

Post Revolutionary Media Policy In Egypt

Should the new 'democratic' Egypt plan to reserve spectrum cleared after analogue switch-off for broadcasting? This might seem a bit of an esoteric question to ask in a country in turmoil, with almost 10% unemployment and more than 19% of the population living in extreme poverty. But whilst managing poverty and economic crisis are priorities, experts are discussing transition plans for the media sector with the aim of creating a framework to protect democratic communication, even though analogue switch-off is still years away.



A good place for digital transmitters?

On the day Cairo held its first elections since the so called 'revolution' last January, a UNESCO-supported conference discussed the role of the media in the transition, and dedicated an entire morning to the OSF project: [Mapping Digital Media](#) in which the author is a partner. The conference is part of an extended intervention by the UN agency that is attempting to bring expertise to bear on the management of the media transition during the building of a new democracy in Egypt.

The new government, which looks likely to be run by the apparently moderate, relatively liberal Muslim Brotherhood, will have to make decisions on its media framework quickly. The coincidence of the transition to democracy with the transition to digital media represents a short window of opportunity to cement democracy. Will the new regime slip back into the old game of political capture of the media? Will a moral backlash provide a smokescreen for extending censorship? Or can something be done to build a media system that offers an open, plural, public sphere for debate? The transition to digital offers opportunities – but also risks – that are technical and subtle. The management of the airwaves is a key battleground.

UNESCO recommended in its October 2011 [report](#) that the spectrum released by digital switch over should be reserved for broadcasting.

But the conference heard allegations that there is no agreed plan for reforming the Egyptian state broadcaster. What to do in a country where the main TV station employs thousands of friends and relations of the former regime? One speaker suggested that the only way forward was to pension them off. But she didn't have a suggestion where the money was to come from. UNESCO might consider the PSB plan before suggesting that the government should award it huge chunks of valuable spectrum. Wouldn't a more radical approach in the home of the Facebook revolution propose giving up more spectrum to mobile internet rather than more digital television. Technical constraints on spectrum use mean this could be a misleading characterisation of the choice, facing Egyptian regulators. But it is nonetheless the case that the government does control access to electromagnetic spectrum and that this is a key policy lever in a new democracy.

The transition to digital offers opportunities to use spectrum policy to reform PSBs. Restricting the spectrum available for existing broadcasters, and favouring new entrants that are independently regulated – and perhaps also using some of the released spectrum to attract investment in mobile internet infrastructure, might be a better use of the airwaves, particularly if doing so could attract some desperately needed cash to the Egyptian government.

Meanwhile in Tahrir square the protesters are still there, acting as guardians for the transition. It is not clear if beneath their slogans they are developing a plan for the more subtle power game that

played out in the space between state and media power.

My translators didn't spot any chants or banners concerning reform of the PSB or spectrum auction design. It is a cliché to say that modern revolutions head straight for the TV stations rather than the government buildings. This Egyptian revolution may have started on Facebook, but it is yet to reach the traditional media.

Reports like [this](#) suggest that the moment of political opportunity for using mobile social media to mobilise opposition to authoritarian governments may have passed. The 'Mozorov Dystopia' of authoritarian governments using social media for surveillance seems to be becoming a reality across large swathes of the globe. Whilst there is therefore a lot to fear for in Egypt's transition, events like this one also inspire hope.

The [conference](#) was Jointly sponsored by UNESCO and the Open Society Foundation and organised by the University of Westminster Arab Media Centre.

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