

Moroccan media: Between change and status quo – new research report

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2016/04/28/moroccan-media-between-change-and-status-quo-new-research-report/

2016-4-28

LSE Middle East Centre researcher Fatima el Issawi has just completed [a report on the state of the Moroccan news media](#) in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring. It aims to give voice to Moroccan journalists to tell their unique story of coping with a complex process of political and media reform: change or status Quo?

In the days when popular protests swamped Arab streets, claiming social justice, dignity and democracy, hopes were high on the revival of a long repressed Arab traditional media industry. Amid the thorny process of institutional building, the reform of this particular sector proved one of most doubting with some insurmountable obstacles.

A combination of a coercive regulatory framework, tight control by the state, outdated structures and editorial deficiencies, hindered attempts at radical change in newsrooms. The hardest transformational process is undoubtedly that of changing entrenched perceptions of journalists of their roles as the “employees” of the state or the political agenda of the media funder.

In the early days of this research project that was based at Polis/LSE investigating the interplay between media and political change in the so called Arab Spring countries (Tunisia, Libya and Egypt), journalists I interviewed were celebrating the start of a process of legitimization they could enjoy after being for decades labelled as the ugly voice of regimes.

But as the political transitions slowed, this process proved elusive. In most of the case studies in this report, journalists, especially those from the elite, actually consolidated the return of autocratic practices rather than supporting change toward a democratic rule.

The Moroccan traditional media landscape reflects these difficulties although it is quite special in its history, structures and environment. The pro-democracy movement of 20 February 2011 calling for a constitutional monarchy was followed by more open debate in media platforms. But the Moroccan mainstream media has evolved in contradictory directions. On the one hand, the industry is today more diversified and diverse with the political dynamism injecting a new vitality in its content and operations. The scope of topics that can be tackled by the press has extended to cover some entrenched social taboos. Investigative reporting on socio-economic topics is a fashionable trend among young journalists.





On the other hand, the the 'sacred' taboos remain: the monarchy, Islam and the territorial integrity of the kingdom. So positive developments remain limited to the politically tolerated topics, away from the real centre of power.

The combination of severe legal sanctions, economic boycott by the

advertisers and an environment hostile to political dissent, in the name of preserving the stability of the kingdom, all these conditions make the development of genuine independent media practices an unrealistic project. The propagation of the model of the "patriotic" journalist who would use his personal agency to delegitimise and ultimately silence critical colleagues labelled as "traitors" to their nation, is another important feature of this landscape. Moral legal cases against critical journalists and activists, based on private affairs, act as a strong weapon in the very conservative Moroccan society. As journalist Fatima Ifriqui puts it:

"Independent critical journalists have no real personal life. They cannot meet friends in bars, they cannot live their life normally, we are obliged to retreat socially; we are not only scared of the regime but even more of the society, which can be violent".

The popular social media platforms, especially Facebook, are contributing to countering the hegemonic discourse of traditional media, while at the same time, consolidating journalists' passive attitude towards their newsrooms' editorial limits. Most of journalists I interviewed told me they express their political opinion freely on Facebook while abiding to limitations imposed by the management in their newsrooms. While these platforms are acting as vehicles for political change, they are also used for the regime's propaganda, defamation and spreading of rumours, thus questioning their role as an engine of democratic change.

This article by Fatima El Issawi, Research Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre

@ellssawi

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science