



# DEVELOPING MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND PROMOTING CULTURAL DIVERSITY WITHIN MEDIA

GUY BERGER

**W**hat more appropriate site for UNESCO's annual 3 May World Press Freedom Day celebration in 2012 than the country of Tunisia? It was the inspiration of the people in this small north African state that kindled five other revolutions in Arab countries, spurred reform in many others, and even had echoes in protests in distant continents. The signal emanating from Tunis on this annual commemoration this May is that press freedom is taking root in that country and that the world is cheering its continuing role as an example to others.

The uprisings that spread across much of the Middle East and North African (MENA) region highlighted the power of media freedom when people no longer accept the lies and the gags of old, and when they decide to take the freedom of public expression into their own hands. By claiming this right, civil society, young people, workers and communities continue to bring about massive social and political transformations. Young people today in many countries continue to urge political authorities to review their usual ways of conducting public affairs and political system. They are using their rights to call for more democracy, social justice, transparency in public affairs management, and an improvement in their countries' economies.

This new situation is the result of the willingness of very many young people to take the time —and often also take serious risks— to create and share a common story, and to build alternative perspectives and possibilities. Today the combination of media and social media has made for super-communication. When this package connects to the determination of young people, it can evidently evoke great changes in terms of political participation. There is, in consequence, great promise for the future of democracy and

development in countries where these have been in short supply.

However, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that media technologies and free speech alone could solve all problems regarding the protection of human rights, promoting economic development for all, and sustaining press freedom as a public liberty. Much more is needed, including developing new laws and institutional arrangements to secure and deepen people's newly-won dignity, and to reinforce the associated contribution that unfettered communication can make to society.

To take one example, a key issue that needs attention in the MENA countries is what to do with the media of the «ancien regime» —whether controlled directly by the state or cronies of the ruling family. Another issue is how to help the sustainability of new media outlets that have emerged in recent times. All these media, no matter their origins, face new challenges among which are the need for training in authentic journalism and the creation of institutions to provide for independent regulation. There is also attention needed to the ways in which free speech could relate to tensions along ethnic and religious lines, and how media can reflect cultural diversity.

## 1.

### **The flourishing of the media in a post-revolutionary context**

The media sector in the MENA region is particularly dynamic. Even before the Arab Spring for example, the pan-Arab media industry was growing at about 19% per year<sup>1</sup>. New channels were being created every year both

online and offline. In 2007, the industry was estimated at around \$10 billion and as still having important growth potential<sup>2</sup>. When the lid was lifted off the boiling pot, the growth of media escalated even further.

The currency in these vibrant media-choice economies is credibility. Before the fall of authoritarian regimes in the MENA region, many citizens did not trust their country's media. They were relying more on international media such as *Al-Jazeera* or *France 24* than on local news sources. *Al-Jazeera*, the Qatari broadcaster launched in 1996, was perceived as one of the only channels to have an independent editorial policy in the Middle-East media landscape. It became a reference in the region thanks to the Pan-Arabic recruitment of its journalists, and its representation of all political shades.

*Al-Jazeera* played an essential role during the upheavals in Egypt, being the only media to broadcast live audio-visual images of the revolt. In Tunisia, it amplified screen-captures from Facebook protestors back to those audiences who did not have internet access. With the electoral victories of Islamist forces, however, many of the more secular protestors sought to blame *Al-Jazeera* for the success of these rival forces. This may well be an exaggeration, but either way international outlets may now be losing their influence.

This is because the liberalization of local media has meant that a multitude of new media outlets now compete with big international media. In Egypt for example, *El Gornal* initially broke the law requiring an official permission to publish a newspaper, but was soon able to attract audiences by an agenda of provoking thought and giving Egyptians the possibility to express themselves and participate in public debates through published reader opinions<sup>3</sup>. In Tunisia, although the mainstream media sector is quite concentrated with existing actors, a lot of news websites have been created such as *Tunisia Live*<sup>4</sup>. This is an English-language platform that reports on Tunisia, serving an international as well as a local cosmopolitan audience<sup>5</sup>. In this way, the site competes with foreign media for international audiences, and helps avoid a situation where Tunisian international information dissemination has to go through gatekeepers who carry their own lenses and pre-defined audience interests. Coming from the cradle of the Arab revolution, any first-hand news emerging from a changing Tunisia is of significant global interest.

Meantime, it is also evident that the media that pre-existed the revolution has been scrambling to catch up, and compete with both international media and the local newcomers alike. Sometimes, this new role has been because a new leadership has been installed (as in Tunisia's public radio system), and sometimes (as in Yemen) it is a function of journalists themselves relishing their newfound elbow-room to work as professionals rather than propagandists. In other cases, however, state broadcasting has not moved into the role of providing a politically neutral forum, let alone

begun to assert an independent journalistic identity that poses tough questions to all sides.

For all media, the key issue is defining and consolidating the meaning of editorial independence in the context of journalistic ethics and self-regulation. This is a process that does not happen overnight, or always forwards, and even when some consensus emerges there is still likely to be ongoing debate as new challenges emerge (such as ethics in regard to social media).

## 2.

### New roles for the media

For many journalists, the recognition of media freedom and the end of propaganda and censorship has been synonymous with the possibility of freely criticizing public authorities. But there is also the risk that some newly-liberated journalists on «old media» might revert to past habits of praise-singing and become sycophants for the new authority. Meanwhile, many newly-hatched journalists are unfamiliar with the ethics of the profession, and some may put political agendas ahead of journalistic integrity. And for both old and new journalists alike, there is the danger of market-driven news when their media houses prioritising the making of profit at the expense of public service, which could lead to weaker ethics and sensationalist content.

Another risk for the private media is dependence on a political benefactor who uses the power of money to manipulate information, skewing it in his (or, less often, her) favour. All these developments would compromise the ethics and deontology of journalists' profession and reduce the quality of information available to the public. The relevant question that this prompts is: *how can free, independent and pluralistic media go hand-in-hand with building quality journalism?*

In the new democratic states, notions of ethics, editorial policy, and independence of news judgement, may not be fully implemented in the media sector. Thus, the development of adequate media training systems must be a priority. New initiatives are springing up to meet the challenges, like the independent media centre created in Cairo, and called «Mosireen», which means «We insist» in Arabic. This centre encourages the development of citizen journalism, and delivers film-training workshops and audio-visual equipment rentals.

The new *Egyptian Journalists' Independent Syndicate*, and the *National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists* (NSTJ) are promoting staff training and the use of an updated code of ethics. In Tunisia, the NSTJ also has an *Observatory of Journalism Ethics* responsible for the application of the *Code of Ethics*<sup>6</sup>. However, the NSTJ says it suffers from a lack of resources to carry out training projects and to develop and implement professional norms and ethics. However, on the positive side, several Tunisian exiled journalist educators



and journalists have returned home to contribute to a culture of excellence.

In the current transitional situation, from the vantage point of UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector's experience in the developing media's landscape in new democratic countries, special attention may be paid to the implementation of some concrete actions, among which:

- ▶ promoting professionalism within media landscape in the MENA countries, especially in regard to coverage of elections;
- ▶ supplying professionals and other media practitioners with solid capacity building and resources about international standards so that they can adapt them to the local requirements for enabling freedom of expression and the right of access to information;
- ▶ consolidating journalistic communities and implementing professional standards so that journalists work as agents for public interest, and developing traditions and institutions for effective self-regulation by professionals themselves;
- ▶ encouraging journalistic involvement in the design of institutions to defend and support free, independent and pluralistic media.

### 3.

#### **Implementing a new regulation framework, a necessity for the media sector**

Before the upheavals in the MENA region, editorial lines were imposed by the authorities. For example, in Tunisia, the Ministry of Information was a powerful instrument to control the media sector. The Arab Free Press Forum, organised by the World Association of Newspapers in January 2012, heard many calls to abolish such ministries, and prohibit governments from being direct actors in regards to the news business. But several questions then arise. What fills the gap in terms of issuing licences for broadcasting (a necessity to avoid chaos on the airwaves)? By what means is government advertising to be distributed? If at least some of the state-owned media outlets are not privatised but mandated to continue as public service institutions rather than propaganda vehicles, what can be done to prevent their abuse by incumbent governments?

In the post-revolutionary situation, regulation is always a tricky issue insofar as it is often seen as censorship. However, some forms of regulation of media can be beneficial to citizens. An independent progressive licensing and support authority, for instance, can promote a diversity of broadcasters, including local voices. The legislature and regulator can also play positive roles that help insulate media from the direct control by the executive.

As another example, generally-applicable laws (not specific to media) can seek to protect audiences by restricting language inciting violence, hate speech and content discriminating against the right of minorities. Given the specificity of free speech rights, however, it is always the courts rather than governments that should be finally adjudicate as to whether certain content oversteps the strict international standards for legitimate limitations on freedom of speech.

In these ways, a legal and institutional framework can be designed in accordance with international principles on regulation of media, such as set out in UNESCO's Media Development Indicators. These indicators, recognised by UNESCO member countries, are based on the way that freedom of expression has been elaborated to encompass independence and pluralism of media in the Windhoek Declaration (a document which has also been endorsed by the international community)<sup>7</sup>. In line with the principles within the Media Development Indicators, each country should give the responsibility of its media sector's regulation to an autonomous administrative body, totally independent of the government and of any other political forces. This kind of institutional arrangement can help an environment to flourish which contributes to media development, promotes freedom of expression, and fosters democracy. Wrestling with this issue of institutional design has been the task of the Tunisian civil society and media body, the Instance nationale pour la réforme de l'information et la communication, known as INRIC. It has successfully operated on a participative and consensus-building basis, as well as serving as an interim independent authority for evaluating broadcast licence applications.

In this wider context, UNESCO is committing to support and develop the media landscape in the MENA states. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Organization has focused its work on promoting press freedom and media development. In 2011, UNESCO conducted rapid assessments of the media situations in Egypt and Tunisia, seeking to identify the key needs for media development. The results highlighted the need for constitutional guarantees amongst others, as well as helped to mobilise international support for elections training for local journalists, as well as the resources to ensure a fulltime UNESCO presence on the ground in Tunisia. In 2012, in both Egypt and Tunisia, there will be more rigorous, consultative and comprehensive research conducted in terms of a fully-fledged application of the Media Development Indicators. If resources can be found, the same could happen in Libya.

### 4.

#### **Building new, democratic and tolerant cultures**

The new democracies along with the reforming countries elsewhere in MENA need to develop a new culture of democratic pluralism, participation and tolerance

of religious and other diversity. A major role needs to be played by media in regard to educating voters and in promoting accountability systems that adapt universal principles to local models that nevertheless align with these self-same principles. Relevant questions that the media should put up for extensive debate are: what model of democracy, what role for the state, and how can there be amelioration of the situation of women, youth and cultural minorities?

The role of media is also vital for promoting dialogue between different cultures in a country. Especially public media should embody the spectrum of values of the society in which they operate. But evidence shows that some media is vulnerable to pressures relating to religious or ethnic conflicts. Meanwhile, when diversity within media is not reflected, this may create a feeling of injustice against minorities, leading to frustration and social tension. Christians, Baha'is and Shi'ites, ethnic groups, such as Nubians and Bedouins in the western and the eastern deserts, and people living in the extreme level of poverty are often invisible or misrepresented in national public television of Egypt<sup>8</sup>.

Even worse is when prejudice is directly fostered by media. In October 2011, more than 20 Coptic Christians were killed and many wounded. Official media were widely accused of having worsened the situation by broadcasting information blaming the Coptic community and claiming that it had been armed.

All this points to the need for raising awareness among media workers and media owners about cultural diversity within media landscape. It is important that they see the value of being inclusive, accountable and most of all a reflection of the total community. They must develop sources, so that to diversify thoughts, feelings, as well as experience of social groups. For many, this means that, instead of counting on official news coming most of the time from the government or political leaders, they need to go out into the streets and villages to talk with ordinary people and especially not overlooking women, youth and minorities. Media owners, both public or private, should also be encouraged to employ journalists coming from different ethnic and religious communities.

UNESCO for its part will do its bit to help with awareness raising and capacity building in the media, so that they can become more accessible to all citizens regardless of their social, religious and gender categories. A special focus is also placed on developing media literacy competencies of

audiences —i. e. on the ability of people to critically choose and evaluate the information they receive—. Indeed, the most convincing argument against new governments deciding to revive restrictions and clamp down on media freedom is that they should rather help to build programmes in schools to empower youth to not only be in control of their media consumption, but also to produce ethical media messages themselves such as via talk shows, Internet comments sections, or even own blogs.

## Conclusion

Access to quality information is fundamental to the health of democracy. It enables people to be well informed, to make good choices and to actively take part in public debates.

For media to play this enabling role, they need to operate freely and independently in a pluralistic environment. It is in this context that journalists should live up to their self-proclaimed ethics of seeking to tell the truth, of conveying citizens' concerns to policymakers, and of being the voice of the voiceless. Media professionals and amateurs alike, plus policymakers and media owners, have to work resolutely to support ethnic and other marginalized groups, as well as ensuring and promoting cultural diversity in media landscape.

## NOTAS

<sup>1</sup> A. T. KEARNEY. *Middle East media on the move*, 2009 (p. 1): <http://www.slideshare.net/AlHaqqNetwork/a-t-kearney-middle-east-media-on-the-move>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> <http://elanthemag.com/a-new-newspaper-for-a-new-democracy/>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.tunisia-live.net/>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://cima.ned.org/blog/2011/12/sparking-media-development-in-tunisia-and-egypt/>.

<sup>6</sup> Joan BARATA MIR. *Political and Media Transitions in Tunisia: A Snapshot of Media Policy and Regulatory Environment*, Commissioned by Internews, August 2011: [http://www.internews.org/pubs/MENA/Internews\\_Tunisia\\_MediaLaw-Review\\_Aug11.pdf](http://www.internews.org/pubs/MENA/Internews_Tunisia_MediaLaw-Review_Aug11.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Available at [http://www.unesco.org/webworld/peace\\_library/UNESCO/HRIGHTS/327-331.HTM](http://www.unesco.org/webworld/peace_library/UNESCO/HRIGHTS/327-331.HTM).

<sup>8</sup> Ramy ALY. *Rebuilding Egyptian Media for a Democratic Future*.