

Global Communications

EDITED BY CAROLA RICHTER AND CLAUDIA KOZMAN

Arab Media Systems





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Carola Richter and Claudia Kozman (eds), *Arab Media Systems*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0238>

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This project received support from the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) that has been funded under the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) grant 01DL20003.

This publication was financed in part by the open access fund for monographs and edited volumes of the Freie Universität Berlin.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800640597

ISBN Hardback: 9781800640603

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800640610

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800640627

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800640634

ISBN XML: 9781800640641

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0238

Cover design by Anna Gatti based on a photo by Duangphorn Wiriya on Unsplash at <https://unsplash.com/photos/KiMpFTuuAk>

13. Egypt: A Divided and Restricted Media Landscape after the Transformation

Hanan Badr

Egypt's media landscape is marked by long years of struggle. This is a paradox: it is one of the pioneers of media industries in the Arab region, yet today, it has a massively restrained media system. The Egyptian media is marked by an unresolved identity struggle between its traditional roots in Arab and Islamic culture and an ambivalence towards modernized, Westernized lifestyles. It is also contending with a highly polarized media-politics parallelism in an environment which does not grant the media system space to develop fully and freely. Despite the great potential of the media system, the recent crackdown on freedom of expression has suspended the potential for the professionalization of an autonomous form of journalism.

Background

Located in Africa's northeastern corner, Egypt is the only country that extends into both the African and Asian continents through the Sinai Peninsula. Throughout its history, the deserts around the Nile Valley and Delta have functioned as natural geographic barriers, keeping the core Egyptian state intact for centuries. Egypt's location, overlooking two seas—the Mediterranean to the north and the Red Sea to the east—has historically made it a natural geopolitical hub for intercultural exchange

and trade, as well as the site of colonization projects and the cradle of empires, as one of the world's most ancient civilizations.

Currently, all of Egypt's neighbors, from the Libyans and Sudanese to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, are witnessing either political upheavals or escalations of conflict. Regional conflicts in these neighboring countries cast their shadows on the military and security roles shaping Egypt's foreign relations. Recent major changes in geopolitics include the 2015 change of maritime borders with Saudi Arabia. That action caused a short-lived public stir, as Egypt refused to renounce its sovereignty over Tiran and Sanafir, the two islands, located near the touristic city of Sharm El-Sheikh.

Terrorism and armed struggle against ISIS-affiliated militias, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, have affected the levels of freedom of expression and public acceptance of security institutions and their rhetoric. These conflicts have advanced the validity of security concerns over terrorism on the political agenda, which has in turn strengthened the military's claim to power after Egypt's failed uprising in 2011.

Egypt's primary and official language is Arabic, whereas the English language is an informal language employed for business communication in international companies centered in the capital, Cairo, and Alexandria. French also has a notable presence due to the enduring Francophone cultural influence. Editions of Egyptian print media appear in both French and English languages to target the limited readership of high-income citizens, who are socioeconomically distinct from the majority of the public.

The population majority is Muslim, but there is a Coptic Christian minority estimated to account for between 5% and 10% of the population, although the exact figure is unclear, as there is no official census (Pew Research Center, 2011). Because Egypt is a socially conservative country, religious media have a considerable presence whether in the form of specialized media issued by the Islamic Al-Azhar institution, or by the Coptic Church in Cairo. While Egyptian society has many marginalized ethnic groups, such as Sinai Bedouins, Siwa Oasis Amazigh and Nubians, tensions frequently erupt over religious and ideological issues. The rise of political Islam from the 1970s onwards—in particular, the Muslim Brotherhood and its use of religious doctrine—constitutes an exclusionary ideology towards others. The Muslim Brothers offer

fundamentally different answers to questions regarding Egypt's identity and international alliances. After a brief rise in power in the wake of 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood and other potentially contentious actors are now harshly excluded from society: since 2013, their members are tracked, exiled, or imprisoned under inhumane circumstances. Other ideological strands, such as remnants of the left wing, or progressive liberals, are weak and remain elitist in their constituency, outreach, and rhetoric.

With its 99 million inhabitants, Egypt has a massive youth cohort: those below 15 years of age constitute more than one third of the country's entire population. The state faces significant challenges in offering education and healthcare services, as well as employment opportunities. Although women have received more legal rights and gained limited representation—for example, the right to vote and the right to education—over the past century there are still disadvantages for women in this socially conservative country, within both Muslim and Coptic Christian communities. Egypt faces the long-standing challenge of illiteracy, as, according to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), almost 25% of the overall population remain illiterate. Trends show higher illiteracy rates in women and in rural areas. Women still suffer—despite gradual progress—from social practices, such as domestic violence, and socioeconomic disadvantages, such as estate inheritance or access to education.

The aftermath of the Arab uprisings still shapes the current political sphere and rhetoric. Caught in between the public's fatigue and fear, the status quo is marked by demobilization, as those currently in power are clearly keen to intensify their mechanisms of authority. The polarizing events of 2013 are viewed by the opposition as a coup against the legally elected president, Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, while they are viewed by the military and its supporters as a second, corrective revolution against an extremist leader. This has caused massive fragmentation with serious repercussions for Egypt. The events of 2013 resulted in moments of international isolation from 2013 to 2015, as Egypt was temporarily ejected from the African Union. In addition to intensive diplomacy, the state media aggressively sought to polish Egypt's image during this phase. Yet amid the rise of global right-wing authoritarianism, and Europe's fear of migration and instability, Egypt's current regime faces neither real pressure to democratize, nor political consequences for violations.

Historical Developments

Egypt is a pioneer of media industries as its media are among the oldest in the Arab region. Print media is more than 200 years old. It started in the late-eighteenth century when Egypt was still a province of the Ottoman Empire and France's Napoleon started an expedition to invade Egypt in 1798. The invaders brought the printing press to Egypt. The first newspaper was *Le Courrier de l'Égypte*, which was published from 1798 in French for Napoleon's soldiers to stay informed and in touch with their home country. After Mohammed Ali assumed power, he published the Arabic newspaper *Al-Khedive Journal* in 1821 to disseminate official news and connect the provinces to the centralized power in Cairo, the capital (Abdel Rahman, 2002, p. 102).

When Khedive Ismail relaxed the licensing policies for newspapers in 1875, Egypt's newspaper scene began to flourish rapidly: within only 15 years (by 1890), more than 200 newspapers were registered. Some of them are leading newspapers with a long tradition of journalism which still exist today, such as *Al-Ahram* (1875). Other newspapers importantly expressed the country's identity struggle and reflected the pluralism of Egypt's political culture. The wide range of new newspapers included the pro-British Westernized *Al-Mukattam* (1888), the traditional reformist *Al-Mo'ayed* (1889), the critical satirical *Al-Ustaz* (1892), and the Egyptian nationalist *Al-Liwa'a* (1900). The Egyptian print media initially benefitted from the influx of Levantine immigrants escaping harsh Ottoman rule, as well as from the gradual diffusion of the print press and growing literacy rates. Historically, this phase bears striking similarities to the era of mass press during the same time in Europe and the US.

1882 marked a political rupture in Egypt, as it brought the second bloody confrontation with Western powers after Napoleon's French expedition in 1798. Amid Britain's aspirations to expand its north-south nexus on the African continent and to connect to its vast colonies in India by means of the trade route running through the Suez Canal, Britain used Egypt's political instability and the supposed protection of the weak Khedive, the Ottoman governor, as a pretext to occupy Egypt. Egypt became an unofficial British protectorate before being formally designated as a protectorate with the onset of World War I, in 1913. These

developments imported British, French, and Ottoman influences into Egypt, and these shaped the media landscape accordingly. The British rule, which began in 1882—in conjunction with the then still official rule of the Khedive Palace, which was loyal to the Ottoman Empire—tolerated the pluralized media scene, with occasional closures of overly critical newspapers, in the hopes of using the fragmentation of media voices against the other competing power. Egypt's media system was affected by conflict and political parallelism. The initial propagandistic mobilization and media-politics parallelism instituted during this era has never really ended. After drafting its first constitution in 1922, the so-called liberal experiment in Egypt, which lasted until 1936, proved how parties and print media could not only coexist, but also nourish each other. This turbulent time, which was marked by frequent protests in the urban centers, saw a rise in debates over Egypt's future and identity. Moreover, the expansion of education formed a new social class. This phase also witnessed the establishment of Egypt's legacy media houses such as *Al-Akhabar* and *Ruz Al-Youssef*, which are still operating today, but in a state-owned form.

In 1952, fueled by grievances against a system of unfair privileges within the army and society in general, the Free Officers Movement overthrew the monarchy and forced the British military forces to leave. President Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in 1954 and established the Egyptian Republic. Abdel Nasser pushed for full control over the public sphere to ensure power over the young independent state. He established a new media house called *Al-Tahrir*, which published the *Al-Gomhouriya* newspaper. In 1960, Abdel Nasser nationalized all media under the pretext of protecting stability and serving the interests of the public.

Radio had an early start in Egypt during its vibrant, cosmopolitan era under British rule. In the 1920s, individual radio stations were founded, often by foreign nationals residing in Egypt in Cairo and Alexandria, primarily for entertainment purposes. This is called the age of "civic broadcasting stations" (El-Sherif, 2015). On 31 May 1934, an official radio program was established in cooperation with the British Marconi Company. As anti-colonial and national attitudes rose, in 1947, the prime minister decided to fully nationalize and arabize the radio stations and begin Egyptian production. To this day, Egypt is keen to invest in its

elaborate radio program, which has 40 foreign-language radio stations as a part of its public diplomacy efforts, including English, French, and German, as well as less widely spoken languages, such as Hebrew and Swahili.

Like radio, Egypt's cinema has its roots in the cosmopolitan era of the late-nineteenth century. Egypt's film industry has a long tradition and popularity in the region: the first film was shown in Alexandria in 1896, only one year after the worldwide debut of cinema. The first production of a fictional film was in 1927 by the Isis Film Company. Dubbed "The Orient's Hollywood," the popularity of its productions is one of the reasons for the widespread use of the Egyptian dialect in Arab countries outside of Egypt. The cinema is a pillar of Egyptian soft power. The 1960s constituted a golden era for Egyptian cinema in terms of the number of films produced and the legacies of famous and popular stars, and despite its political socialist one-party system under Abdel Nasser, the state invested heavily in arts and cinema.

Television is by far the most popular media in Egypt as it is the number one source for news and entertainment. Historically, Egypt has monopolized terrestrial broadcasting in the famous radio and television building, Maspero, situated in downtown Cairo. Television broadcasting started in 1960 under President Abdel Nasser. Building on strong national sentiments, he used the television as proof of Egypt's new, modernized republic. His successor, Anwar El-Sadat, established the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), as the body controlling the radio and television channels aired in Egypt. It slowly developed its program to add more controlled pluralism, by offering the news-oriented *Channel 1* and the lighter *Channel 2*. In the late 1980s, state television expanded its service to offer five additional regional channels, for the capital Cairo, Alexandria, the Suez Canal area, Upper Egypt, and the Nile Delta. In the 1990s, satellite channels were introduced into Egyptian households. They constituted a serious challenge, in that they bypassed the national regulative framework for broadcasting. The offer of competing channels to Egyptian households, as well as the massive brain drain from Maspero's ERTU media workers moving to better-funded Arab television networks, gradually led to a loss of the monopoly once held by the Egyptian Radio and Television Union in the country. Moreover, Egyptian journalists and media personnel who

had left the country were instrumental in initially conceptualizing and managing many media that started in the Gulf countries.

The Internet was introduced in Egypt in 1993. Penetration grew steadily in society, with a rise from 1% of the population being Internet users in 2000 to 45% in 2017. The number of *Facebook* users alone amounts to 35 million in Egypt; hence, a third of the population is on *Facebook*.

Political System and Legal Framework

In his book *Sorrows of the Press Freedoms*, veteran Egyptian journalist and unionist Salah El-Din Hafez (1993) sketched the enduring and multiple constraints over print media. The title sums up the fact that Egyptian journalism's struggle for autonomy, is political, economic, and professional. Egyptian journalism has a long history of not being free, and an almost 200-year struggle for freedom (El-Gody, 2009, p. 732). Owing to strong centralization and executive control of media mobilization for national development purposes, as well as control of media regulations and ownership, Egyptian journalism has only had brief periods of liberalization (Richter, 2011). These brief intermissions have created some dynamism among journalists to push for freedoms and reflect on their profession. The latest window of opportunity was the transformation phase of 2011–2013 after the uprisings.

Egypt's political system has officially been a presidential republic since 1952. During the past seven years, two constitutions were issued: the (now annulled) Egyptian Constitution of 2012, and the Egyptian Constitution of 2014, in addition to constitutional amendments in 2019. This shows two mechanisms at work: first, that the political contest in Egypt has traditionally been settled through legislation; and second, that those in power wish to emphasize the rule of law, in order to protect their image abroad. However, since 2014, consistent regulatory and legal changes have demonstrated a strong re-autocratization and legislative authoritarianism (Hamzawy, 2017). The long-sought abolition of the Ministry of Information in 2014 also did not establish more freedoms, as had been anticipated.

A paradox exists between formally acknowledging press freedom on paper in the 2014 constitution and tightening control of it in practice. Free expression is formally guaranteed in the current constitution, in

Article 65 (freedom of speech) and Article 68 (access to information and official documents). Yet, the creation of three regulatory bodies and media councils in 2017 by presidential decrees narrowed the supposed freedoms given by the constitution. Three councils replaced the abolished Ministry of Information: the Supreme Media Regulatory Council, the National Press Authority (founded to oversee and manage state-owned print media organizations), and the National Media Authority (founded to oversee and manage state-owned audiovisual broadcasting services). Members of the three regulatory councils are appointed by the president, and include journalists, social scientists, and media managers (such as editors-in-chief, etc.).

These councils increasingly exhibit a tendency for greater censorship by using vague ethical rules as legal boundaries. One example of this is Article 215, where the National Media Council, which oversees print, audiovisual, and digital journalism, is responsible for a broad spectrum of media. According to this article, the National Media Council should guarantee media freedoms in their various forms, maintain media pluralism and avoid concentration, protect the public interest, shape the regulations and criteria that lead to the commitment of the media towards the professional traditions and ethics, preserve the Arabic language, and observe society's values and constructive traditions. Loose interpretations of this article can limit freedoms of expression, as demonstrated by legal prosecutions for threatening social values that have been brought against journalists who have published ideas and opinions on progressive issues such as women's rights.

In the wake of the uprisings, Egyptian journalism went through political turbulence, starting with a massive rupture of the system in 2011, and continuing until the gradual elimination of any margin for freedom today. The struggle for journalists' freedom in the post-2011 phase in Egypt was perceived as a window of opportunity to turn journalists' hopes and demands of urgent and overdue reforms in the profession into reality. Right after the "Tahrir Revolution", specific actions for media reform were needed in order to establish greater autonomy (Sakr, 2013, pp. ix-x). These included more independence from executive control, the abolition of the detention punishment, the establishment of strong local and regional journalism, the transformation of state-managed media into true public service media institutions, efforts to

foster pluralism in journalists' associations, and finally, maintenance of good governance in media organizations.

The turbulent years of transformation from 2011 to 2019 can be categorized in four phases:

1. Phase I took place from 2011–2012, directly after Mubarak's resignation when the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) took over power and led the initial stabilization maneuvers;
2. Phase II continued from May 2012 to June 2013 while President Mohammed Morsi headed a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government. Both phases I and II represented the highest potential for a transformation of Egyptian journalism. The intensive euphoria and protests aimed at reforming the Egyptian media. Journalists shared critical self-reflections on the country's journalistic practices. A Freedom House report captured the euphoric 2012 moment when, for the first time in decades, it called the Egyptian media system "partly free." New, pluralistic media outlets mushroomed and catered to those with previously marginalized needs. The strongest newcomers were the Islamist media. Yet, even under these flourishing conditions of freedom, the situation for journalists was considered "precarious" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 76). Examples of this professional precarity include insecure work conditions or poor personal safety during clashes and political turmoil. During the Muslim Brotherhood rule, the press was the target of repeated trials to intimidate journalists.
3. In Phase III, from July 2013 to May 2014, after the SCAF expelled the late President Morsi from his office and introduced an interim president, the negotiation processes to develop the media scene were suddenly interrupted. No genuine processes addressed the core issues of journalism's professionalization, autonomy, and financial viability.
4. Finally, Phase IV started with the election of President Abdelfattah Sisi as president in 2014, and has continued

after his reelection in 2018. Recently, Egypt slid to position 166 (of 180) in the Reporters Without Borders 2020 ranking. The Cybercrime Law issued in August 2018 targets freedom of expression on blogs and social media. An example of direct intimidation occurred in November 2019, when security forces stormed *MadaMasr*, an independent online journalistic platform. This political climate has affected news media coverage and made it less diverse in moments of crisis or security-related concern. Increased control of foreign correspondents, as seen in the revoked accreditation of *BBC* correspondents in 2018 and 2019, aims at controlling non-Egyptian coverage.

One unprecedented moment of escalation between the state and the media occurred in May 2016, when police forces stormed the Egyptian Journalist's Syndicate building to arrest two journalists only one day before World Press Freedom Day.

While practicing journalism is open to all graduates from various disciplines, official protection is only given to members of the Journalists' Syndicate as the sole trade union representing print journalists. Other media professionals have a separate trade union, the Media Workers Syndicate, which is service-oriented and not politically active. The exclusionary and restrictive bylaws of this syndicate's membership discriminate against digital journalists who are prohibited from becoming members.

Economy and Ownership Patterns

The political economy of the media in Egypt demonstrates an unresolved conflict of interests, which predates the Arab uprisings. Indirect state capitalism controls the media economy and determines ownership structures. After the establishment of the Egyptian Republic in 1952, all private media were nationalized and transformed into state-run institutions. Party newspapers were gradually introduced in the early 1970s, and private media emerged in the mid-1990s. The tripartite ownership of Egyptian journalism (state-run, party, and private press) has created stark contrasts in the political economy, financial security, and journalistic practices. State-led print media receive full state subsidy,

and follow the official government line more closely, with a very low margin of tolerance. Editors-in-chief have adapted their approaches and opt for mild criticism at most as a political survival strategy, since they are nominated and appointed by the state. At the same time, within the semi-liberalization strategies under former President Mubarak, the modernization of print technologies in the late 1990s led to huge investments in print technologies in the three largest publicly-funded, state-owned media organizations: *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Akhabar*, and *Al-Gomhouriya*.

State-run print media have low circulation, are overstaffed, and have accumulated significant debt, which amounted to USD 1.6 billion in 2015 (Miri, 2015). For example, the oldest daily newspaper, *Al-Ahram*, sells only 70,000 copies daily, compared with 2013 when the numbers were 10 times as many. Despite the financial losses, journalists in state media, who have the status of civil servants, are secure against layoffs due to the high political cost of such a decision. Corrupt and unethical practices, such as nepotism and an approach of mixing editorial content with advertising, are common (Ghali, 2015). New regulations since 2014 regard state media as a giant financial burden, without any real political benefit. In order to stop the financial drain, hiring ceased altogether. Media investment is not on the current political agenda; on the contrary, rulers view them as adversaries. Rather than make them more powerful, the current strategy is to weaken the media, as their loyalty and public influence are not guaranteed.

Private media institutions have a history of tolerating certain freedoms and are run as purely profit-oriented business models. Business tycoons purchase media to protect their stakes in other businesses (Roll, 2013). Although they incur losses, these are covered by the other non-media businesses. Compared with those who work for the state-run media, private media journalists earn more for high workloads. But major layoffs and shutdowns of enterprises have shaped the private media landscape since 2014. After a short-lived surge in sales from 2011–2012 where, for example, the private daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm* reached 650,000 copies per day, today it struggles to sell 60,000 copies per day. Moreover, party newspapers are well past their golden years of the 1990s and are struggling to survive.

The journalism crisis is severe: in terms of sales, print papers went from three million daily copies in 2000 and 1.5 million daily copies in 2010 to less than 200,000 daily sold copies nationwide in 2018 (personal communication with *Al-Ahram* distribution network officer, August 2019). In a country of 100 million people, this amounts to two sold copies per 1,000 inhabitants. Widespread poverty and illiteracy rates do not suffice to explain the decline in newspaper sales. In fact, young readers have increasingly drifted away from classic media. According to Baseera Think Tank polls, 65% of young Egyptians do not read newspapers, and only 7% “always” do (Egypt Independent, 2015).

Observation of recent media developments has shown nontransparent acquisitions and monopolistic practices in the media industry. At the same time, new private media companies have established strong ties with various state security and intelligence organizations through favored loyalist frontmen, who have acquired majority shares in all the private print media institutions (Reporters Without Borders, 2019b). Horizontal and vertical conglomerates in media enterprises are characterized by this kind of oligarchy. One example is the Egyptian Media Group (EMG), which is closely linked to President Sisi’s supporters and intelligence agencies. It not only owns the three biggest private television networks (*Al-Hayah*, *On E*, *Extra News*) and holds major shares in private newspapers (*Al-Youm Al-Sabea*, and *Sout Al-Omma*), but also controls the cinema production landscape (50% of shares of Misr Cinema Company and 50% of Synergy Production) and has large shares of numerous advertising industry companies (Reporters Without Borders, 2019b).

60% of the television sector, which is regulated by the National Media Authority, is either owned by the state ERTU (*Channels 1* and *2*) or the Egyptian Media Group. Other players include former Mubarak loyalist cronies, who own *Dream TV* and *Sada El-Balad TV*, and businesspersons who closely cooperate in the advertising industry (*Al-Nahar TV*). In addition, there is the Saudi-financed media group MBC, which operates from Dubai and launched *MBC Misr* (Reporters Without Borders, 2019b). As a result, the television sector has become increasingly de-politicized after a vibrant era of intensive political talk-shows prior to mid-2013. At this point, entertainment content accounts for most of the airtime.

Digital journalism is still heavily regulated in Egypt: in October 2018, the Supreme Media Regulatory Council demanded that all native online newspapers legalize their status within two weeks. This was a manifestation of the highly controversial media regulatory laws passed in July 2018 by the Egyptian Parliament (Mamdouh, 2018). Regulation and surveillance of the digital space to curb online freedom of speech have increased, as the Egyptian government cooperates with numerous international tech giants like *Google* (Ryan, 2019).

Media usage in Egypt can be summarized as follows: almost the whole population—more than 97%—watch television, only 33% use the radio, and 16% of people read newspapers (Reporters Without Borders, 2019b). Social media is increasingly becoming a strong competitor of the established professional media. As in other countries, old media find this new competition with the free and not yet fact-checked social media, challenging.

Technology and Infrastructure

Egypt has been a pioneer in media and communication technologies in the Arab world. Having invested early in national television, it aimed at further securing its position as a regional leader in media. Under President Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), Egypt worked to secure its technological leadership in the Arab region. Competing with the newly launched, Gulf-funded television networks and media cities, Egypt launched its first Arab satellite channel, the *Egyptian Satellite Channel* in 1990. It launched its first satellite, *NileSat* in 1998 to consolidate its position as a leader in news and entertainment in the Middle East. However, the project of launching more than 15 specialized channels did not hold up economically and caused extreme financial pressures on the publicly-funded ERTU. At the same time, the government invested in the Media City complex, located in the 6th October suburb of Cairo, to bolster Egypt's regional position and accommodate the ambitious film and drama productions. Media City hosts several studios for privately-owned satellite television stations, such as *DMC*, *Dream*, and *El-Mehwar*.

The relevance of new digital media in Egypt has increased over the past 15 years. In line with the modernization plans under former President Mubarak's rule, during the early 2000s, the state announced

and invested in an ambitious Internet and communication technologies (ICTs) plan. It aimed to connect a PC in every Egyptian home to the Internet by 2008, a goal which was regulated by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (est. 1999) and the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (est. 2003). A partnership with Microsoft was set up to launch incentives to market PCs and 512 ADSL connections. These investments in the technology infrastructure made Egypt an attractive spot for foreign investments and industries. Despite Internet censorship and limited speed, these investments in ICTs paved the way for the evolving blogging and citizen journalism activities that contributed to the 2011 uprisings.

Many scholars and commentators have attributed the Arab uprisings directly to the rise of the Internet, as they are widely referred to as the "Facebook Revolution." However, this is a simplified view of the events and interactions between media and politics (Badr, 2019). Nonetheless, the prelude of the Egyptian uprisings was indeed marked by a rise in citizen journalism and efforts from the blogger scene to push counter-issues of dissent into the mainstream media and thereby create a "trickle-down effect" (Badr & Richter, 2018).

Rapid and massive progress in ICTs before the Arab uprisings shifted political communication towards less deterministic patterns, so a complete state monopoly on media was no longer possible. For example, political blogging expanded the prospects of dialogue, offering vibrant networks for individuals with similar perspectives (Pole, 2010, p. 1).

However, while this describes the state of affairs just before the uprisings, recently there have increasingly been signs of expanded control over the public spheres. Since 2013, and after the presidential elections of 2014 and 2018, zero-tolerance policies towards dissent and criticism have been applied through increased police control and imprisonment of journalists, takeovers of all semi-independent media outlets, and the use of surveillance technologies. In addition to blocking more than 500 websites and media, the authorities issued a law against cyberterrorism in 2018, which tightened restrictions on the overlooked Internet public sphere, for example by incriminating *Facebook* group administrators (Reporters Without Borders, 2019a).

In the telecommunications sector, Egypt has four mobile phone companies: three private companies with shares from the governmental

Egypt Telecom, and a fourth, the government owned *We*. Due to strict antiterrorism laws and state scrutiny of mobile service owners, the mobile phone penetration rate dropped from an oversaturated 112% in 2012–2013 to 95% in 2018, according to ITU data. Ownership follows the state doctrine of licensing telecommunications companies to trusted business tycoons, and has headed towards increased state regulation in recent years. *Orange Telecom* (formerly *Mobinil*) is 99% in the hands of *Orange S.A.*, and *Vodafone Egypt* (formerly *Click GSM*) is divided as follows: *Vodafone Group* (54.93%), *Egypt Telecom* (44.94%), and free float (0.13%). *Etisalat Telecom* is owned by the Emirati company *Etisalat* (76%), *Egypt Post* (20%), and other investors (4%). Finally, there is the most recent addition, the state-owned *We* by *Egypt Telecom*, where the Egyptian government owns 80%, and 20% of the shares are free float.

Challenges

Put simply, the current media system is not sustainable. Amid persistent power asymmetries and a highly repressive environment, the media system reflects an extremely constrained political system, from which any prior pluralism has been removed. Even the tolerated, semi-liberalized pockets of free expression under former President Mubarak seem luxurious when compared with the situation today. However, the massive restrictions have led to a flourishing of free expression outside the country. Exiled Egyptian journalism is rapidly expanding, as many independent journalists are prevented from working inside the country. Yet, the political economy of these exiled journalism initiatives is often dependent on competing regional powers, such as Qatar and Turkey (*Al-Sharq TV* in Istanbul or *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed TV* in London). In addition, other media with limited professional experience depend on media assistance programs, such as the critically acclaimed investigative *MadaMasr*, which is banned within Egypt.

Contextualizing the Egyptian media system within its political determinants is important, as it depends on possible freedoms. The latest rare and short-lived protests in September 2019 erupted after disclosures of corruption were aired on *YouTube* by a self-exiled whistleblower, and resulted in a massive crackdown in the fall of 2019. Those connections between critical voices in exile and those within the country are facilitated

by new media and transnationalization. Situated within the context of the ongoing socioeconomic problems that caused the Arab uprisings, and encouraged by the current global rise of right-wing authoritarianism, the political system has attempted to achieve stability at any cost.

In addition, the professional media scene faces numerous crises, such as erosion of the economic viability of media, declining professionalism, reproduction of loyalist and propagandistic practices, and clientelist patronage within a restrictive environment. The fragmented professional community of journalists has moreover weakened efforts to unionize.

Outlook

Egyptian media are heading into the unknown: the “death of journalism,” extreme de-politicization of the public sphere, and the restrictive media environment have all weakened the media system. Under the current circumstances, no political will is pushing for progress or open investments in the media sector. Although the Supreme Media Regulatory Council announced an ambitious digitization plan for the media, no clear agenda is visible, except tightening control and advancing loyalist media. Official governmental rhetoric is using modernization and innovation discourses to pass collaborations for digitizing randomly selected archives. Massive financial problems and a dependent political economy hinder any serious attempts to give the media a societal relevance when compared with social media. Egyptian media remains oblivious to this convergence. At the same time, the current, globally interconnected world still poses a serious challenge to those in power, as illustrated by the exiled, transnational media landscape. However, these reflect regional alliances that are volatile. The weakened and stifled Egyptian media system has immense potential if given the chance to grow autonomously: a strong legacy, unused economic assets, talented journalists, and a big market that constitutes one-third of the population of Arab countries. Yet, these unused resources still make it unlikely for Egypt’s media system to witness better times anytime soon. Despite these recommendations, the situation is extremely unpredictable in the long term. Therefore, in case of a political opening, whether through reforms from above or the regime was forced to respond by a renewed public upheaval or international pressure, the potential for transformation of the media system is there.

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