

Global Communications

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# 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>

# 16. Tunisia: The Transformative Media Landscape after the Revolution

*Noureddine Miladi*

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The media landscape in Tunisia has witnessed significant transformations since the revolution of 14 January 2011. After decades of being direct controlled and tightly monitored by the dictatorial regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the country has shifted to a new era of a diverse media market. Public service media have been consolidated and made independent from government interference. Newly established television and radio channels have been thriving and stand in competition with the public service broadcasters. This diversity in the media market has also been accompanied by regulatory frameworks which guarantee free speech and the independence of journalists. In spite of its slow development, the independent television and radio regulator Haute Autorité Indépendante de la Communication Audiovisuelle (High Independent Authority of the Audiovisual Commission, or HAICA), has been integral in transforming the nature of the audio-visual market to meet international standards.

However, despite these recent advances in media development, I argue in this chapter that, similar to any other transitional democracy, in the case of Tunisia, ideological forces, the power of business magnates, and overseas influences remain key factors which affect the operation of various media outlets.

## Background

The Arab uprisings, which were triggered in Tunisia by ousting Zain El-Abidin Ben Ali from power on 14 January 2011, have set a landmark for change in all aspects of the locals' lives. The one-party ruling regimes of Ben Ali and his predecessor Habib Bourguiba came to an end and gave way to a new democratic era. As a result, Tunisia, after living through decades of dictatorships, has been undergoing significant transformations regarding democratic governance, freedom of speech, and empowerment of civil society organizations. This transformative scene has evidently reinvigorated and changed the shape of the media market in terms of ownership, governance, editorial policies, and regulations.

Situated in the north of Africa and overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, Tunisia is bordered by Algeria on the northwest and Libya on the south. The population reached 11.8 million in 2020, and its GDP dropped compared with that of 2014 from USD 47.6 billion to USD 39.9 billion in 2020. Although a sizeable portion of its southern region is located in the Sahara Desert, Tunisia has a rich farming landscape and self-sufficient agricultural production.

Tunisia's official religion is Islam. The Maliki school of thought represents a key source for jurisprudence. There exists a small minority of Jews in the north as well as in the southern part of the country on the island of Djerba. Arabic is the official language, and French is the second most spoken language and, to some extent, the language of the elites. Many business enterprises as well as educational institutions still use French as their main language for communication.

Tunisia's past reveals a rich antiquity that spans across three thousand years of successive civilizations. Although Islamic culture overwhelmingly constitutes the country's identity, Tunisia's long history has always included a multiethnic, cross-cultural character influenced by the Carthaginian, Roman, Arab, Islamic, Berber, European, and Ottoman civilizations. As the site of the Phoenician city of Carthage, and later, as the Africa Province, Tunisia was of strategic significance in connecting Africa and Europe during the Roman times and was known as the breadbasket of the Roman Empire.

Tunisia's economic divide can be readily seen in the marked differences between the North and coastal cities when compared with the rural and southern parts of the country. The regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali had heavily invested in infrastructure, education, health, and tourism in the main coastal cities of Tunis, Nabeul, Bizerte, Monastir, Sousse, and Sfax. By contrast, most of the southern regions of Elkaf, Gafsa, Jandouba, Kairouan, Sidi Bouzid, and Mednine, among others, still suffer from poor infrastructure, lack of investments, and high rates of unemployment. The resentment that arose from this regional divide constituted one of the key reasons for the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution in the marginalized city of Sidi Bouzid. This regional divide is also evident in the distribution of media organizations across the country, as both state and private television channels and radio stations, in addition to major newspapers, are still primarily based in the wealthy coastal cities.

## Historical Developments

In the modern era, Tunisia was under colonial rule by France from 1881 until its independence in 1956. Soon after the French invasion, the Tunisian Bey (ruler) representing the Ottoman Sultan was deposed. As a consequence, the beylic system was replaced after the treaty of Bardo and the Convention of Al-Marsa in 1883 by a new French authority called the French Resident General. Immediately after assuming power, the new governor embarked on changing the political, economic, and social order of Tunisia. These measures affected all aspects of everyday life including changes in communication and culture, which were persistently resisted by the locals. Similar to its neighboring country Algeria, the Tunisian anti-colonization movement led a long and unremitting struggle for independence. The resistance movement gathered momentum especially after dramatic changes in the international geopolitical scene after World War II. That momentum had been partly aided by the circulation of newspapers and newsletters among the activists and emerging educated elite.

During the French colonization, print publishing thrived in both the Arabic and French languages. During the French occupation from 1881 to 1956, there were more than 100 newspapers and periodicals

published in Arabic, in addition to tens of newspapers published in French. Newspapers served as significant platforms for the struggle against the French occupation (Instance Vérité & Dignité, 2018). Prominent newspapers at the time, such as *Sawt Attalib Al-Zaytouni*, *Al-Tunisi*, *Al-Hadirah*, *Azzahra*, *Al-Talia'*, *Sabilurashad*, *Al-Fajr*, *Assourour*, and *Al-Dustour*, were crucial in sustaining the anti-colonial movement and challenging the communication strategy of the occupation power. Immediately after taking control of the country, the French colonial power confiscated some newspapers, including the *Al-Raid Al-Tunisi* and *Al-Tunisi* newspapers, among others, and turned them into mouthpieces of the colonial administration. In 1911, the French colonial power censored every Arabic language newspaper except for one which was the official organ of the French colonials. Additionally, as a new measure to regulate and control the newspaper market, a Communication Control Council was set up after WWII and was headed by a general from the colonial council. Part of its mission was to issue new licenses and regulatory laws, and control content.

However, the post-independence era was not free of media repression. Up to the eve of the 14 January 2011 revolution, Tunisia had been ruled by only two presidents: Habib Bourguiba (1956–1987) and Zain El-Abidin Ben Ali (1987–2011). Both had led dictatorial regimes and held control of every branch of the Tunisian state including the media sector. Both eras witnessed dark times as well as instances in which restrictions on free speech were slightly loosened (Zran & Ben Messaoud, 2018). Soon after the country's independence, the self-appointed president Habib Bourguiba not only prevented pluralism in radio and television broadcasting and the press but also monopolized the management and decision-making process in key media outlets. On 31 May 1966, the first television network began broadcasting and later became the Tunisian Radio and Television Corporation. This Tunisian broadcaster emerged as an official government body, which did not have the sovereignty of public service broadcasting institutions. Senior and middle managers were directly appointed by the presidential palace. Leadership positions were also allocated on the basis of strict allegiance to the ruling party, the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique or Constitutional Democratic Assembly (RCD) (Zran & Ben Messaoud, 2018).

As for the printed press, Bourguiba allowed, in the early years of his rule, the publication of only four newspapers: *Al-Amal* (in Arabic) and *L'Action Tunisienne*, which both functioned as organs of his political party (Free and Constitutional Party), as well as *La Press*, which was the mouthpiece of the government, and its Arabic version *Al-Sabah*. Although the two latter publications were declared as independent, they followed strict editorial guidelines set by the Ministry of Interior. Tight legislations governing the press and broadcasting first appeared within Article 8 of the 1 June 1959 Constitution. The document stipulated that freedom of speech and freedom of the press were guaranteed, but the specific legislation governing the field of media and communication was repressive and arbitrary.

In 1961, the *Tunisian and African Press Agency (TAP)* was launched. For decades, it remained the main and official source of news, focusing mainly on the regime and serving its agenda. During this period, the propaganda machine employed every possible means of state media and communication in order to establish political legitimacy and hegemonic influence in the public sphere. Through the Office of State Media, established on 31 May 1956, Bourguiba directly monitored and controlled all media outlets. In the mid-1960s, Tunisia witnessed further setbacks on civil liberties and free speech, which included closing down several media outlets and often forcing their owners to leave the country. This period coincided with the incarceration of the leaders of the Yousfi movement (named after its leader Ahmed ben Yousuf) and banning the activity of the Tunisian Communist Party.

Journalism education was yet another component of Bourguiba's regime. With the aim of breeding new generations of journalists, on 30 December 1967, he inaugurated the first college of journalism in the country and the region, the Institut de Presse et des Sciences de l'Information (IPSI). The institute served as an incubator for future generations of qualified journalists who fed both press and broadcast journalism institutions over the years.

Bourguiba dominated the content of daily news bulletins on state television and national radio, as well as on official and pro-government newspapers. These platforms repeatedly reported on his daily presidential engagements such speeches, meetings, and visits to various places. Due to this controlled discourse, broadcasting outlets seriously

lacked depth and diversity and were characterized by a top-down indoctrinatory style of communication that was well orchestrated by the head of state (Hajji, 2004).

During this period, Tunisia witnessed its darkest epoch in media censorship and the repression of free speech. Total control of the media and self-censorship were the norm. Human rights and political activists rarely dared to openly criticize the ruling regimes. Those who crossed the line even at small gatherings, seminars, or academic symposia were arrested and subsequently given prison sentences. Scores of journalists fell victim to Bourguiba and Ben Ali's media censorship. Bashir ben Ahmed, one of the early diplomats who headed the Ministry of Information, could not tolerate Bourguiba's dominant persona and founded *Jeune Afrique* magazine in 1961 after resigning from office. After he settled in Paris in 1962, *Jeune Afrique* continued to operate as a significant platform for news and current affairs analysis about Tunisia and the African region, attracting not only a large readership among the Tunisian diaspora but also among the Tunisian elites back home. It remains to this day an influential publication.

The state's tight control over media outlets did not change during the mandate of Ben Ali (1987–2011). However, a key feature of this era was that Ben Ali's family members became influential in every sphere of public life including the media. His political party, RCD, was the tool through which the Ben Ali regime managed to infiltrate every media institution.

The Ministry of Information and the External Communication Agency (ATCE) were two official bodies employed by the Ben Ali regime as instruments to control the media (Ben Letaif, 2018). The ATCE was in charge of out-of-state propaganda campaigns for the regime. Mainly through bribing journalists and media companies, the ATCE generously paid writers and PR organizations in Europe and the US to report fake economic successes of the regime and falsified claims about stability, freedom, and respect for human rights at a time when Tunisia witnessed one of the darkest episodes of its modern history. The ATCE, argued Ben Letaif (2018), "paid mercenaries and foreign political figures to promote the image of Ben Ali in their respective countries" (p. 3).

A further measure employed by the Bourguiba regime and later maintained during Ben Ali's rule was the 1975 Press Code that aimed



to censor information and exercise tight control over free speech. The “legal deposit” requirement compelled all publishers to submit a copy of their publications before distribution. This gatekeeping policy allowed regime regulators to censor every form of media content and punish every journalist critical of the regime, such as through heavy fines and sometimes prison sentences. Under such a regime defamation was a politically manipulated legislative tool used to accuse and imprison political dissidents and independent journalists. Tailor-made court sentences for attempting to jeopardize state security and public order or causing offence to the head of the state and other government figures were always in place (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

Among the notorious cases documented by international human rights organizations were those related to the ordeals faced by various journalists, political as well as human rights activists. Um Ziyad, a Tunisian female journalist, was imprisoned and tortured for a month in 2003 after using her blog to highlight problems within the country’s education system and calling for proper reform of this sector. Hamadi Jebali, former editor of the *Al-Fajr* newspaper in the 1980s, and later a prime minister in the coalition government (2012–2013), was imprisoned for over 15 years under Ben Ali’s rule for spearheading a newspaper that heavily criticized the regime’s corruption. Because Internet platforms posed another challenge for the Ben Ali regime from 2000 onwards, systematic blocking of activists’ homepages, *Facebook*, and *YouTube* was common practice. For over 10 years, the websites of *Al-Nahdah Net*, *Al-Kalima*, *Tunis News*, and *Al-Bawwaba*, among other critical news sources, were censored in Tunisia. However, such news sites continued to function as thriving platforms for discussions and news reporting about Tunisian politics in the diaspora. This struggle for freedom of speech among oppositional media, in addition to ongoing political changes in the country, has meant that Tunisia has set a benchmark in terms of democratic governance and media freedoms for other Arab uprising countries

## Political System and Legal Framework

On 23 October 2011, Tunisia witnessed its first free democratic general elections that brought Ennahda, an Islamist political party headed by

Rashid Ghannouchi, to power for the first time. Moncef Marzouki, a former exiled political activist and founder of the Congress for the Republic party was proposed as their preferred presidential candidate. As a result, the country announced its first democratically elected government after over 60 years of dictatorship. A three-party coalition was formed among Ennahda, the secular party Ettakatol, and the Congress for the Republic (CPR) which ruled in Tunisia after the 2011 Constituent Assembly election.

Social and political instability kept mounting due to increasing unemployment, economic uncertainties, and shrinking foreign investment in the country. Political tension between the troika-led government and opposition parties, specifically from the extreme left, continued to simmer and took a dangerous turn after the assassination of two political activists, Chokri Belaïd in February 2013 and Mohammed Brahmi in July 2013. The political deadlock worsened as a result of hundreds of strikes organized by the General Labour Union in various parts of the country, which led the Ennahda Party to withdraw from power and opened the way for a general election. The legislative election held on 26 October 2014 and the presidential elections of 23 November 2014 brought the newly formed Nidaa Tounis (headed by Beji Caid Essebsi, a career minister from the Bourguiba era) to power. This guaranteed the success of a democratic and peaceful political transition and saved the country from falling into the same scenario as Egypt, Libya, or Syria which led either to the return of dictatorship or civil war.

The abovementioned challenges have impacted the media scene in terms of its operation and development. For instance, tension among various political parties has found its way to the front pages of newspapers and heated discussion programs on television and radio stations. As Tunisia has lived through decades of government media control, it will take time for a culture of free speech and free media to mature and develop. Nonetheless, this process is gradually taking place in Tunisia through the development of public service broadcasting, which is empowering independent and community media and strengthening the role of independent regulatory bodies. In fact, the biggest achievements of the Ennahda-led troika government were arguably the writing of the Tunisian constitution and the establishment

of the independent council for media, HAICA. The HAICA was set up in May 2013 as the new regulatory body for monitoring television and radio content, issuing new licenses for both the public and private sectors. The establishment of this new independent regulatory body was preceded by the dissolution of the Ministry of Information and the ATCE, which had been used as the strong arms of the Ben Ali regime in controlling information.

It can be argued that the Tunisian media market has been significantly transformed because of the historical shift in the political scene. Its unprecedented growth has encompassed not only satellite television, but also radio stations, newspapers, and Internet platforms. From a handful of media outlets mainly controlled by the former Ben Ali regime, dozens of radio stations, television channels, and online news platforms, in addition to a plethora of newspapers and magazines, have been launched since 2011. The Decree-Law No. 115 (on the Press, Printing and Publishing) passed in February 2011 concerns both print and electronic media. This new law repealed the 1975 Press Code and paved the way for freedom of the press and organization of the market, and regulated ownership and control of newspapers and magazines. However, unlike the audiovisual market, the printed press is not yet under the umbrella of an independent regulatory authority.

Compared with the Ben Ali era, the post-revolutionary period witnessed a dramatic expansion of the broadcasting market. Today, there are 12 television channels and over 21 radio stations transmitting from various parts of the country. These channels and stations are now licensed and regulated under Decree-Law No. 116 by the Broadcasting Authority, that is, the HAICA. The analogue television market is currently dominated by three television channels, *Al-Watania 1* (known as *Tunis7* before the revolution) and *Al-Watania 2* (known as *Tunis21* before the revolution), both of which cover almost all of the Tunisian territory, while *Hannibal TV* covers only 45% (Office National de la Télédiffusion, 2014). The digital market currently includes the abovementioned two channels (*Al-Watania 1+2*), in addition to nine private channels: *Hannibal*, *Nessma*, *Ezzitouna*, *Attounissia*, *El-Hiwar Ettounsi*, *Attessia TV*, *M Tunisia*, *Tunisna TV*, *Al-Insen*, *Telvsa TV*, *Al-Janoubia*, and *Carthage+* (Office National de la Télédiffusion, 2014). In September 2020, the Press Council was set up as a culmination of collaborative efforts between various civil

society organizations. The council functions as an independent, not-for-profit body that works to establish self-regulation for the media in order to protect freedom of the press, and to defend Tunisian citizens' right to obtain quality information. Its key roles are to assist media institutions in establishing mechanisms that abide by the ethics of the profession, to mediate between the profession and the public, and to improve legislation related to the media sector, especially in the written and electronic press.

This new environment has significantly widened the scope of free speech to a level not experienced before. The global freedom index of Freedom House, for instance, rated Tunisia "very high" in terms of freedom of expression. Although blasphemy remains illegal, the new constitution stipulates that freedom of belief and conscience should be guaranteed for all citizens. It also "bans campaigns against apostasy and incitement to hatred and violence on religious grounds" (Freedom House, 2020). Article 31 states that "Freedom of opinion, thought, expression, media and publication shall be guaranteed. These freedoms shall not be subject to prior censorship." Also, Article 32 confirms that "The state shall guarantee the right to information and the right to access information. The state seeks to guarantee the right to access to information networks." As a reflection of the new free media environment, television and radio stations now host shows and discuss issues that would have been impossible to air before the revolution. Talk shows about political reform, corruption, education, the role of the police, civil society, human rights, culture, and sports have become the digest of scores of channels. This has provided a critical space for members of the public to express their views regarding the shape of the new democracy in the country. The public service network is rapidly adapting to the challenge of finding its role in light of the competition from private channels. However, the public television network is caught in the middle of ideological tensions. These tensions exist partly among a few influential key players from various political parties who have infiltrated these media institutions and, to some extent, the regulatory body, HAICA, and the National Journalism Syndicate.

## Economy and Ownership Patterns

Ownership and control of Tunisia's media organizations has also been subject to transformations. After decades of total control under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes, ownership of television channels, radio stations, newspapers, and magazines has taken a dramatic turn since January 2011. This boom has brought new players into the market, many of whom are state funded, while others are privately funded or receive support from external bodies. Although private media organizations claim independence, direct links between media proprietors and political affiliation are highly visible. Nabil El Karoui, founder of *Nessma TV*, for instance, was also one of the founders of the political party Nidaa Tounis, later a founder of Kalb Tounis, and eventually a presidential candidate in the elections of October 2019. Tahar ben Hassine, the founder of *Al-Hiwar Ettounsi*, was also one of the founders of Nidaa Tounis and an influential member of the previous regime of Ben Ali. Larbi Nasra, founder of *Hannibal TV*, is a key figure in the party Voice of Tunisia People. Oussama ben Salem, founder of *Zitouna TV*, is a member of Ennahda, and his father was also one of the founders of Ennahda. Mohammed Ayachi Ajroudi, owner of *Janoubia TV*, is a key figure in the Tunisian Movement for Liberty and Dignity. Although a few of the abovementioned media owners/founders sold their shares before entering politics (namely Oussama ben Salem and Tahar ben Hassine) to comply with the HAICA regulations, political influence over various channels during election campaigns openly continued. *Nessma TV* was accused by the regulatory body HAICA of blatantly promoting the presidential candidate Nabil Karoui and his party Kalb Tounis during the legislative elections of September 2019 and presidential elections of October 2019 (HAICA, 2019). According to the same report, *Nessma TV* dedicated 24 hours and half of its airtime during the legislative election campaign to promote Kalb Tounis and its leader: six hours were direct propaganda and about 18 hours were various other political promotions such as advertising the humanitarian campaign of Nabil Karoui and his relief organization Khalil Tounis.

## Technology and Infrastructure

Compared with other African countries, Tunisia has one of the most “sophisticated telecommunications and broadband infrastructures in North Africa,” according to Lancaster (2020). Mobile and Internet technologies were also rated among the highest in the region in terms of coverage and penetration. Governance of the Internet has been relaxed since 2011 following a liberal turn (de la Ferrière & Vallina-Rodriguez, 2014). The Telecommunications Act of 2013 put an end to Internet censorship and encouraged competition between online platforms. Also, the laws supporting e-commerce have boosted online marketing and digital business activities. ADSL service is primarily provided by *Tunis Telecom*, a state-owned telecommunications company. Other main players in the market include the Qatari-based *Ooredoo* and *Orange Tunisie*. Both are licensed as fixed-line operators and have launched DSL and fiber-to-the-premises (FTTP) services. The Digital Tunisia 2020 program launched by the government aims to boost Internet connectivity and improve service in underserved areas all over the country.

Tunisia is reasonably developed when it comes to mobile phone technology. In 2016, the state issued three licenses to major networks in order to provide 4G technology, which enabled faster services and telecommunications coverage in every part of the country. These licenses came with a commitment from each service provider to reach 98% of the country by 2031 (Instance Nationale des Télécommunication, 2016, p. 37). Looking ahead, the regulatory body has also confirmed that 5G licenses are expected to be released in 2021.

These developments in telecommunications technologies have also been reflected by Tunisians’ increasing Internet and social media use even before the revolution of 2011. In early 2020, Internet users reached 7.55 million (64% of the population) and active social media users constituted 62% of the population (7.3 million). *Facebook* remains the most popular social media platform among Tunisians. The number of total users of *Facebook* reached 6.9 million, which constitutes 75% of the population over 13 years of age. Although *Twitter* is a very popular platform in other Arab countries such as those the Gulf region, those who prefer this social media platform in Tunisia do not exceed 272,500, whereas *Snapchat* attracts 765,000 users, *Instagram* 1.9 million (21%

of the population), and *LinkedIn* 1.2 million (14% of the population) (Hootsuite, 2020).

Much has been said about social media networks as platforms for promoting social activism and resistance. *Facebook* and *Twitter* were considered instrumental in the Tunisian uprisings, operating as tools with which protesters challenged the brutality and censorship of the Ben Ali regime. Although it is hard to measure such influence, it was evident that social networks became alternative platforms for news. As argued by various studies on the Tunisian uprisings (Castells, 2012; Chomiak, 2011; Karolak, 2018; Miladi, 2016; Zayani, 2015), thanks to these digital platforms, protesters managed to get their voices heard by and stories out to the world. Marginalized youth proved that they were not mere observers or followers of news but could become shapers of mainstream media's news agenda. Most noteworthy was that they gained influence in disrupting the Tunisian regime's information management and its political communication channels both locally and internationally. Ben Ali's External Communications Unit, for instance, faced challenges in controlling the barrage of information spreading via social media and reaching out to an international audience via satellite television. Constant monitoring and partial blocking of *Facebook* in December 2010 was the last resort of the failed regime's attempt at containment and control.

The post-revolutionary period in Tunisia has witnessed the growing influence of social media platforms. For instance, with reference to the Tunisian elections of 26 October 2014, social media, it can be argued, assumed an effective watchdog role. For example, the youth-led civil society organizations of I-Watch and ATID harnessed social media platforms during the presidential and legislative elections of 2019 to monitor the election campaigns as well as the voting process. Thus, they not only monitored occurrences of possible corruption among candidates, but also checked media coverage against any possible ideological influences. At the same time, an analysis of the candidates' online activism during that election period revealed that contenders learned from the lessons of previous years and understood that social media was equally as important as traditional media, especially for reaching out to young voters (Miladi, 2016). Activities in the online sphere indicated that *Facebook* and *Twitter* had become battlegrounds

for ideological fights, which the contestants and their supporters had to navigate skillfully. Yet again, *Facebook* pages became critical platforms for a thriving citizen journalism (Zayani, 2015).

It is evident that social media networks have become indispensable tools for communication, news sharing, and political campaigning in Tunisia. Whether employed by activists and opposition groups or political leaders, such networks have increasingly advanced communication and information sharing in various situations, such as political or social campaigns.

## Challenges

The media scene in Tunisia has dramatically changed since the 2011 revolution. A new era of media plurality has not only seen a plethora of television channels, radio stations, and newspapers emerge across the country, which reflects a diverse political and cultural spectrum, but has also freed public broadcasting from government control. However, these changes have not come without challenges in terms of media ownership and regulation. The road to democracy in Tunisia still seems rough given the various obstacles that continue to crop up (Richter, 2017). The current government of Hisham Al-Mishishi, which came to power in August 2020, still needs to radically improve three main areas: 1) sustainability of media's business model, 2) ideological manipulation, and 3) elitist orientation.

Regarding the issue of sustainability, the print market witnessed the closure of hundreds of newspapers and magazines soon after the boom in newspapers and the audiovisual media market from 2011 to 2015. By 2017, the number of printed papers had dropped to 50 after reaching 250 in the post-revolutionary period. For instance, *Akhbar Al-Jumhuriyah* was suspended on 11 October 2017 after 25 years of operation. The broadcasting market has also faced similar challenges. For instance, *First TV* closed down in October 2017 because it was not financially viable. Restructuring, however, has been taking place for a few channels such as *Al-Mutawassit TV* and others.

In respect to manipulation of the media, the growth of the media market has meant increased challenges for regulatory bodies and has caused genuine concerns regarding the influence of new online media



outlets. As such, this post-revolutionary period has also witnessed unremitting tensions between influential media enterprises and Tunisia's first democratically elected government. This is partly due to the conflicting understanding of the media's role in a transitional democracy and attempts to manipulate the media by rich entrepreneurs and ideological lobbies. This raises the question of media independence under the liberal consensus of the market (Johnson & Jacobs, 2004). In this context, concerns about external influences in the Tunisian media market are becoming more prevalent. Many of the challenges faced by the media are directly related to external funding, which has been given to certain media outlets arguably to promote certain political interests.

In terms of the issue of elitist orientation, the class base for the broadcasting and newspaper markets has remained mostly the same even though the state media in Tunisia has dramatically shifted from being government-controlled to a public service media and the regime change has brought new political players to the forefront of politics in the country. The national television broadcaster *Al-Watania TV1* can be seen as part of a divisive process that was firmly established in the decades of dictatorship under Ben Ali and Bourguiba and has continued to shape and strengthen its influence after the revolution. In this post-revolutionary period, particularly during election campaigns, a large number of media outlets are split along ideological and elitist lines rather than adhering to professional norms of journalism practice which, at their core, intend to serve public interests (Miladi, 2019). Public service media are expected to raise awareness about corruption rather than attempt to eliminate it, and are required to bring the public's attention to social problems rather than endeavor to force change in society. The power struggle that has surfaced during the last few years has revealed how a few ideological and elitist groups have attempted to set the agenda for public opinion by using media platforms such as television and radio.

## Outlook

Changes to the telecommunications market, although significant, do not "change how the elements which constitute the deep state govern on a daily basis. Nor does such a change reform the political culture of submissiveness and bullying that allows the repressive state apparatus

to coerce cooperation on behalf of ISPs without any independent oversight” (de la Ferrière & Vallina-Rodriguez, 2014, p. 652). Applying this to the whole media system, one could argue that, during this transitional period that Tunisia has been witnessing, the media remain a sophisticated space of manipulation and power struggle among the emerging power structures in the country. This power struggle is taking place primarily in public spaces, although evidence of it can also be found on television screens and radio airwaves as well as social media networks.

Extensive debates have been taking place across platforms on how to consolidate freedom of speech and strong, diverse, and independent media. These debates have also discussed the best model for regulating the media in Tunisia, and have been supported by various initiatives such as the decree-laws and the establishment of HAICA. In spite of these achievements, more attention needs to be directed towards preventing political influences and overseas infiltration of certain media outlets in Tunisia, and setting up a regulatory body for the newspaper market.

Lastly, the future of the broadcasting market looks bright if the public service broadcaster *Al-Watania Network* steps up and adheres to its professional standards. The new editorial policy aims to reflect a politically, culturally, and economically diverse society. Yet, its news values, documented in the revamped editorial guidelines, are yet to materialize. Among Tunisians, public service media have been upheld as a cornerstone for consolidating a democratic climate in the country’s emerging democracy. Tunisia’s transition to democracy cannot happen without an ideologically neutral media that will constructively observe its role as a watchdog against the corrupt activities of certain politicians and influential power elites in society. Academics and media critics have stated that, although *Al-Watania* television network is an important public service broadcaster, it needs structural reform in its editorial policy, journalism practice, and professionalism standards before it can serve this crucial role of watchdog.

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