

Global Communications

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Arab Media Systems





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4. Jordan: Media's Sustainability during Hard Times

Basim Tweissi

This article will shed light on the main features of the Jordanian media system and how it relates to the political, economic, and legal systems. It focuses on the efforts to develop a sustainable media industry under difficult circumstances. For many decades, Jordan navigated the turbulent waters of the Middle East, the scene of devastating regional wars, civil wars, uprisings, and political instability, all of which undermined the efforts for political reform and the development of a healthy, robust media.

Background

Jordan is strategically located in a region that rarely escapes news headlines. Bordered by Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Israel, it is landlocked with the exception of 26 kilometers on the Red Sea. Its 89,200 square kilometers are predominantly desert in the south and east. Its capital, Amman, is the center of political, cultural, and media activities. With limited agriculture and natural resources, it struggles economically.

Jordan boasts a rich history within its borders, which were established in 1946. Islamic, Byzantine, Roman, and Nabatean monuments and archaeological sites stand witness to past civilizations that flourished there. The most critical battles of the Arab Revolt in 1916 and 1917, which ended the Turkish-Ottoman occupation of the Arab World, were fought out on its lands. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire culminated in the Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France. An outcome

of the agreement was the establishment of the Emirate of Transjordan in 1921 under the British Mandate.

In 1946, Jordan became a constitutional monarchy called the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Following the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, the West Bank of the River Jordan, including parts of Jerusalem, was annexed, but in June 1967, after the second Arab-Israeli war, Israel occupied the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In 1988, Jordan relinquished its sovereignty over the West Bank to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and in 1994, the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, ending the state of war between the two countries, was signed. Over the decades, however, the flight of waves of Palestinians from violence, occupation, and economic hardship have altered the demographic structure of Jordan's population, as well as integrating the Palestinian cause into its politics.

Jordan's geopolitical position has given it strategic and political significance as a regional player. It shouldered the responsibility of receiving waves of Arab refugees fleeing regional conflicts. In addition to the significant influx of Palestinian refugees during the wars of 1948 and 1967, thousands of Lebanese sought refuge during the mid-seventies, fleeing the civil war that had erupted in their country. The situation was further exacerbated in 1990 when Iraq occupied Kuwait, leading to the expulsion or departure of tens of thousands of Palestinian and Jordanian guest workers to their country of residence, Jordan. More waves were to follow with Iraqis escaping the hardships of the UN sanctions and the post-2003 occupation of their country. From 2011, a huge number of Syrian refugees streamed over Jordan's northern frontiers as the civil war raged in Syria. More than 1.3 million refugees fled to Jordan, of which 640,000 were registered with the UN and settled in camps (Department of Statistics, 2015). Thus, in the 55 years since independence, Jordan's population has more than doubled to 10.6 million today. Non-Jordanians constitute 30% of the total population, of whom 15% are Syrians, and the remainder are Palestinians. Young people constitute the majority of the population, with 34% being under 16 years of age.

Jordan's economy prospered for some decades. However, since 2010, Jordan's economy has suffered due to cost of energy, water, poor agricultural unemployment, and the burden of hosting Syrian refugees. Media have nonetheless flourished and responded to the fast-changing

pace of events. The rapid population growth has presented new opportunities to the media.

Jordan adapted to the new circumstances. In 1989, it embarked on a program of democratic reform marked by the suspension of martial law, the resumption of parliamentary life, and the formation of political parties. The democratic transformation made significant strides before regressing in the 2000s. Although parliamentary elections continued to be held regularly, they were designed in a manner that limited their power. Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, known as the Hirak Protests in Jordan, the Jordanian government once more undertook a series of reforms through the introduction of broad constitutional amendments and the establishment of an Independent Electoral Commission and Constitutional Court. Historical Developments

The birth of journalism in Jordan coincided with the birth of the state more than nine decades ago, when it began to play a significant role in the construction of national institutions and the formation of a Jordanian identity, by underscoring positive achievements. Currently, the media is still undergoing a massive transformation that is proportional to the country's slow political reform.

Historically, the Jordanian media has evolved in three phases: the Emirate years from 1921 to 1946, the Kingdom years from 1946 to 1970, and the current phase, which can be divided into two periods. The first period (from 1970 to 1989) was marked by financial stability and the adoption of modern technologies. The second period began in 1989, when Jordan underwent a democratic transformation (Al-Moussa, 1998).

The first Jordanian newspaper, *Al-Haqq Ya'alu*, was published in 1921 in the city of Ma'an. When printing was introduced in 1923, the official weekly and sometimes biweekly *Al-Sharq Al-Arabi* newspaper was published. In 1926, the newspaper's name was changed to *The Official Gazette of the Government of Trans Jordan*. It was later changed again to *The Official Gazette of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan* (Al-Moussa, 1998, p. 261). It is still being published today.

In 1927, several privately-owned newspapers were published: *The Arab Peninsula*, *The Arab Echo*, and *Al-Urdun* which ceased printing in 1982. In the 1930s, there were short-lived attempts to publish newspapers and magazines, such as *Al-Hikma*, *Al-Mithaq*, and *Al-Wafa'a*, but none

survived (Al-Moussa, 1998, p. 261). During this period, Jordanian journalism could be described as unsettled, financially poor, and lacking a clear identity. Party-affiliated newspapers began to emerge. Their content was predominantly political and literary.

The second phase began in 1946 when Jordan gained independence and became a constitutional monarchy. The West Bank of Palestine was annexed, and the 1952 constitution was enacted, guaranteeing political and civil freedoms and freedom of the press for the first time. This phase continued until 1967 when the second Arab-Israeli War broke out, resulting in Jordan's loss of the West Bank. The Palestinian resistance movements set up training camps in Jordan, and Israeli fighter jets patrolled the skies over Jordan unchallenged. The coverage, content, and quality of newspapers representing all political parties improved at the beginning of this period and readership was wide. However, in 1959, there was a marked decline in quality when democracy was put on hold. The 1960s were characterized by a polarized political climate in the Arab world. Newspapers became more partisan, and the government stepped in to micromanage media; some papers were suspended, others were banned altogether. With the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's charismatic leader—who captivated Arab masses with his message of Pan-Arabism supported by his fiery rhetoric, which was widely broadcast with his country's powerful radio transmitters—Jordan's monarchy felt threatened and tried to counter the tide of Nasserism. Jordan launched, in 1956, a national radio station from Amman as its first national public media outlet, and shared the allocated frequency with its then primary radio station, which broadcast its programs from Ramallah in the West Bank.

Jordan's government also felt that Jordanian newspapers published in Jerusalem were not helpful in countering Nasserism associated with Palestinian patriotism. The government, headed by Premier Wasfi Al-Tel, believed that media which advocated Arab nationalist movements countenanced Nasserism. Against this backdrop, in 1967, the government introduced a new publications law (replacing the 1955 law) to enable governmental control of newspapers. The law was known as "the Merger Law" because several newspapers were forced to merge as a result of it. *Palestine* and *Al-Manar* merged into the *Addustour* newspaper, which later moved from Jerusalem to Amman, where it is

still being published today. Similarly, *Al-Difa'a* and *Al-Jihad* merged into the *Al-Quds* newspaper, which is still published in Palestine (Sakkijha, 1998, p. 45). On 13 May 1971, the government issued a decree for the establishment of a cultural institute and a state-owned newspaper capable of analyzing the political scene. In due course, the Jordan Press Foundation was established and published the *Al-Rai* newspaper, which later became a public shareholding company (Hijazi, Al-Fank, & Kharob, 1995, p. 11).

The third phase (1970–1989) was characterized by stability and modernization. The government restructured the ownership of Jordanian newspapers, turning them into publicly-owned corporations. A total of 35% of the shares were retained by the original owners, 25% by shareholders, 15% by independent public enterprises (i.e. Jordan's Social Security Corporation and the Postal Savings Fund), 20% by traders on the stock market, and 5% by newspaper employees. During this period, a new generation of qualified Jordanian journalists emerged, raising professional standards, and on the business side, new financially and administratively independent corporations emerged.

In addition, HBS radio underwent further expansion in the 1970s and 1980s and began transmissions on different wavelengths and frequencies; its short-wave transmissions reached audiences worldwide. Today, it boasts five radio stations with different programs, along with regional radio stations in Irbid in northern Jordan. In 1968, *Jordan TV* (JTV) was launched as a state-owned station. By the 1970s and 1980s, the JTV staff had the know-how and editorial skills needed to be regarded as pioneers and helped with the process of setting up other television stations in the region. However, they also carried with them the values that had been instilled in them, such as the notion that the image of the state was paramount.

The fourth phase (1989–present) was characterized by the democratic transformation process, in which the Press and Publication Law of 1993 was introduced. The new law contributed to the growth of media; the number of dailies rose to nine, and weeklies jumped to 32 in 1995. In 1997, the number of newspapers reached 17; however, following amendments to the law, that number dwindled to seven. It was also a time in which new media started to emerge.

Ammon News, the first news website, was launched in 1997. The new broadcasting era that shaped the Arab region from the late 1990s onwards was reason enough for Jordan's parliament to approve the Audiovisual Media Law in 2002, thereby ending the government's monopoly over radio and television broadcasting rights. The private sector and civil society were granted the right to own and manage radio and television stations.

In 2019, Jordan's media landscape included 39 licensed satellite television channels, representing 16 Jordanian and 23 foreign channels, and 40 radio stations, including slide show (a televised form of radio) channels. Print outlets numbered 19 (including seven daily, nine weekly, and three monthly newspapers). Furthermore, the number of licensed news websites and so-called "electronic publications" reached 122.

Political System and Legal Framework

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a constitutional monarchy made up of three branches—the executive, legislative, and the judiciary—in accordance with the 1952 constitution, with ministerial portfolios that should reflect the various political and social components of society.

The constitutional amendment of 2011 protects the freedom of the press. Article 15 stipulates: "The State shall guarantee freedom of expression and every Jordanian shall be free to express his/her opinion in speech, in writing, or visual representation and other forms of expression provided that such expression does not violate the law." The amendment also stipulates that "the State shall guarantee the freedom of the media and publishing within the limits of the law." The same article states that "newspapers and information media may not be suspended nor license thereof revoked except by a court order in accordance with the provisions of the law." However, the ensuing relevant laws have limited these freedoms (Shukeir, 2011).

Jordan ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2006, which states in Article 19 that "everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression," and the Arab Charter on Human Rights in 2004, which guarantees the right to information and freedom of opinion. Moreover, Jordan is a signatory to the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child, which ensures a child's right

to freedom of expression, and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EuroMed) agreement between Jordan and the European Union, which supports media freedom and the rights stipulated in international conventions, and which was signed in 1999 (Shukeir, 2011, pp. 19–26).

Media regulation remained volatile during the democratic transformation process, although, since 1989, the Kingdom has moved towards a more pluralistic political structure, lifting martial laws and guaranteeing freedom of expression through the Press and Publication Law No. 10 of 1993 and the multiparty system which was established through the Law for Political Parties No. 32 of 1993. Starting these reforms required substantial effort because, until that point, media management and control were the legacy of the Cold War in a region that sought to use the press as a weapon. In the 1970s, William Rugh (1979) categorized the Jordanian press as “loyalist” with a heavy influence from the government (pp. 25–29). Rugh also described the content of Jordanian press as featuring limited diversity, touting the government’s point of view, failing to report accountability, and always supporting the status quo. He also said that it was slow in responding to events (pp. 79–80). Rugh’s findings were still valid a decade later, as evidenced in Issam Moussa’s (1989) content analysis of the *Al-Rai* daily newspaper, where he found that international content featured a degree of variety, while there was limited coverage of domestic issues, with a focus instead on official and domestic political topics (p. 98).

Since the mid-1990s, Jordanian media has seen important positive changes: a movement towards pluralism and editorial independence driven by a competitive spirit among newspapers (Al-Kilani, 2002). Another factor for the improved coverage was the emergence of weeklies, which proliferated following the enactment of the Publication Law of 1993 (Jones, 2002), but eventually decreased in number.

Yet media reforms kept taking one step backward for every step forward (Sakr, 2002). In 2001, for example, the government opted for the dissolution of the Ministry of Information and reassigned some of its roles to other public institutions, such as the Audiovisual Commission and the Department of Press and Publications. With these steps, Jordan’s media regulation displayed more openness and tolerance compared with its neighboring countries (Armijo, 2009). On the other hand, growing official dissatisfaction with the media’s performance led

to allegations that it was harming Jordan's image, and consequently, the Press and Publication Law was amended five times between 1997 and 2012. Some of these amendments represented a step forward, while others represented a step backwards. For example, daily newspapers still needed to be licensed through a decision of the Cabinet of Ministers. Moreover, although Jordan is considered the first Arab country to enact a law upholding the right to access information (the Access to Information Law No. 47 of 2007), the application of this law did not result in a noticeable change on the ground. Most surveys showed that a lack of access to information was just the first of many challenges to improving media professionalism.

The Internet, on the other hand, was not officially regulated until December 2010 when the Court of Cassation, the highest civil judicial authority, issued a ruling stating that all websites shall be subject to the Press and Publication Law. In 2012, parliament passed new amendments to the law that required news websites to register with the Jordan Media Commission in order to be licensed to operate.

Despite the positive legislative changes introduced during the last decade, progress has been slow and limited. The overlapping laws in various parts of the legislation render the media law complex. There are 12 effective laws that restrict the freedom of the press within the 24 bills pertaining to the press and media. Chief among these are: the Penal Code, Protection of State Secrets and Documents Law, the State Security Court Law, the Press Association Law, Law on the Contempt of Court Proceedings, the law governing municipalities, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Public Assemblies Law.

Against the backdrop of the HIRAK protests in 2011, allegations were made on social media by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society activists against the authorities, accusing them of exploiting poor media professionalism and poor content as a pretext to curtail media freedom (Hawatmeh & Pies, 2011). Amendments to the Cybercrime Law were proposed by the government using hate speech as an excuse and claiming it was spreading on social media networks. The draft law is still being debated.

The progress of media freedom since the start of the reform era can thus be best described as teetering within the context of other public liberties. 1993 was characterized by sweeping political reforms (Freedom

House, 1994), and as such is also regarded as a liberal year for the media. Similarly, freedom of expression improved during the HIRAK protests but has regressed again as a consequence of the war on terrorism, especially since 2013. New laws, including the Anti-Terrorism Law, were created, and online activities were closely monitored. Further ambiguities in the legal framework have hampered the pluralistic development of the media: although journalists enjoy the privilege of protection of their sources by law, the legal and political systems continue to justify practices which do not comply with international media standards (UNESCO Office Amman, 2015). In addition, there is the problem of the limited independence of the Jordan Media Commission, a regulatory body whose head is appointed by the prime minister and charged with licensing media channels and services and addressing complaints. The commission thus gives the government the final say in licensing radio and television channels or newspapers.

In the meantime, despite a climate of rampant social media abuses and distortion of news, the public has expressed concern for media independence. Public opinion surveys revealed that respondents believe the freedoms of movement, ownership, worship, and belief are more protected than the freedom of the press and freedom of expression (Center for Strategic Studies, 2011).

Another problem is that the compulsory membership of journalists in the Jordan Press Association is used as a tool of control—only those who are members of the association are considered journalists and thus protected by the laws. But broadcast or online journalists are not included under the umbrella of the Jordan Press Association. Membership is restricted to editors and anchors of news bulletins. Therefore, some journalists advocate the establishment of multiple associations (UNESCO Office Amman, 2015).

Finally, although the Jordan Radio and Television Corporation Law describes *JTV* as a public entity that enjoys administrative and financial independence, the reality is different. An evaluation study carried out by the UNESCO Office Amman (2015) concluded that *JTV* tends to act as a mouthpiece for the government instead of focusing on its role as a public service broadcaster. An important development in this context was the Independent Public Service Broadcasting Channel Bylaw of 2016, which paved the way for setting up *Al-Mamlaka TV* as a new public

service channel. The station, a 24-hour news and information television channel, has developed its own editorial policies and uses focus groups to shape them. The Board of Directors is appointed by the King, and the government has no say in the appointment of its staff in contrast to *JTV*. *Al-Mamlaka TV*, which is state-funded, faces challenges such as drastic cuts in budget support and its dwindling ability to protect its editorial mandate in the face of official pressure.

Economy and Ownership Patterns

Jordan's economy is relatively small and has endemic problems. External debt levels constituted 94% of Jordan's GDP in 2019 and this figure is growing due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy. Although poor in natural resources, the Kingdom's human resources, competitive investment environment, and openness to world markets are major positive attributes. These factors have helped to boost growth and expansion of the media industry despite the modest advertising expenditure of USD 220 million in 2018, a small proportion of what has been spent in neighboring oil-producing countries.

The Audiovisual Media Law of 2002 put an end to the government's monopoly on radio and television ownership. Although the law allows both public and private ownership of media, there is no explicit reference to the status of ownership of community service media that are owned and run by civil society. Despite this lack of regulation, community service media have started to make their presence felt, albeit on a small scale, since 2005, namely through the initiative *AmmanNet*, which includes *Radio Al-Balad*. Moreover, public institutions, such as universities and municipalities, own ten smaller radio stations which serve their local communities.

The government has a stake in various sectors of the media industry and owns, along with Jordan Radio and Television (JRTV), the only two land-based terrestrial channels, in addition to three satellite channels and the national news agency *Petra*, a public entity. The private sector, on the other hand, owns seven satellite channels, including *Roya TV*, *Amman TV*, and *Jo TV*, and with the government co-owns two Arabic-language and one English-language newspaper out of a total of seven. The state holds, through its Social Security Corporation, 55% of *Al-Rai*

shares and 33% of *Addustour* shares, while the balance is held by the public. JRTV also owns five public radio stations. The private sector, however, owns 25 radio stations. Statistics show that private media ownership is expanding, with businessmen owning most media outlets; for example, *Roya TV* is owned by the Al-Sayegh Family, and the *Al-Ghad* newspaper is owned by Mohammad Olayan.

Article 9 of the Competition Law, which regulates the market concentration, stipulates that a written ministerial approval is required if 40% of the shares of a media enterprise are to be traded, which reflects a reluctance on the part of the government to relinquish control of the media (UNESCO Office Amman, 2015).

Since 2011, print media in Jordan have struggled as the economic crisis has deepened. The decline of print media is due to the contraction of its advertising revenue share. The print media's failure to adapt to the digital publishing technologies is one of the main reasons for this crisis (Economic and Social Council, 2018). The two major Arabic dailies, *Al-Rai* and *Addustour*, began to hemorrhage financially and were forced to take drastic cost-cutting measures. In 2011, *Addustour* had to lay off 77 of 700 employees, and closed down its weekly English edition. Three years later, it adopted further drastic measures, reducing its staff to 320. The government had to intervene when the newspaper failed to pay staff salaries and committed advertising funds for government legal notices as support (Economic and Social Council, 2018). *Al-Rai* daily, for its part, stopped giving annual salary increases to employees as of March 2011, and reduced the number of columnists it employed from 53 to eight. In March 2015, it closed down some of its offices outside the capital. Another newspaper, *Al-Arab Al-Yawm*, also became a casualty of the crisis and had to close down completely in 2015.

The fear of a runaway media has slowed down the emergence of a professional class of journalists able to produce commercially sought-after content. The relaxed implementation of copyright laws is also a stifling disincentive. On the other hand, *Google* and *Facebook* have an unfair competitive advantage since they dominate the limited advertising market available to local media.

Technology and Infrastructure

Jordan's media infrastructure is considered adequate compared with that of other developing countries. JRTV is one of the biggest Arab media corporations with advanced technical capabilities and know-how, which were acquired when *BBC* engineers and production staff assisted with setting it up. In the early 1970s, JRTV provided essential engineering and production staff to Arabian Gulf countries who set up national television and radio stations. JRTV became a national flagship during this period. It helped found the Arab States Broadcasting Union and became an active member of the European Broadcasting Union. Since 1972, it has contributed news coverage from Jordan, and has produced international scoops, such as the first pictures of Syrian tanks capturing the Golan Heights in October 1973, because it was the only television station at the time with access to a satellite ground station. In 2001, Jordan agreed to set up a tax-free zone, the Jordan Media City (JMC), to provide regional and international broadcasting services, production facilities, satellite uplinks, and television channel streaming. An agreement was signed with the Arab Media Corporation, which invested USD 15 million with its activities to be overseen by the media regulator in accordance with the laws of the Jordan Media Authority (UNESCO Office Amman, 2015). JMC currently uplinks and turns around 450 television channels and provides Jordan's first commercial television station, *Roya TV*, with studios and transmission facilities (Jordan Media City, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, *Roya TV* encountered state intervention due to their broadcast of a video of protesting citizens who had suffered a loss of income due to the lockdown.

Despite the expansion of Internet coverage in Jordan over the last decade, the printing and book publishing industry have also seen a remarkable development. The number of small printing houses based in Amman grew to 439 in 2019. The number of advertising companies stood at 384 (Jordan Media Commission, 2019). Similarly, the media production industry flourished. *Al-Rai* and *Al-Ghad* newspapers borrowed heavily to invest in enormous printing plants, in the belief that print media would last forever, disregarding the impact of the inevitable advance of electronic publishing. As the flow of advertising revenue migrated from traditional print media to the new media, there

were serious financial shockwaves and massive debts to be reckoned with. Since the lockdown in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the suspension of all print media, the future of Jordan's print media remains in doubt.

Startups in the field of video production have played an increasingly important role in creating a significant change in content and form. An example is *Kharabeesh*, a platform for digital creativity founded in 2007, which focuses on entertainment, humor, and satire, and publishes its animated cartoons widely on the Internet. *Tiber* is another example, which describes its role as "producing and publishing original multimedia journalism and analysis, and providing a platform for critical conversation", and frequently publishes daring videos and investigative reports which have caused discomfort and elicited retaliation in the form of suspensions by the authorities.

The Internet was introduced to Jordan in the mid-1990s (Shukeir, 2009). As a result, the telecommunications market grew and became more competitive over the following two decades. Three communication companies currently dominate the market: *Zain*, *Orange*, and *Umniah*. Two of them, *Zain* and *Orange*, are international operators, and *Umniah* is Jordanian. Their services encompass ADSL, 3G, and 4G Internet access technologies. Fiber-based broadband is also being rolled out in the capital and most governorates.

The 3G and WiMAX technologies were introduced in Jordan in 2010. At the time, 38% of the population was estimated to have access to the Internet. Since then, news websites have begun to grow on the web, delivering news at a faster pace than conventional newspapers.

The 2017 statistics show that the spread of computers, smartphones, and tablets had increased, and 67% of the population now have access to the Internet. A similar rise has occurred in the use of social networks, specifically *Facebook*. The figures also show that 88% of people had mobile phone subscriptions in 2018, while 38% of households had a computer. 89% of households had Internet access, while 7% of the total population subscribed to the WiMAX service (Telecommunications Regulatory Commission, 2017).

The digitization of newsrooms in Jordanian newspapers began with the advent of ADSL and 2G Internet technologies at the turn of the century. In 2006, *Ammon News* became the first news website to go

online, challenged only by conventional dailies and weeklies. By 2019, the number of news websites officially registered in Jordan stood at 167 (Tweissi, 2019). Recent developments in ICT also indicate a stronger engagement of local communities, as users are allowed to post their comments and feedback on news websites. However, amendments to the Press and Publications Law of 2011 stipulate that website owners are held personally liable for any opinions published through their outlets. The measures were brought about due to the tense climates generated by the HIRAK protests and the protests that raged across the Arab world. News websites were launched with the specific mission of toppling the government with what were regarded as hearsay, rumors, and fake news. The choice laid before the government was either chaos or closure of websites which could not be held accountable in a court of law. Nonetheless, the Internet had already changed Jordan's media landscape, enabling the use of multimedia and ICT, which helped to enrich the content produced and consumed (UNESCO Office Amman, 2015). Additionally, all of Jordan's six dailies embraced the technology and launched online versions with varying degrees of coverage and quality.

Challenges

Jordan's media system reflects a state of "frazzled stability" as any progress made has been offset by setbacks and restrictions. Media reforms and political reforms are interdependent. Recognizing the importance of free, independent, and diverse media on the political level will be crucial to pushing the media reform agenda forward. Although Jordan went through a prolonged transitional period since the launch of political reforms and the return to parliamentary life, the reforms undertaken from 1989 to 2019 were lacking. Regional instability, on the other hand, still poses the biggest challenge to Jordan's media system, given that Jordan is dependent on the Arab Gulf states support, and specifically Saudi Arabia, which opposes the rise of any Arab media system that upholds values or a philosophy different from its own. Thus, fear of the independent media has generated pressure on the government to create laws that have seriously undermined the media's capacity to be the watchdog and guardian of public interest. In all, 22

laws have been introduced to curb the freedom and independence of the media.

Furthermore, the comparatively modest size of the advertising market restricts its expansion and provides little incentive to investors, unless they are politically motivated or partisan. While new media offer economically viable models, traditional media have failed to follow in their footsteps to adapt to new technologies, for which they have paid a hefty price. Traditional media outlets have been in regression of late and face capacity-building challenges. They have failed to fully embrace digital transformation, and many dailies are plagued with acute financial difficulties and the mounting costs of paper combined with a recession of readership. Unionization is another problem too since it remains weak, and Jordan's Press Association Law does not meet international standards.

Codes of conduct are also still new to the media community, while previous attempts to appoint a media ombudsman have failed. Efforts are also needed to address the gap between journalism schools' curricula and media market needs. Media education is mostly theoretical, with little or no field training. Textbooks and teaching methods are outdated. Furthermore, the lack of access to information remains a major hurdle that impedes the media's capacity to gain the trust of society, despite the fact that Jordan was the first country to adopt a freedom of access to information law in 2007.

Outlook

The degree of media freedom is not likely to change in the next few years. However, modest progress might still be realized in the area of freedom of speech and the independence of media institutions. Jordan, in the meantime, will try to maintain a reasonable level of Internet freedom. The government believes that advancing the promising ICT sector depends on providing a favorable legal environment, which would positively affect digital media platforms and Internet freedom.

In recent years, the government has paid a great deal of attention to entrepreneurship and startups. It has also launched digital startup accelerators. New media startups that embrace digital technology have also begun to surface. These developments provide a vast window of

opportunity for the growth of digital media, which will likely have an impact on the future of the media in Jordan and in the region.

Public broadcasting also took a positive step by enacting the Independent Public Service Broadcasting Channel Bylaw, which established *Al-Mamlaka* news station. Moreover, *JRTV* has developed and begun implementing a series of plans to enhance performance and to enforce the public broadcasting standards. The COVID-19 pandemic has reversed some of these modest achievements and the fear of what is to come has stifled the will of policy makers. Furthermore, recent regional developments and the political landscape of Arab-Israeli relations has required the media to restrain its reaction to events. This move was driven by fear of offending fellow Arab countries who do not separate media attitudes from official government stances on an issue. A complex series of factors unique to Jordan's position in the Middle East are always in play, hampering and slowing down the development of the media, and its ability to break free.

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