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Challenges Facing Arab Journalism, Freedom, Safety and Economic Security.

Zahera Harb

City, University of London

The Arab world was taken by surprise when mass protests erupted in Tunisia in December 2010, followed by mass protests in Egypt in January 2011. Much optimism was expressed towards a new era for journalism freedom in the Arab world, in Egypt specifically with the fall of Hosni Mubarak and the long reign of his authoritarian regime. The influx of private media mainly TV channels following his demise was remarkable. Seven years on from the Egyptian revolt and the state of journalism in Egypt has transferred from a state of hope to one of despair.

When assessing the state of Arab journalism, two countries come to the forefront: Lebanon – a plural and diverse model, but still bound by confessional system (entails distributing political and institutional power proportionately among different religious sects) and ideologies and Egypt, the largest country in the Arab world in terms of population and area. and

-a country of media freedom contradictions post-Arab uprisings with general tendencies among journalists to express loyalty to those in power.

Two of the main challenges that face journalists in Egypt and Lebanon post Arab revolts are safety and job security. These challenges were mirrored in 30 in-depth interviews I conducted with journalists across platforms in both Egypt and Lebanon in 2016 and 2017.

Egyptian journalists are struggling to avoid being arrested and become one of the nation's 'disappeared' people following the security clamp down sweeping the country under the banner of fighting terrorism. Lebanese journalists on the other hand are facing the worst phase of job cuts with newspapers closing down and mainstream media houses making journalists redundant due to financial difficulties.

William Rugh (2004) situated Egypt within the transitional media and Lebanon within the diverse media systems. Rugh's categorisation needs to be re-visited as a whole. His categorisation no longer applies to Egypt and Lebanon. Egypt sits within the framework of a polarised loyalist press (see Hallin and Mancini 2004). As one journalist put it to me 'we don't have independent media, but independent journalists' (M, interview with author, 2016). In the case of Lebanon, Rugh's categorisation is not fully representative because, 'while the Lebanese media system is diverse and free from government and state control, it is not free from political and economic affiliation' (Harb, 2013, p.39). One of the Lebanese journalists interviewed summarised the case of Lebanese press emphasising that in Lebanon 'we have freedom of speech, but we don't have a free press' (N, interview with author, 2016).

Egypt witnessed an influx of newly established TV channels post January 2011, among those were channels financed and supported by the Muslim Brotherhood. There was a time where there was a shift in moving away from the one homogenised message in support of the government and the country's leaders in both print and broadcast media (Diab, *the*

Guardian, 2011). That did not last long. Following the June 30th revolt and the military forces attempts to control the political scene in Egypt, the media were used as a mobilising tool in the hands of the army led by Abed Al Fatah al Sissi. Journalism's notions of fairness and balance in covering events vanished. The country's media was divided into two extreme media clusters; one in support of the brotherhood (Ikhwan in Arabic) including *Aljazeera Misr* (stands for Egypt in Arabic) and the other in support of the military. Hate speech against 'the other' on both sides came to dominate until the military led authorities closed down channels affiliated to Muslim brotherhood and other Salafi affiliated religious channels.

The message became unified across the board. Slogans like the people want to execute the Muslim Brotherhood followers became a celebratory message. There have been several attempts to balance the scene in Egypt including a satire program produced and presented by the Jon Stewart the Arab World, namely Bassem Yousef; a current affairs program produced and presented by Reem Majed; and one produced and presented by Yousri Fouda. Within two years, the increase of private satellite TV stations in Egypt stopped being a celebratory move towards media diversity; instead print and broadcast media ended up singing from the same hymn sheet, that of the military rule. The three programs mentioned above were taken off the air for presenting what was deemed to be critical voices against the political and military elite.

Lack of autonomy tends to be a dominant feature among a majority of Egyptian journalists; journalists became tied to the political actor with whom they support. To borrow Hallin and Mancini's term, the media in Egypt became "instrumentalized." (2004, 37). Journalists in Egypt (mainly broadcasters) identify themselves with particular points of view, which means not serving the public (even though they claimed they are), contradicting their own standards of practice as specified in the Code of the Profession ratified in 1986, which none of the journalists interviewed use as a reference in their daily work.

During Mubarak 'reign' there were no claims that independent media existed. Egyptian airwaves are now dominated with hours and hours of one man or one woman shows, talking heads claiming they possess the truth, the wisdom and that their audiences should be grateful. As prominent broadcast journalist Reem Majed put it, 'the media is playing the lapdog role rather than the watchdog role, keeping an un-informed populace, that can be easily confused, deceived and directed' (Majed, 2015).

Fabrications and counter fabrication, hatred and counter hatred are what dominates the Egyptian media scene these days and it seems it is going to be the ruling scene for some time to come with Abed Al Fata7 el Sissi telling the Egyptian people in an exclusive interview with Egyptian OnTV and cbc channels on May 5 2014 before he took power, 'the state should contribute in "correcting" people's ethics through using mechanisms such as the media, the family and religious institutions' (Darweesh, *Ahramonline*, 2014).

Lebanon on the other hand is characterized by the *interwoven* relationship between the media and the political elite. This polarised media system went through different phases and engendered different media models since Lebanon gained its independence in 1943. The civil war (1975–1990) witnessed an influx of illegal TV and radio stations which were later regulated in the post-civil war Lebanon. The regulation mirrored the confessional

political system. Even though the law specified that no political party or politician should own a majority share in any of the newly licensed TV station, the practice came to echo the socio-political structure of the Lebanese society (Dajani, 2001).

Lebanese journalists also lack autonomy from the political actors they are affiliated with. Here also as in Egypt, the media became “instrumentalized” (Hallin and Mancini’s, 2004). The media is being controlled by outside actors, parties, politicians, social groups or movements, or economic actors seeking political influence (ibid: 37). Most journalists in Lebanon in the years that followed the assassination of former Prime Minister of Lebanon Rafic Hariri in 2005 (See Harb, 2013), identified themselves with particular political points of view.

Lebanon’s broadcasting scene has always been well-developed, lively and diverse, reflecting the country’s pluralism and political divisions. Lebanese media feature diverse opinion, aggressive question-and-answer television shows with government officials and politicians, and lively criticism of authorities and policies (see Boulos, 1994 and Dajani, 2001). However, political affiliation, thus self-censorship, remains a problem. Authorities, owners and editors are quick to clamp down on journalists who cross both un-stated and stated boundaries on sensitive topics. There always existed an *interwoven* relationship between the media and Lebanese politicians. Politicians have a strong appetite for owning and even running media organisations. Many prominent politicians own shares in private broadcasters and publications (Harb 2013).

Most media organisation in Lebanon live on funding supplied by political actors in the form of individuals or foreign states comprising mainly Arab gulf countries. The constant shift in the political alliances in the region means less ‘political money’ (the phrase used in Lebanon) to indicate money given to dictate and disseminate certain political messages. Two national newspapers closed down in the last two years. *Assafir* Newspaper went out of print after 42 years of publishing and as a consequence 120 journalists lost their jobs. Its website was also shut down. *Al-Itihad* newspaper went out of print just after 3 months of printing in 2017. TV stations and other national newspapers are late in paying salaries. No online presence was established.

For journalists in Egypt and Lebanon, the need to unite and actively support each other is crucial in order to survive the threats to their safety and economic hardship. Freedom and safety are to be defended and they can only be achieved, when journalists stand together in solidarity. The scene is gloomy, but the journalists I interviewed spoke of resilience and hope in a better future.

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