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Abstract

“Change” and “Purification” are two key words you often hear nowadays among Egyptian and Tunisian journalists. For them, the revolution has not ended ... it has just begun. Much as the Egyptian and the Tunisian people were eagerly waiting to overcome their fear of the police state, the journalists of both countries are now waiting for another seminal moment in the history of their profession. It is time to free the media from ex-regime allies. Tunisian media demonstrations succeeded in changing editorial teams on national television and newspapers while the ongoing Egyptian demonstrations are calling for the election of a new board for their association and to bring new blood to the stagnant national media. “It is a seminal moment in the history of our profession. Our media will only be purified and changed when ex-regime allies leave,” said Wael Abul Saoud of Akhbar Alyoum newspaper, during a demonstration opposite the Egyptian Cabinet’s headquarters in Cairo, calling for the firing of the editors-in-chief appointed by the former regime.

Arab Media during the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia: Time for Change

By Rasha Owais | rasha.owais@tbwaraad.com

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Much as the Egyptian and the Tunisian people were eagerly waiting to overcome their fear of the police state, the journalists of both countries are now waiting for another seminal moment in the history of their profession. It is time to free the media from ex-regime allies.

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“It is a seminal moment in the history of our profession. Our media will only be purified and changed when ex-regime allies leave,” said Wael Abul Saoud of Akhbar Alyoum newspaper, during a demonstration opposite the Egyptian Cabinet’s headquarters in Cairo, calling for the firing of the editors-in-chief appointed by the former regime.

Wael’s words were echoed by Ammar Ben Aziz, a Tunisian blogger and journalist at Al Arabiya TV. “Yes, change and purification are happening now. The Tunisian media has changed a lot, but is still changing and we will continue changing it further,” said Ammar.

Wael and Ammar both remember incidents when ex-regime allies at the Egyptian and Tunisian national television stations would not criticize the performance of the pro-Mubarak Prime Minister or air reports on the corruption cases of former Tunisian President Bin Ali and his close circle.

“Two weeks after the revolution, Tunisian National TV was still influenced by the ex-regime allies. They refused to air corruption stories of Bin Ali and his allies,” said Ammar.

“We thought censorship was over, but it surfaced once again, after a television program criticizing the performance of Ahmed Shafiq, the former pro-Mubarak Interim Prime Minister, was denied a repeat airing on National TV,” said Wael.

In Egypt, the authorities “officially” backed-off, but the intelligence services remained active under the radar. It was not difficult for Egyptian people and media professionals to recognize the ex-Mubarak media advocates who suddenly became revolution supporters.

Days after Mubarak resigned, the national newspaper, Al Ahram, published an unprecedented editorial in which it unreservedly apologized to the Egyptian people “for all its bias to the corrupt regime.” It also took “pride in the pure blood that was shed to defeat the forces of backwardness and oppression,” and sought “the forgiveness of the families of the martyrs” who died during the Egyptian revolution.

Everyone was quite amazed. Egyptian national newspapers, TV editors and directors had always idolized Mubarak, to the extent that they claimed, “Egypt was born on his birthday.” Now, should the Egyptian people believe that they had become “revolutionists” defending the young people involved in the uprising whom they had accused of being agents only a few days earlier!

On the internet, video clips of a famous Egyptian talk show dated prior to the fall of the Mubarak regime are available as well as footage of the same program after the revolution. The difference in the presenters' attitude, before and after, is a source of great entertainment for Egyptians.

"The national Egyptian TV, newspapers and private satellite channels owned by businessmen lost their credibility. The change of the presenters' attitudes is ridiculous and shows us that we can't trust them. Editors-in-chief must leave. Mubarak's regime survived because of the state intelligence and those editors," stressed Wael.

Unlike the Tunisian people who have a higher level of literacy, explained Wael, Egypt has more than 40 percent illiterate citizens who neither read newspapers nor access the internet. Television is their main source of information, and the ex-regime journalists will certainly brainwash them, at a time when Egypt is readying itself for elections.

But despite the ongoing "War of Purification," Wael and Ammar acknowledge that there have been changes after both revolutions. Tunisians, for example, saw Al Jazeera TV's reporters on the streets for the first time since they were banned by Bin Ali years ago. Editorial teams at the Tunisian National Television Stations and newspapers were elected, and news on trials of Bin Ali's closest circle was printed.

In Egypt, the writing style of articles has become more daring "if not ruder." Opposition leaders appeared on national TV, and talk shows brought down the Interim Prime Minister. "After Ganoushi became the interim Prime Minister, the media refused to take orders from anyone and decided to elect its own editorial teams to manage the national stations and newspapers. We now watch interviews with formerly-exiled opposition leaders on screen and read about the trials of Bin Ali's close circle in newspapers," said Ammar.

The live talk show *Baladna Belmasri* [Our Country] on the channel ON TV owned by Nagub Sawiris made history when it brought down the Interim Government's Prime Minister, Ahmed Shafiq, after a heated discussion with the famous Egyptian novelist, Alaa Alaswani, who said straight to Shafiq that he would be joining demonstrators on Friday at Tahrir Square to kick him out of power. Shafiq lost his temper to the extent that the presenters began cooling down both speakers in an attempt to bring the show back on track. The next day Shafiq was forced to resign.

In another incident, some Egyptian satellite television channels and websites re-aired a bitter argument between a well-known Egyptian TV anchor and the former Egyptian Minister of Information, Anas Al Fiqqi, which highlighted the extent to which the media had begun playing a more independent role.

These examples of change reflect the attitudes of the majority of Egyptian media professionals, who know very well that freedom of expression is not given but has to be fought for. "The change will not come about smoothly, and it certainly won't be rapid, or without obstacles. It is not easy to convince everyone to adopt a new liberal, independent way of thinking overnight, after many decades of practicing a policy of censorship, authoritarianism and corruption," explained Wael.

Ammar agreed and said: "The changes are not yet up to the revolutionists' aspirations, but let us admit that watching opposition leaders was an impossibility on national TV earlier. Privately-owned TV stations now express themselves freely, to the extent that the profession's code of ethics is in danger. The privately-owned Hanibaa TV has lost track of professional ethics and now plays the role of a judge and condemns people right, left, and center."

In Tunisia, continued Ammar, "the two newspapers of the ex-ruling party, the Arabic *Al Horreya* and the French *Le Renouveau*, are now pro-revolution. The Arabic *Al Sahafa* newspaper now has

a new editor in chief, Ziad Al Hani, who reports corruption stories of Bin Ali and his allies. These stories are well known to the Tunisians, but they never dared to publish them."

"A year prior the revolution, the Al Sabah newspaper, which was earlier owned by Bin Ali's son-in-law, Sakr Al Materi, has opened doors for all political thinkers, leftists and Islamists, and allowed readers to interact with it. It is also ethically responsible, as it does not publish any story without documentation," Ammar added.

But what about further changes? What will the Tunisian and Egyptian media look like in the future? Wael and Ammar both agreed that newspapers will continue to be daring, if not fiercer in headlines and stories. They will keep focusing on topics that interest the peoples of both countries: politics, economy, security, democracy and readying the societies for political life.

"We are living in the wake of the revolution. All media outlets, be it newspapers, television, or social media, are saying whatever they like, and criticizing whomever they please. It can be overwhelming sometimes," said Ammar.

"After any revolution, it is very natural for newspapers to turn foul and adopt a rude writing style. When things settle down, the Egyptian media will be fiercer and critical, but respectful," commented Wael. To this, Adel Al Sanhoury of the Egyptian website Alyoum Al Sabe'e added: "The Egyptian media is definitely putting its records on track. The writing style is now more balanced than the early days of the revolution. In our website, we took a clear decision not to write anything unethical against colleagues in the media regardless of the employer."

Adel also expects the Egyptian national newspapers will become fierce competitors of their private counterparts. "The national newspaper, Al Akhbar, appointed Yasser Rizk as editor-in-chief and ever since then, they have expressed themselves freely to the extent that their circulation rose from 80-90,000 to 300,000 copies daily. This is a clear indication of the coming competition," Adel pointed out.

The coming period will demonstrate an acute change that will lead to the re-structuring of national newspapers and television, and perhaps the private ones too. This in the end is in the best interest of readers and viewers. "National newspapers were originally financed by the taxes the Egyptian people paid to the government. Basically, they were launched by the people and to the people, but they never expressed the views of the Egyptians. Now, everyone is studying new structures of ownership and the government, for example, might be allowed a 40% ownership of one newspaper and one TV station, while the rest of the ownership will be offered to the public and journalists employed at those newspapers, in an Initial Public Offering," said Adel.

But what about Facebook and Twitter? Wael, Ammar, and Adel say they know that the internet is now a strong weapon. "Facebook is magic. It is the best source of information, and people depend on it because they no longer trust the Egyptian national media," said Wael.

"Tunisia now has 1,800,000 Facebook and Twitter users, a figure that is higher than the number of German subscribers. Tunisians now interact more on Facebook; the opposition and the earlier silent majority are now on the Net. I will give you a small example, within a few days I had 300 friends, and now I have 700," declared Ammar.

He also hopes Facebook is used "responsibly" as it had lately turned out to be a source of rumours. "All the creators, including myself, of the Tunisian revolution pages, decided to launch a joint page titled the Union of Revolution Page with the purpose of publishing credible stories. We have genuine stories and named administrators, and we do not publish anonymous stories," said Ammar.

According to the latest statistics, more than 56 million Arabs are regular cybernauts, and the number is rapidly increasing. Despite efforts by most Arab regimes to censor and control the internet, tech-savvy youths who represent up to 50 % of the region's population are able to outwit their elderly rulers whose average age is over 70.

Recently, Abdul Bari Atwan, editor-in-chief of the London-based Al Quds newspaper, said that the region's growing middle-class, many of whom have studied abroad and speak European languages, understands the benefits and mechanisms of democracy, and this is heavily reflected in their Facebook, Twitter, and blogs postings. It is mostly this class, together with workers' unions, that has been organizing and driving the current uprisings; they can be expected to be crucial to the nation-building process that will ensue.

Atwan stressed that Arab media professionals can't underestimate the role played by the internet in informing and galvanizing Arabs; the unprecedented freedom of information available in cyberspace has helped fuel and channel resentment. WikiLeaks recently detailed the nouveau-riche excesses of the Tunisian regime while impoverished and oppressed Libyan cybersurfers discovered that their national wealth was being squandered abroad by Gaddafi's sons who allegedly paid pop stars millions of dollars to perform at private parties.

Social networking via the internet has helped protesters organize and gather support with unprecedented rapidity. Slim Amamou who became known as the Tunis Blogger told reporters that the brisk toppling of Bin Ali was due to text messaging and the Internet: "Information was immediately available," he said, "people could instantly synchronize their actions."

Wael Ghoneim, the Egyptian who lives and works in Dubai and his colleagues, were also instrumental in breaking the Egyptian January 25th revolution, through their page Kolena Khalid Saeed [We are all Khaled Saeed], the 28-year-old Alexandrian man who was tortured to death by two police officers. The page, now in Arabic and English, has 1,045,712 members in its Arabic version and 104,781 members in its English version.

Atwan pointed out that more than 8.3% of Facebook users are in the Middle East and North Africa. Egypt alone has 1,820,000 on Facebook and, together with Twitter, it is the source of most real-time news from Libya at the moment. Many of the initial aid campaigns to the Libyan people were organized through Facebook Events and Pages.

Social networking sites also convey the kind of human element sought in professional journalism. One particularly striking posting on Facebook by an Egyptian youth at the height of the struggle read: "To DIE for something ... is better than ... to LIVE for nothing ... R.I.P. all Egyptians dead in this Revolution."

In these days of uprisings and political change throughout the Arab world, signs of the next media revolution are obvious. There is a new drive and hunger for truth and freedom, which seems to be infectious. In reality, it is the new independent mostly internet-based media that is transforming the region.

The role of keeping the public informed and holding the powers-that-be accountable is gradually shifting to individuals and distributed networks and groups that are increasingly able to reshape the news agenda, said Atwan. Al Jazeera, he added, compelled a revision of the peace negotiations when it, along with the Guardian, released the largest-ever trove of confidential documents related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "With these non-traditional approaches entering the fray of journalism, the practices and rules of investigative journalism are perhaps ripe for a rethink," he said.

In light of recent groundbreaking reporting, how should investigative journalism be conducted in the future, given the new tools and capabilities that technology affords ordinary individuals?

There has been pressure on governments in other Arab countries to loosen press restrictions. Journalists working for state television and newspapers demonstrated in Jordan recently, an act unthinkable before this year. Yemen has announced a new, more liberal media law, although critics say it's a smokescreen behind which the authorities will continue to repress freedom of expression.

Restrictions on the press remain very firmly in place in Morocco, but King Mohammed VI has announced plans to hold a referendum on constitutional changes, Atwan said. Aboubakr Jamai, a Moroccan journalist who founded *Le Journal* back in the 1990s, said this is precisely what the opposition has been calling for. "If you're a journalist and you wanted to cover the protests on 20 February, or if you want to cover the protest called for 20 March, you have to be on the right Facebook sites. Don't waste your time elsewhere," he added.

Even hard-line countries like Syria and Saudi Arabia are not immune to the spirit of the times. In Syria, the ban on Facebook has been lifted. Social media is making inroads in Saudi Arabia as well. Diverging from the trend toward more openness, the government in Iraq has reacted to weekly Friday protests by cracking down on the press, said Atwan.

Libya remains the current flashpoint. The satellite TV stations *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* are serving a familiar role there as the only source of non-state news for much of the country. Idris Ibn Tayeb, a well-known Libyan writer and long-term critic of the Gaddafi regime, said that things are changing in the eastern part of the country.

Speaking from his home in Benghazi, Ibn Tayeb said journalists there have been publishing short newspapers with news of the fighting and announcements. Voice of Free Libya radio is now broadcasting on medium wave transmissions from Benghazi, which reach far into the west of the country, and a TV station in Benghazi has just launched on satellite.

But when the fighting stops, Libya will have a lot of catching-up to do, according to Ibn Tayeb. There is very little to build on in terms of institutions, including the media. "During 42 years of Gaddafi, we've been struggling with nothing."

Thanks to satellite channels, Libyans were able to follow the talk-show *Baladna Belmasry* which led to the resignation of Egyptian Interim Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq. While Shafiq's resignation happened after he appeared on the traditional medium of television, his resignation demonstrated just how far new media has penetrated the Arab world. The Egyptian Supreme Military Council governing Egypt announced Shafiq's resignation on its Facebook page.

Shafiq himself had a page on Facebook and the current Egyptian Interim Prime Minister, Dr. Essam Sharaf, created the official Egyptian Cabinet's Page on Facebook as well. In fact, the power of the net is forcing the Egyptian government to study the possibility of allowing Egyptians abroad to vote electronically in the upcoming elections.

The outcomes of the Tunisian and Egyptian popular revolutions, along with the Libyan revolution, concern all Arab media professionals. Despite the positive and encouraging achievements, so far Arab media professionals have failed to produce a single truly independent Arab media outlet. Perhaps lessons drawn from the Egyptian media experience will be useful for countries suffering similar situations.

If Arab media organizations break the tradition of blindly supporting whoever is in power, then they may be able to sustain the repercussions when their countries are hit by change. Those who steadfastly defended the Egyptian regime before it was overthrown have either changed or ended up on trial for corruption. The task for Arab journalists and media professionals is to start considering how to create truly independent media outlets.