

Professional journalistic standards and the Arab spring

(why they are considered subversive in some countries...)

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Many Arab journalists don't like to speak about journalism ethics. Ethics addresses questions about morality, good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, and just and unjust. Journalists in the Arab world tend to think that questions of right and wrong belong to the religious domain or –more often- that it's the state or the government that draws the red lines.

Most of the time, those red lines are imposed through written and unwritten laws, sometimes through repression, but rarely through a debate among journalists or readers, rarely through a personal reflection about what journalism should be like and what the consequences of written words can be.

I remember engaging in discussions with Yemeni journalism students during a training workshop discussing professional ethics. There are certain things you can do and certain things you cannot do as a journalist, I tried cautiously. For instance can you publish information which is only based on *one* source, I asked. And what if that source doesn't want to be identified? And what happens if you obtain information which is stolen? Or information which is not meant for your eyes and you got your hands on accidentally? Are you allowed to mix your own opinion and hard facts in a news story? Are you allowed to receive gifts or money to report certain issues and to remain silent on other issues? How to handle leaked information from an anonymous source?

I tried hard to give more examples of what I meant by journalism ethics but most of the students simply didn't get it. "It's easy", one of them said, "there are things which are not legally allowed, for instance slandering people or blasphemy. The law forbids these things. So journalists have to refrain from slandering and being blasphemous. But everything that is not forbidden is legally allowed. So what is your problem?"

There are of course also a lot of media professionals in the Arab world who have a more sophisticated understanding of the purpose and necessity of journalism ethics and a Code of Conduct. Important pan-Arab media outlets like Al Jazeera, al Arabya and Sharq al Awsat-newspapers do have an internal Code of Conduct. But they are actually the exception to the rule.

Arab society with its overdose of authoritarian rules, its overdose of restrictions and regulations is not eagerly waiting for what is perceived as a new set of *do's and don'ts*. Arab society is looking for more freedom and more democracy, a sentiment widely shared by most Arab journalists. Ethics are often perceived as a new set of rules. The word *code* tells it all: you behave according to the code or you don't. And always the inevitable questions pops up: who is

going to enforce the *do's and don'ts* of this code? Are there any punishments or sanctions if somebody violates the Code?

To avoid misunderstandings it may be better not to speak about (Journalistic or) Journalism Ethics, ethics in journalism or about ethical journalism, but rather about *professional standards*. What are the standards of good journalism? This question inevitably leads to the question what journalism is all about and what is it good for. An Iranian journalist said: We often say that we have freedom of speech, but we don't have freedom *after* speech. If the *standard* would be unbiased, objective reporting and then the government is punishing the messenger who adheres to that standard... then it becomes obvious that professional standards can look almost subversive.

This is what happens in a country like Syria. I remember visiting Syria as a journalist in February 1982. On my way back to Beirut, where I was stationed as a correspondent at the time, I heard a news item on the BBC world service about an alleged massacre that had taken place in the city of Hama. I could hardly believe it. In the ten days before that I had been in Damascus, speaking to officials, embassy people and other journalists to write a series of articles about Syrian politics, nobody had spoken about an uprising in the north in the country. I had had no clue about what was taking place in Hama. A couple of weeks later, by the way, I went back to Syria to do a story on Hama, on the destruction and the thousands of people who were killed. Very few foreign correspondents had made it to Hama and my newspaper was eager to print the story.

This would be impossible nowadays. News travels much faster and the Syrian activists are using You Tube like the Egyptian and Tunisian citizens used Facebook and Twitter earlier this year to counter the local media black out. But in the case of Syria the authorities still do succeed to spread disinformation. As Syrian press freedom activist Mazen Darwish said the other day in an interview with the Sharq al Awsat newspaper: "The manner in which the media discourse is being managed serves only to aggravate the situation, and contributes to the acute division that is splitting Syrian society. The evidence of this can be clearly seen today. The Syrian media has split the country into two camps; conspirators and patriots, or traitors and honourable citizens. This is part of accusing people of treason, and it is something that will have catastrophic consequences."

The Syrian regime claims that foreign satellite television and the international press are "biased" in their coverage and they are not allowed into the country. At the same time the international media are blamed for covering events from outside. As for the Syrian journalists they face censorship and psychological pressures to choose between being pro-government or anti-government, which hinders journalistic objectivity and impartiality. Objectivity and impartiality being the two pillars of professional journalistic standards.

Syria and Libya are caricatures of an Arab world of old where traditionally the governments enjoyed full control on information flows in society. Information, propaganda and psychological

warfare were pretty much the same thing. Thanks to satellite TV, internet, social networks, blogging, mobile phones and the like this control is now vanishing. It goes without saying that the availability of uncensored information and images played an important role in the Arab spring.

But this new situation also puts the discussion about professional journalistic standards on the agenda. After the euphoria of a new found freedom the question arises of what information is true and what information is untrue, who is credible and who not, what to believe and what not. More than ever the 'new Arab citizen' who aims to have his and her dignity rehabilitated, who wants transparency and the corrupt leaders sent to prison, who wants democracy and hence needs to be informed about his or her choices, this new Arab citizen has great expectations of the media. No matter on which platform journalism is exercised: electronic, radio, TV or the old fashioned paper; people want fact based, multiple source based and fact checked news stories. The new Arab citizen wants to be respected and wants the truth, or at least accurate reporting, not the propaganda junk he's been fed in the last decades.

In this respect I think Arab journalism faces some enormous challenges. Professional standards do consist of skills, of knowledge, of know-how and -yes- also of some moral and philosophical choices. Professional journalism is about searching for truth, striving for accuracy – and sometimes, this mean being honest about all those situations, where a journalist is NOT sure about what the truth is and maybe can't even make sense of the facts.

Professional standards are about balanced stories, about representing different views and about representing a diversity of perspectives existing in society. Professional standards are about the protection of sources and about the privacy of non-public persons.

All this requires an enormous effort to reform Arab journalism. I think the situation of Arab journalism in 2011 resembles in a way the situation of journalism in post-communist Eastern Europe in the nineties. Like in Eastern Europe, the transformation of Arab journalism may come from a combination of many factors: external media support combined with self organization and, above all, a re-invention of what true journalism can and should be.

(Written on the occasion of "Media in Arab Society" A one-day conference about the role of media in the Arab societies that took place on Tuesday, 14th of June 2011 at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi. Organized in cooperation with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.)