THE CARNEGIE PAPERS

TRANSITIONAL LIBYAN MEDIA

Free at Last?

Fatima el Issawi

MIDDLE EAST | MAY 2013

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

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Summary

Muammar Qaddafi kept a firm grip on Libya's media sector and used it as a propaganda tool for his regime. After the dictator's fall in 2011, the media sector was opened up, but reconstruction efforts lacked vision and have fallen prey to the tumultuous situation on the ground. A completely unbiased and free media industry remains an illusion. The rebirth of Libya's media sector requires a comprehensive approach that involves regulatory reform and builds up the skills of journalists.

The State of the Libyan Media

- Transitional bodies established after the revolution to reorganize the media sector took radical measures to break with the past, disbanding many of the former media outlets with the aim of creating a freer system. This was interpreted by former state journalists as punishment for their complicity.
- With Qaddafi gone, Libyan journalists face new forms of control exerted by militias, armed factions, and Islamic extremist groups. Journalists now engage in new forms of self-censorship.
- The poor professional skills of Libyan journalists continue to undermine efforts to build a new media sector.
- Libya's tribes have not tolerated open debate well, which is hampering the development of investigative journalism.
- There is a divide between journalists from the Qaddafi era and the new wave of "revolutionary journalists."
- The battle for the assets of former state-owned media has hampered the liberalization and modernization of the media sector.
- Private media outlets are flourishing, but they suffer from weak structures, opaque funding, and a lack of regulatory frameworks.

How Libyans Can Nurture a Freer Media Sector

Lobby for the rights and security of journalists. It is the responsibility of the Libyan government to provide security for journalists in the face of sustained abuses, intimidation, and attacks. It is crucial for the media community to press the government to guarantee its rights and safety.

Establish a specialized expert body to spearhead the liberalization and reconstruction of Libyan media. The body should be granted executive power so that it can reorganize the former state media and draft laws for the private media. It should incorporate the lessons learned in other transitional countries.

Reintegrate journalists employed during the Qaddafi era into the new media sector. Staff from the former state media can bring experience and leadership to the national media community.

Adopt tailored, long-term training programs. Training should not just include short-format schemes based on Western models. Instead, long-term mentoring programs customized for the specific problems and challenges of Libyan media are necessary.

Introduction

The Libyan media has transitioned from an extremely closed and manipulated sector to one that is more or less open following the country's 2011 revolution. But, more than a year after the overthrow of the regime of Muammar Qaddafi, Libya's media sector is still lacking in vision. It is beset by diverse and complex problems, some stemming from the old regime and others mirroring challenges of the country's current political transition.

These problems make it difficult to pinpoint the start of the media reconstruction process. The national media, for decades used as a simple publisher of the regime's politics, is becoming more of an unbiased provider of information. However, the obstacles facing this sector are huge.

Widespread insecurity in post-Qaddafi Libya and the growing power of armed groups and militias are hindering the development of a professional and free national media industry.

For years isolated from the experiences of their Arab and international counterparts, Libyan journalists' skills are extremely poor. The state media that developed under Qaddafi is struggling to find its place in this new phase of Libyan history. Private media outlets are flourishing, but they suffer from weak structures, opaque funding, and a lack of regulatory frameworks. The widespread insecurity in post-Qaddafi Libya and the growing power of armed groups and militias are hindering the development of a professional and free national media industry and making field reporting and investigative journalism major challenges for local media professionals.[1]

Libyan Media Before the Revolution: The Propaganda Machine

After Qaddafi seized power in a coup in 1969, the media was transformed into a propaganda tool for the new regime. Independent organizations, including those of the media, were brought under government control. Qaddafi saw these institutions as a threat to the relationship between the government and society.

Qaddafi's Green Book,[2] which laid out his political philosophy, explained that "the press is a means of expression of society and is not a means of expression of a natural or a corporate person. Logically and democratically, the press, therefore, cannot be owned by either of these."[3] All public organizations, including the media, were linked to People's Committees, which were local-level bodies serving as intermediaries between citizens and the national

government. The book claimed that these committees directly represented local or professional entities and so the regime was therefore establishing a direct popular democracy. In reality, Qaddafi loyalists were selected to run the People's Committees, which were also frequently linked to the security apparatus, extending regime control.[4]

The state media was controlled by different organizations, depending upon the regime's mood and its willingness to relax or strengthen its grip. In 1971, the state media was put under the umbrella of the Ministry of Information. The following year, a press code was issued detailing the government's limits on the media and the punishment for transgression. The code punished those who "tarnished the country's reputation" with life imprisonment and prescribed the death sentence for anyone who dared advocate inside Libya "theories or principles aiming to change the basic tenets of the national constitution or the basic structures of the social system, or aiming to overthrow the state's political, social or economic structures."[5]

In 1979, the Ministry of Information was rebranded the Secretariat for Information, and in 1988, it was renamed Ministry for Information and Culture. In 2001, the regime established an executive body called the Jamahiriyya General Information Corporation to directly manage the media sector and maintain its subservience. This organization oversaw and managed all media outlets. It included the Jamahiriyya General Broadcasting Corporation for audio-visual media and the General Press Corporation for print publications as well as related industries.

National media expansion began during the late 1970s and ended with the economic turmoil of the late 1980s. The economic sanctions of 1993, imposed on Libya by the United Nations following the Lockerbie bombing, damaged Libyan national media by preventing imports of computers and other technology. Internet access was introduced to Libya in 2001, but only small clandestine media operations in eastern Libya were able to bypass the state monopoly on Internet service providers.

State media had no real political function other than to publish information provided by the regime. The sector employed approximately 5,000 people, mostly technicians and administrative workers. Journalists amounted to less than half of the administrative staff. The regime-approved Jamahiriyya National News Agency (JANA) had a monopoly over political news, which meant that the regime could continuously control the content. It was under the tight control of Qaddafi and his powerful Information Bureau, which provided directives for each news item. For instance, a storm hitting the United States was to be reported as nature's anger against imperialistic America, and former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was to be referred to as "the traitor."

The state media reproduced such news without amendment. The main state press publications—*al-Jamahiriyya*, *al-Shams*, *al-Zahf al-Akhdar*, and *al-Fajr al-Jadid*—had only minute differences because headlines, editorials, and

political news were provided by the national news agency. The "news" format was extremely redundant and consisted of lengthy prose in praise of the regime interspersed with insults of its opponents.

With the limited number of media outlets and continuous changes in structure, journalists moved from one position to another within the same media apparatus. Sometimes this was, in fact, punishment for a journalist's misbehavior. The regime used a variety of tools to enforce its rules, including removing journalists from their positions, stopping them from producing, or assigning them to a less important role or a different industry.

Media outlet performance depended in part on the management style the regime opted for during different phases. Mohamed Baio, the head of the General Press Corporation right before the revolution, describes what this meant in practice: "I managed to implement many reforms, especially in providing these media outlets with new equipment. The content was always restricted."

The press avoided publishing any material that could be deemed offensive or threatening, particularly to Islam, national security, territorial integrity, or Qaddafi.[6] But journalists' descriptions of their own practices demonstrate that actual laws had less impact on content than self-censorship, regime control, and security bodies.

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But there was a limited degree of freedom to be found within this structure. Qaddafi encouraged local print and radio outlets, which "provided niches for Libyan journalists and intellectuals in the prevailing environment of ideological journalism." This output avoided the heavily regulated political sections of the media. The large state media operations focused on international and national news relevant to the regime, but local newspapers became a breeding ground for more community-oriented journalism.[7]

State journalists also had more room to maneuver on socioeconomic or cultural topics, especially in the latter years of the Qaddafi regime. Many journalists said avant-garde editors in chief encouraged them with opportunities for advancement, which meant field reporting on domestic issues. Since broadcast media was under tighter state control, this experimentation was mainly left to print publications whose reports could sometimes question the performance of a high official or critique the shortcomings of the public administration. But the regime's presence could be felt in that area as well. According to Abdel Razzak Dahesh, former editor in chief of *al-Jamahiriyya* newspaper, "Even the critical tone of some publications was dictated by the regime. . . . We were encouraged to cause trouble from inside the regime, but only under their directives."

Former state media journalists acknowledge some positive elements from their experiences. Although oppressive, the state media offered them a secure work environment with clearly defined expectations. The situation on the ground also began to change slightly in the 2000s. Under international pressure, the regime allowed a carefully controlled opening of the country's

media. This period was marked by the end of United Nations sanctions on Libya in 2003 and the so-called normalization of diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom and the United States. Qaddafi had begun to adopt limited top-down economic liberalization similar to that seen earlier in other Arab dictatorships such as Egypt. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch visited the country officially for the first time in 2004 and 2005, respectively. After twenty years of refused entry, Reporters Without Borders was able to interview dissident journalists in Libya in 2006.[8] And, in the brightest phase of Qaddafi-era media, the strongman's own son, Saif al-Islam, launched a liberalization project.

The Al-Ghad Project

Saif al-Islam Qaddafi sought to rebrand the face of the regime and attract and engage its opponents—primarily the Muslim Brotherhood—through an alleged state reform initiative. His criticism of Libya's lack of press freedom became particularly striking in 2006.[9] The next year, he launched the al-Ghad group, an ambitious media project that provided journalists with a much more open environment in which censorship was limited.

Al-Ghad was composed of a main television channel (al-Libiyya TV), two newspapers (*Oea* and *Quryna*), and a news agency (Libya Press). Saif identified four issues that could not be discussed: Islamism, the "security and stability of Libya," Libya's "territorial integrity," and Muammar Qaddafi himself. All other areas were no longer immune to criticism. Foreign press publications appeared on newsstands after a twenty-five-year ban, and three foreign news agencies opened offices in Tripoli.[10]

But al-Ghad ended up a total fiasco. The media's newfound bravery was short-lived, and it buckled under the pressure of internal battles between the old and new guards. The flagship channel of the project, al-Libiyya TV, was suddenly shut down in 2009 after it aired a program featuring a controversial Egyptian journalist. Libya Press was dismantled after it published an article criticizing the old guard. The newspaper *Oea*, which shut down after it published an article calling for the return of a prominent Libyan dissident,[11] reopened in 2010 under the name of *Sabah Oea* and pledged allegiance to Qaddafi. Thus, the end result of the media liberalization project was merely a new version of the old state media.

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Although disappointing in outcome, most journalists still consider the al-Ghad media project a rare opportunity to experience firsthand professional journalism. Mahmoud al-Misrati, editor in chief of *Libya al-Jadida* newspaper, describes his work as a reporter for *Oea*: "We stopped using redundant discourse in storytelling; the format of the publication was really newsy," he said. "We could do investigative work

with relation to people's daily problems and polemic topics such as corruption and the high prices for goods."

Not all journalists share al-Misrati's opinion. For former state media journalist Mohamed Baio, the al-Ghad experience was all show. "They took the best of Libyan talents, but the change was restricted to the form and not the content," he says. "This project was a bubble that finally exploded."

At the least, the editorial style used by the al-Ghad project was a complete departure from the old-fashioned state media style. Even if it was largely cosmetic, it was still a major change in the national media industry. The project offered journalists channels for training through which they could build upon their core competencies. The relative openness of al-Ghad media outlets encouraged state media to push the boundaries of what was permissible. "We would not be able to run media outlets today without the experience of the al-Ghad project," says Mahmood al-Sharkasy, a talk-show host at the al-Assema TV station. "We had proper training then and we learned for the first time about something called professional skills." This is echoed by Rana al-Akbani, former journalist at Libya Press news agency: "We were trained by Libyan journalists who used to work for Al Jazeera. We had the pulse of the street, we could experience investigative journalism, but we also had many limitations."

State journalists experienced a taste of this professional freedom and development again in the months immediately preceding the revolution. Then, state media was provided with subscriptions to international news agencies, bringing exposure to international media and Arab satellite television channels. "I greatly enjoyed the two months that preceded the revolution as we had a unique margin of freedom, thanks to the particular conditions of revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt," says Mariam al Hajjaji, head of the FM radio station al-Libiyya. "We could talk about cartoon films, violence, graffiti on walls, the meaning of citizenship, and the conditions of student campuses. . . . We still faced internal struggles but this was a golden phase, better than the current situation now after the revolution."

The Revolution and Qaddafi's Clampdown

Once the revolution began, the regime saw media control as crucial to its survival. According to Abdallah Rached, a state media journalist who remained in his position until Qaddafi's fall, "the regime wanted to win the battle at any price. The media was more important than the field battle."

State media had clear directives for journalists: protesters were to be labeled as thugs or the vestiges of al-Qaeda, angry protests were to be called support demonstrations, and members of the general public were to be portrayed as supportive of their leader.[12] As the regime struggled to cling to power, state

media was increasingly steadfast in its disinformation campaigns, even fabricating stories about alleged mass crimes committed by rebels. The battle for the hearts and minds of Libyans—whether they should trust the state media or the regional Arab satellite television stations, which were the main voice of the rebellion—was fierce. Traditional media outlets, especially television stations, were the regime's main propaganda tool during the crisis. The al-Libiyya channel was rebranded as al-Jamahiriyya 2, which the regime used as its main propaganda machine. Talk-show-stars-turned-pundits used their positions to launch politically charged campaigns against dissidents. These media figures quickly received attention because of their antics. The most prominent example is Hala al-Misrati, a television presenter who drew a gun in the studio of al-Libiyya TV and promised to defend the regime to the end. She was also well known for her police-style investigative talks with imprisoned journalists.[13]

Meanwhile, the use of new media expanded rapidly in the wake of weakening state power. Social media was gaining traction with the so-called Libyan Electronic Army of young, computer-savvy regime supporters. Even now, this social media "army" is alive on Facebook, calling for revenge for the "martyr leader Qaddafi."[14]

The Reconstruction Process

When Qaddafi's regime ultimately fell in 2011, the transitional Libyan government was faced with the daunting task of transforming the long-repressed Libyan media into a functioning sector. Most former state journalists had lost their media headquarters during the conflict.[15] NATO air strikes damaged the state television station, and Qaddafi's phalanges attacked the print publications' offices after the fall of Tripoli.

The transitional bodies established after the revolution to reorganize the media sector took radical measures to break with the past. Article 14 of Libya's Interim Constitutional Declaration guaranteed freedom of expression and freedom of the press. It repealed laws restricting freedom of the press, speech, and expression until a government was in place to enact a new legislative framework. And according to the government's Decision 7 of December 2011, the new state media apparatus will be limited to one official state television station, one official radio station, and one official newspaper.[16] Other media outlets may be funded by the government for a period, but only these three will represent the Libyan regime's official voice. However, it is unclear which media are considered "state media" and what role they will play.

Newspapers

The Committee for Supporting and Encouraging the Press (CESP), formed in the aftermath of the regime's fall, decided to dismantle the state's main newspapers and to publish new ones to keep people employed. The purpose of these newspapers is to provide a new work structure for former state media staff and to encourage state-funded publications in the outlying regions, says Idris al-Mismari, the head of CESP.

The newly founded newspapers were created by CESP without any apparent criteria or sufficient resources. The identity of these newspapers—funded by the state but without editorial control—is unclear. Their content is far from professional, and they are frequently accused of replicating old state media practices by flattering figures of the new regime. One state-funded weekly, *al-Masar*, recently halted publication; another, *al-Bilad al Aan*, is employing former state media workers in an attempt to reintegrate them.

The daily *Febrayer* newspaper is considered the official state newspaper.[17] Its editorial quality is low, and substantial criticism has led to calls—even among the newspaper's own staff—for its rebranding or closure. Managing editor Ahmed al-Ghomari explains, "Our newspaper was established to be the voice of the revolution. This phase has now ended. This newspaper should be transformed into a real professional newspaper. For this, we need professional staff, real journalists, a disciplined internal structure, and to acquire more courage in tackling topics in relation to people's problems." He adds, "I believe that starting fresh could be less hectic than fixing a problematic structure."[18]

The sustainability of all these publications is questionable. They are loose in structure, understaffed, and lack real vision and planning. The limited space in their new headquarters and the inadequacy of the newsroom facilities are aggravating the problems of new state-funded newspapers.

These fragile newspapers cannot attract former state journalists, who view the decision to dismantle the old state newspapers as punishment for their complicity. They also refuse to return to work because they are still earning wages from the state despite not being on the job. According to al-Mismari, "I cannot force people to go back to work, although this situation is causing us a huge problem. . . . In Libya, a salary is considered a right to the person and their family, especially in this sensitive period." His plan is to gradually phase out the old state media by incrementally integrating it into the private media.

To encourage this process, private newspapers are "offered" staff, whose wages as well as some equipment and publishing costs would continue to be paid by the state. In return, the newspapers are asked to share some advertising revenue with the CESP. Eventually, it is hoped, the private newspapers will manage to assume complete responsibility for the staff. Success is not certain, but the CESP is actively signing agreements with new private publications.

Broadcast Media

The situation of state-funded broadcast media is even less clear. Most of the old state television and radio stations are not back in business; some are controlled by factions and armed militias.

The flagship al-Libiyya TV channel, which was rebranded al-Jamahiriyya 2 during the revolution, was renamed Libya Station and made the only official television station by the Ministry of Culture. Despite its high technological capabilities, this station is proving the most problematic case of this media transition. Due to managerial problems and a power struggle over its assets, it is now only broadcasting old documentaries and revolutionary songs.

A struggle over control of the former television and radio stations is hindering their revitalization.

A struggle over control of the former television and radio stations is hindering their revitalization. For instance, the former al-Jamahiriyya TV station, the principal television station under Qaddafi, witnessed brutal battles over its staff and its logo. According to Ali Mohamed Salem, head of the television station's news services, the transitional government tried to impose new management, which was counteracted by staff strikes and sit-ins.

The station, now called al-Wataniya, imposed itself as the main state television station—although, by law, it is not—and refused to give this role to the former al-Libiyya TV station, which is struggling to keep afloat. The government in the end accepted this de facto situation, providing the al-Wataniya TV station with exclusive rights to cover official events. Like other state television and radio stations, its management is continuously in flux.

Though early in the transition, there were discussions about transforming the old state media into a public service media outlet similar to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), this vision is now less appealing given the poor conditions of the former state media and growing trends encouraging private media.

Regulation

Regulation seems to be the weakest link in the process of reorganizing the media sector. Extensive media legislation is still lacking, though existing libel and defamation laws allow people the right to take up civil claims. And there is still no agreement over exactly what kind of organization should oversee the media sector.

Shortly after the fall of the regime, the transitional government decided to put the media sector under the Ministry of Culture and Civil Society. Less than a year later, in May 2012, Decree 44 established a High Media Council that would report directly to the National Transitional Council (NTC) and be responsible for overseeing the media sector. It was tasked with reorganizing Libya's media industry—formulating regulations and laws for media,

adopting a code of ethics, and granting necessary licenses for various media groups.[19] The council was given authority over the assets of state media, print and broadcast media, and all media centers in and outside the country.

Heavy criticism led to the suspension of the decisions related to the High Media Council in June 2012 until the conclusion of elections of the General National Congress to replace the NTC.[20] Although the National Transitional Council endorsed this new council in July 2012, it also confirmed the body's transitional role "until the General National Congress assumes its duties and responsibilities and takes the actions it deems necessary thereof."[21] The struggle between these two bodies, both claiming to represent journalists, has further divided the media community.

The High Media Council itself became the subject of a power struggle. Under the former regime, journalists' unions were permitted under the banner of "association," which limited their function to that of a social club. Yet at a conference in Jadu in western Libya in June 2012,[22] journalists elected a second High Media Council. With 21 members, this council sparked a new firestorm of criticism, mainly because the electoral body was composed largely of citizen journalists and technicians rather than clearly defined professional "journalists."

Discussions about reorganizing the media sector are still focused on establishing a High Media Council to oversee the sector in lieu of a ministry of information with executive powers. Supporters of this idea believe that nominating a minister for information will lead undoubtedly to the return of a hegemonic government with strong implications for independent media.

But most recently, amid strong opposition, the Libyan parliament voted to reestablish the Ministry of Information to address the legacy of the former regime and put some order in a chaotic media sector.[23] The new minister of information, Youssef Sharif, is a novelist who has no direct expertise in the field.[24]

Many are afraid that reestablishing a state-controlled media will stifle freedom of expression. Moreover, there is a general perception that state media has no raison d'être in post-Qaddafi Libya, a sentiment that is shared by those who used to lead the media industry. Abdel Razzak Dahesh says, "I don't believe in state media today. If they will allow state-funded media to be critical of the government, what will be the difference between these newspapers and the private ones?"[25]

Going Private: Who Controls the New Libyan Media?

As state media struggles to find its place in post-Qaddafi Libya, the private sector is booming. Private media outlets have undertaken many new projects, most of which are thought to be linked to political agendas. Although

politicians avidly use the new media sector for their own interests, business executives are equally complicit. Broadcast outlets are the most attractive media platform for both political battles and business opportunities, and the thriving radio sector has proven to be the most popular.

A Proliferation of Outlets

Private national media outlets are usually categorized as one of three types according to popular perceptions: liberal media outlets that mainly support former transitional council leader Mahmoud Jibril, media that support the Muslim Brotherhood, and media funded directly by Qatar. The main media actors, however, reject this categorization and usually present themselves as independent. They claim to be funded only by Libyan business and advertising revenues.

There are unconfirmed reports about Libyan media receiving funds from business executives of the former regime who are living abroad. The television station Libya Awalan, for example, is said to be funded by businessman Hassan Tatanaki, a former Qaddafi executive who is also funding the Libya al-Hurra Charity.[26]

Allegations about the Muslim Brotherhood pouring funds into different media outlets are also rampant yet unconfirmed. Asked about the link between the Libya al-Hurra TV station and the Muslim Brotherhood, Saleh al-Majdoub, chairman of the television station, denies a direct connection, saying "I am a member of the group but the group does not finance the station."[27] Majdoub contends the station is funded by Libyan businessmen. Asked why he is reluctant to divulge further information, he answers rhetorically, "Is Al Jazeera, for example, disclosing its funding sources?"

Local media outlets, which are usually funded by businessmen from the region, bring locally based issues to light. Yet some of these outlets are becoming the main platforms for inciting tribal rivalries now surging in Libya, such as the battle between the towns of Bani Walid, a last stronghold of Qaddafi supporters, and Misrata, one of the first to rebel. In October 2012, Libyan government forces launched a major military operation against Bani Walid after the town refused to hand over those accused of torturing and killing a rebel. The operation was carried out by Misratan units, igniting historic tribal tensions. Local television stations (Tobacts TV in Misrata and Dardanil in Bani Walid) were transformed into platforms for tribal provocation.[28] Dardanil called army forces "gangsters" and showed footage of dead and wounded children.[29] The tension on the ground, the biased stance of the television stations, and the intimidation of media crews kept the national media from being able to report directly from the field and get both sides of the story.

Libya is also witnessing the rise of Salafi-affiliated media. Currently, there are few such outlets, and they are only functioning where Islamic extremist groups are operating. This stands in contrast to the situation in Egypt,

for example, where Salafi television channels have large audiences and are extremely active in spinning the news to further their political and religious agenda. In Libya, the Salafi-affiliated media mostly uses FM radio stations, including one station in the town of Darna, the al-Iman ("Faith") station in Benghazi, and a station in Sabrata. Rather than adopting an overt Salafi identity, these stations present varied programming on social topics while providing a Salafi discourse.

Additionally, the number of media outlets communicating in the Amazigh language is growing. Various small radio stations are broadcasting in the language, mainly from areas where Amazigh people live. A satellite television station was launched recently called Abrarn ("Diversity"),[30] but it is still in its trial phase. In addition, the number of television and radio stations presenting this culture in local and national programs is increasing. And this development is not limited to the private sector—one weekly magazine supported by state funds is published in Amazigh.

The battle between pro-liberal and pro-Islamic agendas that is raging in several transitional Arab countries is also reflected in the new and diverse Libyan media landscape, though it is not as fierce in Libya. The al-Assema TV station is generally perceived as the platform for liberal and antireligious voices, a description that is not totally refuted by station owner Gumaa al-Osta. He describes the station's support for Mahmoud Jibril, the head of the National Forces Alliance who won the July 2012 national election: "During the elections, we did not hide our affiliation and support for the candidacy of Jibril, but we treated the others equally in terms of broadcasting their electoral publicity slots."[31] Libya al-Dawliya, which is funded by Libyan businessmen and commonly considered the television station of Jibril's coalition, is broadcasting a variety of programs with no direct liberal bias. Its programming is still limited in scope.[32]

The battle between pro-liberal and pro-Islamic agendas that is raging in several transitional Arab countries is also reflected in the new and diverse Libyan media landscape.

As for the Islamic-oriented programming, Libya al-Hurra TV is considered the main voice of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya. The station was accused of being biased toward extremist Islamic factions in its reporting on popular demonstrations in Benghazi.[33] The station's office was attacked by demonstrators who accused it of biased coverage of the Bani Walid crisis.[34] The head of the station, Saleh al-Majdoub, refutes the Islamic label, stating that the station is equidistant from various affiliations.[35]

Libya al-Ahrar TV, which broadcasts from Doha with large operations inside Libya, presents the largest news coverage outside of talk shows.[36] Popularly called Libya "al-Ashrar" ("the bad") instead of Libya "al-Ahrar" ("the free"), it is accused of serving the agenda of its funder, Qatar. The station is also accused of supporting controversial propositions, such as the division of the country. However, the head of the station's office in Tripoli, Ibrahim

el-Mezwoghi, refutes these accusations, which he believes stem from the fact that Libyan audiences have not yet accepted free debate and, thus, consider any criticism an attack against a group or a tribe.[37]

Struggling to Survive

Most of these new private sector media outlets were created to support the rebels by countering state media propaganda. The majority of them were born outside the country, mainly in Tunisia and Egypt, and many simply did not survive the transitional phase. Those that did now struggle to redefine their identity in the postrevolution era.

According to Gumaa el Osta, the al-Assema TV station, for example, "was born for the revolution phase only. We wanted to stop this project with the fall of the regime, thinking that the former state media would resume work. This did not happen. What pushed us to continue was the discourse carried by some media, accusing those who remained inside the country under the regime of treason. With the proliferation of media funded by the Muslim Brotherhood, we found that we had a patriotic mission to continue broadcasting; the goal was not media itself, but the challenges of the new politics."[38]

Now, al-Assema TV is struggling to adopt a sustainable business model. According to el Osta, he is willing to implement a mixed funding model for the network. Although the door is open for the public to buy shares, he will retain a 51-percent stake so as to maintain its editorial line.

A major challenge for these new publications is how to survive on limited funds for printing and distribution without being propped up by the state. Since most of the publications are not yet sustainable, it is impossible to find accurate figures on their distribution. Moreover, new broadcast media outlets are not required to reveal their sources of funding, though they must obtain from the Ministry of Culture a minimum six-month temporary license with the possibility of renewal. In print media, it is not clear if new private publications must also adhere to a licensing system.

Small projects are usually funded by the business activities of their owners. However, most new media owners had no previous experience in media, and their interest in the field was often a means to buy their way into the political conversation. Thus, the majority of these projects lack long-term planning and operate using volunteer staff or poorly paid youth. Some projects were launched by doctors, engineers, university students, or other professionals, but they rarely survived the pressure and realities of the media industry.

The two most viable options for funding are accepting the patronage of wealthy business executives who, in return, have some editorial input or securing monthly sponsorship from ministries and governmental departments in the form of advertisements or sales from copies.

These choices appear to be more secure than relying on the unpredictable nature of private sector advertisements, though some of these projects are

indeed driven by advertisements. Radio Zone,[39] a youth-oriented radio station that broadcasts Western music and social talk shows in the Libyan dialect, is a good example. It is popular among young Libyans and university students. According to one of its three owners, the tone of the radio station was based on market trends in order to establish a particular market niche. Even so, the station does not attract enough advertisements to cover its operating costs.[40]

Libya al-Jadida's Mahmoud al-Misrati managed to move this publication from a weekly to a daily by using a combination of advertising revenues and financial support from the state, which he procured in return for employing former state media staff. He relies mainly on freelancers paid piecemeal and has few full-time employees. Some business executives have offered to buy shares or fixed advertisement slots because of the publication's growing popularity. But selling the newspaper's shares seems risky to the publication's owner; he, like el Osta, wants to preserve his publication's identity and independence.[41]

Overall, though some of these projects are showing signs of sustainability, many others, such as the increasingly popular Jawhara radio station, are proving to be more random in execution. Asked about his plans, the merchant owner of this new private station simply pointed his finger to the sky: God would help him find sufficient funds to keep his radio station alive.[42]

Journalists in the New Libya

The Libyan media community in the post-Qaddafi era is composed of three distinct groups. The first includes staff of the former state media apparatus. Few of these former state media professionals work in postrevolution media institutions. Some former senior editors and managers are at large, and others who were banned from work at former state media entities had their passports confiscated and await judicial review. The second group, the so-called media of the revolution—or frontline media—is made up of citizen journalists who documented the rebellion. This group is composed largely of doctors, engineers, and other working professionals.

The final group includes vocal dissenters from the Qaddafi era. These individuals have no previous newsroom experience and are mostly writers and cultural figures.

A power struggle for control over the media sector is raging between these three groups, and the first group—the only one with previous media training—is proving to be the weakest.

After the revolution, a campaign of accusations divided the media community. Those who were labeled as prorevolution were pitted against those who were accused of backing the Qaddafi regime, popularly called *tahaleb* (algae). Leading figures of the former state media were excluded from the media restructuring and banned from returning to work as part of a larger campaign to purge

Qaddafi-era leaders from a variety of industries. Some former media officials managed to flee the country to neighboring Tunis or Cairo. Others were intimidated and are not willing to integrate themselves into new media outlets.

The reactions to the members of this group who have attempted to reenter life in the media have proven unpredictable. There appears to be either a willingness to avoid conflicts with them in newsrooms or a rejection of their presence. The experience of Abdel Hakim Maatouk, former editor in chief of the *al-Shams* state-owned newspaper, is also instructive. "After the fall of the regime," he says, "I gathered my former team of *al-Shams* newspaper to discuss publishing a new newspaper with a new discourse. In the middle of the meeting, three armed persons stormed the room and took me away. They interrogated me and insulted me. I finally managed to talk to their leader who appeared to be wiser. They let me go after they took my passport. After a week, I managed to contact their leader who finally accepted to give me back my passport."

In comparison, the junior- to mid-level staff members of the former state media are often reluctant to resume work, especially given that they maintain their status as salaried employees of the Libyan government whether or not they show up for work. The transitional power lacks authority, which leads to problems of insecurity and the absence of protection for journalists. But most importantly, the new media environment does not seem attractive to these journalists. Most of the new state-funded press publications were established without a clear vision, and they are currently struggling to develop modern and functional internal structures.

There is a major clash between journalists of the Qaddafi era and newcomers, or former citizen journalists who rose to prominence during the revolution. For Mariyam al-Hajjaji, who was appointed head of al-Libiyya FM radio, these upstarts are pushing out the more experienced media staff: "The revolution brought us a new wave of journalists who have no link to the industry. We find ourselves invaded by thousands who pretend to have worked in media during the revolution—although we never heard of them. The real journalists are at home. The newcomers took over using their revolutionary connections." To those who worked under the former media regime, these newcomers are contributing to the endemic problems of mainstream media and lowering the already poor quality of journalism. For these old-school journalists, an ordinary citizen cannot be fast-tracked into a professional journalist.

According to the newcomers, however, there were no real journalists under Qaddafi; those who worked in state media were simply the mouthpiece of the regime. When the topic of professional journalism before the revolution is broached, they usually respond with a sarcastic smile.

These former citizen journalists and young newcomers are the most enthusiastic about being integrated into the new Libyan media landscape. This means they are also those most welcomed by the industry, regardless of their

competence. A few have attended training courses, but in practice most are trained inside the media outlets, where quick development to professional standards is expected.

Reporting on Politics: New Redlines?

The relationship between journalists and their news sources has become more interactive and democratic in postrevolution Libya. In the complex new political arena created in the aftermath of parliamentary elections and the formation of a new government,[43] journalists can question the political powers, albeit with limitations.

The relationship between journalists and their news sources has become more interactive and democratic in postrevolution Libya.

One benefit of the new struggle between different factions in Libyan political life is that journalists now cross-check the veracity of information from different sources. This is a notable move toward increased transparency in a country where the news was once under a total blackout. According to Mohamed Kamal Bazaza, a former engineering student who became a talk-show host on the Libya al-Hurra TV station, competing sources provide fodder for political discussion. "I have informed sources within my personal network. I use this information to challenge my guests. I benefit from the tensions between representatives of different political parties in the parliament," he explains. "If I meet someone from this party, they will provide me with tips against another party."

The game of "news leaks" is very much driving political reporting. Belligerent politicians find media to be an excellent platform for flagging the shortcomings and mistakes of their rivals. And according to *Libya al-Jadida*'s al-Misrati, leaks can uncover backstage politicking. "Leaks are more honest and transparent than official sources," he says. "For example, we were told about a suspicious deal brokered by the Ministry of the Interior. We asked the minister and he gave us false information. An honest employee inside the ministry leaked us the relevant document." However, this is a dangerous game in which inexperienced journalists can be easily manipulated.

If questioning players in the new political sphere is finally possible, it is not a simple and straightforward process. Journalists and their sources are not yet fully acclimated to this move away from the practices of the former regime. The experience of Mohamed al-Saghir, a freelance reporter and former reporter for the al-Libiyya TV station, aptly reflects this situation: "Before, we used to have only one redline: Qaddafi and his family. After the liberation, we have hundreds of redlines. If I criticized a political party, I would receive an angry phone call. If I criticize a minister for his performance or decisions, I—or even the media institution where I work—become labelled as troublemakers. . . . I might also risk losing my job."

The new political sphere's lack of experience in dealing with a free media is also impeding the development of investigative journalism. In the pre-revolution era, news was what people discussed at home behind closed doors. Sensitive information, even when verified, was subject to nondisclosure. Libyan politicians are still struggling with the fact that information is now promulgated and can no longer be limited to closed quarters. The manager of *Libya al-Jadida* newspaper, Faisal al-Hamali, describes this legacy: "There is also a culture inherited from the [former] regime, which is to look with suspicion upon any journalistic activity. Officials usually avoid interacting with the media for fear of retaliation or losing their jobs. They are not used to dealing with media in an open manner."[44] Journalists' ability to access sources of information is still obstructed by the lack of communication within the new political sphere. According to al-Hamali, "This structure did not exist under the [former] regime and it is yet to be found by the new government."[45]

New "redlines" are implicitly imposed under different headings or slogans. For example, Gumaa el Osta of the al-Assema TV station explains that the new debates going on in the country are actually becoming "a new tool to terrorize media," impeding their ability to discuss controversial topics openly. "There are stories that media cannot tell today," he says. "Being critical in Libya today is not possible. The other party cannot accept criticism as a legitimate expression of opinion."

Attacks against Libyan journalists are becoming alarming. Reporters Without Borders has expressed concerns about "the frequent recurrence of threats, including death threats, against Libyan journalists, which are often but not solely made by semi-official armed groups or religious groups." This report was issued after an attack by security guards on a television crew outside the National Congress building in Tripoli on February 1, 2013.[46]

The divide between Islamists and liberals is shaping political life in the new Libya. However, this struggle is still somewhat limited in scope. Although it affects the media landscape, it is not replicating the scene in Egypt and Tunisia, where control of the national media is becoming part of the intense struggle between new government leaders and the opposition. According to journalist and writer Razan al-Mughrabi, "It is not that local media has no clear political affiliation, but their lack of skills and experience makes them unable to conduct spin campaigns equal to their counterparts in Tunisia and especially in Egypt."

In conservative Libyan society, the importance of religion is not to be challenged in media platforms. Wearing a veil was normal for women under Qaddafi, and it is still rare to see women without a veil in Libya. Religious programs, which were allowed under the former regime, are becoming popular for broadcast media, especially radio stations. Except for a few media with explicit Salafi affiliations, these programs provide moderate religious content.

However, the growing authority of militias with extremist Islamic agendas is gradually imposing a strict social code in which the media exercise self-censorship. Journalists are hesitant to cover topics related to these groups and especially in reporting their abuses. For a brief period, journalists were able to push the boundaries by investigating controversial topics such as torture in post-Qaddafi prisons. They lost their enthusiasm for this sort of probing reporting, however, after frequent threats against media staff and outlets. For example, after *Libya al-Jadida* published a caricature mocking the growing power of extremist armed groups, an anonymous long-bearded man hand-delivered a threatening letter, without a word, to the editor of the newspaper.[47]

If such reporting is risky for the national media in Tripoli, then the pressure exercised by these groups on regional media can be overwhelming, especially where their authority has replaced that of the state. In some locales, militias interfere with media freedom to the extent of meddling in the nature of programming. For example, a recent statement on a talk show about the place of a woman's veil in Islam sparked an angry reaction that went far beyond the program itself. The High Council of Libya Revolutionaries posted a call on its Facebook page for a demonstration in Benghazi against a lawyer who claimed that the veil was not an obligation in Islam.[48]

The eastern Libyan city of Darna is representative of the plight of local media operating under the hegemony of armed groups.[49] In this lawless port city, jihadist groups inspired by al-Qaeda impose strict social mores and interfere extensively with media operations, though the level and consequences of this interference appear to vary. According to Fathi al-Maryami, who works for the *al-Mukhtar* weekly, "We were able to conduct interviews with leaders of these groups, asking them courageous questions, although we are living in a town where there is an absolute lack of any presence of state security." Another journalist, speaking confidentially, presents a much darker image: "Media outlets in the region were able first to talk about freedoms and democracy as well as arts and culture. This is now totally different. These [jihadist] groups are interfering with media, banning music and songs as well as the work of male and female journalists together inside newsrooms. Finally, most of [the] media here were driven to stop their operations."

According to this journalist, who lives in Darna, the interference extends to defining the shape of programs—for instance, imposing a female speaker on a radio program to preach the full veil for women. Even if everyday life seems normal, reporting on these groups proves impossible. On a Facebook page called "The Information Centre of Darna" and bearing the slogan of "Darna the Jihadist," threats against media and other state institutions are posted; they mock the authority of the state by referring to these institutions as "infidels." In one post, the group announced an attack against the Libya Awalan television station in Tripoli, calling it a "first warning" in response to

the "deforming [of] the image of Mujahiddeen."[50] That same day, local media reported an attack against the television station's offices.

Several protests have been held to denounce the hegemony of these extremist groups and their continued challenges to state institutions. After the killing of U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens in an attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in September 2012, thousands of Libyans took to the streets. The demonstration ended in bloody clashes with the Ansar al-Sharia militia, the group blamed for Stevens's death. Similar protests occurred in the city of Darna, where activists and residents held a sit-in calling on tribes to end the "state of terrorism" created by the militias.[51] Although they were pushed out by the demonstrators, these groups are now back in action.

An Uncertain Shift From Prepackaged Stories to Professionalism

Although the media industry in post-Qaddafi Libya saw a critical change in its situation, the swift turn from a closely monitored media regime to an open and disorganized one has left journalists in a state of confusion. These developments have left media professionals questioning what it means to be a journalist, how one can work without clear guidelines and boundaries, and what it means to be professional.

Under the Qaddafi regime, all media production—political or nonpolitical, broadcast or print—was linked to the government's national, regional, and international agenda. All stories, even cultural pieces, typically started with lengthy introductions praising the regime for its achievements. After years of applying such prepackaged formulas, Libyan journalists are facing a fundamental challenge: figuring out exactly what "the news" is.

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In post-Qaddafi Libya, media professionals can experiment with many journalistic genres, including investigative reporting and feature writing. The most prominent pieces, according to journalists, are political reports. However, political reporting is still problematic. The best example of this may be the experience of the Libyan News Agency (LANA), which was formerly JANA.[52] For decades, JANA was the official conveyer of the regime's messages. And after JANA was rebranded LANA, modernization of the old-fashioned body into a professional news provider proved to be a thorny process.[53]

The agency intended to move from redundant, non-newsy reporting to a news-based format in which the main elements of any story were clearly presented. It is still far from achieving this goal. Bashir Zooghbiya, who was elected by the transitional government to head LANA's steering committee,

recounts the difficult reorientation: “We told the staff that each news item has to have an identified source and that any statement should be recorded. This was our major battle: regaining the trust and respect of sources as a professional agency providing accurate and objective news.”

The agency started the rehabilitation process by training local correspondents in different regions so they could better decipher internal Libyan affairs for an international audience. This was not an easy task given the limited number of correspondents (the organization includes 30 journalists, as compared to 240 administrative staff employees) and their poor reporting skills. According to Abdel Basset Abou Daya, the head of LANA’s news department, “The first challenge was to kill the fear factor inside journalists. We told them you can publish a story, and if you make a mistake that is fine, it can be corrected. . . . There are no redlines other than the unity of Libya and the safety of its territories. The sub-editor is able to publish a story without the editor in chief’s permission. Before, even a simple story needed approval.”

Despite these efforts, as Zooghbiya explains, journalists sometimes fall back on the old style: “It is extremely difficult for journalists to improve upon the practices they learned and applied for years in news reporting. On the first anniversary of the revolution, they wrote stories using the same glorification style that used to be applied in covering the regime’s revolution anniversaries. They just replace the phrase ‘September Al Fateh revolution’ (of Qaddafi) to ‘the February revolution.’”

Talk Shows Under Fire

Talk-show programs have flourished in postrevolution Libya as an unprecedented exercise of public debate.

In the past, these shows too were under regime control. During the revolution and early in the transition, these shows aimed to encourage dissent from the former regime. Zainab al-Zaidi, a presenter in the old state media, was one of the hosts who voiced the rebels’ message: “My task was then to make Libyans cry. I myself was crying when I spoke about the regime’s atrocities. It was crucial to liberate Libyans from fear.”[54]

But in postrevolution Libya—rife with tribal tensions, political struggles, and the increasing authority of armed groups—debating politics in the public sphere is a dangerous practice. Therefore, talk-show content is becoming somewhat more mundane.

There is a lack of news slots in most broadcast media outlets, so these shows provided the latest news from different regions of the country. But inexperienced talk-show hosts and guests make these programs far from professional. Most hosts did not receive media training, and their guests are usually from the new political sphere.

The talk-show format allows for unprecedented audience participation. Many programs feature controversial topics and give their audience the opportunity to phone in. Other times, hosts report from the streets, asking randomly chosen people to express opinions on the latest political developments. At times, this spur-of-the-moment opining degenerates into insults, slander, and defamation.

But this freedom has a limit. For the principal talk-show host of al-Assema TV, Mahmoud al-Sharkasy, it is simply impossible to host opposing voices on the same platform. Most of his guests refuse to participate alongside their rivals. Although al-Sharkasy has tackled sensitive topics such as the power of extremist militias, continuous threats have pushed him to become less critical. "They sent me indirect threats reminding me that I have a family and children," he confided. "I am not afraid of them, but I became wiser and less enthusiastic. I am now calculating risks and limiting its scope."

Mohamed Kamal Bazaza, a university student who became a talk-show host for the Libya al-Hurra TV station, details the dangers of discussing politics during the complex transition: "Some armed groups have the same culture of Qaddafi. I am careful in my uses of expressions. For example I often say 'phalanges of the revolution' instead of militias. The word 'militias' is not accepted by our audience. I also make sure not to relate the news to myself. I only announce the news and leave the comment for my guest."

In contrast, Radio Benghazi FM presenter Ahmed al-Mukassabi claims that "friendship" with militia leaders grants him some protection. Al-Mukassabi, who worked under the former regime and defected soon after the revolution, describes this situation: "I hosted a leader of armed phalanges who put his guns on the table between us. I was not afraid. Although he is quite strict, there is some friendship between us. They trust me because of my position against the regime. This does not impact the debate itself. I support phalanges when they do good things but I can be critical in matters related to the spread of arms and insecurity."

Toward a Free Media

In seeking to restructure the country's media sector, the transitional Libyan government attempted to completely break from the past. But although there has been progress in moving away from the entrenched practices of Qaddafi's hegemonic regime, the existence of an unbiased and free media industry may be an illusion.

The management of the media's transition brought major problems, compounding the poor legacy left by the former regime. Characterized by volatility, the restructuring process was unpredictable and lacked long-term vision. New and reconstituted state media outlets lack transparent funding models

and sustainable operating standards. The newly flourishing private media sector is chaotic.

The power struggle over controlling the state media has plunged the industry into turmoil. Drastic measures taken by the transitional bodies with regard to the former state media have been perceived as punishment to the sector. And the media industry's decades-long isolation from Arab and international markets poses a particular challenge to its reconstruction, especially when compared to the transitional media industries in Egypt and Tunisia.

Media reform in Libya requires tailor-made solutions that can address the specific needs of the national mainstream industry. There is a crucial need for a specialized body to be granted executive power so that it may take charge of reorganizing the former state media and drafting laws for the private sector. Reintegrating former state media staff is paramount, especially given the acute lack of skills and leadership within the national media community.

This media reconstruction process is also strongly linked to the political reconstruction of post-Qaddafi Libya. The political transition is progressing slowly and painfully while tribal tensions are affecting media culture. An independent media is a main pillar in state building. But Libya's budding media industry is still searching for its role in a complex political climate. Whereas the new Libyan media is finally able to question and thoroughly investigate political actors, its structural shortcomings are hindering its ability to act as a catalyst for the democratization process. A strengthened media would be a vital player in rebuilding Libya and consolidating the fragile post-Qaddafi national reconciliation.

Today, Libyan journalists are not free. Although the fall of the Qaddafi regime liberated them from their role as publishers of state propaganda, implicit redlines—such as militias and religion—have pushed journalists to censor themselves and obstruct media operations in the name of their own personal security.

Today, Libyan journalists are not free. Implicit redlines—such as militias and religion—have pushed journalists to censor themselves and obstruct media operations in the name of their own personal security.

Once again, the testimony of Mohamed al-Saghir expresses this plight. Al-Saghir was arrested and tortured after voicing his opposition to the Qaddafi regime on Al Jazeera during the revolution. With Libya's liberation, al-Saghir thought he could finally work free of fear. However, he has since been arrested by former rebels for reporting on controversial topics. Before we had one Qaddafi," al-Saghir laments. "Today we have hundreds of Qaddafis."

In the new Libya, professional journalism has proven to be a mirror reflecting its past. There remains a long journey ahead on the path to professional and unbiased media.

Notes

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