the footage of killed demonstrators "to avoid fuelling tension."⁶³

The same discourse was used by state TV in the coverage of the bloody crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood supporters. State media along with private media echoed the military narratives, neglecting any reporting from the side of protestors.

Self-censorship has slowly become the main tool for control over media content with no need for direct government intervention. State control over the production of media evolved from overt to indirect control. Under Nasser's rule, a censor sat in press newsrooms and intervened directly with news production. Later, the control process moved to the printing houses where a security official halted production if the press contained controversial content. State control later adopted a softer approach through the nomination of editors-in-chief who were close allies of the regime. The "professional controllers" know what is allowed to be published and can make sure the content is respectful of the governmental restrictions. These notorious editors became the representatives of the government with large prerogatives inside newsrooms. A common way to implement self-censorship in newsrooms was to offer promotions to journalists or the potential to earn additional revenue by appointing them to advisory positions (whether for governmental bodies or for wealthy businessmen connected to the regime). This form of control proved to be efficient as the controllers—the prominent editors-in-chief—were journalists by profession, rather than security officials, and thereby knowledgeable of newsroom practices. These usual practices led to entrenched self-censorship mechanisms where journalists understand the red tape and abide by it without any need for external intervention.

As the main function of state media was to embellish the image of the regime, it provided restricted reporting on opposition groups and always with a nega-

62. Interview with author, March 2013.

63. Ibid.

tive slant, such as legal cases against them. The street protests that erupted with the outbreak of opposition civil movements were covered only by private media and adopted a soft tone in their coverage, thereby avoiding giving a platform to the radical demands of these protests. For state media, these protests simply did not happen. This approach is currently maintained by state media. Major events that challenge the government are often ignored, even when about large mass killings.

Post Revolution: An Internal Shock, Not a Revolution

Immediately after the resignation of Mubarak (22 February 2011), state media continued to do what it always had by applauding the new powerful men. State media moved automatically from denying the existence of an uprising to flattering the revolutionaries. For instance *al-Ahram* newspaper, which used to ignore the protests and describe protesters as troublemakers, ran the headline “The People Toppled the Regime” the day following the fall of the regime.

Immediately after Mubarak’s resignation, state media newsrooms embarked on two major battles: removing the editors-in-chief who used to symbolise state control and reforming the salary scales to limit disparity. The new editors were chosen by staff and are those who had the longest experience inside newsrooms. However, the change in editors did not follow any professional criteria and was largely a revenge process for the benefit of those who were marginalised under Mubarak. Thus, the shuffle did not always lead to the appointment of qualified managers. The need for the new managers in tune with staff demands obliged the new leadership to please staff in order to keep their positions. Winning the hearts and minds of staff included increasing financial incentives for them, therefore exacerbating the financial hardship of the state media sector. Under the interim governments which followed Mubarak’s resignation, a Deputy Prime Minister was assigned to implement the prerogatives of the then dissolved Shura Council, and appoint the editors-in-chief of state press. In the short period in which the Ministry of Information was abolished, the functions of this Ministry were exercised by

the government-appointed heads of ERTU. After the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood government, the new Shura Council appointed new editors-in-chief of state publications, sparking the indignation of journalists. They considered these nominations as an attempt to circumvent long-standing requests to free this process from the authority of the Shura Council.⁶⁴ These positions were changed twice under the former Muslim Brotherhood rule.⁶⁵ The Shura Council's call for applications for the positions of editor-in-chief of state publications was met with opposition from the journalism community. Those in opposition demanded an end to all kinds of subordination of national newspapers to the Shura-controlled Supreme Press Council.

According to Khaled Sarjani from *al-Ahram* newspaper “*the new editors replicated the old managerial style. They did not take any measures for liberalising the internal structures such as enforcing editorial independence and setting clear editorial policy and standards. There were no real changes inside newsrooms.*”⁶⁶

This is echoed by the journalist of *Roz el-Youssef*, Issam Zakariya. According to him, state media newsrooms witnessed an internal shock after the 25 January revolution, but it did not amount to a “revolution” in editorial practices.⁶⁷

Despite this, two major accomplishments were achieved in state news-rooms: firstly, the opening of opinion pages and talk show debates to dissident voices, which boosted the credibility of state media. Secondly, the diversification of news sources away from the uniformity of official sources.

This was another challenge as these newsrooms had applied redundant news formats for many years. As the competition became tough with the opening

64. *Al-Arabiya*, “Egypt’s journalists protest new Shura Council rules for state-run press,” 4 July 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/04/224408.html>

65. *Egypt Independent*, “Brotherhood-dominated Shura Council makes second round of press appointments,” 4 September 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/brotherhood-dominated-shura-council-makes-second-round-press-appointments>

66. Interview with author, June 2012.

67. *Ibid.*

of the media market, state media had to face the major challenge of surviving while suffering from a lack of resources, a debt crisis and out-dated structures.

This relative openness did not overcome the entrenched habits of obedience and bureaucracy. The fall of the Mubarak regime left state media staff in limbo, unsure of how to proceed without directives, especially for controversial topics.

Gamal Fahmy, the first secretary of the Journalists Syndicate said they continued to censor themselves:

*“The idea of prohibited information no long exists but journalists are used to it. They continue to define new red lines even if no one asked them to do so. They had to be reassured by the publication of the information by private media to consider the news as non-prohibited.”*⁶⁸

The experience of Ahmad Hamdy, the junior reporter of Nile TV, is instructive. He describes the heavy bureaucracy of editorial decision-making in the coverage of issues considered sensitive, stressing how these internal dynamics have remained in force post-revolution. However, the coverage of state TV changed after the revolution, according to Hamdy. An example is the coverage by Nile TV station of the violent clashes between demonstrators and security forces in the so called Mohamad Mahmoud street events (November 2011):⁶⁹

*“Our correspondent was not relying on the news provided by the official news agency as we used to do. He was in the street, when the police issued a communiqué saying that they did not use gunfire, our correspondent was reporting live showing us the empty cartridge in streets. We were telling what we were seeing and not what we were told to say.”*⁷⁰

68. Ibid.

69. M. Adam, “In midst of renewed clashes on Mohamed Mahmoud, remembering the violence of 2011,” *Egypt Independent*, 19 November 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/midst-renewed-clashes-mohamed-mahmoud-remembering-violence-2011>

70. Interview with author, June 2012.

While there were some reporters trying to do a real job of journalism many of the old guard acted as a brake:

*“Our major problem is our editors who still follow the old practices, such as waiting for the government to issue a communiqué before reporting on the events. The quality of reporting is very much linked to the personality of the editor of the day. There is no clear editorial policy.”*⁷¹

From SCAF to the Muslim Brotherhood: A Freer State Media?

The relative change observed in the practices of some parts of state media did not evolve into a sustainable process. In the internal debate about state media, there is an obvious trend to distinguish between state-owned media and public media representing the people’s voices and not the government’s policies. However, it is not clear how this distinction is translated into professional practice for journalists. The lack of clear professional standards is accompanied by an internal trend among journalists to translate their newfound liberty into expressing personal views and unfounded accusations.

For Egyptian journalists, the military institution is a closed box where no information can be reported beyond the official communiqués. It is also considered to be the most well-established and feared institution in the history of the country. However, journalists’ testimonies demonstrate that even the Supreme Council (SCAF) was not totally exempt from media criticism although with great caution, an operation led by private media. The military institution is historically immune from scrutiny covered by the law number 313 (1956; amended in 1967) that restricts coverage of the military. The law “prohibits publishing or broadcasting any information or news on the armed forces and its formations, movements, equipment and personnel”

71. Ibid.

without obtaining the written consent of the Director of Military Intelligence, or his deputy in his absence.”⁷² It is important to note that military affairs are usually restricted to the “military editor” within each media outlet, accredited by the military and responsible for all coverage related to this institution.

Breaking this entrenched taboo is a real challenge for journalists who face the threat of trial before military courts. Some of them developed different techniques to deal with controversial topics related to the military by differentiating between SCAF as an administrative body temporarily tasked with running the country and the military institution. SCAF’s approach to media was ambivalent. They took some repressive measures against expressions of direct criticism and then backed off when the media community reacted to these measures.

The military generals deployed a PR campaign to seduce media by organising regular briefs for senior journalists from both state and private media in an attempt to pre-empt any possible critical reporting and to encourage positive reporting using a carrot-and-stick policy. The description of these meetings by the talk show host Mahmoud Saad demonstrates the extent to which these meetings were able to influence journalists’ perceptions:

*“SCAF invited some influential presenters and press editors. They met every one of us alone, they briefed us on on-going events. The aim was to provide us with accurate information so when we address our audiences we don’t mess up and we avoid rumours on the military. I could understand the real role of secret services, the nature of their work and to what extent they are involved in everything.”*⁷³

The rule of SCAF witnessed major protests that were harshly repressed by security forces. SCAF restored many of the censorship measures and intimi-

72. A. Iskandar, “Year of the ostrich: SCAF’s media experiment,” *Jadaliyya*, November 2012, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8135/year-of-the-ostrich_scafs-media-experiment

73. Interview with author, June 2012.

dition tools used by the Mubarak regime.⁷⁴ An example is the decision of SCAF in May 2011 to summon talk show host Reem Maged and her guest, prominent activist/blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy, after they openly criticised the military for attacking protestors.⁷⁵ The blogger Maikel Nabil Sanad was arrested for openly criticising the military in blog posts and he was jailed for 302 days on charges of insulting the military.⁷⁶ Another blogger, Alaa Abdel Fattah, was jailed for publishing an article on the death of an activist during the army's attack on Coptic protestors. Dina Abdel Rahman, a television presenter on a privately owned channel, was fired for reporting a newspaper article, which was critical of the SCAF.⁷⁷ The military threatened to enforce the emergency law, allowing the pursuit of journalists before state security courts. Other anti-press measures included the closure of an Al-Jazeera bureau and the freezing of the process of issuing licences to satellite television stations.⁷⁸

Criticising the military will lead to serious consequences for those who are brave enough to do so. Most of journalists interviewed, from state and private media, described their way of dealing with SCAF as a red line they have to be cautious about without being sacred. The deputy editor-in-chief of the official news agency (MENA), Rajai Mirghani, describes the change of dynamics in covering sensitive events post revolution when related to the military.

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74. C. Walker and R. Orttung, "For Egypt's state media, the revolution has yet to arrive," Freedom House, 24 January 2012, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/blog/egypt%E2%80%99s-state-media-revolution-has-yet-arrive>; D. El-Bey, "The state-owned media, both broadcast and print, faces an uphill struggle," *Ahram Weekly*, 9 March 2011 <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1037/eg22.htm>
 75. See the video of Reem Maged and Hossam el-Hamalawy discussing the meeting with military prosecutor: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEO11WLnaDc&feature>
 76. Committee to Protect Journalists, "Jailed Egyptian blogger on hunger strike," 31 August 2011, <http://www.cpj.org/2011/08/jailed-egyptian-blogger-on-hunger-strike.php>
 77. S. Yassin, "Egypt: self-censorship and the military hinder press freedom," Index on Censorship, <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2011/12/egypt-self-censorship-scaf-press-freedom-egypt-independent/>
 78. Committee to Protect Journalists, "Egyptian military institutes new media restrictions," 13 September 2011, <http://www.cpj.org/2011/09/egyptian-military-institutes-new-media-restriction.php>

“Before, we used to ignore any news related to the demonstrations of civil movements. After the fall of the regime, we witnessed an unprecedented level of publishing news covering all street expressions. The relative red line was SCAF as we were reluctant to openly criticise the military council. But this was not as sacred as it used to be under Mubarak’s regime.”

Take the experience of Maysa’ Fahmy, a junior reporter for *Ashourouq* independent newspaper, in covering the polemic “virginity tests,” an important case that rose under the SCAF’s rule. A group of female protesters in Tahrir Square during the interim military rule were forced to undergo virginity tests.⁷⁹ Fahmy recounts:

“I attended a press conference during which women talked about a virginity test they were forced to take. I wrote an article but my piece was not published the next day. Nothing was published also in all newspapers. When I asked my editor for the reason behind not publishing my piece, I was told that people will not believe that the military police can do something like this.”

The timidity of journalists from both state and private media, in challenging the military discourse regressed with the expansion of violent repression of demonstrations under SCAF’s rule. However, they were unable to overcome this long-standing taboo. The threat of military trials make the coverage of topics related to the military a tricky one. This did not obstruct the coverage of abuses by security when reflected in a powerful image.

Some powerful images of abuses were captured and disseminated by traditional media, mainly the photo widely shared of a woman being stripped of her clothing by security officers during a demonstration (a photo taken by *al-Masry al-Yom*)⁸⁰ and the TV footage of a civilian dragged naked through the streets of Cairo by police (taken by al-Hayat TV network).⁸¹

79. In March 2011, 18 female demonstrators were arrested during protests in Tahrir Square. After being transferred to a military facility, seven women were reportedly subjected to a virginity test by a military physician who was declared innocent later by the judiciary.

80. See the following YouTube clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFFyKvSZqrY>

81. BBC, “Cairo police beating: Victim Hamada Saber blames police,” 3 February 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21314782>

Muslim Brotherhood-Dominated State Media?

Morsi's rule witnessed an unprecedented wave of legal cases against journalists in the context of a hostile relationship between the so-called liberal private media and the new Brotherhood government. It also witnessed a high level of diversification of viewpoints in state media platforms.

The alleged attempt of the Brotherhood rule to dominate state media, (*akhwanat el iilam*, or "Brotherhoodisation" of media) became a major topic of debate on state media.⁸² It was seen as a part of the power struggle between the bloated civil servant apparatus, the so called "deep state," and the alleged attempts of the Islamic new rulers to control the state institutions in order to implement their conservative policies.⁸³

The Brotherhood government resorted to the arsenal of legal repressive texts that prevailed under the Mubarak regime to intimidate critical voices.⁸⁴ Most of these cases were based on legal provisions that criminalised insulting the president or religion, triggered by notifications from civil parties, mostly lawyers with Islamic background. There were around 30 legal cases against media staff and writers during the first eight months of Morsi's rule, according to a report by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information.⁸⁵

82. *Ahram Online*, Egypt "TV presenters march on Tahrir to protest Islamist media 'domination,'" 9 December 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/60149/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-TV-presenters-march-on-Tahrir-to-protest-Isl.aspx>

83. B. Momani, "In Egypt, 'deep state' vs. 'Brotherhoodization,'" *Brookings*, 21 August 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/08/21-egypt-brotherhood-momani#>

84. Committee to Protect Journalists, "Egypt steps up campaign against critical media," 3 January 2013, <http://cpj.org/2013/01/egypt-steps-up-campaign-against-critical-media.php>

85. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, *The crime of insulting the president, a crime of an authoritarian regime*, 20 January 2013, <http://www.anhri.net/en/?p=10908>

Asked about the wave of legal pursuits against journalists, the former Minister of Information under the Brotherhood government argued these are legal practices:

*“The law allows any citizen to resort to legal cases against expressions of defamation targeting the president given that he is representing them and they elected him. This is our law. The president did not intervene personally against any journalist. Most importantly, no journalist has been imprisoned under these cases.”*⁸⁶

An important progressive step was the decision of Morsi to ban pre-trial detention measures for journalists charged with press-related offenses, after a journalist was detained pending trial in charges of insulting the President.⁸⁷ However, the judicial summons triggered by complaints from citizens overshadowed this important development. According to the process, a journalist subject to investigation could be referred to trial before a tribunal with the possible imposition of prison sentence. The Journalists Syndicate is asking for the limitation of the right to submit a claim in defamation cases to the person(s) who is (are) subject of the alleged insult.

The alleged attempt of the Muslim Brotherhood to dominate state media was targeting the manipulation of both the media content and the appointment of a new leadership for state media.⁸⁸

After abolishing the Ministry of Information, a military officer was assigned with overseeing the state radio and TV apparatus, thus sparking the rage of Maspero journalists.⁸⁹ This was followed by the appointment of media

86. Interview with author, June 2012.

87. Freedom House, “New Press Law Enacted as Media Crackdown Continues,” 2012, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/new-press-law-enacted-media-crackdown-continues>

88. F. Elshhati, “As Cairo undergoes democratic transition, media remains at center of struggle for control,” International Press Institute, 12 September 2012, <http://www.freemedia.at/home/singleview/article/as-cairo-undergoes-democratic-transition-media-remains-at-center-of-struggle-for-control.html>

89. N.H. Rashwan, “Egypt’s state media: Obstacles on the road to freedom of speech.” *Ahram Online*, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/4/17790/Egypt/Media/Egyptys-state-media-Obstacles-on-the-road-to-freedom.aspx>

professor Sami al-Sherif as head of the TV and Radio Union.⁹⁰ The latter had to resign after an internal revolt of staff against him. The interim authorities resorted to re-instating the Ministry of Information, nominating a former military correspondent followed by a military general to oversee state broadcasters.

According to Somaya al-Shinnawy of Egyptian TV and radio, “*any change in leadership is irrelevant. All the second and third rank managers inside Maspero are known to be members of the Mubarak regime’s party.*” For this journalist, who was investigated before a military court for her participation in sits-in within the state TV premises, “*the new appointed editors were simply a replication of those who were removed.*”⁹¹ She added “*staff considered themselves to be slaves of any ruling regime. They don’t need any direct instructions. They will serve the regime as part of their identity.*”⁹²

The Brotherhood government resorted to the prerogatives of the old regime in appointing high ranking officials inside state media outlets sympathetic with them, mostly from the existing staff. The lack of a long standing “loyalty” among staff to the Brotherhood, especially in mid to lower ranking positions, made the operation of content control by the new government a thorny process.

Research findings show that the reaction of media staff to alleged attempts to manipulate and control the production of state media can be categorised into three groups: the first group of journalists simply shifted their positions from loyalty to the old regime to flattering the new regime for fear of retaliation and professional ambition. The second group was formed from media staff lobbying for an improvement to their working conditions regardless of the political agenda of the current government. Finally, the third group repre-

90. *Asharq al-Awsat*, A media professor appointed head of Egyptian TV and Radio (Arabic), 4 March 2011, <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=610924&issue=11784#.UsAW386Gm9h>

91. Interview with author, March 2013.

92. *Ibid.*

sented the few pockets of resistance among journalists who were lobbying for editorial independence from political power. However, this quest for editorial independence was not channeled into professional structures and was frequently translated into a chaotic expression of personal views and beliefs in support of the “revolution.”

According to *al-Ahram* journalist Khaled Sarjani, the focus of the Brotherhood government was to build new mid-management leadership inside state media although this was not a straightforward process.⁹³ According to the former Minister of Information under the Brotherhood, Maspero filled 160 mid-management positions⁹⁴ using a new system of competitions. This hiring process, which was not based on clear criteria, was portrayed by some journalists interviewed as a mere formality to legitimise the appointment of the new leadership.

If the appointment of new leadership is characterised as a relatively direct process, then control over media content was much more complicated.

The openness of the media sector to dissident voices in the immediate aftermath of the revolution was more noticeable in state media more than private media. This was reflected in the diversification of opinion pieces in state newspapers, a timid diversification of news sources and the opening of TV debate platforms for critical voices. The trend regressed gradually with the complication of the political struggle.

Although strongly denied by the management of these state media outlets, journalists talked about a trend to lower the tone of criticism in state media by limiting the representation of radical and critical voices. There were speculations about unwritten⁹⁵ black-lists for personas non grata, agreed upon and

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. Journalists have to ask for the approval of editors before inviting guests. There was an understanding, according to journalists interviewed, about excluding guests known for voicing radical opinions.

applied by journalists in their choices of programmes' guests. The allegations about blacklists are strongly denied by the former Minister of Information and the head of the state TV news department. The latter nevertheless does not hide his preferences for *“moderate voices which aim to build the nation and not to destroy it.”*⁹⁶

Asked about the alleged blacklists of guests, the head of the news department Ibrahim Sayyad said *“if a guest is employing obscene expressions and using our platform to settle personal accounts, he cannot be a regular guest with us. I asked the staff to invite the wise people and the moderate voices; those who have constructive opinions that unite and not divide.”*⁹⁷

While there are no clear criteria for the definition of the so-called “moderate voices,” the staff members have interpreted it in their daily practices and thus tend to avoid inviting “trouble makers.” An example is given by an editor in the state TV news department who spoke on condition of anonymity: *“I interviewed by phone a revolutionary leader known to be vocal against the Muslim Brotherhood. The director of programmes was angry and asked me to choose a softer voice. I asked him to provide me with a list of unwanted guests. He will never put it on paper.”*⁹⁸

According to the journalist of the state TV Somaya al-Shinnawy, *“Staff are reluctant to invite radical voices for fear of retaliation. Under the military council, there was debate inside the TV if we can host (the former liberal candidate for presidential elections) Mohamed el-Baradei. During the election campaigns, all candidates were more or less represented. After the elections, some main political leaders were absent.”*⁹⁹

The same trend of exclusion of vocal critical voices is witnessed in the print sector. After having allowed a noticeable openness in opinion pages in the

96. Interview with author, March 2013.

97. Ibid.

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid.

first months after the revolution, this margin of freedom was again narrowed with decisions to ban articles and writers highly critical of the Brotherhood.

A report by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information counted 28 cases of abuses and forms of retaliation against journalists and staff during the Brotherhood mandate in Maspero.

These intimidations ranged from referral to the Public Prosecution and administrative investigations to arbitrary salary deductions. It included suspension from work, prohibition of access to the workplace, cessation of a programme or change of its identity among other sanctions.

The report¹⁰⁰ cites “mistakes” leading the imposition of these sanctions such as the participation in internal protests, expression of opposition against the regime, expression of critical opinions towards the management of the institution and repetition of revolutionary slogans during programmes.

Asked about this wave of intimidation, the Minister of Information of the Brotherhood government said;

*“In any media system, journalists and staff can be subject to investigation when they commit professional mistakes. A presenter for example praised a guest while he was expressing insults. This is not professional. Will this be accepted in western media?”*¹⁰¹

The continuous increase in financial incentives for journalists exacerbated the financial crisis of state media. The tough competition from the private sector and the acute financial crisis reduced the state TV to poor programming unable to stir the appetite of advertising agents.

According to the former Minister of Information Abdel Makssoud, “*the staff salaries were raised after the revolution by 400 percent. I managed to cut these*

100. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, *Maspero in the reign of the first elected President: Violations and undesired reforms*.

101. Interview with author, March 2013.

expenses gradually and by enforcing the professional bands that fix clearly the incentives for staff. Some of the staff are earning incentives while they are not even working."¹⁰²

For the head of the news department, the problem was a lack of discipline; journalists tended to express the newfound liberty in chaos. El-Sayyad said:

*"We are working for setting editorial guidelines and unifying the use of expressions in storytelling. For example, we cannot report on trouble makers while using the word of +demonstrators+, they are in reality trouble makers."*¹⁰³

Several journalists interviewed spoke of directives from the management to use the expression "trouble makers" in their reporting on demonstrations.

On the other hand, the internal resistance of state journalists against alleged attempts of content control is frequently expressed in a chaotic way in which the defining line between news and views is blurred.

Take the example of sanctions taken against presenter Hala Fahmy for presenting an episode of her show on state TV ('The Conscience') in which she was carrying a shroud in a symbolic gesture to express the "death" of the Egyptian state.¹⁰⁴ The excessive personalisation of this internal opposition by media presenters/ stars hindered the institution of an in-depth and sustained debate about professional editorial standards that should govern the practices of state media.

According to Soha el-Naqqash, an anchor of State Nile TV, "*the problem with some of the opposing voices inside state media that they don't know how to criticise without expressing explosive personal views*".

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid.

104. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, *Maspero in the reign of the first elected President: Violations and undesired reforms*.

Post-Brotherhood: State Media at the Service of the “People”

Diversity of voices, fair representation and professional standards were a concern for state journalists under Brotherhood rule. Now, the popularly backed military coup has been accompanied by an orchestrated media campaign to glorify the military. This appears to have plunged state media back into its past traditions of echoing the regime’s discourse and restricting its representation of the opposition to negative reporting.

Both state and private media are embracing a propagandist tabloid style and narratives demonising opposing voices, going to the extent of smear campaigns against critical opinions. Many examples will be given later in this paper. They are also expressed in a national campaign where songs chanting the glory of the army are repeatedly played on national media.¹⁰⁵ This chorus of nationalistic anthems flooding the media spread a strong message of exclusion of Brotherhood supporters, representing them as “evil,” “anti-Islamic” and “anti-national,” among other negative labels.¹⁰⁶

According to a BBC Monitoring officer following Egyptian TV channels broadcast immediately after the military coup:

“The state media and the private media instantly moved to supporting the army. They reacted on the spot to the military council statement, they supported it, they cheered it and adopted an ultra-nationalist tone...I haven’t seen or heard any pro-Muslim Brotherhood voice on any of these channels since 3 July.”¹⁰⁷

105. See a video clip here for a patriotic song hailing Gen. Sisi, , http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ETI-mMFAUU

106. The following songs state: “They are not our kids/ Those who lost hope and were bought by evil”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=op4YPquQ1hA>; see also the following song which states “We are a nation and they are another nation/ we have a God and they have another God”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQrwXE-RINQ>

107. Y. Knell, “Egypt crisis: A challenge for TV channels,” BBC, 9 August 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23635879>

After Morsi, a similar wave of internal revolts against editors accused of being close to the Brotherhood swamped state media newsrooms. In some of these newsrooms, staff agreed to the election of an internal committee that would be responsible for overseeing the production of editorial policies independently from the management. Yet, this remains a limited initiative. An entirely new slew of editors-in-chief were appointed lately by the new Supreme Press Council.

Well-known columnists who used to praise the Muslim Brotherhood regime shifted to praising the military. Immediately after Morsi's ousting, the state press was flooded with stories carrying all kind of accusations and conspiracy theories against the Brotherhood leadership, mostly based on "security sources" and "informed sources."

During the clampdown on the Brotherhood camps in Cairo the focus of state media, TV and press was to demonstrate the alleged arms used by the demonstrators against the security forces, the attacks against governmental buildings and churches and the active role of security forces in combating "terrorism" targeting the Egyptian state and people.

The state press is striving to play its traditional role as the main media source of exclusive information provided by the security forces. However, private media is also adopting this role. The anti-Brotherhood opposition during Morsi's rule was spearheaded by private media, especially TV stations.

Khaled al-Sarjani of *al-Ahram* said that the military is now in favor of private media:

*"The trust of the military in state press is not solid after the editors of this press leaned with the Muslim Brotherhood. They prefer to use private media as a channel for their information."*¹⁰⁸

108. Interview with author, September 2013.

The counter narratives are ignored in Egyptian state and private media alike, according to al-Sarjani from *al-Ahram*:

*“The view of the Muslim Brotherhood from the latest developments is not expressed. There are only a few signs expressed within the storytelling of events while the focus is on the governmental communiqués.”*¹⁰⁹

State media does not allow any criticism of the military even when it is expressed by a third party, according to Somaia el-Shinnawi, a journalist from state TV:

*“We had heated debates after editors decided not to air news of a communiqué by al-Qaeda chief slamming the Egyptian army. We told them it is not possible to ignore such news”*¹¹⁰

She said that there are daily directives from management on what is not allowed to be aired in programmes and news bulletins.

Issam Said, a talk show host of a pro-revolutionary programme aired on a regional state TV station talks about a few pockets of diversity within the monotone and unilateral coverage of the state media apparatus:

*“The focus is on national broadcasters and TV news bulletins. They tolerate critical expressions in few programmes with limited impact while the general service is propagandist for the regime, any regime, as it had always been in state media.”*¹¹¹

Asked about the coverage by the state TV and radio of dramatic events that followed Morsi’s overthrow, the newly appointed head of the state TV and Radio Union Issam el-Amir is not apologetic:

“There is a great hostility from the Egyptian people against the Muslim Brotherhood. The streets’ anger against them is overwhelming. Some of our

109. Interview with author, September 2013.

110. Ibid.

111. Ibid.

viewers are expressing opinions such as +burn them all+. I asked presenters not to tolerate these expressions...we are the reflection of the streets' pulse and people's will. If we expressed views against people, people will remove us as they removed powerful presidents. We cannot go against people's will."

But aren't the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and other critical voices part of the Egyptian people? Issam el-Amir says that depends on their political status:

"We will wait for their new revolution. If they will manage to go to the streets by the millions to overthrow the current regime, they will be the powerful."¹¹²

112. Interview with author, September 2013.

Private Media: Independent Media?

Private Media: Diversifying the Storytelling

The Egyptian press was in essence private until it was nationalised by Nasser. The partisan press, allowed in the late seventies with the re-introduction of political plurality in the country, managed to break the state monopoly over media. The private press with foreign licences flourished as a way to circumvent the tough restrictions on granting national licences. The Egyptian independent press with local licences witnessed a pioneer experience with *al-Dustour* publication. Published first as a weekly and later transformed into a daily, *al-Dustour* was the main target of the regime's pressure. It contributed to relaxing the media discourse by the use of colloquial Egyptian Arabic as well as the caricature as a tool to express criticism. It provided a different press model as a departure from the rigid formats of the state press.

The newspaper *el-Masri el-Yom* (2004) represented a new experience for Egyptian media by breaking the state monopoly over news, according to the newspaper's first editor-in-chief Anwar Hawari:

*"We provided Egyptian audiences with a newsy output shifting the focus from the traditional centres of interest (government, president...) to social actors which are neglected by state media such as universities, civil society groups, the church... We were not interested in competing with state media over the official news."*¹¹³

113. Interview with author, June 2012.

These trends were consolidated with the launch of a competing project, *Ashourouq* newspaper, which adopted an elitist way of providing analytical news services.

The independent media was able, to a certain extent, to challenge the rigid discourse carried out by state media without breaching established taboos, especially the person of the president and the military. It was accused of being manipulated by the regime as a tool to vent popular anger without calling for radical change. In the end, this thesis proved inaccurate. “*Before Tahrir Square demonstrations, the regime was already under siege from independent media,*” claims Hawari.¹¹⁴

The solid link between the interests of these businessmen and the regime’s policies allowed a limited margin for independent media according to Mohamed Radwan, an editor of *el-Masri el-Yom*:

*“We used to push the boundaries and to back off when we were faced by strong pressure. Sometimes the pressure on the owner of the newspaper pushed him to interfere to lower the tone of the coverage. We were pushing the limits as far as we were not met with tough reaction from the regime. We finally managed to expand the margin of criticism to the extent of openly criticising the plans for inheritance of presidency from Mubarak to his son Gamal.”*¹¹⁵

Although introducing an important element of diversity, the so-called independent press did not manage to define clear professional standards and editorial policies independently from the interference of the major shares owner, termed the “anchor investor.”¹¹⁶ According to Radwan, the latter could change editorial policy from one extreme to the next, rendering the media outlet a tool to further their interests:

“There is no legal framework establishing boards of trustees who will define editorial policies of these newspapers. The private press is treated as invest-

114. Ibid.

115. Ibid.

116. Rizk, N.E. and L. Atallah (2011), “Egypt’s Evolving Media Landscape: Access, Public Interest and Control.”

ment companies. However, we are not selling sugar; our product is contributing immensely to the formation of public opinion.”

The opening of the media market after the revolution witnessed the flourishing of dozens of new publications, most of which had limited operations and sustainability. Among the newcomers were *Tahrir* newspaper; *al-Watan* newspaper, considered as the platform for anti-Brotherhood opposition; and the Brotherhood’s *al Huriyya wal Adala*. Other Islamist-funded newspaper publications include *El Masreyon* and *Al Fattah*, both of which adhere to Salafi ideologies.

Broadcast Boom

Although the print sector witnessed a boom of new publications, it is the broadcast sector that fuelled the appetite of investors.

The opening up of the media sector in the last decade has seen the burgeoning of “media empires,” some of them are owned by businessmen known for being closely tied to the Mubarak regime, limiting the pseudo-diversity of the private sector and transforming it into an elite privilege. The oldest of these TV kingdoms is ‘Dream TV Network’ (2001) owned by the prominent businessman Ahmad Bahghat an investor in household, electronic appliances and real estate. Hassan Rateb’s *Al Mehwar* TV network, comprising six channels, can be considered the largest Egyptian-funded media investment. Rateb, a cement business tycoon, was one of the main funders of Mubarak electoral campaign in 2005. *Al Mehwar* was criticised for its anti-revolution stance and accused of incitement against demonstrators. Another prominent businessman in the media sector is Mohammed el-Amin. He owns the Cairo Broadcasting Channel (CBC), a new venture that was launched after the revolution with large media operations and audiences. El-Amin also owns *al-Watan* newspaper, and *al-Yom al Sabee* (“the seventh day”), a widely visited online news website. El-Amin’s financial investments in this sector are unclear.¹¹⁷

117. Ibid.

Al-Hayat TV network is considered one of the most popular networks in Egypt. Its main owner and chairman, el-Sayed Badawi, is the head of al-Wafd political party (opposition under the Mubarak regime) and a prominent businessman. Another important business tycoon investing in media is Nagib Sawiris who is known to have solid investments in telecommunications under the Mubarak regime. He co-owns the newspaper *Al Masri Al-Yom* with businessman Saleh Diab and had to sell out the liberal TV station ONTV after being accused by the Brotherhood government of tax evasion. Another important figure is Ibrahim El Muallem who owns the prominent publishing company Dar Ashourouq, *Ashourouq* and *Tahrir* newspapers. It is clear from the above that there are strong links between these pseudo-independent media outlets and the political and economic elites. The attempts to limit the interference of the powerful media owners in the editorial policies by setting internal charters or agreements are new initiatives whose efficiency needs to be proven.¹¹⁸

The short-lived Muslim Brotherhood rule witnessed the burgeoning of a number of pro-Islamic media outlets that claimed to be funded by businessmen entirely independent of the government. These religious channels were forbidden from tackling politics before the revolution and their programmes were frequently suspended by the government. However, the most prominent of these TV stations, the Brotherhood's "Misr25TV," was not able to attract viewership beyond the Brotherhood supporters. TV stations with Salafi affiliations flourished and had a large reach among their main supporters. The most prominent of these TV channels—al-Hafez, al-Omma and al-Nas—provided religious and political programmes, adopting an extremist view.¹¹⁹ They were abruptly shut down immediately after Morsi's removal.

118. The management of the online website el Yom al Sabee signed recently an agreement stipulating the separation between the ownership of the media outlet and its editorial team, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=1103229>

119. F. el Issawi, "In post-revolution Egypt, talk shows redefine the political landscape," *Foreign Policy*, 10 October 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/10/in_

The Liberal-Islamist Media War

The influential private broadcast media has pushed the boundaries of what is tolerated. This has shifted the media discourse from a monotone narration of the regime's policies to a somewhat more diversified one that allows some representation for dissident voices. The business interests of the wealthy owners of these media outlets did not hinder the development of this margin of freedom that was either extended or reduced depending on circumstances. After the January 25 Revolution, the divisions shifted from opposing the regime to a media war between two camps: the Islamic pro-Brotherhood camp and the liberal anti-Brotherhood camp. While the so-called liberal media claimed to be under attack with attempts to silence its voice,¹²⁰ the new regime accused them of spreading lies and fuelling popular anger, calling for the “purification” of the media community. The most prominent example of this “war” was a frequent Salafi-led siege of the media production city accompanied by attacks and intimidation against media staff and their guests.¹²¹ They were calling for purging the media of what they consider as Mubarak regime remnants. The tension between the two camps was furthered by criticism against liberal media coming from high-ranking officials in the regime, among them Morsi himself.¹²²

The Islamic-oriented TV stations and press were the spearhead of this war against liberal media and politicians. An example is Khaled Abdallah's Al-Nas TV channel—known for its campaigns against secular political figures and the Coptic Christian minority. In an episode of his talk show, Abdallah threatened to behead a Christian viewer who sent him an email

120. *Al-Rasub*, “12 Newspapers And 5 Tv channels strike For freedom of expression,” 4 December 2012. <http://www.alrasub.com/12-newspapers-and-5-tv-channels-strike-for-freedom-of-expression>

121. *Egypt Independent*, “Jihad organization calls for new siege of media production city,” 8 January 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/jihad-organization-calls-new-siege-media-production-city>

122. See the following clip on YouTube in which Morsi accuses media of corruption <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlxMOeajYGs>

insulting Islam. He denied that his programme was guilty of fuelling hatred between Muslims and Copts:

*“We are merely demonstrating the mistakes committed by Copts. When we commit similar mistakes, we are labelled extremists; but when they do so, their actions are just dismissed as simple mistakes.”*¹²³

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the ‘liberal’ media¹²⁴ launched sustained campaigns against what they viewed as the ineptitude of the Islamic government and its questionable links with foreign regimes. Talk shows became the platforms for criticising government policies and decisions. The worsening socio-economic situation in the country sparked fury against the Islamic government.¹²⁵

However the alleged plans to sell or rent out Egyptian historical and cultural symbols, part of a widespread discourse disseminated by liberal media, also acted as a powerful tool to fuel anger against the Brotherhood rule. These alleged plans were never fully investigated by media.

For Magdi al-Gallad, the editor-in-chief of *al-Watan* newspaper, presumably close to the military institution, it was not possible for liberal media to adopt neutrality.

He said: *“this is a battle we did not choose. We were portrayed as evils: The spiritual leader of the Brotherhood called us the media of shame, the newspaper’s offices were burned ...”*¹²⁶

123. Interview with author, June 2012.

124. They usually define their identity as non-religious or non-Islamic but not necessarily liberal.

125. See the following clip of a talk show episode in which the presenter is slamming alleged governmental plans to rent out the pyramids <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFV45qcKocc>

126. Interview with author, March 2013.

Beyond lobbying for views, the publication of “confidential” documents is a powerful tool frequently used by national media in smear campaigns. *Al-Watan*, known for mastering this game, had published various allegedly leaked documents, such as suspicious bank accounts for senior figures in the Brotherhood leadership or tax evasion for business projects owned by them. “We published the full details and there was no reaction from the Brotherhood because they knew that our documents are not false,”¹²⁷ said Magdi al-Gallad, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, stressing that these documents were leaked from different sources including the military.

If the publication of leaked documents is not specific to the Egyptian media, the frequent use of these documents, with no independent channels to verify their content, exacerbated the political manipulation of media platforms. The fact that these documents are amplified, being re-published by news websites, the press and social media pages as well as being debated on talk show platforms, makes them a powerful political tool.

One of the major critical platforms against the Brotherhood government was comedian Bassem Youssef’s satirical programme, ‘el Bernameg.’ Youssef’s programme frequently ridiculed the government with direct criticism of these alleged plans to sell off national interests for the sake of regional connections, especially with Qatar.¹²⁸

One episode of the programme was aired post-Morsi with mild criticism of the powerful General Sisi. The channel (CBC) issued an apology statement announcing the suspension of the satirical programme. The program is now back, broadcast by the privately owned pan-Arab station MBC Masr.

There has also been a trend towards investment in news media as a business, rather than simply for influence. These media projects rely on the advertising

127. Ibid.

128. See the following clip on YouTube in which the comedian is ridiculing the connections between the Brotherhood government and Doha in a song which became a national hit, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpDQNoshDK0>

revenue despite the precarious conditions of this market. The sustainability of these projects is strongly linked to the success of agencies set up to attract advertising revenue, some of which monopolise large shares of the market and frequently intervene in the editorial policies.

According to Amer al-Kahki, the head of networks of an-Nahar TV stations, *“our project is based on a feasibility study and it needs three to four years to achieve self-sufficiency.”*¹²⁹ Asked about the political identity of the network, he stressed *“we don’t have any political affiliation. Our identity is that we are a business project and the owners have previous experience in media and in advertisement. Our aim is simply to inform and to entertain.”*¹³⁰

The important influence of this media platform fuelled rumours about fierce battles over the control of this market between businessmen from the two belligerent camps of Islamists and liberals for political purposes.¹³¹

According to the Chairman of an-Nahar TV stations Walid Moustafa, the lack of transparency on media projects’ finances makes investigating these claims difficult:

*“Regardless of the source of funding which is not possible to be truly transparent, the most important matter is to define and implement clear rules and criteria for the production itself. This is not possible yet.”*¹³²

129. Ibid.

130. Ibid.

131. A.S Hteita, “Controversy over political funding of satellite channels in Egypt” (Arabic), *Asharq al-Awsat*, 10 January 2013, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=37&article=731877&issueno=12613#.UsHMJ86Gm9g>

132. Interview with author, March 2013.

Post-Brotherhood Rule: From Independent to Official Media?

After Morsi was overthrown, an unprecedented wave of anti-media repression followed. The liberal media transformed itself into a trumpet for the military, portraying the military take-over as a national operation to rescue the country from the Brotherhood, labelled a secret terrorist group.

The so-called independent media was a pioneer in introducing a diversity of voices in national media. However, the propagandist style adopted by the independent media post Morsi's removal has nullified the difference between state and private. In doing so, the private media has lost its main *raison d'être*, that of providing different and diversified media narratives. Instead of slowly pushing the boundaries, as it used to do under Mubarak, this media sector is now reduced to blunt propaganda for the regime. The exclusion of dissenting voices from traditional private media gives social media platforms again the primacy in allowing diversity beyond the dominant narratives of "the army and the people against terrorism."

Immediately post-Morsi, the authorities launched a large campaign of repression against the media. The police raided and shut down four Islamic stations: the Brotherhood's Misr25 and three pro-Morsi Islamist stations (Al-Hafez, Al-Nas, Al-Rahma). Al-Jazeera Mubashar Misr, a Cairo-based al-Jazeera affiliate, was shut down by a judicial ruling after its offices were raided and some of its staff members detained and deported.¹³³ The Qatari channel filed a legal case against the Egyptian authorities, accusing them of detaining its staff, shutting down its offices and attempting to jam its broadcast signal.¹³⁴

133. Committee to Protect Journalists, "Al-Jazeera station raided, 3 others shut in Egypt," 3 July 2013, <http://www.cpj.org/2013/07/al-jazeera-raided-3-others-shut-egypt.php>

134. *BBC Arabic* "Al-Jazeera accuses the Egyptian authorities of arbitrary detaining its journalists and jamming its broadcast signal," 12 September 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2013/09/130912_egypt_aljazeera_legal_actions.shtml

The judicial ruling accused the channel and four other channels satellite channels of threatening national security and social peace.¹³⁵ Reporters Without Borders criticised the ruling as a political decision that questioned the independence of the judiciary system.¹³⁶

This repression campaign is targeting media considered to be sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood or critical of the government's decisions and policies. The campaign has included journalists' arrests, temporary detention of media staff, confiscation of production equipment, and the blockage of pan-Arab TV channels by the Egyptian satellite operator Nilesat.

According to Reporters without Borders, more than 10 journalists have been detained (as of September 2013) without being brought to trial. Their detention is renewed every 15 days, the legal limit for administrative detention.¹³⁷ The journalist of *al-Masry al Yom* newspaper, Ahmed Abu Deraa, was detained on account of his coverage of the military operations against terrorism in North Sinai, mainly the shelling the two villages by the Egyptian military forces. The journalist was referred to the military prosecution that accused him of publishing false news about the Egyptian army. He was recently jailed and sentenced to a suspended sentence of six months.¹³⁸ The young Egyptian reporter Ahmed Samir Assem was killed by a sniper outside the Republic Guard building in Cairo while he was taking pictures of the building.¹³⁹

135. The Arabic Network of Human Rights Information, "Egypt: ANHRI rejects the closure of media outlets," 3 September 2013, <http://www.anhri.net/en/?p=13539>

136. Reporters Without Borders, "Freedom of information falls prey to military crackdown."

137. Ibid

138. Ibid

139. *The Independent*, "Video: Shocking footage appears to capture moment Egyptian filmed his own death through his lens," 10 July 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/video-shocking-footage-appears-to-capture-moment-egyptian-filmed-his-own-death-through-his-lens-8700519.html>

Another journalist, a provincial bureau chief of *Al-Ahram* state newspaper, was killed by security forces after they opened fire on a car they thought had escaped from a checkpoint during the night time curfew.¹⁴⁰

Although this kind of pressure has been frequently used by all regimes, it has become more systematic since the military take-over. This is accompanied by a hostile discourse towards the foreign press, which is accused of siding with the Brotherhood protesters. Many representatives of foreign media were attacked or killed while they covered the dispersion of pro-Morsi protesters by the military forces. Many were detained or arrested, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) Deputy Director Robert Mahoney:

*“Through a series of arrests, prosecutions, assaults and censorship, the Egyptian government has made one thing crystal clear to journalists: Deviate from the official narrative at your own risk. The authorities must stop this attempt at quashing independent and critical reporting.”*¹⁴¹

Private media, especially TV stations, have turned out to be the favoured channels for spreading the military’s message. They strongly echo the narrative of the authorities, mainly focusing on an eminent national threat that necessitates extraordinary measures and calling for endorsing all governmental policies as a “patriotic duty”.

Albert Shafic, the director of ONTV private TV, long perceived as the voice of the revolutionary, argues in defense of the media unified voice: *“We are in a state of war against terrorism. We have to take a side, can we logically give platform to terrorism?”*

140. *Al Jazeera*, “Egyptian journalist shot dead after curfew,” 19 August 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/08/201381922624519858.html>

141. Committee to Protect Journalists, “Press harassed amid heightened tension in Egypt,” 13 September 2013, <http://www.cpj.org/2013/09/amid-heightened-tension-in-egypt-press-harassed.php>

ONTV station along with others barely showed the footage of dead bodies of the pro-Morsi supporters in the Rabea al-Adawiyya protest site. Shafic argues:

“We showed these bodies but we also showed other bodies, those of opponents killed by the Muslim Brotherhood and buried within the same site. We filmed them while they were transporting these bodies.”

Asked about how he got the footage and how he could verify its authenticity, he responded ... *“We had a camera there.”*¹⁴²

The coverage by private media of the crackdown of Brotherhood protesters played down the magnitude of mass killings decried by human rights watchdogs, by widely propagating conflicting narratives. Some of these stories include those of bodies already at the protest site prior to the security clamp-down and arms confiscated from within the sit-in premises. It is simply impossible to verify all these claims with the absence of transparency from the government and the political alignment of national media.¹⁴³

Ashourouq newspaper managed to provide different coverage from the dominant media discourse by allowing a larger margin of expression to critical voices.¹⁴⁴ According to the newspaper executive editor-in-chief Imad Hussein, the unlimited freedom that used to tolerate unfounded criticism under the Brotherhood rule cannot be allowed under the current particular conditions:

142. Interview with author, September 2013.

143. H. Mcrobie, “From Morsi to Sisi: The evolution of targeting journalists in Egypt,” *Open Democracy*, 18 August 2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/heather-mcrobie/from-morsi-to-sisi-evolution-of-targeting-journalists-in-egypt>

144. This did not stop the management of the newspaper from banning the publication of an article considered to be highly critical. See article http://www.akhbarak.net/articles/13099549-%C2%AB%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86%C2%BB%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%83%D8%B1_%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B9_%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84_%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84_

“We started verifying the content of articles in order to make sure that there is no defamation that could bring legal retaliation against us. It is hard to be balanced. The first party in this struggle, the army, is known and we can publish its statements—but the second party is unknown. I cannot publish communiqués of dodgy groups; I don’t want to give them a platform.”

For the executive editor-in-chief of *Ashourouq*, the safety net to avoid any retaliation is to report stories such as the events in Sinai based on declared sources, whether it is the army or the people in the area:

“I only publish statements of the army and residents of these areas or state employees there when they declare their names.”¹⁴⁵

Most journalists interviewed said they are hostage to a strong populist mood in the streets that expresses rejection of the Brotherhood. Yet, to what extent has the media contributed to exacerbating these populist trends? The *al-Masry al-Yom* editor-in-chief, Yasser Rizk, known for being strongly anti-Brotherhood, said *“we were the spearhead of the battle to topple the Muslim Brotherhood by uncovering their failures. We did not create it. This was their reality.”*

Only few media voices are distinguishing themselves from this dominant discourse. However these few do not challenge it. This margin is mainly harboured by the independent press. Samir Ahmed, who writes opinion articles for *al-Masry al-Yom*, is one of these voices (he recently moved to *Ashourouq* newspaper). The young journalist explains, *“There is no direct dictate from the government. Journalists are practicing self-censorship.”*

After the Brotherhood overthrow, we witnessed a growing trend of publishing leaked documents provided by “sovereign sources,” “security sources” and sometimes openly citing the secret services.

These leaks became the new battlefield between the new regime and the embattled Brotherhood. A series of statements by General Sisi in which he

145. Interview to author, September 2013.

controversially calls for suppression of the media and personal immunity against prosecution were leaked but barely picked by the national media. On the other hand, the new regime is feeding national media with extensive leaked material discrediting not only the Brotherhood leadership but also revolutionary leaders who are mostly imprisoned for breaching the new protest law. These documents widely shared and discussed on media platforms are becoming the occasion for fierce defamation campaigns against opposing voices.¹⁴⁷

The fear of being singled out from this media orchestration limits the scope of critical voices among the community of journalists; the blurred identity of journalists and activists, as well as the understanding of journalists having a “patriotic duty” that should guide their practices, are contributing to lowering these voices.

Take the example of Soha Naqqash, a news anchor in the state TV (she recently moved to ONTV channel). With the first wave of bloody repressions against the pro-Morsi demonstrators, she posted a critical view distancing herself from the coverage of the state TV (which totally ignored the incident) on her Facebook page. The Facebook post was largely shared among journalists and used by the websites sympathetic to the Brotherhood. Naqqash had to give interviews the next day to explain that her critical view was purely professional and not related to any political support for the Brotherhood.

Soha explains, *“This was a professional call that no one wants to support.. When I tried to say to colleagues that the coverage could be different, I was simply silenced.”*¹⁴⁸

146. Interview with author, September 2013

147. *Al-Arabiya*, “Egypt prosecutor probes accusations that activists were ‘foreign funded,’” 8 September 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/09/08/-Egypt-Prosecutor-begins-probe-on-activists-for-foreign-funding-.html>

148. Interview with author, September 2013.

The media representing the Muslim Brotherhood that continue to operate under these conditions are limited to the online website of the Freedom and Justice newspaper and a restricted circulation of the paper.¹⁴⁹ According to Hazem Ghourab, the head of Misr 25 TV station that was lately closed, “*the communication of our message is mainly by direct contact with activists in demonstrations and via social media platforms which are becoming the main platform for us not only to communicate but also to uncover the wrongdoings and scandals of the military government.*”

For the head of the main media platform for the Brotherhood, now closed, the current media environment is a “*new nationalisation of media empowered by an implicit deal between the regime and the owners of private media*” leading to the replication of the unilateral media discourse that was prevailing under Nasser.¹⁵⁰

149. See the link to the website <http://fj-p.com/>

150. Interview with author, October 2013.

Media Values and Professionalism

In Egypt—What Does it Mean to be Professional?

As described by journalist and syndicate officer Gamal Fahmy, the Egyptian media post-revolution transformed into a free-for-all: a platform for freedom of expression of any and all opinions. Unlike other Arab media industries, the Egyptian media transition began in the last years of the Mubarak regime. The aim of this media relaxation was to absorb the growing tension resulting from the deterioration of the socio-economic conditions and limited political participation according to Fahmy:

*“We are the country that invented the expression of ‘democratic margin’. We lived in this margin of democracy for 34 years. The regime believed that this margin would never extend. This proved incorrect.”*¹⁵¹

However, this model of chaotic expression of opinions is not new for the Egyptian media which has seen it expressed in the sensational tabloid media. Under Mubarak, the tabloid style was limited to the opposition papers. The sensational reporting style became later the common media model especially under the Brotherhood. This trend was led by private media and copied by the state-owned media sector that acquired some bravery before retreating again to self-censorship. Some of the features of the tabloid media style are the “political clubs” introduced by talk show hosts and used as a platform for political lobbying. Talk shows replaced the weak political parties and acted as an influential platform to de-legitimise the political adversary.

151. Interview with author, June 2012.

The change of the political landscape post-revolution left both the private and state media in a state of confusion as to how they would define “media professionalism.” “*Media staff lost their compass,*” said Mohamed Khair, a freelance journalist and writer:

*“Under the former regime, the relationship between the political system and the media was clear and stable, whether it was positive or negative. This solid structure no longer existed.”*¹⁵²

This confusion is aggravated by the decline of the conventional sources (the official communiqué) with the growing role of social media platforms as an influential tool for feeding traditional media. It became usual for journalists in traditional media to publish stories according to posts in Facebook or twitter feeds and without taking the efforts to verify its content. The Journalists, meanwhile, are not able to develop investigative techniques independently from official statements. The combination of these elements leads to a story-telling model based mainly on rumours and unnamed sources. According to Khair “*the chaotic media scene is linked to the chaotic political scene after decades of stability.*”¹⁵³

With the changes in the political scene, the definition of reliable news-worthy information became opaque. Under the former regime, journalists’ understanding of news was solidly linked to the information provided by official communiqués. This narrative was challenged by private media, which extended it to the coverage of citizens’ everyday problems and opposition movements. However, this did not develop into solid investigative reporting traditions. The post-revolution phase with its extraordinary developments made the debate on professional standards a secondary issue for journalists and their editors.

Talk show host Mahmood Saad says reporting in this environment has become complex:

152. Interview with author, June 2012.

153. Ibid.

*“The official sources responsible for providing information for media are becoming limited. We have to contact different sources to be able to report on the story. For example, in reporting the story of a lawyer beaten in a police station, no statement was issued from an official source. Under the former (Mubarak) regime, we had at least official sources we could contact.”*¹⁵⁴

This is echoed by Manal el-Diftar, head of new services at CBC network, who says it was even more complex under the Brotherhood government:

*“The worst enemy of news is rumours. Most of the information we got from the government or the presidency is a denial of non-confirmed information reported by media. If we asked about official information to elucidate the story, we have no answer. We have to always deal with unfinished stories.”*¹⁵⁵

After the January 25 Revolution, the diversity of voices in media platforms extended tremendously. However, this trend for a fair representation of political actors is noticeable only in the coverage that does not generate tension between the two belligerent camps. The quest for relatively fair representation regresses when the coverage tackles a highly divisive topic leading to biased coverage in the name of “national” or “revolutionary” ideals.¹⁵⁶

Hazem Ghourab of the now-extinct Misr 25 TV station said the presidential elections were an example of this polarisation:

*“There is nothing called neutrality. This is a lie. There is a professional bias. In the second round of the presidential elections, I was biased to the candidate of the revolution (Morsi), in the name of patriotism.”*¹⁵⁷

154. Ibid.

155. Interview with the author, March 2013.

156. Cairo Institute for Human Right Studies, *Assessing Media Outlet Performance During The First Phase Of 2011 Egyptian parliamentary Election*, 2011, <http://www.cihrs.org/?p=347&lang=en>

157. Interview with the author, June 2012.

If the diversity of voices in media platforms extended noticeably after the January 25 Revolution, this important development did not lead to an inquisitive reporting style that went beyond the simple expression of opinions. Hani Shukrallah, the former editor-in-chief of al-Ahram online, (the English online news website of the state al-Ahram publishing house) believes that Egyptian media missed a golden opportunity to develop investigative reporting, leaving the field to social media:

*“Topics are endless such as torture in prisons or the killing of demonstrators; traditional media could expose all these cases. However, we don’t have the required media skills and media managements are not willing to invest time and money for this kind of reporting.”*¹⁵⁸

This “formal media freedom” of unprecedented media bravery during the short-lived Brotherhood government cannot amount to an established media freedom. It is not embedded in adequate professional and legal structures that would provide support for journalists to operate in a professional manner. According to Gamal Fahmy from the Journalists’ Syndicate:

*“National media was not able to benefit from the high ceiling of freedoms, professional capacities were gravely diminished under the Mubarak regime, media is unable to develop its own tools for professional advancement.”*¹⁵⁹

Social media has affected mainstream media by allowing a less hierarchical communication dynamics, forcing traditional media to follow the trend.¹⁶⁰ However, this impact is perceived by some traditional journalists as exacerbating the widespread confusion between information, lobbying and smear campaigns.

Abdallah Kamal, the former editor in chief of *Roz el Youssef* state newspaper, gives an example:

158. Ibid.

159. Ibid.

160. Khamis, S. & Vaughn, K. (2011), Cyberactivism in the Egyptian revolution: How civic engagement and citizen journalism tilted the balance. *Arab Media & Society*, issue 13, summer 2011: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=769>

*“I can publish a few lines in my Twitter account in the morning. These lines will be published by a low key online website and later discussed in talk shows. Important political institutions will be dragged to comment on it. But, at the start, the journalist who published my tweet did not take the effort to check the information.”*¹⁶¹

Kamal argues that this situation is leading to a naïve relationship between the media, the political sphere and public opinion.

After the popularly backed military coup, social media platforms regained their role as the provider of a diversity of views while traditional media returned to exercising self-censorship on its content, limiting itself to echoing the military discourse in reporting controversial developments. For instance, the management of the state issued directives to staff to verify guests have no sympathetic ideas with the Brotherhood immediately after the decision of the government to declare the Brotherhood a “terrorist organization” (25 December 2013)¹⁶²

This self-censorship is not imposed on journalists by fear of retaliation but rather adopted by journalists and enforced in their production as an expression of their leaning with the “state” against the “terrorists.” It is important to note that the government is not hiding its unease in dealing with critical media narratives, frequently calling media to stick to the story provided by official sources of highly important events.¹⁶³

161. Interview with author, June 2012.

162. *Sada el Balad*, “The state television accepts the directives of the government and labels the Brotherhood as terrorists”, 26 December 2013, <http://www.el-balad.com/761716>

163. *Ahram Online*, “Egypt’s interior ministry calls on media to only publish official info on bomb blast,” 6 September 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/80975/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt’s-interior-ministry-calls-on-media-to-only-p.aspx>; *Ahram Online*, “Coordination with military required to publish info on army: Spokesman,” 28 September 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/82724/Egypt/Politics-/Coordination-with-military-required-to-publish-inf.aspx>

Take the example of *al-Masry el-Yom* independent newspaper in the coverage of the military operations in Sinai. Mohamed Radwan, one of the editors of the newspaper, explains:

*“There is some blackout on information published on military operations. I don’t agree with it but I can understand its reasons, mainly the spread of terrorist operations against the army in Sinai. There is not enough information on civilians’ losses during these operations coming from the military. This is left for information provided by residents of these towns. We publish a few of these accounts but not that much, because we are with the state and against terrorism. Our policy is not to give much platform for accounts or statements against the army.”*¹⁶⁴

While the official communiqué is again the major source for news disseminated by traditional media, the narratives ranging out of this discourse are limited to minimal pro-Morsi demonstrations coverage, usually presented as fought back by “residents of the areas where it is occurring.” The coverage includes a few opinion articles/talk shows tackling critical topics such as the excessive use of force for security, torture in prisons and the deterioration of living conditions. However, these critical views constitute a variation in the current dominant media discourse without challenging it.

Such orchestration of the media is played down by Gamal Fahmy the Secretary General of the Journalists’ Syndicate, who describes it as “*an exceptional case which cannot last, mainly linked to the large popularity of the army as well as the quest of some of these journalists to gain popularity from leaning with the army.*”¹⁶⁵

Talk Shows: The Political Clubs

Talk show slots represent a major production in the Egyptian broadcast sector. Under the shaky and complex political transition, talk show moderators have become arbiters of public opinion and contributors to shaping

164. Interview with author, September 2013.

165. Ibid.

the political discourse.¹⁶⁶ When they assumed this role under the Mubarak regime, they became a main driving force in the battle between Islamists and liberals during the Brotherhood rule. Accused of fuelling political tension, these lengthy slots played a major role in the popularisation of information from the elite to the wider population, in a country where illiteracy rates are high¹⁶⁷ and TV represents the main provider of information.

The rise of these popular political TV shows started in the last years of the Mubarak regime. Their appearance coincided with the relative opening up of the political landscape, including the appearance of civil society opposition groups. Talk shows were able to tackle touchy topics without crossing established “red lines,” above all direct criticism of the President and his family.

One of the most popular of these shows was “*el Beit Beitak*”¹⁶⁸ (“My Home Is Your Home”), the flagship programme of state TV. It was launched as part of the attempt to reform state media in order to revamp the image of the regime in its latest years and in the face of growing deterioration of the state media. The programme tackled controversial issues without contravening strict taboos.¹⁶⁹ The private broadcast sector has also developed a niche for primetime talk shows.

After the January 25 Revolution, talk show hosts gained more courage, allowing their stars to challenge politicians directly on air in a departure from the flattering style usually adopted when interviewing politicians. A prominent example is the talk show episode in which Ahmed Shafik, appointed by Mubarak during the revolution to serve as Prime Minister, was severely

166. F. el Issawi, “In post-revolution Egypt, talk shows redefine the political landscape.”

167. According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), the total number of illiterate people aged 10 years or more has exceeded 16 million in 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/capmas-more-16-million-illiterate-people-egypt-2012>

168. See the following clip on YouTube on the show: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJQZA03nUAQ>

169. F. el Issawi, “In post-revolution Egypt, talk shows redefine the political landscape.”

challenged by prominent ONTV talk show hosts Reem Maged and Yosri Fouda.¹⁷⁰ The following day, Shafik announced his resignation.

The “hot” political scene of the post-revolution, with its fast-moving pace and extraordinary developments, transformed televised talk shows into a crucial media platform for covering and debating these developments—especially since news bulletins were limited. For decades, news services were a monopoly for state media. The monotone and unilateral content of these news bulletins covering mainly governmental activities made them unappealing to large audiences. Private stations are not allowed by their licences to provide news services. Under these conditions, talk shows developed news slots in which reporting news from different regions is mixed with the personal views and commentary of the presenter.

After the revolution, the deluge of talk shows and the fierce battle between presenters and channels over the hearts and minds of Egyptians confirmed the importance of these TV platforms as both forums for debate and news providers as well as main attraction for advertisement revenues.

During the rule of the Brotherhood, the talk show scene extended to new players; the religious preachers who used to be limited to religious content in their talk shows were granted the opportunity to talk politics. The preachers of Salafi TV stations were the most active in lobbying for Islamic political agendas. For instance, Khaled Abdullah,¹⁷¹ the prominent preacher of al-Nas TV station, believes that his show was instrumental in boosting the chances of Salafi candidates in parliamentary elections by openly calling his audience to vote for them.

The accentuated mentoring role of talk show hosts contributed to nurturing the “free for all” style of transitional Egyptian media. These televised shows

170. See the following clip on YouTube from the talk show: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jo61wpG_9i4

171. See the following clip on YouTube for one of the show’s episodes: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Nq3TzN1a4A>

which act as political platforms have limited structure and can be understood as a way to communicate the talk show host's thoughts and inclinations. They provide coaching for political leaders, attacking those who stand in the opposing camps and commending/advising those who belong to their own camp. These debates can extend on for hours, going beyond the usual format of the programme. The moderator is an active player in the debate expressing his/her views and frequently answering the questions that were meant to be addressed to the guest.

For talk show hosts, assuming neutrality could be understood as an act of treason. This freedom is a luxury they said they could not afford in the raging political battles under Brotherhood rule. When asked about his role in "guiding" public opinion, Mohmood Saad, one of the highest paid talk show hosts in Egypt, expresses his rejection of the objectivity requirement:

*"Some people prefer to offer an opinion implicitly. I choose to express my opinions clearly. As far as I'm concerned, I'm not a simple presenter. I'm a journalist."*¹⁷²

This activist role is also stressed by Tamer Amin, a prominent talk show host. For him, his role is not to report the news but to "make news, not just deliver it." In so doing, he believes he can "propose solutions to current problems, thus urging decision-makers to respond to it." He believes his audience is not ready for objectivity:

*"There is a difference between the public opinion in the West and that in Arab countries. Here, they need to be told what to think. They need guidance. I try not to express my opinion but I received phone calls from my audience asking me to give them advice."*¹⁷³

There is a common understanding among these media stars that the ideals of Western impartiality are incompatible with the nature of the Egyptian audiences and could constitute a barrier against the popularity of the talk

172. Interview with author, June 2012.

173. Ibid.

show host. This view is strongly refuted by Sherif Amer¹⁷⁴ who represents a different approach to moderating talk shows:

“I did not cry on air when Mubarak gave his emotional speech¹⁷⁵ before resignation. I did not celebrate when we was overthrown.” He adds *“I avoid indecent expressions although I tackle all topics. I monitor my discourse with rigour, I made no mistakes the regime, any regime, can use to blackmail me.”*

According to Amer, who had previous experience in Western media, the Mubarak regime use to blackmail prominent talk show hosts to push them not to tackle some topics in return for turning a blind eye to some suspicious business projects/deals. *“This is a dirty business, I don’t play this game,”*¹⁷⁶ he said.

The dubious relationships between these prominent talk show hosts and regimes are disclosed in frequent confessions by these stars about “deals” with politicians or military officers to blackout information or to disseminate rumours.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, there is a widespread accusation that talk show hosts gain a percentage of advertisement revenues broadcasted on their shows. All media owners and talk show hosts interviewed denied it. The popularity of these slots makes the time allocated for advertisement in some cases equivalent to the content of the programme itself.

Amer’s detached and sober style, considered “respectable” but not necessarily popular, constitutes a departure from the talk show scene in Egypt. On the

174. See an episode of Amer’s talk show al-Hayat el-Yom (Life Today), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfSPLeD40a0>

175. Mubarak addressed the Egyptian people stressing his achievements in serving the country. The speech was considered highly emotional and contributed to redress his image. The talk show host Mona Shazli cried on air after the speech ended. See the following YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHkVQYdCtNk>

176. Interview with author, March 2013.

177. See this YouTube video in which the talk show host Wael el Ibrachy talks about his decision not to air an interview with the Muslim Brotherhood spiritual leader with controversial information <http://www.alnaharegypt.com/t~148438>

other side of the spectrum is Rim Maged,¹⁷⁸ whose support for the revolution from day one turned her into a media star/activist. When the demonstrations grew, Maged left the studio for her “natural place”: Tahrir square. There, Maged supported demonstrators and gave direct interventions to international media.

She claims she can bring together the two different roles of talk show host and an activist serving a cause:

“I have struggled between my professional and human identities. Talk shows are a powerful weapon. I will not renounce this weapon in the service of my cause while others are still using it for the service of their causes.”¹⁷⁹

The popularity of talk show slots is making their hosts the sole decision-makers on their content and format. Most of these talk show hosts have their own production team and the management of the TV station has little say unless it is threatening the owners’ interests with the regime. The revenues from advertisement are consolidating the authority of these hosts, leading to an implicit struggle with the management in the absence of clearly defined editorial policies according to ‘an-Nahar TV’ chairman Walid Moustafa:

“The talk show host is responsible for what he is saying in his programme. It is very difficult to control him/her. On air, it is difficult for us to intervene. After the programme, we can discuss.”¹⁸⁰

Hassan Rateb, the major owner of al-Mehwar TV network, has his own way of “controlling” the content of the popular political talk shows in his TV station. He knows how to choose a “loyal” media team:

“I choose carefully my people, those who really care about our interests and that of the TV station. I have principles such as avoiding causing sectarian strife, or attacking the security forces...”¹⁸¹

178. Maged’s programme Baladna bil-Masri (Our Country in Egyptian) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3A83YCz8Hsg>

179. Interview with author, March 2013.

180. Ibid.

181. Ibid.

In the post-Morsi phase, prominent talk show hosts need no directives from their management. They are fully engaged in a unified voice that expresses loyalty to the new regime and attacks its opponents who are labelled as “terrorists,” “dangerous cells,” “gangs,” “mafia,” “anti-Islam,” “anti-Egyptians”¹⁸² etc. The impact of these talk show hosts on the political scene is to the extent of pressuring the government to take extreme repressive measures, expressing serious accusations and predicting crimes and assassinations. For instance, calls for labeling the Brotherhood as “terrorists” were orchestrated by several talk shows leading finally to a governmental decision declaring the group as “terrorist”.¹⁸³

According to Liliane Daoud, talk show host of ONTV, the political clubs are part of a mainstream media alignment with the new regime:

*“These talk shows are in tune with a general popular mood rejecting the Muslim Brotherhood. The fear of Islamists pushed people to a certain fascism, reflected in media as well. Some media figures are doing this out of fear from retaliation and others for sending a message to the military to express their loyalty...”*¹⁸⁴

Sherif Amer, the prominent talk show of al-Hayat TV station claims this reflects audience opinion:

*“The pressure on media moved from being exercised by the regime to being enforced by the society largely rejecting any representation of any Islamic voice. Every time I host a representative of an Islamic current in my programme, I receive extreme reactions such as we don’t want to see bears on TV.”*¹⁸⁵

182. See these YouTube videos in which talk show hosts express their emotions after the announcement of the removal of Morsi, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55W1sWs_7us

183. See YouTube video in which a talk show host urges the government to declare the Brotherhood a terrorist organization crying from the site of an explosion <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvBG1zbbfno>

184. Interview with author, September 2013.

185. Ibid.

He stresses that the “public mood” allows limited representation of dissenting voices, such as human rights activists, on media platforms. Radical critical voices are expressed narrowly and mostly from personalities who are outside the country hosted by these talk show platforms.

Conclusion

Under the Mubarak regime, the rules of the game were clear. Media content, especially that of state media, was mostly unilateral reporting on the activities of the regime. The outbreak of private media introduced diversity; dissident voices were already represented, albeit with limitation, in private media platforms, especially during the later years of the regime. With the political divide infiltrating media post-January 25, this tabloid style was extended to diverse media outlets aligned with either liberals or Islamists. The trend deepened after the Brotherhood government was expelled, with sensationalism becoming populism.

The post-January 25 Revolution phase created confusion in the media's long-standing traditions. The erosion of the old status quo in the relationship between media and politics did not lead to the edification of new clear dynamics, thereby leaving the media to struggle with the shaky and complex dilemmas of the political transition. When asked about their ability to influence the new political sphere post-revolution, most editors interviewed stressed they were overwhelmed with the fast and complex developments of the political transition to the extent of being hostage to politics.

However, the political alignment of the media elite in state and private media alike makes them unable and unwilling to define their role independently of political camps. The strong alignment, amplified following the military take-over, has transformed the role of media from a platform that contrasts views to a tool for delegitimising rivals, demonising them to the extent of portraying their physical eradication as a patriotic necessity.

The long-standing traditions of self-censorship exercised by journalists are the most troublesome handicap for the media. Journalists are compliant with the political sphere, not only because of fear of retaliation but also because of a will to satisfy what they consider to be a “patriotic duty.” The conflicting relation between the Brotherhood government and private media reflects the rejection of the Islamic government considered by this media as non patriotic, rather than the regression of the self-censorship traditions among journalists.

The first months post-revolution witnessed unprecedented journalistic courage to approach long-standing taboos, empowered by the environment of liberation brought about by the revolution. Consistent expressions of bravery—although in a chaotic manner—had a snowball effect which resulted in the challenging of some major established taboos, notably the sacred person of the President. The consistent criticism targeting Morsi from liberal media led to the fall of the reverential approach in dealing with the President, considered a sacred topic until very recently. The resurrection of self-censorship practices consolidating populist media trends represents a setback for the debate on reforming traditional national media. The media platforms which allow for a counter narrative are very limited and not able to challenge the dominant propagandist media discourse. Social media platforms are again taking the lead in representing diverse voices beyond the official discourse.

The rebirth of a free and professional Egyptian media can only be an internal process enabled by journalists’ shift of identity from messenger to investigator of the political sphere. However, this identity change will not be realistically possible without an enabling legal and institutional environment. The post-revolution developments witnessed by Egyptian traditional media are linked to the history of the Egyptian media industry as well as the extraordinary events of the political transition. Self-censorship habits are entrenched in the practices of Egyptian journalists with the pre-dominance of state media, a large employer for Egyptian journalists. For state media journalists, the perception of their role as servants of political masters did not change post-revolution, even though the debate on reforming state media was high on the agenda.

Private media did not introduce a radical change on story- telling in departure from state media, although it managed to diversify its news sources and extend its coverage of the Egyptian streets. The subordination of these media outlets to the interests of their funders puts in question the notion of independent media.

Post-revolution media reform was stalled by not only continuous political crises but also the lack of any meaningful reform of an extremely oppressive regulatory framework. The new draft constitution guarantees important rights for journalists yet allowing their imprisonment and their trial before military courts for press offenses. The crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood is accompanied by the revival of legal and institutional features of the police state, which threatens both the ideals of the revolution and democratic values. The regression of the vitality acquired by media platforms under the Brotherhood rule is associated with a general regression in rights and freedoms encouraged by a popular “mood” of sacrificing liberty in the name of national security.

The current strong resurrection of self-censorship practices reflected in a one-sided story orchestrated by a compliant media puts into question the future of media reform. The popularisation of such compliant media is not only hindering its ability to reform but also the entire democratisation process. It is therefore reasonable to state that a comprehensive media reform cannot not take place before the country’s return to a dynamic and pluralistic political process.

Appendix

From the eruption of the January 25 Revolution to the date of the publication of this report, the Egyptian transition has witnessed the following major phases:

- ▶ **Millions-strong demonstrations lead to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011. After Mubarak steps down, the military takes over, dissolving parliament and suspending the constitution.**
- ▶ **The rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) witnesses violence and repression of protesters decrying military rule. An interim Constitution is proclaimed (23 March 2011).**
- ▶ **The parliamentary elections organised over a period of three months (November 2011–February 2012) lead to the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood, winning nearly half the seats of the lower house. Ultra conservative Salafis win another quarter of votes. In the upper house, Islamists win nearly 90 percent of the seats.**
- ▶ **The presidential elections see a high voter turnout (16/17 June 2012) and a fierce battle is fought between the top two candidates in the electoral runoff: the Brotherhood's Morsi and Ahmed Shafiq, the last prime minister under Mubarak. Morsi wins the elections with 51.7 percent of the vote.**

- ▶ President Morsi issues a constitutional declaration granting himself far-reaching powers. The declaration (22 November 2012)¹⁸⁶ gives his decisions immunity from judicial review and bars the courts from dissolving the constituent assembly and the upper house of parliament. The move sparks large popular dissent.
- ▶ Although members of liberal parties and representatives of Egypt's churches withdrew from the assembly, the new constitution drafted by a largely Islamic assembly is approved in a two-round referendum (63.8 percent votes in favour).
- ▶ Millions of Egyptians demonstrate on Morsi's first anniversary in office, calling on him to step down (30 June 2013) and accusing him of inefficiency and abuse of power.
- ▶ General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's military chief, announces the ousting of Morsi (3 July 2013) in a popularly backed military coup. Supreme Constitutional Court Chief Justice Adly Mansour is sworn in as Egypt's interim President. Mansour dissolves the Islamist-dominated upper house of parliament as Morsi's supporters stage mass protests demanding his return.
- ▶ Gen. Sisi calls for Egyptians to give him a mandate to combat the so-called "terrorism" threat.
- ▶ Security forces crush two pro-Morsi protest camps in Cairo, killing nearly 1,000 people (14 August 2013). Thousands of Brotherhood members are arrested in a widening crackdown on the group. The move causes days of nationwide violence that also leads to attacks against churches and governmental sites. The crackdown of the camps is described by Human Rights Watch as the most serious incident of mass killing in the modern history of Egypt.¹⁸⁷

186. *Ahram Online*, "Egypt's President Morsi expands power, defies judiciary with new declaration," 22 November 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/58936/Egypt/Politics-/Egypst-President-Morsi-expands-power,-defies-judic.aspx>

187. HumanRightsWatch, "Egypt:Securityforcesusedexcessivelethalforce," 19 August 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/19/egypt-security-forces-used-excessive-lethal-force>

- ▶ Morsi is facing trial along with top Brotherhood leaders accused of inciting violence.¹⁸⁸
- ▶ A 50-member panel is formed to draft a new constitution for the country; the 2012 constitution is withdrawn. The new draft constitution strengthens the army's power and allows civilians' prosecution before military courts. The constitution has been voted in a national referendum in 14 and 15 January 2014.¹⁸⁹
- ▶ A new protest law restricting demonstrations sparks large outcry. Human rights groups have condemned the law as a major blow to freedom in Egypt.¹⁹⁰
- ▶ The Egyptian government declares the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group after blaming it for series of attacks against security HQ. (25 December 2013).¹⁹¹
- ▶ Freedom of expression is threatened by a series of coercive measures including arbitrary closure of TV stations and journalists' arrests. Systematic pressure is exercised on local and foreign journalists "displaying clear hostility towards media that fail to sing the army's praises" according to Reporters without Borders.¹⁹²

188. J. Fleishman, "Mohamed Morsi to stand trial in deaths of Egyptian protesters," *Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.latimes.com/world/worldnow/la-fg-wn-mohamed-morsi-trial-20130901,0,7433266.story#axzz2ozqxqyJe>

189. BBC, "Egypt referendum: '98% back new constitution,'" 19 January 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25796110>

190. *Al-Jazeera*, "Egyptians on streets to defy new protest law" <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/11/egyptians-streets-defy-new-protest-law-20131129145449383814.html>

191. BBC, "Egypt Muslim Brotherhood declared "terrorist group" 25 December 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25515932>

192. Reporters Without Borders, "Freedom of information falls prey to military crackdown," 25 September 2013 <http://en.rsf.org/egypt-freedom-of-information-falls-prey-25-09-2013,45234.html>

