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Media and Freedom of Expression

# Between Awakening and Repression

The Arab Media Landscape in Transition

Ulf Laessing

Ten years after the uprisings of the “Arab Spring”, the media landscape in the Middle East and North Africa is in a state of radical transition. Mass media in countries like Tunisia and Sudan, which were once loyal to the state in their reporting, now report in a more balanced manner. At the same time, the rich Gulf states and Egypt in particular are investing in their state media. However, a whole range of private online formats, such as blogs and podcasts, are attempting to defy the dominance of state media and to report objectively for the people in the region.

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### **The Facebook Revolution and the Politicisation of Arab TV Stations**

When mass protests erupted against Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak in January 2011, the hour of social media and Qatari TV channel Al Jazeera arrived. Young people had long since turned away from local newspapers with their daily photos of Mubarak on their front pages and were using social media as their main source of information. Activists used Facebook to call for protests in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. Those who did not join the demonstrations watched day and night on Al Jazeera as Mubarak was overthrown.<sup>1</sup>

Al Jazeera had earned respect since its launch in 1996 when it broke the monopoly of state broadcasters, whose programming was largely limited to official announcements.<sup>2</sup> The channel introduced talk shows featuring opposition figures, which quickly led to problems with many Arab governments.

Nevertheless, Al Jazeera was never fully detached from Qatar’s politics, according to critics, and this was also evident in Egypt and other countries where mass protests also broke out. The enthusiasm of many viewers for the Egypt reports ended when the channel came under suspicion of taking sides – for instance in Syria, where the regime’s suppression of protests was reported, but acts of violence by the opposition were often ignored.<sup>3</sup> Many prominent journalists left the station as a result.<sup>4</sup> The channel’s credibility suffered further

when Qatar suppressed calls for democratic reforms in its own country.<sup>5</sup>

Other Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which found Al Jazeera’s influence to be a thorn in their side, mounted a media counteroffensive. The Dubai-based Saudi TV station Al Arabiya was launched in 2003 and, after the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt, became a platform for governments such as Saudi Arabia, which expressed concern about the rising influence of Islamists, Iran, and Tehran-allied militias, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. Sky News Arabia, another UAE-based broadcaster, was launched in 2012.<sup>6</sup>

### **New Freedoms for Old and New Media**

Many young people have turned away from traditional media since 2011 in the face of the polarisation of television broadcasters, as credible alternatives emerged with the upheavals. On the one hand, these were already existing media, such as newspapers – for example in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco – where journalists were now taking advantage of newly won freedoms. In addition, new formats such as political talk shows were launched to discuss previously taboo topics, such as the role of the army or Islamists. Newspapers like Al-Masry Al-Youm critically monitored the chaos that ensued after Mubarak’s overthrow, when Islamist President Mohammed Morsi was narrowly elected in 2013 without ever being accepted by many Egyptians.

## Tunisian media provide credible reports on the country's transformation.

Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, is another example of the changes in the media landscape in the region. Many Tunisians turned away from Arabic TV channels because of the polarisation described above, while traditional media in this North African country, from newspapers to private radio stations to state media, reported professionally after the fall of Ben Ali. Radio broadcaster Mosaique, which also operates a news website, and state news agency TAP were the government's mouthpieces prior to 2011. Since 2011, they have been reporting credibly on the transformation of the country in all its facets: from almost daily anti-government protests, government crises, and the new democratic constitution, to attacks by jihadists.

### *Mada Masr and Tunisie Numérique*

Additionally, a number of media start-ups have also emerged in the region. The most prominent example is the online platform Mada Masr in Egypt, launched in 2013, which is known for its investigative reporting and features on politics and economics and remains one of the region's best-quality media outlets. The editorial team has since expanded its coverage beyond Egypt to Sudan, Libya, and other countries. Mada Masr emerged from the online newspaper Egypt Independent, another start-up after 2011.<sup>7</sup> In Tunisia and Morocco, new media have also been added or existing ones have expanded. A popular news portal is Tunisie Numérique, which reports objectively on politics, economics, culture, and local and consumer issues from

Tunisia, the region, and the world in Arabic, French, and now also in English.<sup>8</sup>

Mada Masr was not the only innovation in post-revolutionary Egypt: in 2011, Egyptian political satirist Bassem Youssef, who had previously criticised long-time ruler Mubarak in YouTube videos, began hosting a TV show in which he regularly made fun of newly elected President Morsi and pilloried grievances such as power cuts. However, his show was discontinued when the current head of state, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, came to power in 2013. Youssef had to leave Egypt a year later after a court conviction and he now lives in exile in the United States.<sup>9</sup>



Influential and controversial: The Qatari television station Al Jazeera went on the air in 1996. Since 2006, there is also an English version.

Source: © Naseem Zeitoun, Reuters.

## *Media Debates in Libya*

In Libya, a similar development was observed after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. New newspapers, television and radio stations, and news websites emerged in which politicians debated the future course of the country. It has not been forgotten that after the disputed election of Prime Minister Ahmed Maiteeq in 2014, two parliamentary vice-presidents discussed the validity of the election on live television – under Gaddafi there had not even been any debates.<sup>10</sup> With the division of the country into western and eastern camps in 2014 and the intervention of several foreign powers in the conflict, television broadcasters and the

wider media landscape also became polarised. Pressure on journalists grew, and from then on all national media outlets supported one of the opposing factions. As a result, many people lost interest in traditional mass media and formats, as is the case in other countries.<sup>11</sup>

## **Development of New Formats Abroad**

The new freedoms enjoyed by the media also began to decline in other countries in the region. Egypt is the best example: since 2013 its government has been exploiting a desire among elements of the population to return to a “strong” state after the chaotic years following the overthrow of Mubarak. Talk shows and media are now



allegedly controlled by the authorities through directives to editors-in-chief via a WhatsApp chat room.<sup>12</sup> In Yemen, Libya, and Syria, civil wars have intensified, making access for journalists more difficult. Other countries, such as Morocco, Kuwait, Algeria, and Jordan, also continue to grant freedom to the media as long as certain red lines are not crossed. This applies in particular to criticism of the security forces, ruling families, or heads of state. Jordan, for example, banned any reporting on a dispute in the royal family in April 2021.<sup>13</sup> Morocco has recently intensified its crackdown on media reporting on corruption cases involving companies owned by the royal family or members of the government. According to Reporters Without Borders, opposition newspaper Akhbar Al-Youm ceased operations in March 2020 after authorities stopped running ads for some time and denied the publisher aid in the coronavirus pandemic that was given to other, less critical media houses.<sup>14</sup> Several senior editors have been arrested in recent years, and in July 2021 editor-in-chief Soulaïmane Rais-souni was given a five-year prison sentence.<sup>15</sup> In another setback for press freedom, investigative journalist Omar Radi was sentenced to six years in prison, also in July.<sup>16</sup>

**New formats have emerged, and editorial offices have relocated abroad whenever it has become difficult to work professionally at the local level.**

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Despite the polarisation of local media and increasing pressure on media professionals in some countries, progress made since 2011 still outweighs the challenges. Independent quality media are now also present in the Middle East and journalism is a very attractive profession, despite all the challenges. Foreign media, such as news agencies with offices in the region, constantly receive applications from university graduates, for example from the American University in Cairo (AUC), which continues to

train journalists despite an increasingly difficult environment, sometimes in collaboration with foreign universities.<sup>17</sup> New formats have emerged, and editorial offices have relocated abroad whenever it has become difficult to work professionally at the local level, or when visas have been hard to come by – as during the 2019 mass protests in Algeria, when the government refused entry to foreign reporters.

This is a trend that was already visible in Sudan under the autocrat Omar al-Bashir. The government granted few press visas during its time in office and made independent work in conflict regions like Darfur practically impossible. Due to this, media supported by foreign donors, such as Radio Dabanga and Nuba Reports, moved abroad and, thanks to good local sources, provided professional reports from Darfur and the conflict region of South Kordofan.<sup>18</sup> Both media have now extended their coverage to the whole of Sudan.

A similar development can now be seen in civil war-riven countries such as Syria, where several online formats have emerged, based in Lebanon or Europe. They use the input of local reporters and sources that no longer have a platform in the country for political reasons. One example is the Syrian online portal Al-Jumhuriya, which produces features and background reports on Syrian refugees in exile, life in Syria under President Bashar al-Assad, and other topics, in both Arabic and English.<sup>19</sup> The articles are written by opposition members but are often worth reading and not just clumsy counter-propaganda. Quality reporting on universities and higher education courses in the Arab world with a somewhat more politically neutral tone can also be found, for example, in the student online magazine Al-Fanar.<sup>20</sup> Other formats offering balanced reporting are Syria Direct<sup>21</sup> and Syrian Observer<sup>22</sup>.

*New Supraregional Magazines*

There are now also high-quality transnational portals such as Newlines, a magazine launched in 2021 to cover the Middle East with excellent feature reports and background articles. It is run by a team of mainly Arab journalists from

Washington who commission experts from the region to cover topics.<sup>23</sup> Another quality online magazine is *Jadaliyya*, which was launched shortly before the start of the Arab Spring to provide political and scientific analysis from the countries of the region. The portal has expanded its offer in recent years and provides background information on current issues and conflicts.<sup>24</sup>

## For many young people in the region, social media or private blogs are the main source of information.

Increasingly, foreign investigative formats are also working with journalists in the region to research articles on topics such as corruption or migration that would be difficult to publish in the country itself. Prominent examples are the German online investigative magazine *Correctiv* and the international portal *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)*, among several similar projects. With the help of a Syrian journalist, *Correctiv*, for instance, has uncovered inaccuracies in Middle East reports by German television stations and interviewed survivors of a chemical weapons attack on the Syrian town of Khan Shaykhun.<sup>25</sup>

### The Rise of Blogs, Digital Media, and Citizen Journalism

For many young people in the region, the polarisation of traditional national and regional media has led them to use the internet – such as social media or private blogs – as their main source of information. The number of internet users in the Middle East and North Africa has more than doubled since 2011 to 65 million.<sup>26</sup> Arabic posts account for a higher-than-average share of pages on the 100 most popular pages on Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms.<sup>27</sup> The previously mentioned online news portal *Tunisie Numérique*, for example, has almost half a million followers on Facebook alone.

In Algeria, one of the most popular news sources is the portal *alHirak.com*, which is mainly run by activists who organise protests against the government and desire political change. The portal mostly consists of posts that are critical of the government, but there are also links to foreign media, as well as sports and cultural reports.

In many countries, private blogs, operated not least by young people and women, have also been started to write about everyday problems. They often fail to meet journalistic standards due to a lack of appropriate training, but they nevertheless reach a wide audience.

The latest innovation consists of dozens of thematic groups on the Libyan conflict on Clubhouse, an iPhone app launched in 2021. The portal has become the main medium for Libyans who want to discuss their country objectively, which is no longer possible in their mass media because of politicisation. New Libya forums are added to Clubhouse every week.<sup>28</sup> Also present in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Yemen, Clubhouse facilitates dialogue between journalists, activists, and the public, and has so far bypassed state censorship.<sup>29</sup>

“Citizen journalists” like these are for many an alternative to traditional mass media such as newspapers, which in Egypt and Syria, for example, are mostly state-owned and printed, regardless of whether they are read or not – comparable to the *Neues Deutschland* newspaper in the former GDR. In October 2020 Information Minister Osama Heikal admitted that none of Egypt’s under-35s get information from local newspapers or television stations.<sup>30</sup> He had to resign as a result, but it is no secret that state newspapers like *Al-Ahram* have little appeal for a young population that has grown up with social media.

The biggest challenge for new digital media is to develop a sustainable business model and to implement journalistic standards. Non-governmental organisations, such as the American Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR),

offer advice and workshops on this. New media often get little advertising revenue from public authorities and have suffered additional losses from private clients in the course of the coronavirus crisis. Critical media like Mada Masr rely on subscribers and donations. They have no problem finding interested readers and winning journalism awards, but they have difficulty financing themselves.

### *Gulf Media are Expanding*

According to experts, support for new digital media is important because more and more governments are clamping down on press freedom, as shown by the example of The National newspaper of Abu Dhabi. The English-language UAE state newspaper is currently the biggest growth project in the print market in the region. New correspondent offices are currently being set up in addition to the editorial office in order to make this the leading newspaper in the region. Thanks to attractive salaries, the newspaper has attracted prominent Western and Arab reporters who report objectively on the Syrian conflict, as well as the situation in Iraq and Jordan. The situation is different in countries where the UAE is militarily and politically active, such as in Libya, where Turkey's military intervention is reported without referring to the fact that the Emirates are supplying arms to the eastern Libyan commander Haftar, as documented by the UN.

## **On the whole, journalists have retained many of their newfound freedoms.**

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The picture is similar for TV stations like Al Arabiya, which has expanded with the Alhadath brand. An offshoot of Alhadath is Haftar's home station in eastern Libya. On the other side of the political spectrum is Al Jazeera, which critics say continues to report positively on its Arabic channel about countries with close ties to Qatar, such as Turkey.

## **Outlook and Scope for Action**

State repression has increased in some countries, such as Egypt, in recent years, but on the whole journalists have retained many of their newfound freedoms. The journalism profession remains attractive to young people despite all the difficulties and state repression. Relatively good working conditions continue to exist in Tunisia, Lebanon, Sudan, Morocco, and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait and Jordan. In Tunisia, private daily newspapers and radio stations continue to report critically on politics and the recent wave of protests. In the Gulf Emirate of Kuwait, too, newspapers regularly criticise the government and parliament, but direct criticism of the ruling house and of the Emir remains taboo. Jordan tolerates the work of journalists as long as they do not report negatively on the royal house and the monarch.<sup>31</sup>

There is a lot of scope, including for international actors, to support targeted local media – especially digital platforms and other actors, such as press officers.

### *Hope in Sudan after al-Bashir's Overthrow*

There are high hopes that conditions for journalists will improve in Sudan after the overthrow of long-time ruler al-Bashir following mass protests in 2019. Under his dictatorship, Sudan was one of the worst countries in the region for repressing journalists. Opposition newspapers were regularly censored, and critical reporters were imprisoned. With the establishment of an interim civilian government, supported by the still-powerful military, media professionals are now enjoying new freedoms. The online portal Ayin was already reporting undercover from civil war areas, such as South Kordofan under al-Bashir, but now it has expanded its activities.<sup>32</sup> The state news agency SUNA now reports objectively and live from press conferences, similarly to state media in Tunisia.

Nevertheless, there is a lack of support for civil authorities desirous of providing better working conditions for journalists. The new information minister, Faisal Saleh, faced restraints as

an opposition journalist under al-Bashir. The new civilian government is committed to press freedom and has announced new laws to give the media more access to official information. However, they lack the resources to offer training courses for press spokespersons in the ministries and agencies.

### **Some press officers still treat information that should be public like state secrets.**

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While the climate has generally improved significantly, some press officers still treat information that should be in the public domain as state secrets – as they did under al-Bashir’s rule. This concerns not only unofficial taboo areas for journalists when researching the role of the military and allied militias, which control parts of the economy, such as the gold mines that are important for exports,<sup>33</sup> but also less controversial areas, such as economic data on state finances. Until now, access to such information has often been dependent on personal relationships. Training courses could also have an important role to play here by initiating a rethink to end the stigmatisation of media professionals who have made a career in media close to the former autocrat al-Bashir and now feel marginalised in the “new Sudan”. The Sudanese Professionals Association or the Sudanese Journalists Network, both of which are held in high regard by the public, could be considered as local partners.

Moreover, local newspapers would benefit from help in improving their online presence. The main problem for independent media in Sudan, as in other countries, is still how to develop a business model during the country’s worst economic crisis in decades. Many projects, such as Radio Dabanga, remain dependent on grants from foreign donors. Daily newspapers, such as Al-Sudani, have very rudimentary online versions, which limits their reach beyond the main circulation area in Khartoum and other major cities like Port Sudan.<sup>34</sup> Targeted training would

help here to improve the quality of the online offer and thus the marketing opportunities.

### *Balancing Acts in Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, and Jordan*

Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, and Jordan, along with Sudan, are promising countries for projects to support media professionals. These countries have media markets where journalists enjoy more freedom than in Egypt, for example, and can work if they avoid certain sensitive issues. In particular, the regime change in Algeria with the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 2019 following mass demonstrations has brought about a slight improvement in working conditions, which opens up potential courses of action for international actors. During the weeks of unrest, state media, such as the official news agency APS, also reported on the protests, after some initial hesitation. Since then, journalists have been writing regularly about the demonstrations, which did not die down with the departure of Bouteflika but were now also directed against the dominance of the army and political elite. Following a protest, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune declared an amnesty in February 2021 to release a number of critical media professionals and activists, such as Khaled Drareni. Drareni is one of Algeria’s most prominent journalists with 165,000 followers on Twitter; he works for French broadcasters<sup>35</sup> and runs his own news website, the Casbah Tribune<sup>36</sup>. He is also an activist for press freedom in the organisation Reporters Without Borders and has repeatedly criticised the role of the army and what he sees as an undemocratic transition since Bouteflika’s departure. Some observers view his release as a sign of greater freedom being allowed, despite the many problems that still exist.<sup>37</sup> Several blogs and independent newspapers and the website alHirak.com are monitoring the still unclear direction of the country’s ongoing transformation, but some of them are quite inexperienced in terms of journalistic standards, offers, and marketing. Training courses can help here, especially to improve local reporting, which often does not rise to the level of the media in Morocco.





Reliable information? In recent years, working conditions for Iraqi media have deteriorated. Source: © Teba Sadiq, Reuters.

Morocco is one of the few countries in the region where there is a whole range of professional media – for example, the online news medium *Le Desk*, known for its investigative reports on sensitive issues, such as corruption by government officials and companies belonging to the royal family’s extensive business empire. Other professional online formats providing excellent business news include *Lakome2*, *Telquel*,

and *Medias24*. The pressure on independent media and journalists not to report on taboo subjects, such as corruption in the royal house, has increased<sup>38</sup> – but there is still a certain amount of freedom. For example, independent local media regularly report on protests and poverty.

In Morocco, collaboration between foreign investigative platforms such as *Correctiv* or



OCCRP and Moroccan journalists could drive joint research on topics that could also attract interest in Europe or the United States – such as economic migration to Spain. Le Desk and other media outlets report on this range of issues almost every week and could do much to improve the often superficial reporting by the European media. Such a project would also make sense in cooperation with Algerian media, since many unemployed Algerians attempt to reach Europe by boat. There are regular reports on this in local newspapers but very little in foreign media, which are rarely present in Algeria. With cooperation of this type, the European and German media could support their colleagues in Morocco and Algeria to carry out ambitious long-term research on local issues from an international perspective.

In Morocco, workshops on economic reporting would also make sense. The Casablanca Stock Exchange is one of the most important trading locations in North Africa, and listed Moroccan companies and banks have expanded heavily into Sub-Saharan Africa in recent years as part of the Kingdom's foreign policy. Coverage in local media often does not go beyond the official announcements. Workshops could bring about qualitative improvements here.

### **Some local media in Iraq have to reduce staff and cut costs as advertising volumes have collapsed in the coronavirus pandemic.**

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Journalists in Iraq are currently performing a balancing act. Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, many new media have entered the market – both independent and party-affiliated. In recent years, the climate has deteriorated further.<sup>39</sup> The government has suspended television stations and, at times, foreign media such as the Reuters office in Baghdad.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, there are still media outlets there that

continue to do their work professionally, such as Radio Al Mirbad, which reports from Basra in southern Iraq – a region that suffers from corruption, poverty, and pollution, although it is the main source of income for the Iraqi state budget thanks to its oil wealth.<sup>41</sup>

International partners could help local broadcasters, news websites, and newspapers in the capital Baghdad and in Iraqi Kurdistan to improve their journalistic output, especially in the often superficial local sections. Better-quality reporting on issues such as poor public services resulting in dirty drinking water would probably attract great interest and raise the profile of such media. Some local media have had to reduce staff and cut costs as advertising volumes have plummeted in the coronavirus pandemic. They barely have any resources to train reporters – another task for international actors. Here, too, special training for press officers or joint workshops with journalists would help to improve the relationship between the media and the authorities and to reduce mutual prejudices. Similar projects could be considered for Jordan. Internships or editorial visits to Germany would give journalists from the region valuable experience.

#### *Wanted: Fact-Checking in Civil War Regions*

In civil war regions such as Libya, Yemen, and Syria, where there are virtually no independent media, international actors can contribute to building basic knowledge and developing tools for private blogs to check facts – an extremely important task in times of fake news campaigns by governments and their supporters on social media. In Libya and Syria, but also in Egypt and the Gulf states, public discourse is dominated by state media and troll campaigns that use automated bots to make false claims and attack perceived opponents on social media.

In Libya, for example, there is not a single media outlet that does not belong to an opposing faction. The main forums for debate are social media and the new Clubhouse app, where Libyans seek factual information – fact-checking webinars

would also help to bring quality to debates and exchanges between Libyans of different backgrounds and political views. In Libya, private and interactive blogs and podcasts enjoy greater credibility than mass media controlled by opposing factions. Workshops could help blogs and podcasts become more professional and give minorities and women a greater voice.

Both media consumers and journalists in other countries, such as Lebanon, or countries in the midst of democratic transition, such as Tunisia or Sudan, often have little basic knowledge about political and economic interrelationships or of how to recognise misinformation. Projects that also contribute to general political education or media ethics would also be beneficial for this target group.

State repression and the politicisation of state broadcasters in some countries of the Middle East and North Africa seem likely to increase, but the new freedoms created in 2011 have permanently changed the thinking and ambitions of journalists in the region. The media landscape will continue to be in flux in the coming years, and new formats and channels will emerge, some of them abroad, to provide balanced reporting from individual countries despite state censorship. International actors can play an important role in supporting journalists on this journey.

*- translated from German -*

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- 17 For example, the AUC website lists a project in collaboration with the City University of London: The American University in Cairo (AUC) 2021: Announcements, 8 Jul 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3eGZT9W> [22 Jul 2021].
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- 39 In the current Reporters Without Borders ranking, Iraq is 163<sup>rd</sup> (out of 180) and is only two places above Libya. Reporters Without Borders 2021: World Press Freedom Index, in: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking> [29 Jul 2021].
- 40 The Reuters office was temporarily closed in April 2020. The reason for this was a report revealing that official COVID-19 infection rates are underreported. Reuters 2020: Iraq lifts suspension of Reuters licence, 19 Apr 2020, in: <https://reut.rs/3yavtUU> [22 Jul 2021].
- 41 Al Mirbad was founded in 2005 with the help of media NGO BBC Media Action. BBC Media Action: Al Mirbad: an independent media outlet in southern Iraq, in: <https://bbc.in/3BEYxGy> [22 Jul 2021].