

EGYPT¹

Egypt has a relatively strong tradition of a liberal media, dating back to the time of the monarchy. As a result of domestic pressure to free up the journalistic environment, the proliferation of regional satellite TV and also foreign, mainly American, pressure to liberalise politically, Egypt witnessed a general trend towards more media freedoms until the middle of this decade. Recent years, however, have marked a worldwide decline in information freedoms, and Egypt has been no exception. While the country still enjoys a relatively liberal media environment, some indicators suggest that the laissez-faire times are over. In the last couple of years press freedom in Egypt has increasingly suffered from repressive laws, and the extralegal intimidation of journalists is a common occurrence. Some observers even argue that 2007 was among the worst years for freedom of information in Egypt's recent history (Dziadosz 2008).

1. GENERAL INFORMATION ON MEDIA AND MEDIA USE

Egypt has done a relatively good job of combating illiteracy over the course of the last half century, bringing the number of its citizens who can both read and write from 12.5 per cent in 1960 to an official rate of 70 per cent in 2006 (SIS 2007). Despite these positive indications, Egypt's population growth tends to make illiteracy ever harder to confront. The generally poor condition of the state-run education system is another obstacle to universal literacy. The state – struggling to transform the formerly state-controlled economy into a globalised, private sector-driven one, while attempting to accommodate some 600,000 additions to the labour market annually – has strained budgets to breaking point. The high pupil-teacher ratio of around 40 students to one teacher in state schools is an oft-quoted indicator (IDSC 2007: 30).

Literacy and education

There are a large number of local radio and television stations, as well as numerous newspapers available to the Egyptian consumer. Egypt, with its long affiliation with the printing press and political broadsheets, also boasts an enormous number of printed Arabic-language periodicals which has soared to more than 500. Egypt's publications fall into roughly four groups: state-owned publications like Al-Ahram, Al-Akhbar, and Al-Gomhuriya, are not censored. However, their editors are government appointees. Reporters and columnists are given a fair amount of latitude in what they write, as long as they stay away from certain taboos. Publications owned by political parties like Al-Shaab, Al-Wafd or Al-Watan Al-Arabi are not censored either. The party leadership exercises varying degrees of control over editorial policies, which range from hard-line ideology to no influence whatsoever. All of them are vulnerable to various forms of government pressure if they step beyond certain limits. Very rarely, the Supreme Press Council allows an independent publication to register inside of Egypt, like Al-Osboa and Al-Naba. To get such a licence, requires informal clearance by all of Egypt's major security and intelligence agencies. Many Egyptian publications are legally registered abroad due to the difficulties involved in getting registered in Egypt. The country where they are most commonly registered is Cyprus because of its proximity to Egypt and the relative ease with which a licence to publish can be obtained. Thus independent Egyptian publications are often collectively referred to as the 'Cyprus Press'. These publications are subject to the foreign publications censor, who answers directly to the Minister of Information.

Media landscape

Egyptian radio – the first radio service in the Middle East – has long played a vital role in the state's history. Today, eight radio-broadcasting networks, all run by the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), fall under the auspices of the information ministry, and transmit the Egyptian Radio Service countrywide (BBC: Country Report Egypt 2007). State radio is the main provider of news programmes, presenting the government's position on domestic and world affairs. The main stations include Arab Republic of Egypt General Service, Voice of the Arabs, Holy Koran Service and Greater Cairo Radio. The state retained a total monopoly on radio broadcasting until 2003, when two privately operated music stations were launched by the privately owned Nile Production Company: Nigoom FM and Nile FM. These stations, however, are totally restricted to the broadcasting of Arabic or Western pop music and shallow entertainment. Despite the general growth in numbers of radio stations, listening figures have dropped dramatically owing to the spread of television in general and the wide availability of satellite television in particular.

The state also boasts eight terrestrial, free-to-air TV channels. According to Egyptian law, the state is the sole authority allowed to establish and broadcast TV or radio channels locally. Private terrestrial TV channels are still not allowed. Foreign-licensed TV or radio channels may hire air time and transmit their programmes from Egypt, but Egypt cannot be the headquarters of local or foreign private-sector TV channels. The launch of Egypt's two Nilesat communications satellites, one in 1998 and the second in 2000, dramatically increased the number of regional and international stations available to those Egyptian households with satellite dishes, estimated to be between 10 and 20 per cent of all households countrywide. This profoundly affected the landscape of local TV. As regional competitors pulled market share away from Egyptian state news channels, Cairo had to liberalise in order to maintain its audience. This was probably why Cairo allowed the launch of the private sector Dream TV station in the late 1990s by business tycoon Ahmed Bahgat.² Entertainment programmes form much of the output on Dream 1, which targets 16- to 26-year-olds, while Dream 2 attracts older viewers with live talk shows, airing controversial issues not covered on state-run TV. Dream TV triggered off new initiatives by the private sector – such as the newly launched Orascom Television.

Party media All state-run television, radio channels and broadsheets are de facto mouthpieces for the long-ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). These include the 'big three' state daily papers, along with a number of weekly papers and other periodicals, and the ERTU-dominated television and radio stations. Opposition parties may form their own newspapers which, for instance, led to the establishment of newspapers by the Ghad and Karama parties.

Internet media In addition, a rising number of independent local internet newspapers exist. Such local websites, however, avoid agitating the government – i.e. they steer clear of the 'red lines' – as they are still susceptible to harassment, bureaucratic or otherwise. The government, meanwhile, in line with its tilt towards 'modernisation', economic integration and foreign investment, has promoted internet use through several campaigns. Most estimates put the number of Egyptians with internet access at between 8 and 10 per cent of the population.

General media access As for the percentages of the population with access to general media outlets, the following can be said: Nearly all households have radios, while around two-thirds of Egyptians listen to the radio on a regular basis, with news and religious programmes being particular popular. Television remains the most popular medium, with nearly all households having access and an estimated penetration rate of 95 per cent. Newspaper readership among literate Egyptians is low, with regular readers constituting between 15 and 20 per cent of the adult population.

Media consumption Although Egypt suffers from a high illiteracy rate, the print media often serves as a source of information. The ubiquity of radios and especially TV more than offsets the disadvantage in terms of media penetration. The internet is mostly used for emailing and only by a small percentage of the population. However, within this group it is often used for exchange of information. Ultimately, Egypt continues to be a word-of-mouth culture. Verbal exchange probably still accounts for the vast majority of information transfer.

The mass media has a significant influence on the formation of political opinion. Given Egypt's long experience with the mass media (relative to other countries of the region), along with the deep penetration of almost all forms of mass communication, it comes as little surprise that radio, television and newspapers inform the vast bulk of the public. While alternative sources of information (via satellite and internet) have become increasingly accessible, the vast majority of Egyptian citizens still get their news from state information organs. The state's long acquaintance with – and jealous guardianship of – the national communications apparatus has made it adept at steering popular perceptions, primarily over domestic issues, to its own advantage.

*Media influence
on political opinion*

All local television stations, the vast majority of local radio stations, and a large proportion of Egypt's newspapers are state-owned. As stipulated in the constitution, Art. 47, the press is meant to be 'a popular, independent authority,' which '...shall exercise its vocation freely and independently in the service of society through all the means of expression.' In practice, though, the long standing domination of the government by the NDP – and by virtue of the fact that practically all national media organs come under the exclusive purview of the state – has led to a situation where news coverage in state papers is inevitably pro-NDP. Officially, all the holders of leading positions at state-owned newspapers and media authorities are appointed by the Ministry of Information. According to Egypt's Press Law, chief editors of 'national press organisations' are appointed by the Shura Council, whose head is also the head of the Higher Council of the Press.

*State-owned
media*

Currently, the state controls the vast bulk of published and broadcast opinion. This ratio is, however, quickly tilting towards equilibrium, as satellite television is available to a rising number of citizens. The introduction of regional competitors – freely available via satellite dish – has dramatically affected the equation. Larger and larger numbers of Egyptians are getting their news from Gulf-based or Lebanon-based news stations, which are perceived as offering more objective news coverage. It should be added, however, that this phenomenon has forced Cairo to liberalise its news coverage – incrementally, at least. The notion that 'They'll get it anyway from Al-Jazeera' has, at least in some cases, persuaded the state media to report events that would have otherwise gone uncovered. Clearly, there remains a dominance of state-owned media.

*State-owned
media and
published opinion*

The coverage of the state-owned media tends to be very friendly towards the government, although there is a discernible difference when it comes to treatment of the government and its policies in the three different branches of the media. Relative to the broadcast media (television and radio), the press (even the state press) is considerably more liberal in its outlook. In the big state newspapers, and in the handful of opposition ones, a certain degree of criticism of the government is allowed. Certain well-known editorialists (who presumably know just how far they can go) will often offer light to moderate disapproval of certain state policies. The president, personally, of course, is never the subject of criticism.

The broadcast media are much more conservative. Criticism of the government and its policies is rarely seen or heard. Presumably, the fact that so much more of the population relies on radio and television for their news rather than on newspapers (given the still relatively high illiteracy rate) has emboldened the state to allow greater scope for criticism in the latter. There is a notable difference between local news coverage in English and in Arabic, with news in the former tending to be more liberal. The state-run, English-language Al-Ahram Weekly, for example, is allowed notably greater leeway in its coverage of traditionally touchy subjects, government election rigging, police torture and the presidential succession.

Presidential speeches and press conferences are almost always broadcast or carried in newspapers, while cabinet ministers – especially the so-called 'young reformers' holding economy portfolios – are regular speakers at numerous events, which are usually covered by the local press. With the launching of a daily version of the newspaper Ruz Al-Yussuf they were even able to establish their own 'mouthpiece'. In another indication of Cairo's efforts to at least appear more transparent, the government appointed a presidential spokesman. State television also regularly broadcasts parliamentary sessions. During the presidential election, state-run broadcasters and newspapers

*Government
press conferences*

dedicated a substantial percentage of their election coverage to the ruling NDP. Organisations which support free media in Egypt have monitored Egyptian state controlled media during the election campaign and criticised that they dedicated up to 95 percent of their election coverage to the NDP (CIHRS 2008).

All journalists, though, are not given equal access to press conferences. Generally, journalists must get permission to cover senior-level press events from the Information Ministry's press centre. However, if a journalist does not have accreditation with a reputable media organisation, or if they represent a media outlet that has written critically about the government in the past, permission could be delayed until the event has passed. Particular writers, known for critical writing, will be blacklisted from events, and are often denied official press cards. This is much more common, of course, with local journalists than with foreign ones. Major press conferences at the presidential or ministerial level are usually broadcast by one or more of the state television networks.

2. LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

Freedom of expression Technically, freedom of opinion is explicitly defined as a right due to all citizens. Article 47 of the Egyptian constitution reads: 'Freedom of opinion shall be guaranteed. Every individual shall have the right to express his opinion and to publicise it verbally or in writing or by photography or by other means within the limits of the law.' While freedom of opinion is not restricted by any subsequent amendment, it can, in theory, be challenged within the context of the Emergency Law, which has remained in effect ever since the 1980 assassination of President Anwar Sadat. The emergency law stipulates that, given a 'state of emergency', the state can essentially override anything set down in the constitution if it involves a threat – real or perceived – to national security.

Free media coverage The next article, number 48, guarantees the 'Freedom of press, printing, publication and mass media.' It goes on to state that, 'Censorship of newspapers is forbidden as well as notifying, suspending or cancelling them by administrative methods.' However, this is immediately followed by an important qualifier: 'In a state of emergency, or in time of war, limited censorship may be imposed on newspapers, publications and mass media in matters related to public safety or national security in accordance with the law.' The Emergency Law has long served as a handy excuse to stifle opposition opinion in the media, as it essentially allows the executive to do virtually anything it wants – without accountability to any other branch of the government. Ostensibly, the law is aimed at threats to national security, but such a general, unspecific mandate can be made to fit any circumstance.

Regulation of media coverage Egypt's defamation and press laws, which include prison sentences in the case of offences, are a source of longstanding controversy. Given the government's tight control of the broadcast media, defamation or libel cases are the most common. Libel is punishable by a maximum of one-year imprisonment and/or a fine ranging between LE 2,000 and LE 5,000.³ If the target of the offence is a public official, the maximum penalty is two years in jail and/or a fine ranging between LE 5,000 and LE 10,000. The new Press Law of 2006, did in fact remove some of the articles in the Egyptian penal code that result in custodial sentences, but left the overall outlook for press freedoms depressing. To make matters worse, the 2006 law introduced new strictures, one of which created the offence of insulting a foreign head of state. It also made editors-in-chief responsible for the offences of writers serving under them. Observers argue, therefore, that the new press law was at least partly responsible for the deterioration of the legal situation for Egyptian journalists in 2007 (Black 2008).

The implementation of general media coverage is also set down in the constitution. Article 207, under the 'New Provision' (amended in 1980), which, in its second chapter, deals with the Press Authority, states: 'The press shall exercise its vocation freely and independently ... It shall thus interpret the trend of public opinion while contributing to its information and orientation within the framework of the basic components of society'. However some informal restrictions are ostensibly imposed on media coverage when handling some issues broadly considered as immoral, such as homosexuality. This issue is regarded a taboo in the Egyptian society and usually represented as a social or physical disease.

In detail, media coverage is not only regulated by the constitution and the press law but also by a number of other laws such as the penal code, the Journalism Regulation Law, the State Documents Law, the Party Law, the Civil Servants Law and the Intelligence Law. These laws ban a lot of media coverage on several issues and impose detention on 'whoever affronts the president of the republic'.⁴ This regulation in particular led to the increase of imprisonments and restrictions imposed on journalists in summer 2007 after the publication of false speculations about the president's state of health. Beside the laws removing the right to collect information, publishing it, and codifying the state monopoly of information, there is also the Emergency Law, under which censorship is permitted in cases of emergency. For instance Article 2 of the Emergency Law 162/1958 provided exceptional procedures against freedoms of the press and expression, empowering authorities to censor newspapers, publications, periodicals and all kinds of expression and advertisement before publication.

The legal framework that governs media coverage has witnessed some ambivalent trends in the past few years. In 2006 for instance, an amendment to Egypt's publishing law was passed by the Egyptian parliament, which removed an article stipulating prison terms for journalists who defamed public officials with allegations of corruption. Positive developments like this were neutralised by new regulations in 2007, which led to the detention of critical journalists and to the closure of some private satellite TV stations (i.e. the Lebanese channel Al-Manal, run by Hizbullah). These developments show that the legal environment has slightly improved in some areas and slightly worsened in others, leaving a general impression of no change in quality.

Changes in the past five years

The events of 9/11 changed the freedom of media coverage in Egypt in some respects. While no new anti-terror legislation was passed restricting the freedom of media coverage, none was really necessary, as the Emergency Law was already in place. The one thing 9/11 did do is push the cancellation of the Emergency Law – which some observers had thought was imminent – into the distant future. In 2007 and 2008, the abolition of the law remains a chief demand of the vocal opposition, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. The government has partly reacted to this demand by announcing a new Anti-Terror Law for 2008, which should replace the existing Emergency Law, but it promises little change in practice.

For many observers the year 2007 marked a slight worsening in free media coverage in Egypt. This impression is generally based on four developments. First, was the imprisonment of several chief editors in September 2007 after they had published rumours alleging President Mubarak's health was ailing. Second, was the tightening of operating conditions for Egypt's lively blogger scene, which has been under increasing legal pressure since November 2006. Third, was the discussion about monitoring the financial, administrative and legal aspects of the independent press by government authorities that arose on the occasion of a new decree in December 2007. And fourth, was the attempts of the Egyptian government and the Arab League – supported by Saudi Arabia – to establish a code of ethics for journalists, aiming at banning satellite stations which air 'immoral' content.

All newspapers registered abroad submit all of their issues to the official censors prior to distribution. Stories that do not pass the censors' criteria are eliminated from the final publication, assuring that the whole newspaper will not be banned – which can result in substantial economic losses to the publishers. The government employs official censors whose job it is to peruse all printed materials registered abroad before they are printed locally. Content deemed offensive to the state or to religious sensibilities is removed. Copies of publications which, for instance, reprinted the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad considered to be offensive to Islam in 2006 and again in 2008 were banned in Egypt.

Legal censorship

The local broadcast media are – with the exception of the two music-oriented radio stations – entirely controlled by the state and are, therefore, self-censored. Printed publications registered abroad, however, must allow government censors to check content before printing (which is in most cases done locally) and distribution. State censorship covers two main categories: the morally offensive and the political. In the first case, the state will censor any film or pictures that would be

viewed as offensive to traditional sensibilities. Political censorship by state authorities is permitted, in a state of emergency, with 'limited censorship' being imposed on mass media 'in matters related to public safety or national security in accordance with the law' (Article 48). Obviously, both terms could be applied to almost anything. In some cases, coverage of certain groups – or issues associated with those groups – is restricted. Coverage of potentially divisive religious issues is forbidden.

If journalists or media organisations cross any 'red lines', they face a number of legal (and possibly extra-legal) consequences. If their reporting could be construed as an attack on an official figure, they could face substantial fines; prison sentences of up to two years; closure of the publication; and unofficial bureaucratic harassment and intimidation. As already mentioned, in 2007 four prominent journalists were sentenced to one year each in prison for publishing libellous material about the president, his son – who is also assistant secretary general of the ruling party – and the minister of interior. The defendants included prominent editors such as Ibrahim Eissa of the independent daily Al-Dostour, Wael al-Ibrashi of independent weekly Sout al-Umma, and Adel Hammouda of independent weekly Al-Fagr. At the time of writing the court cases were still pending.

Media licenses TV stations, radio stations and newspapers must be licensed by the state before they can publish or broadcast. Obtaining such licences is extremely difficult. Licences are very often simply refused rather than taken away. For businessmen and companies, the likelihood of acquiring an Egyptian publication licence is minuscule, as the authorities make the bureaucracy involved untenable. The authorities responsible for licensing new media organisations are entirely controlled by the ruling NDP.

Journalists' legal status No particular people, groups or organisations are excluded by law from working as journalists, but this does not mean that everybody can work as a media professional. Authorities only acknowledge members of the Press Syndicate as journalists, threatening everybody working as a journalist without syndicate membership with six months in jail for taking on a false vocation. Consequently, denial of membership of the Press Syndicate is a popular tool to prevent certain people from working as journalists. In February 2008, for example, the team of the independent Al-Badeel newspaper was not given membership status, supposedly for not meeting certain 'formal criteria' (Daily News Egypt 10.3.2008). A substantial number of journalists are denied the right to join the Press Syndicate. In addition to these restrictions, certain groups are given less opportunity to air their complaints via the media. These groups are generally characterised by their religious affiliations. One of the things the state is most sensitive to is the potential for inter-religious strife between Christians and Muslims. For that reason, interdenominational frictions are quickly dealt with by the authorities – and played down in the state-run media.

Official press cards are given to journalists – local and foreign – by the Information Ministry's press centre if the applicant works as a journalist for a state media organ or if they are the employee of a known and approved media service. Press cards gain the holder entrance to most ministerial-level press conferences, but a special 'presidential card' is needed to attend events where the president will be present. The activity of journalists – local and foreign – is controlled by this system of press cards. Occasionally, journalists are turned down who are not accredited with reputable news institutions or are deemed hostile to the state. Work permits are refused quite often. Generally, journalists with press accreditation (i.e. approved by the press centre) can attend public meetings of the government and parliament. In the case of high-level meetings, for example at ministerial level, special arrangements have to be made in advance with the press centre.

In cases of state repression, journalists can appeal to the Journalists' Syndicate, which is quite active in supporting journalists' rights and usually takes up the cause of journalists suffering from state repression. The power of the syndicate, however, is extremely limited vis-à-vis the state. Following elections for a new chairman and council in November 2007, the syndicate is even more likely to use soft power than outright confrontation with the government. The new chairman is widely perceived as the government's choice (Black 2008; Shehab 2007). Since 2006, journalists can also resort to the Supreme Press Council, an 'independent' body that was formed by presidential decree in 2006 to administer the affairs of the press. This entity is an adjunct of the Shura Council and considered merely a front for the government's attempt to control the media. This was

illustrated in 2006, when the council issued a warning against the Journalists' Syndicate, threatening to take its own appropriate measures against journalists.

While the formation of private media monopolies is almost impossible, it is not, technically, prohibited by law. Private media cartels generally do not exist, as the state tends to keep the nation's media organs under its control. There is one exception: the Good News Group of the entrepreneurial Adeeb family, which owns the private business-daily *Al-Alam Al-Youm*, holds a significant stake in some radio-stations and has also contributed substantial funding for the launching of the independent newspaper *Masri Al-Yawm*.

Monopolies and cartels

3. POLITICAL CONDITIONS

There are certain groups that have traditionally been excluded, to varying degrees, from having their concerns and interests covered in the mainstream local media. Such groups can be broken down into two general categories: religious and geographic. The former include the Coptic Christians, who form a substantial minority of the national population and have regularly complained that Christian affairs go relatively uncovered by government media.

Coverage of marginal groups

It should also be mentioned that, in terms of newspapers, readership is thought to be heavily concentrated in the capital, reflecting an inherent bias in the media. All printing is done in Cairo, with distribution to the rest of the country on a nightly basis by rail or truck. More importantly, though, coverage is slanted towards issues relating to the central government or the country as a whole, with an accompanying Cairo-oriented slant in the perspective. There is hardly any such thing as a serious local newspaper, even in Alexandria, with a population of nearly 5 million, including affluent and well-educated segments.

Essentially, all state-run media practises self-censorship, as the editorial staffs of these institutions are well versed in what can and cannot be covered. In contrast, foreign publications printed in Egypt must be shown to state censors before printing and local distribution. Self-censorship occurs in all segments of the state-run media, as well as in certain state-friendly publications. Generally, the 'red lines' to be avoided in self-censoring publications are criticisms directed at the person of the president and his immediate family and divisive religious issues. Dangerous areas also include Egyptian cooperation with Israel, the issue of the presidential succession and political Islam. Self-censorship in films and TV programs is also widespread, not only to escape the censors at home, but because the Egyptian entertainment industry relies heavily on the Saudi and Gulf market. Saudi guidelines for productions are much more stringent, prohibiting certain expressions such as criticism of religion, swearing, references to horoscopes, etc.

Self-censorship

Instances of threatening or intimidating journalists have gradually declined over the last decades – at least compared to the 1970s – but journalists are still occasionally subject to harassment by the state. A report published in 2005 by the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights said that journalists in Egypt suffer numerous forms of discrimination including unfairness in legislation, judicial prosecution of journalists for their writing and opinions, assault and death threats, and sexual assault of female journalists (EOHR 2006). The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) issued its first annual report about the state of freedom of expression in Egypt in 2007. According to this report, many violations were committed in 2007 against the press, including suing, threatening and arresting journalists in addition to defaming them, physically assaulting them and preventing them from doing their job. ANHRI listed several violations committed against various kinds of artistic creation. These violations included: banning, sponsorship, intervention to amend soap operas, filing cases and fatwas of 'Takfir' (edicts stating that someone is an unbeliever) (ANHRI 2007).

State repression

Internet access in Egypt is not restricted. Due to the successful implementation of a free internet strategy, Egypt now has the largest internet market in Africa with more than six million users in 2007 (Internet World Stats 2007). However, internet penetration is still relatively low and the vast majority of users are located in urban areas. While Egypt does not have an official policy of

Obstacles to internet access

'censoring' the internet, it would appear that, at least on some occasions, state authorities have taken steps to block or disrupt certain websites, particularly those that tend to be highly critical of the government. In this case the user is given the illusion that the websites are inaccessible due to server errors or browser malfunctions (Dziadosz 2008: 122). While mostly Islamist websites were affected by this policy in the past, nowadays it is Egypt's blogger scene that is facing intimidation. Most famous has been the case of the blogger Kareem Amer who was sentenced to four years in prison for 'defaming the president of Egypt' and 'insulting Islam'.

Changes in the past five years The threat of state repression has not changed in quality over the last five years. Despite pressures – both internal and external – to reform, it is understood that, if the state feels threatened, it will not refrain from using extra-legal forms of repression and harassment. This situation is not expected to improve in the short term, especially vis-à-vis rising popular dissent with the ruling elites and deteriorating living conditions.

Government control over print media State-owned media monitor the production and distribution of print media. They are produced entirely by employees of the government, and therefore toe the government line. However, all media sources follow the principal of self-censorship, implying that they automatically avoid whatever issues have been defined as 'off limits' by the government. Generally, state authorities most definitely take advantage of these informal mechanisms of control and frequently use this kind of repression. The legal restrictions also include controlling the distribution of independent newspapers, which are controlled by national newspapers' distribution companies. Nearly all magazines and newspapers are printed by one of seven government-owned printing houses. The government uses its control of the region's publishing to limit the output, access, and influence of opposition groups, which has been observed by the International Journalists' Network. In 2006 and 2007 the daily Al-Masry Al-Youm and some other independent newspapers could not be found on newsstands as the distribution company, owned by the national newspaper Al-Ahram, delayed their distribution.

4. ECONOMIC PRESSURES

State subsidies Government influence on local private media institutions is done more by stick than carrot. While the state does not subsidise private media by way of advertising revenue, it does use the powerful position of its print-media infrastructure to keep private media close to the governmental line. This applies only to print media, as there is little private-sector radio and television.

Further aspects The state can subtly threaten publishers with bureaucratic delays or unexpected tax increases for printing/distribution services if a private publication strays too far from the accepted guidelines of what can and cannot be published. Compared to the size of the private media advertising market, the state subsidy is, however, negligible. However, all state and most private advertising goes to the state-owned papers for both political and circulation reasons, despite increasing private advertising in independent newspapers such as Al-Dustur and Masri Al-Yawm. Consequently, the channeling of advertising revenues and public funding is a useful tool for keeping them to the government's line (Allam 2008). No wonder that the state press is considered to be a propaganda instrument of the government.

5. NON-STATE REPRESSION

Repression by non-state groups During the 1990s, journalists and media organisations were repeatedly attacked and harassed by religious groups for broadcasting or printing content considered offensive to religion. Since the Egyptian government has been quite successful in eliminating violent Islamist groupings this no longer seems to be the case. But interference in media coverage by religious groupings and authorities is still – albeit rarely – a problem. In many cases it is unclear whether it can be labelled as 'non-state repression', since the state – as in many other Arab countries – uses religion and religious authorities to censor media.

This is particularly obvious with Al-Azhar, the foremost authority on Sunni Islam. Egypt's various governments gave Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Council (IRC) the power to advise on the banning or censoring of any book it judged to be heretical. The centre was even given the authority by the Ministry of Justice to confiscate books and audio- or videotapes that it believed violates Islamic teachings. This led to the confiscation of hundreds of publications from bookstores. For example, in 2005 IRC banned a book published by the prestigious American University in Cairo Press, which discussed Wahhabi Islam. In 2007, Sheik Tantawi of Al-Azhar, helped to legitimise censorship by issuing a fatwa declaring that a journalist publishing an incorrect report deserved to be lashed 80 times. This influence of traditional Muslim authorities on what can and cannot be published seems to be constant. Therefore, the intimidation through non-state actors has not changed in quality over the past five years.

Changes in the past five years

6. CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, one can say that the local media are generally free but still suffer from major restrictions. Most obviously, state monopolisation and control of all domestic media organs is antithetical to the notion of free media coverage. As long as the government sets down specific 'red lines' delineating the subjects that cannot be broached by the media, certain – highly relevant – topics will go uncovered. Second, that the state is so sensitive to the religious sensibilities of the conservative Muslim population also means that news coverage of stories that could give an unflattering image of religion will go unreported. Third, the journalistic environment in Egypt suffers badly from the influence of advertisers, who will often – successfully – try to influence the coverage of media outlets in return for advertising revenue. Locally, this phenomenon is rife; it is often implicitly understood that generous advertisers will receive positive coverage in whatever forum they advertise in. Fourth, because the government is such an avid monitor of what is being written or broadcast locally, many sources that would otherwise be quoted in the media are often afraid to go on record, fearing some measure of retaliation from the government if they were to say anything contrary to the state's wishes. This has the effect of making it harder for journalists to garner information for their articles, even if said articles are relatively innocuous or apolitical. Finally, there is the long-held perception in Egypt that a career in journalism is not necessarily a respectable profession; that journalists are not necessarily responsible for fulfilling the function of a 'fourth estate' in the western sense. In the state media, journalists are perceived as government employees rather than reporters of news stories.

Freedom of the media: general situation

Given all these observations one has to conclude that the short-lived 'Arab spring' of the years 2002–05 must be considered to be over in Egypt. Since that time, the free coverage of the media has slightly worsened.

Changes in the past five years

Major obstacles to media coverage are direct and indirect censorship, intimidation, the absence of laws and governmental practices that support transparency and information, low salaries and generally poor working conditions. Therefore, independent journalists in Egypt are suffering from numerous forms of discrimination, travel restrictions, unfairness, prosecution, assault, threats, and – in the case of female journalists – sexual harassment. Given these circumstances, the development of quality standards for journalists seems to be a luxury that many media professionals in the country cannot afford. As a result, many Egyptian media products dedicate most of their output to sensational crime stories, sports, lifestyle, gossip columns, and life coaching and can hardly be considered serious works of journalism.

Major obstacles to free media coverage

- 1| This article is a completely revised and updated version of the 'Egypt' country report that was published in the KAS Democracy Report 2005 'Media and Democracy'.
- 2| Meanwhile, the vast majority of Dream TV is owned by public banks and the state-owned ERTV following the bankruptcy of Bahgat in 2004. In 2002 another private channel, Al-Mihwar TV, was established.
- 3| One LE equaled around 0.12 eurocent in March 2008.
- 4| Article 179 of the penal code.

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