

NOREF Policy Brief

The media and freedom of expression in the Arab world

Jean-Paul Marthoz

Executive summary

Online media, global TV and social networks played a significant role in the Arab Spring and will be important factors in determining the direction of these “revolutions”.

A positive contribution of the media to the consolidation of democratic systems requires a dismantling of the old media order, a reform of journalistic institutions, and a change of paradigm in the conception and practice of journalism. The keywords of these changes are freedom of expression, independence, public interest, ethics and excellence.

The profession is divided among the heirs of the old order, the “fellow travellers” of the new (mostly Islamist) majority, and a minority of “liberals” who see the media as a watchdog on the old and new powers. International actors can play a positive role in supporting the democratic transition if they

devise a long-term strategy based on the creation of a new journalistic and media culture.

A selective approach is needed to focus resources on reinforcing press freedom groups; reframing training institutions; supporting key quality media; institutionalising public service broadcasting; strengthening press ethics not as an alibi for censorship, but as a lever for responsible journalism; and promoting diversity and gender equality in newsrooms and media contents. Creating a democratic media culture also requires reinforcing so-called “citizen journalism”, i.e. the media empowerment of the people, teaching media literacy especially in the school system, strengthening civil society’s communications and media skills, and setting up a state-funded but independent and impartial public information system.

Jean-Paul Marthoz is senior adviser to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, a consultant for the Mediterranean Media Programme of the Panos Institute-Paris and a professor of International Journalism at the Université de Louvain-la-Neuve. He is the former director of the Media for Democracy Programme (1993-1996), which supported journalism and media reform in sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb countries, Eastern Europe and Russia. Recently he has been invited to Tunisia and Morocco for hearings and workshops on the reform of the media.

Introduction

The media were key actors in the Arab revolutions. Even before the start of the Arab Spring some “non-official media” – pan-Arab television broadcasters like Al Jazeera, independent print or online publications like *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* in Morocco or *Kalima* in Tunisia, individual bloggers, or social networks activists – were already playing a significant role in undermining the media monopoly and political legitimacy of the region’s authoritarian states.

During the “revolutions” they were joined by new “information doers” and “citizen journalists” – the so-called Facebook generation – who played a strategic and highly symbolic role in mobilising public opinion.

However, while recognising the role of these transnational heavyweight broadcasters, informal “citizen” media and independent “little media”, the challenge today is to contribute much more broadly to the “refoundation” of a “mainstream” national public and private media system that will address the population at large, with a view to promote and protect fundamental freedoms, reinforce the rule of law, act independently as a “watchdog” on public authorities, guarantee pluralism, acknowledge diversity and provide for the inclusion of ordinary people in the “public conversation”.

This challenge might have to be gradual due to resistance to change, but it implies:

1. a dismantling of the old legal, political and media system (the drawing up of a new constitution, the elimination of restrictive and punitive laws, the creation of an independent judiciary, the establishment of a pluralistic and autonomous public service broadcasting system, etc.);
2. a reform of journalistic institutions (journalism schools, professional organisations, media councils, etc.); and
3. a change of paradigm in the conception and practice of journalism towards more independence, ethics-based journalism and excellence.

The situation

The Arab world is not a homogeneous space when it comes to assessing the media sphere. The Maghreb in particular presents very different national situations in terms of media laws, the strength of the independent media sector, or the “allowed leeway” in the coverage of “taboo topics”, especially Islam or the definition of the “nation”.

However, most countries in the region are confronted with similar challenges that limit the scope for the exercise of truly professional and independent journalism “in the public interest”, such as state dominance of the broadcasting sector, political pressures (by national governments, the military or Islamist groups), cronyism and commercialism on the part of media owners, and the weakness of professional organisations.

The concept of journalism – of its role in a democratic society, and of its norms, rights and duties – is often blurred and uncertain. “A free media is not necessarily a credible media”, writes expert Lawrence Pintak, who recently wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review* about the Arab media’s generally low standards and their regular practice of “inaccuracy, innuendos and incitement”.

The profession is also politically divided between supporters of the “revolutions” and those that worked either actively or passively with the old regime. A division is also clearly emerging between “liberal” and religious/fundamentalist groups that supported the overthrow of the ruling regimes.

The idea of what journalism really means is also contentious and marks a split between journalists who see themselves as watchdogs and “agents of change” in the tradition of “committed journalism”; journalists who in the name of the “objectivity doctrine” favour a more “neutral” (or more market-driven) approach to the role of the media; and others who conceive the media as a tool for economic development, national cohesion or religious orthodoxy.

The authorities – from the military establishment to the new emerging religious and political

forces – are ambiguous towards press freedom and journalism. They hesitate between the traditionally strong-armed system of state control and a more paternalistic approach that calls for “media responsibility” (often a code word for self-censorship). In these circles and among the public at large the idea of freedom of expression as the touchstone of democracy remains fragile and subsidiary to other factors like religion, the “Arab nation” or the state.

Media development

Many countries, intergovernmental organisations, NGOs and foundations are involved in media development in the region.

Some Western donors (like France in Tunisia) have been compromised by their links with the former regime. France also suffers from the Arabisation movement that has been reinforced by the electoral power of the Islamist parties, which tend to present the use of the French language as a concession to the former colonial power and a symbol of anti-Muslim secularism.

Non-Western countries are also present in the region. However, they also raise eyebrows among the most independent journalists who see the Gulf states in particular as too close to Islamist parties or China as attached to forms of journalism that do not make a clear break with past authoritarian and bureaucratic practices.

Co-ordination and consultation are strongly advised due to the number of projects that are already in place. Some degree of co-ordination has been put in place, for instance in Tunisia, which is considered by many public and private donors as the “model” of the Arab Spring and the “best bet” for a democratic transition.

A reasonable approach should be to work with the most respected press freedom institutions that are already mapping the road for the media. In Tunisia, for instance, these institutions could be the INRIC (National Institute for the Reform of Information and Communication) and IFEX-TMG,¹ which has linked Tunisian media activists

with the leading press freedom organisations like Article 19, Index on Censorship, Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, etc.

This consultation process could provide very useful guidance regarding the fields that should be prioritised and covered by outside donors in order to avoid overlapping and conventional projects.

Recommendations

1. Creating a new culture of journalism

Reinforcing press freedom groups

Supporting press freedom groups remains essential. If there has been progress in the Arab world, as documented by Freedom House in its May 2012 press freedom rankings, the Arab Spring has not yet created a free press. Old laws are still on the books, security services have not been reformed, journalists are under pressure from intrusive state and corporate owners, and Islamist movements and the security forces are exerting pressure to restrict the scope of freedom of expression.

Press freedom groups are fragile and sometimes accused of being “Western implants”. They are, however, key players in the creation of a new culture of freedom of expression that should expand beyond the media into the academic, social and religious spheres in order to build a stronger constituency in favour of freedom of expression.

Internet freedom is particularly important, as illustrated by the role of the Web and social media (Facebook, YouTube and Twitter) not only as communications tools for organising protests or meetings, but also as means of managing information (news gathering and distribution) and interactive tools (for debates and exchanges of views).

Helping to develop an Internet freedom policy and support independent Internet-based media would be a positive contribution to the opening and liberalisation of the media sphere.

¹ IFEX is the International Freedom of Expression Exchange network, based in Toronto, which co-ordinates dozens of press freedom groups around the world, some of them in Arab countries.

Reforming journalism schools and reframing training

Although these countries have a pool of good professionals, the average level of journalism is rather low, mostly due to decades of repression that has created a culture of passivity and conformity. In this context most journalism schools have focused on teaching technical skills instead of the fundamental professional values, norms and practices of independent journalism.

Training journalists should be a significant part of any media programme. It could be done within newly reformed schools of journalism, but also by organising short-term “hands-on sessions” to teach the fundamentals of the exercise of journalism in a free society or specific skills (investigative or explanatory journalism, etc.)

Without excluding foreign trainers, these programmes should rely first on local talent, even if tensions might be expected between the new and old generations of journalists, and especially between the journalists that served the former rulers and those who challenged them.

Helping to create and sustain a “media of reference”

There is a crucial need for one or two quality independent media (also in the digital field, which is so crucial to reach Arab youth) with a strong dedication to professionalism and a clearly democratic line that would embody the transition, like the *Mail & Guardian* in South Africa, *Página 12* in Argentina and *Reforma* in Mexico. They could serve as a reference/referee for the population, a watchdog on/for political actors and an example of excellence for the profession.

Reinforcing public service media

State broadcasting, which was “the master’s voice”, has to be completely reformed into a truly public service system that guarantees freedom of expression; political and religious pluralism; journalistic impartiality; and protection against political, corporate and religious intrusion.

Strengthening press ethics

Ethics is an important, but often ill-understood issue. It should be seen first and foremost as a professional challenge and a test of excellence

in journalism rather than as a moral or “social responsibility” issue.

The call for “responsible journalism” makes sense in the delicate, complex and highly volatile environment of Arab transitions. There is a risk, however, that the elaboration of codes of ethics or the creation of press councils might be misconceived – by heirs of the fallen regimes and by representatives of the new (mostly Islamist) majorities – as an alibi to tame the media and limit the implementation of international norms of freedom of expression.

Promoting respect for diversity and gender issues

One of the key challenges for journalism has always been, as the famous U.S. Hutchins Commission stated in 1947, to present “a representative picture of all the components of the society” that it covers. Although this is a highly sensitive subject, especially when it is mentioned by foreigners, the question of “diversity” is particularly crucial in the Maghreb countries. The press should give particular attention to providing a balanced coverage of cultural, linguistic, religious, gender, and other groups and promoting an inclusive form of journalism dedicated to combating discrimination and racism.

This point is particularly significant in terms of gender issues. The media should promote the inclusion of women journalists on their staff and devote special attention to the coverage of women’s issues, with a focus on rights equality.

2. Creating a democratic media culture

Creating a democratic media culture also implies empowering citizens and providing them with the knowledge and tools to understand the role of the media, but also helping citizens to be part of the democratic conversation by giving them the skills to intervene in news flows and public debates.

Reinforcing “citizen journalism” and media literacy

Bloggers have played an active role in the Arab revolutions. So-called “citizen journalism” – in conjunction or not with established media –

through social networks, blogs or community radios should be developed not only as a way to circulate information, but also to educate the public on the media (media literacy). It could be done via the general school system or civic associations. Such programmes may also contribute to building up a citizens' constituency for the defence of freedom of expression and in particular Internet freedom.

Strengthening NGOs' communications skills

Civil society organisations are expected to play an active role in the new Arab world. They need to learn the skills to allow them to communicate about their activities and positions, directly or through the media. Training leaders, activists and communicators from smaller organisations working in areas less covered by the media

(poverty, health, the environment, etc.) would help create a more balanced and inclusive press coverage.

3. Creating public accountability

Helping state authorities (at all levels) to organise an independent public information system that breaks with former "information ministries" and recognises the public's right to know should complement the work with media professionals.

Adopting new legislation that formalises public accountability and transparency (in particular on media ownership) and citizens' access to public information would effectively contribute to the creation of a democratic media culture.

