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# Arab journalists and the social media threat

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*Social media platforms, primarily Facebook and Twitter, were once hailed as agents of change, facilitating the ousting of long-standing dictators and authoritarian regimes in several Arab countries during the waves of uprising in 2011. They were identified as catalysts for a new public sphere – an emerging space where democratic change could be communicated and realised. However, this vision has largely faded. Social media platforms have increasingly become spaces where various state and non-state actors, political opponents, and even audiences, intimidate journalists and activists. Many Arab journalists are subjected to targeted disinformation campaigns that generate online hate speech, harassment and sexual abuse. Threats to their safety and that of their families have forced many to resort to self-censorship in their reporting. Arab female journalists, in particular, have become the most vulnerable to such attacks. Through 30 interviews, this paper investigates social media's impact on the daily news work of Arab journalists in two Arab countries, Egypt and Lebanon. It examines how journalists assess the role of social media in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the types of intimidation they experience online – including trolling, violence and hate speech – and identifies the main actors behind such campaigns.*

**Key words: Arab journalism, social media, Lebanon, Egypt, trolls, electronic committees, electronic armies, online violence**

## Introduction

Extensive research has explored the role of social media in the 2011 Arab uprisings (Harb 2011; Khamis and Vaughn 2011; Comunello and Anzera 2012; Rinnawi 2012; Khamis and Vaughn 2013; El-Nawawy and Khamis 2013; Brym et al. 2014; Herrera 2014; Wolver 2016). Della Porta et al. observed that 'collective identity is closely linked to recognition and the creation of connectedness' (1999: 21). Sharing Facebook posts and Twitter hashtags during the 2011 Egyptian revolt served as a crucial bonding mechanism for protesters. Furthermore, Della Porta et al. argue that 'identity is not a fixed characteristic that pre-exists action; rather, it is through action that feelings of belonging are either reinforced or weakened. Collective action leads to ongoing redefinitions of identity' (1999: 93). In the case of the Arab revolts, protest served as the form of action that brought people together to form a collective identity, while social media provided the platform through which the youth of the region could forge these connections.

The issue, however, is that in many Arab countries, the strength of popular power has diminished. In Egypt, for instance, military rule has returned, even though millions of Egyptians once again took to the streets on 30 June 2013, demanding the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was later prosecuted and executed (Kingsley 2015). Following Morsi's removal, his successor, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the former head of the Egyptian military, invoked what he called 'the people's mandate' to justify a crackdown on most forms of opposition (ibid). As a result, political freedom and freedom of speech in Egypt have suffered severe setbacks. Meanwhile, Syria, Yemen and Libya remain divided and ravaged by civil wars. Lebanon, which witnessed popular uprisings against sectarianism and corruption in 2011, 2015, and on a larger

scale in 2019, is now regarded as a failed state and attacks on freedoms and journalists originate from political parties affiliated to sectarian groups.

This paper acknowledges the role social media played in the Arab uprisings; however, it argues that its role as a democratic space (Harb 2011) has largely transformed into a more restrictive one. It focuses on Egypt, a country that witnessed one of the early uprisings, and Lebanon, often celebrated for its free press, but marked by internal and external conflicts (Harb 2019b).

This paper investigates social media's impact on the work of Arab journalists in Egypt and Lebanon post-2011 and examines the role social media plays in the lives of a group of journalists striving to challenge the status quo politically, economically and socially. It seeks to answer how Arab journalists assess the role of social media in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the forms of intimidation they face and the key actors behind such campaigns.

Adopting a critical perspective, the paper argues that the concept of freedom serves as a discursive strategy employed by journalists to carve out space for their professional activities. It conceptualises journalism and journalistic freedom as phenomena that are both experienced and enacted within the specific, situated contexts of everyday journalistic practices (Rupar et al. 2019). Rather than framing press freedom as the normative 'freedom from' external constraints, this paper aligns with the notion of 'freedom to' – emphasising the agency and capacity to act within the boundaries of those contexts (ibid).

**Online violence against journalists**

Attacks on journalists are increasing worldwide, especially in the Global South (UNESCO 2021). Scholars have characterised online attacks conducted by organised gangs as a form of 'mob censorship', with the intention of stifling the voices of professional journalists (Waisbord 2020). In India, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) employs a digital army of right-wing supporters to harass journalists who are critical of the party's Hindu-nationalist principles (Bhat 2023). According to Bhat (ibid), to overcome the effects of social media harassment, journalists employ self-defence mechanisms: strategic social disconnection, formation of alliance networks and working for non-profit news sites and international media organisations.

Claesson (2023) indicates that media organisations fail to address gendered online violence adequately. This is due to unequal access to support, gendered norms that discourage reporting online violence as 'weakness', and the industry's entrenched precarity, forcing journalists to work under unsafe conditions. These dynamics perpetuate inequality regimes within the media sector. Claesson also contends that journalists face increasing normalisation of online violence, driven by business models prioritising metrics over safety. Reporting online violence is challenging due to a lack of support from management who often underestimate the issue. Freelances and isolated workers are particularly vulnerable. Gendered norms further reinforce inequality.

In South Korea, specific shaming websites aim to insult and discredit targeted journalists leading to self-censorship practices (Park and Lee 2023). Elsewhere, in their study on the role of Twitter in slandering journalists in Colombia, Barrios et al. (2019) pointed out that attacks on freedom of the press originated from a legitimate actor, causing an extremely polarised discussion among citizens who took sides, which provoked further threats and accusations. Conciliatory positions were hard to find.

In Portugal, journalists feel an increasing hostility aggravated by the digital environment including online abuse and sexual harassment (Sampaio-Dias et al. 2023). Joao (2023), in their study exploring gendered online harassment of Portuguese journalists, also revealed widespread hostility exacerbated by the digital eco-system and a lack of effective protection mechanisms. The research emphasised that online harassment against women journalists in Portugal is rooted in historical intolerance and structural hostility and is often normalised as an intrinsic part of the job. This normalisation leads to under-reporting and allows media organisations to remain inactive, further embedding the issue.

The scene in the Arab region is not different, where social media platforms have become a space used to intimidate Arab journalists and activists. Governments across the region have had a tight grip on most communication channels, whether traditional or online, national or pan-Arab (Pintack 2022; Harb 2019a).

Al-Ashary (2023) in their study that used focus group discussions and surveys with journalists from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Oman, Jordan and Egypt, indicated that journalists from these countries endured severe censorship by their respective governments. The recommendation of the study encourages media organisations to play a more active role in setting policies that make it easier for journalists to adopt and use digital security tools, while Egyptian journalists perceived the new digital media law introduced in 2018 as a barrier to media independence because it allows the government to exercise greater information control through digital policy and imposes regulatory rules on journalists (ibid).

Aya Majzoub, Amnesty International’s deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa, told New Arab Newspaper that Lebanon’s insult and defamation laws were designed to protect those in power from all forms of criticism (Caramazza 2019). Majzoub implied that high- ranking officials were targeting journalists, human rights defenders, activists and others who are peacefully expressing their opinions and working to expose allegations of corruption (ibid).

The Arab context explored in this paper is shaped not only by political instability, geopolitical pressures and authoritarianism but also by the pervasive influence of social media. Social media platforms, while offering avenues for expression, are particularly susceptible to amplifying political, gendered and intersectional violence. These dynamics underscore a complex environment where traditional and digital forms of power intersect, creating unique challenges for media practitioners and civil society alike.

**Gender-based violence against Arab journalists**

Many Arab journalists are being subject to targeted disinformation campaigns, generating online hate speech, harassment and sexual abuse. Threats to their own and their families' safety have made many of them choose to self-censor their reporting. Arab female journalists have become the most vulnerable in clear cases of online gender violence. A UNESCO-commissioned study, carried out by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), uncovered a disturbing trend of online violence from doxing, Islamophobia and misogyny, through to targeted death threats against female journalists (Zatat et al. 2021). The report showed that among the women journalists surveyed, 73 per cent experienced online violence. While 25 per cent of women experienced death threats, 18 per cent experienced sexual violence (ibid).

The case of Al Jazeera Arabic principal presenter, Lebanese journalist Ghada Oueiss, speaks of the brutal gender-based online violence campaigns. X (formerly Twitter) was identified as the main disseminator of such campaigns (Posetti et al. 2023). Oueiss has been subjected to relentless gender-based online abuse since the Arab Spring in 2011, despite not joining social media until 2014. The abuse she faces is intensely misogynistic, with more than one-third of the personal attacks directed at her on X over a six-month period being sexist or sexually explicit. Oueiss frequently receives rape and death threats and is disparaged as a 'prostitute'. She is also targeted for her age, her employer's political ties and her Christian faith (ibid).

The online violence and disinformation campaigns escalated significantly following her reporting on the 2018 murder of her friend Jamal Khashoggi. In 2020, her phone was hacked by agents linked to foreign governments, who stole and manipulated private photographs to smear her reputation falsely. Oueiss was inundated with 40,000 abusive messages on X (Twitter). Later that year, she filed a lawsuit in the United States against prominent political figures, including the crown princes of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, accusing them of orchestrating the attacks, thus shedding light on state-backed online violence against journalists (ibid).

Another documented case is that of the Lebanese-British journalist Liliane Daoud (Harb 2019a). After the 2011 revolts, Daoud (whose daughter is Egyptian), decided to leave the BBC Arabic service in London and move to host a television show on one of the rising channels in Egypt (OnTV, owned at the time by Egyptian businessman Najeeb Saweris). Her talk show, The full picture, aired critical views of Sisi's government and hosted protesters and youth leaders as well as government officials (Guardian 2016). In February 2015, Daoud issued a tweet, calling on those Egyptian youths who had been sentenced to five years in jail for protesting 'not to despair as the slayer will keep trying to deprive you of your will to live and your will for a better life…' Following this tweet a hashtag on Twitter appeared, which called for the deportation of Daoud. '#Lilian_must_leave' went viral and became the highest trending hashtag on Twitter in Egypt for two days (Almawke3 News 2015). The hostile tweets that attacked Dauod included death threats. Users believed she was mocking El Sisi (the then-Egyptian President) and referring to him as the 'slayer'. Many Egyptian journalists jumped on this bandwagon, attacking Daoud, while articles published in publications such as Al Youm Al Saba'a fabricated information about her.

However, some Egyptian journalists also took to Twitter and social media to support Daoud against the hate campaign to which she was subjected. They tweeted and posted on Facebook defending her professionalism and journalistic integrity, reminding the Egyptians that during the rule of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood she also hosted critics of the Islamist group and, just like much of the Egyptian people, she celebrated the ousting of Morsi. That, however, did not deter the authorities form deporting Daoud in June 2016, claiming that 'she was deported because her residency has expired' (Guardian 2016). Daoud was deported hours after her contract with OnTV was terminated. One OnTV official told *Al Monitor*:

> The decision to stop broadcasting Daoud's show and end her contact, which was supposed to continue until the end of the year, came as the result of 'editorial policy' and conditions that the new ownership tried to impose on her. She was said to have rejected this, with the contract ending in an amicable manner (Saied 2016).

The termination of the contract came a month after the channel was sold to another businessman with close ties to the Sisi regime. In this instance, social media was used as a 'coordinating tool', to use Clay Shirky's term (2011), to spread hate and mobilise dissent against journalists who did not agree to the 'Hail, Caesar' approach to public life.

A recent investigation by Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) sheds light on the experiences of Sudanese female journalists who have faced digital threats – some of which escalated into physical assaults – largely as retaliation for their reporting and as attempts to silence them (Daraj.com 2024). Following the initial ceasefire between warring factions in Sudan on 18 April 2023, Samar Suleiman left Khartoum for Kassala, a city more than 480 kilometres from the capital. From there, she reported on the abuses Sudanese women endured during the conflict and engaged in humanitarian aid efforts for displaced people in local shelters.

Suleiman recounted receiving threats through Messenger, including one from a former minister. She was also offered money to publish specific news on her Facebook page. After refusing, she received ominous threats warning that they would come after her. Suleiman soon became a target on social media, where some accused her of being a 'sleeper cell' secretly working for the RSF, a paramilitary force formerly operated by the government. Additionally, her name, along with other journalists', appeared on so-called 'shame and disgrace' blacklists, labelling them as alleged RSF affiliates. Journalist Sara Taj Al- Sir also found her name on one of these lists. She faced social media backlash, especially after a US envoy shared a photo with her and other journalists on his official page. The Sudanese Journalists' Union reported the emergence of anonymous lists accusing journalists of supporting one of the warring factions. The union warned that those named could face violent repercussions after the fighting ended (ibid).

**Methodology**

The paper draws upon 30 in-depth interviews conducted between 2016 and 2024 as part of a larger project on 'Cultures of journalism in Egypt and Lebanon'. The sampling followed a purposive snowball technique. A thematic analysis has been employed to allow the emergence of complexities and new patterns.

All journalists interviewed work or used to work for newsrooms supported by professional organisational structures. They range between mid-career and senior journalists (those who have been in the profession between 10 and 20 years) to the top echelon who work in the roles of editor and deputy editor. Respondents were based in both state-run and privately owned news organisations. None of the interviewees work for the Pan-Arab media organisations Al Jazeera or Al-Arabiya. Questions posed to these journalists included: how social media has affected their way of conducting journalism, how they use it, what content it tends to generate and whether they have been subject to online bullying or harassment campaigns.

The journalists interviewed have been anonymised and random numbers used to refer to each individual. Egyptian journalists have the letter E in front of the number and Lebanese journalists the letter L. Interviews were conducted via email, Zoom and face-to-face. It is worth mentioning that many of the Egyptian journalists took part in the protests in Tahrir Square in 2011. Some of the Lebanese journalists interviewed participated in the 2015 anti-sectarian demonstrations and later in the 2019 anti-corruption protests. At the time, they thought it extremely important to fulfil their role as citizens first and then as journalists. It should be noted that the interviews were conducted before the 66-day Israel war on Lebanon and over a span of eight years, providing valuable insights into evolving patterns and trends over time. However, this extended timeframe also has certain limitations, such as potential changes in context, shifts in societal or political dynamics and the challenges of maintaining consistency across such a long period.

**Journalists' use of social media**

Like other activists during and after the Egyptian revolt in 2011, Egyptian journalists took to social media to express their views. One of them was later identified as a rising star of Egypt's 'online opinion journalism' (a term coined by De Angelis 2015). Despite this accolade, the journalist himself told me that the phenomenon reached its zenith between 2012 and 2015 and has now ended. Some of this decline, according to journalist E5, has been due to 'the negative impact of social media' (my emphasis). For him, social media played the role of the censor, where journalists are judged by users according to their own perception of how journalists should be practising their profession. 'Some users tend to classify and attack you according to their political beliefs and perceptions of political reality' (interview with author 2016).

Still, social media was seen by many participants as a significant source of news and information in a country where accessing information is restricted and sometimes impossible (for example E13, interview with author 2016). Journalist E21 spoke of how social media had alerted her to stories as they were happening, even before they became news. She added that, because of 'the government propaganda' in mainstream outlets, she has now turned to social media.

> Like many reporters, I've been able to contact sources through their social media accounts or identify a story simply by following actors on the ground tweeting about what they're seeing or what is happening around them. And because I can no longer read the papers regularly (the government propaganda could be a put off) I keep track of read-worthy content when it's shared on social media (E21, interview with author 2016).

Journalist E13 gave credit to social media users, because it was these people who were altering her production team to stories and issues that needed to be brought to the public domain, and that would not otherwise have gained attention.

> We also used it to find guests for our show away from the official voice and the elite. It enabled us to disclose many human rights violations. We investigated those and verified the accusations, and, in most cases, they were reliable stories. We cannot consider social media users as representative of public opinion, but they do represent one fraction of the society (interview with author 2016).

Journalists E19 and E2, being senior editors, speak of the role of social media in bypassing censorship. Facebook is used to post full articles by journalists who have had to remove information deemed not in the 'national interest' from articles published in mainstream newspapers. Readers and users can see the two versions of the same article and realise what has been censored in the printed edition.

> Social media helps in raising the bar of freedom of expression and in confronting censorship in Egypt. Social media is also helping in opening the space on mainstream media to discuss issues that are usually not permissible to be discussed in the public domain. We use social media trending stories to talk about political or economic issues and publish stories that are perceived by the censor as crossing the line. That is why we are now witnessing an orchestrated campaign against social media (E2, interview with author 2016).

One such Facebook page is Al-Mouqef Al Masri, which has 1.3 million followers, which exceeds all national Egyptian newspapers' daily distribution (Ezzelarab 2024).

Social media has been used, therefore, as a tool to help journalists resist the official discourse that is being recycled through mainstream media, especially television. At the same time, social media is used as a platform to distribute lies and disinformation, items that attempt to justify government failures or policies. Journalist E1, despite depending on social media interaction for certain stories, said he was mostly sceptical of stories posted on social media (interview with author 2018).

Moreover, the positive sentiments among some of the Egyptian journalists in 2016 changed in 2018 and to a higher extent in 2021 and 2024. In the contemporary landscape, much of the social media scene in Egypt is centred on nationalistic and patriotic sentiments, and the fear of insecurity. The regime has succeeded in manipulating the fear of chaos and violence seen in other Arab countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen post-

2011 and using it every time voices of dissent (mainly through social media) rise to prominence. Journalists who say they have not been subject to demonising campaigns tend to confirm they have stopped being active on social media in fear of such campaigns. As will be demonstrated below, this is a situation shared by both Egyptian and Lebanese journalists alike. Many of the advantages of using social media that Lebanese journalists expressed in 2018 diminished in 2024. Social media, to many of the journalists in both countries, can be a destructive tool directed at journalists, used to undermine their professional integrity and keep the political status quo intact.

Social media users in Egypt are as divided as journalists themselves, between those acting as a mouthpiece for the regime and those whose voices are critical of the economic hardship, political corruption and social injustice in the country. The division in the landscape of users in Lebanon, however, is defined along both political and sectarian affiliation. The state is not as strong an actor in the political life as in Egypt (Hamoud 2023).

**Threats, bullying and gender-based harassment**

Journalists from both Egypt and Lebanon speak of the negative impact of social media on their work. Journalist E3 believes it represents an authoritarian tool for censorship that holds journalists accountable according to the authorities' perceptions of the journalist's role and not what is actually their role as journalists. 'They force you to write and produce material that aligns with their desires, based on what they want to watch and read' (interview with author 2018).

The power that the state and authorities in Egypt have in censoring journalists is also mirrored by the influence that political factions and religious sects have in covertly and overtly attempting to censor journalists' voices. In the case of one prominent Lebanese investigative journalist, this has escalated to threats against his life and the safety of his loved ones. He said:

> I've received direct threats from across the political spectrum in Lebanon. Every time my investigations expose a politician or an affiliated figure, social media explodes with messages of bullying, hate, and threats to my family's safety. The most frightening part is that they somehow obtained my WhatsApp number, and the most violent threats happen there (L20, interview with author 2024).

The case of L20 demonstrates that gender-based violence on social media targets male journalists as well, with personal slanders against their mothers, wives and daughters. 'All of this is because of my journalism. And when things get serious, the slander turns personal – it targets my wife and my mother' (ibid). This phenomenon appears to be more prevalent in Lebanon than in Egypt, where gender-based violence is primarily aimed at women journalists.

Death threats and threats to safety, however, are not exclusive to the Lebanese context. Egyptian journalists face them as well, with social media being the primary tool for disseminating such threats. One Egyptian

journalist, E30, said:

> I received death threats from a member of parliament after publishing an investigation into his misconduct. Unfortunately, the newspaper didn't stand by me – they chose to resolve the dispute through consensus instead of defending my work (E30, interview with author 2024).

**Online political trolls: Electronic committees and armies**

In Lebanon and Egypt, online trolls are often associated with specific names. Journalists in both countries speak of the destructive role of what they call 'electronic committees' in Egypt and the 'electronic army' in Lebanon. In both cases, similar to political trolls (Cabañes and Cornelio 2017), these groups are described as organised mobs of social media-users who participate in coordinated campaigns disseminating the same message, information, or sentiments.

> Anything [you publish], for example, that involves criticism of any official decision or state institution misconduct, you will be attacked not only by trolls, but by those following these trolls. In Egypt, we have a phenomenon called electronic committees. These are groups of people or bots – God knows who – that publish the same content and say the same things. It's essentially a copy-paste operation with one target: journalists, activists, or groups related to the political opposition. For hours, they inflict personal attacks on the targeted individual or group, often bringing up private data or material. Sometimes, they publish recordings, for example, of private calls between people (E22, interview with author 2018).

No matter which side journalists report on, they get attacked. They are targeted based on the narrative they oppose. These electronic committees or armies exist on both sides – those carrying the state narrative and those opposing it.

> In Egypt, we face what are known as 'electronic committees'. These are highly organised groups that launch coordinated attacks on social media, primarily targeting journalists who cover politics. Women are the most frequent targets. These groups flood social platforms with the same repeated messages, spreading false information designed to undermine a journalist's integrity and moral character (E21, interview with author 2024).

Character assassination is a common tactic used in these organised campaigns to slander journalists, attacking their honour and undermining their highly regarded societal morals (Posetti, Maynard, Kaisy, Harb and Shairr 2023).

**Silencing 'other' opinions among 'allies'**

One significant theme emerged from interviews with Lebanese journalists: the silencing of allies' opinions via social media platforms, particularly Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). This phenomenon was vividly illustrated in the case of a female journalist who, during the Lebanese revolt of 2019, was a vocal advocate for

journalists' rights to speak out against the political establishment responsible for the country's economic collapse.

Reflecting on her experience, the journalist (identified as L10 in the interview) spoke of her participation in the protests on the streets of Beirut. Like many of her peers, she was motivated by a deep commitment to social and economic justice, a cause that has historically been central to the role Lebanese journalists assign to themselves as advocates for societal change (Harb 2019b). However, L10 soon noticed an unsettling dynamic among certain activists:

> I participated in the protests on the streets of Beirut, but I soon noticed a troubling dynamic among some activists. They were bullying and undermining others on social media simply because they disagreed with their approaches or analyses (L10, interview with author 2024).

This internal fragmentation, manifested through online bullying and suppression of dissenting voices within activist circles, raises questions about the commitment to the principles of free speech and tolerance that the movement ostensibly championed.

In response, L10 published an article urging the 2019 Lebanese revolt activists to reconsider their approach. She warned them against 'shooting themselves in the foot' by attacking each other and criticised their tendency to silence voices that deviated from the agreed-upon rhetoric. Her article emphasised the irony of their behaviour, comparing it to the very authoritarian practices of suppressing speech that they were fighting against:

> I asked them to stop butchering the speech of those who step out of the agreed rhetoric. I questioned their claim to be the speech police and urged them to step back and reflect on how they were simply replicating the same oppressive tactics that the authorities excel at (ibid).

However, the reaction to her article was rapid and harsh. Instead of fostering dialogue, her call for unity and tolerance among activists triggered an intense online backlash from those she had considered allies.

> I was attacked online and bullied in a campaign that demonised me as a journalist, researcher and woman. The reaction was swift and brutal: a wave of bullying, harassment and character assassination was launched against me by the very activists I had considered allies. My intention had been to call for tolerance and unity among us, but instead the campaign escalated to the point of revealing deeply personal information about my life – details I had only shared with a few trusted individuals (ibid).

The hate campaign targeted her with accusations of various behaviours, undermining her credibility and integrity as a journalist. Particularly painful was the fact that these attacks came from individuals who shared her broader vision of a Lebanon liberated from corruption and sectarian politics:

> A hate campaign accused me of all kinds of behaviour, coming from those who were supposedly allies in the fight for a better Lebanon free of nepotism, corruption and confessional politics (ibid).

This account highlights a paradox within activist movements: the suppression of internal dissent by individuals who claim to champion freedom of speech and social justice. It underscores how the fragmentation of solidarity, particularly through social media, can undermine the very principles such movements seek to uphold. In the case of the Lebanese revolt, the silencing of 'other' opinions among allies reflects deeper challenges of polarisation, groupthink and the misuse of digital platforms as tools for harassment rather than constructive dialogue.

L10 is not alone in facing brutal attacks from supposed allies. Other journalists face similar situations simply for expressing views that do not align with those of their own ranks. The vivid experience of L10 serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating how movements for change can risk replicating the oppressive structures they seek to dismantle. It raises important questions about the role of journalists and activists in fostering a culture of tolerance, unity and mutual respect, even amidst differences.

**Self-censorship**

Self-censorship became a defining common feature among many of the interviewed journalists, often emerging as a response to threats, bullying and harassment – or the fear of them. For many, the pressures of navigating public discourse in an increasingly hostile environment have led to profound changes in how they express themselves. This shift is not merely a theoretical observation but a deeply personal experience, as told through the stories of those who have lived it.

One individual, L4, recounted how social media transformed their relationship with self-expression. 'I started applying self-censorship,' they admitted, reflecting on the profound shift in their behaviour. 'I had never done that before social media. You should pay attention to what you want to say because someone might insult you, comment ridiculously on what you say, classify you, or consider you a traitor and your comment a treason' (interview with author 2018). The fear of being misinterpreted or vilified created a constant sense of vigilance, altering how they communicated and interacted with the world.

For L20, the consequences of speaking out became even more personal. In 2024, a businessman targeted them with threats of a lawsuit and a vicious online campaign. Initially, they stood their ground. 'I told him to go ahead and follow through with his threats,' L20 recalled. 'He didn't take it any further. He knew he was at fault' (interview with author 2024). Despite their resilience in the face of this confrontation, the experience left scars. 'I try to stay away from social media,' they confessed, acknowledging the toll such attacks can take on mental well-being.

L10's story offers a poignant illustration of how fear can silence even the most dedicated voices. A targeted campaign against them shattered their confidence, making them question their ability to write. 'That campaign

drew fear in my ability to write again,' they said. 'I stayed away from writing articles and focused on my work as a researcher' (interview with author 2024). Though they eventually resumed writing, the ordeal left a lasting impact. 'The experience took a heavy toll on me mentally. It forced me to pull back, reconsider my writing, and exercise extreme caution with what I posted on social media' (ibid.). Now, every word they share is carefully weighed to avoid provoking another wave of bullying and harassment.

The common thread running through their experiences is a deep sense of vulnerability – an awareness that words, once spoken or written, can provoke disproportionate reactions. Yet, even amidst fear and caution, there is resilience. Each of these individuals continues to navigate the fraught terrain of public expression, balancing their desire to speak with the risks that come with it. Self-censorship, then, is not merely an act of suppression but a reflection of the broader dynamics of power, fear and resistance in the open space of social media.

The intersection of social media platforms, media organisations and journalists' syndicates plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of journalists facing harassment and threats (Joao 2023). Yet the narratives of those directly affected reveal a glaring gap in support and accountability, leaving individuals to fend for themselves in hostile online environments.

For L20, social media platforms have been complicit in perpetuating harm. Reflecting on their experiences in 2024, they singled out Twitter, now rebranded as X, as the 'worst offender'. 'They've allowed threats and deeply personal insults, including ones targeting my wife, to remain online,' L20 recounted (interview with author 2024). Despite repeated efforts to report these attacks, the platform failed to act. While Facebook was initially no better, they eventually became more responsive. That change may have happened because L20 managed to meet some of their regional managers in person at a conference. This underscores the systemic challenges in accessing support from tech companies.

For E21, the stakes of online harassment extend beyond personal safety to professional credibility. In their view, silence is not an option. 'What can you do in such a situation? Do you let them spread lies, or do you respond?' they asked. 'I believe you have to respond; if you stay silent, they will succeed in damaging your credibility and convincing the public that their lies are true' (interview with author 2024). This dilemma highlights the double bind faced by journalists: responding can fuel further attacks, while silence risks eroding public trust.

Media organisations, which should serve as a bulwark against such attacks, are often absent when needed most. 'Media organisations have a critical role to play in protecting their journalists from these attacks, but unfortunately that support is often non-existent,' E21 lamented (ibid). The lack of institutional backing leaves journalists exposed to relentless online abuse without adequate resources or recourse.

Compounding the issue is the absence of structured training and support for online safety. As E21 pointed out: 'We are severely lacking in training for journalists to protect themselves online. Online safety has essentially

become a personal initiative for journalists to pursue on their own' (ibid). This lack of preparedness not only endangers individual journalists but also weakens the profession's collective resilience against coordinated harassment campaigns.

These accounts reveal a troubling dynamic: social media platforms often fail to act decisively against abuse, media organisations provide little to no support and journalists' syndicates rarely address the urgent need for training and protection. As a result, journalists are left to navigate these challenges largely on their own, relying on personal initiative and informal networks to safeguard their well-being and credibility. These stories underscore the urgent need for systemic change to ensure that journalists can perform their essential work without fear of reprisal or harm.

**Not all is gloomy**

Despite the challenges and negative aspects of social media, many of the journalists interviewed acknowledge the unique opportunities these platforms provide. Social media serves as a powerful tool for publicising their work, finding sources and uncovering stories that might otherwise remain hidden. L5, for example, highlighted how she leverages social media in her professional life: 'I use it often to publish my articles, to communicate with some personalities, and to express my opinion on matters that I cannot talk about where I work' (interview with author 2018). This illustrates how social media offers journalists a degree of autonomy, allowing them to share their views and engage with audiences outside the constraints of traditional media outlets.

Social media is also lauded as an alternative space to state-controlled media. As illustrated earlier, E27 reflected on its pivotal role during Egypt's political turmoil:

> Social media in the build-up to the revolution [in Egypt] was an alternative to the media under Mubarak. Now, citizen journalism is not as influential as before, with many activists either out of the country or in jail. However, social media remains a platform where people express their opinions. Social media is still the only breath of freedom in the country, and journalists need to keep an eye on what's being said there (interview with author 2018).

These observations highlight the dual role of social media: as a tool for empowerment and a platform for resistance. Even in repressive environments, it offers a critical outlet for dissent and the dissemination of ideas. For journalists, social media is more than a digital space – it is a means of bypassing traditional gatekeepers, amplifying marginalised voices, and accessing stories that might otherwise be silenced.

While the risks and challenges of using social media are undeniable, its potential as a tool for journalistic innovation and freedom of expression cannot be overlooked. For many, it represents a vital resource in an increasingly restrictive media landscape.

Over the course of the study, negative sentiments regarding the role of social media became increasingly prominent in journalists' responses. These sentiments were expressed with greater intensity in the later years, reflecting a growing disillusionment with the platforms. Journalists' assessments of social media's role tended to become more pessimistic, highlighting concerns about its harmful impacts. This shift was accompanied by an increase in calls for social media platforms to take greater responsibility in safeguarding journalists from harm, including addressing issues such as harassment, abuse and threats encountered online. Yet journalists' pessimism regarding the role of social media did not deter them from practising journalism or from being the critical voices that led to their attacks in the first place.

## Discussion and concluding remarks

The findings from the 30 interviews with Egyptian and Lebanese journalists paint a complex and often harrowing picture of the double aspect social media plays in their professional lives. While social media platforms have opened doors for greater audience interaction, access to sources, and the promotion of independent journalism, they have also become battlegrounds rife with threats, disinformation and harassment.

### *The negative impact of social media*

For many journalists, particularly in Egypt and Lebanon, social media has become a tool of repression rather than liberation (Claesson 2023). Both states and political parties have weaponised digital platforms, deploying electronic armies/committees to attack journalists for their work. In Egypt, the government leverages social media to silence dissent, while in Lebanon, political factions utilise similar tactics to intimidate reporters. Disinformation is a pervasive threat, used strategically to discredit journalists and undermine public trust in their reporting.

Trolling and bullying are commonplace, with women journalists bearing the brunt of gender-based online violence (Joao 2023). Female reporters frequently face attacks targeting their gender rather than their work, a phenomenon that forces many to retreat from social media or adopt self-censorship as a protective mechanism. 'In Egypt, we don't have independent media; we have independent journalists,' remarked journalist E21 (interview with author 2016), encapsulating the struggle for autonomy in a deeply politicised media landscape.

The dependence of audiences on social media as their primary news source exacerbates these challenges. Journalists express concern over the unchecked spread of disinformation and the need for robust tools to verify sources in a digital environment where truth is easily distorted (Macleod 2024). This is compounded by the absence of effective, independent regulators in Egypt and Lebanon, leaving journalists vulnerable to unchecked abuse. Social media platforms often fail to act swiftly – if at all – on requests to remove harmful content, further endangering the safety and mental well-being of reporters.

### *The potential of social media*

Despite these challenges, journalists recognise the significant opportunities social media provides. Platforms like X (Twitter) and Facebook allow journalists to publish material denied space in state- controlled or politically aligned mainstream media (Wolver 2016). They also enable easier interaction with audiences and access to sources, creating pathways for independent reporting in environments where traditional journalism is heavily restricted.

In Egypt, social media played a pivotal role during the January 2011 revolution, serving as an alternative to state-controlled media under Mubarak (Khamis and Vaughn 2013; Shirky 2011). While citizen journalism has lost some of its influence in the years since (Harb 2019a), social media remains, as one journalist described it above, 'the only breath of freedom in the country'. It continues to offer a platform for dissent and public discourse, allowing journalists to launch campaigns and disseminate information that authorities would prefer to suppress.

For many independent journalists, social media is a lifeline. As mainstream media grows increasingly entangled with political institutions, journalists are turning to online ventures and digital platforms to hold those in power accountable. Though the unity of social media users and activists from the January 2011 revolt has fractured, the determination of independent journalists to safeguard democratic change remains steadfast (Magdy 2023).

**A call for collective action**

The fact that the interviews spanned eight years presents certain limitations, influenced by the political, economics and societal changes experienced by Egypt and Lebanon during this period. However, it also holds significant value. The findings highlight a growing pattern of social media's destructive impact on journalists over the years, in stark contrast to the jubilation expressed during the early years following the 2011 Arab revolts (Harb 2011; Khamis and Vaughn 2011; Comunello and Anzera 2012; Rinnawi 2012; Khamis and Vaughn 2013; El-Nawawy and Khamis 2013).

The findings suggest that the harassment journalists face online should not be viewed as an individual issue but as a systemic one. It requires collective action from news organisations, social media platforms, the public and regulators. Social media platforms, in particular, bear a responsibility to respond to journalists' requests to remove hate and harmful content and ensure their safety in the absence of independent regulatory bodies in Egypt and Lebanon.

When journalists' safety is threatened, it creates a significant crisis in the delivery of information. This disruption often results in reduced news coverage and a lack of accountability (Badran 2017).

The fight for independent journalism in these countries is far from over. Despite the overwhelming challenges, journalists continue to use social media as a tool for resistance, advocacy and accountability. Independent

journalists, though few in number, are paving the way for a more democratic inclusive future, proving that even in the darkest times, the pursuit of truth remains unwavering.

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