The Role of Egyptian Media in the Coup

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The following statement expressed by one of Egypt's most prominent talk show hosts reflects the common narratives on Egyptian media that have dominated public discourse following the military coup that led to the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood President, Mohammed Morsi. The presenter Ahmed Moussa, known to be vocal in his support for the military, claims to have received exclusive 'information' from them, warning his audience: "The free army officers decided that anyone suspected of killing a security member will be killed by them directly in the street. There is no need for courts any more"[2]. The statement of this talk show host, clearly advocating unlawful killing in the streets, is not a unique feature in Egyptian media today. National Egyptian media shifted from an excess of attack dog journalism under the rule of the deposed Muslim Brotherhood President to an excess of lapdog journalism post coup. State and private media alike are disseminating a uniform message of glorification of the military and exclusion of its opponents, presenting the latter as the ultimate danger to the State that needs not only to be silenced, but also exterminated. In this continuous orchestration of simplistic, propagandist media narratives, there is no room for a representation of the opposing camp – labelled

terrorist by the State and the media – nor for any plurality of voices. The case of the Egyptian media after the military coup is reflective of the difficult process of building an independent media system under a political transition, in itself a fragile and volatile process.

This article discusses the role played by traditional national media in supporting the military coup that led to the ouster of the elected government of the Muslim Brotherhood. The article starts with a brief discussion of the role of media in fostering democracy under political transitions followed by an overview of the main features of the Egyptian media landscape before and after the 25 January 2011 revolution. It investigates the role played by Egyptian media, especially prominent talk show hosts, in providing legitimacy to the military-backed regime, with examples from the daily practices of journalists, and concludes with an analysis of the Egyptian media with respect to its cultural and historical context as compared to international transitional experiences.

Media and Democracy

The analysis of the interplay between media and political systems under transitions has been the subject of several debates with a particular focus on the impact of media on the fragile process of democratisation. However, the democratisation of the media sector itself, often governed by a repressive structural and legal arsenal under autocratic regimes,

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[2] See the link for a video clip of the talk show in which the host advocates street killing of suspected "terrorists" www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ut3s4YtYtpE.

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remains a major challenge in the context of political transitions.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) presented three media models in their analysis of the relation between media and the political sphere: the polarised pluralist model (the Mediterranean countries), the democratic corporatist model (northern and central Europe) and the liberal model (North Atlantic countries); anticipating an international trend towards the third model governed by the commercialisation and privatisation of media, as opposed to one of state interference. However, this analysis is based on a media landscape evolving in stable and democratic Western systems. Emerging media systems demonstrate different dynamics to stable ones, although the polarised model presents common features with media systems emerging in eastern and central Europe (Voltmer, 2008:25).

The complexities of the interplay between media and politics in new democracies render the application of imported models an unrealistic task. Voltmer points out the particularities of each media system and its correlation with national cultural, political and historical elements, as well as the special conditions of its implementation when it is imported from another context (ibid).

The notion of political parallelism – one of the dimensions used by Hallin and Mancini to define media systems – as the solid alliance between political groups and the media is relevant to the case of Egyptian media post uprising. However, as pointed out by Voltmer (2008), political parties are not central to political life in countries like Egypt, where these parties are weak and lack popular legitimacy. The notion of professionalism – another dimension used by Hallin and Mancini in defining media systems – is also problematic as there is no commonly accepted definition of professionalism across all media systems and countries.

After the regime change, the coexistence of the old and new models "causes considerable confusion and conflicts among journalists as to their role in the new democratic order" (Voltmer, 2008:27). This confusion is very true in the case of Egyptian journalists stuck between an old-fashioned journalistic model, which has been implemented for decades, and a new – yet to be defined – model where established red lines have fallen. This confusion ended with the victory of entrenched habits, reflected in the outbreak of populist media narratives post military coup in defence of what is perceived by these journalists to be their 'patriotic' role and identity (el Issawi, 2014).

The reform of the media system, like the reform of the political system, can only be based on the structure and traditions inherited from the old regime. Arguing against the notion of good and bad systems, Voltmer concludes that "emerging democracies develop unique types of media systems that differ significantly from those in established democracies" (2008:37). This is a thesis demonstrated by the case of the Egyptian media where the legacy of the past overshadowed reform efforts.

Thus, the role of these emerging media systems in promoting or hindering democracy is very much linked to the pre-conditions of the political transition and the nature of the old system and its institutions. Paths to democracy are also not a linear process. Revolutionary ideals can be fought by counter revolutions and the struggle between the old and new regimes can be particularly complex and unpredictable (Ibid).

The Egyptian Media Landscape before and after the Uprising

It is not possible within the remit of this short article to present a detailed analysis of the Egyptian media industry. I will focus rather on some of its main features. Egyptian media is known for a long-standing tradition of heavy-handed state intervention. This is reflected in the establishment of a redundant apparatus of state-owned media and a coercive regulatory environment in which journalists are threatened by prison sentences and trials before military courts (el Issawi, 2014).

The re-introduction of private media in the later years of the Mubarak regime provided a newsy and modern media output as well as limited representation of dissenting voices. However, the nature of this private sector, largely owned by business tycoons

linked to the regime, defies the notion of an 'independent' media. The ability of the regime to apply different pressure tools on these media outlets – such as behind-the-scenes control of advertising revenues – further limited the ability of these media outlets to provide counter narratives (Khamis, 2011). The new constitution (January 2014) provides real progress in the protection of freedom of information, such as guaranteeing freedom of expression and opinion, press freedom and media independence and banning censorship and prison sentences for media offences. However, these improvements are at odds with an unprecedented repression campaign, implemented by the military-backed government and designed to silence dissenting voices. According to Reporters Without Borders: "arrests, detention, trials on trumped-up charges – the authorities flout the constitutional guarantees enshrined in article 71 and stop at nothing to silence those who refuse to relay the government's propaganda" (March 2014).

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It is important to note here two main features of the Egyptian media landscape related to the topic discussed in this paper. First, the entrenched self-censorship habits of Egyptian journalists who largely perceive their role as guardians of the regime. This collaborative journalism is at the heart of the *raison d'etre* of the state media, often used as a platform for defamation and de-legitimisation of political or media opponents under the Mubarak regime. This role shifted to the private media in the current post-coup phase. Second, the lack of defined and established editorial processes inside these newsrooms rendered private media, supposedly independent, unable to counter the interven-

tion of media owners. The independence of state media – recently recognised in the new constitution – is not realistically possible with the heavily bureaucratic structure of state media and the prominent role of the Ministry of Information in controlling this structure.

Media at the Service of the Coup

Under political transitions, the ability of media to play the role of a "market place of ideas" is crucial in providing a platform for alternative views, thus empowering a vivid civil society, although possibly aggravating conflicts and creating confusion (Voltmer, 2006:04). The political conflict marking these transitions, causes media professionals to struggle between the two opposite ideals of neutral journalism, presenting all sides of the controversy, and the need for using media for political mobilisation (Voltmer, 2006:06).

This notion of a market place of ideas was accommodated by Egyptian journalists in the immediate aftermath of the uprising. During this time, the margin of representation of dissenting voices witnessed an unprecedented expansion to the extent that they were permitted a platform in state media. This diversity was short-lived as media professionals were less inclined to follow the Western ideals of professional journalism than to satisfy their political affiliation and what they consider to be their national or revolutionary duty.

The political parallelism described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) was reflected in the practice of Egyptian journalists under the rule of the deposed Brotherhood President, where the media transformed into the favoured platform for political lobbying. However, the parallelism between media and politics was a two-way process, where the media played an active role in shaping the political sphere, empowered by the lack of popular legitimacy of the new political actors.

The conflict between the apparatus of civil servants commonly known as the "deep State" and the elected Islamic government took media as one of its main battlefields. The Brotherhood's alleged attempt to control state media – known as the Brotherhoodisation of media (*akhwanat el iilam*) – was a major factor in this struggle. Media independence from state

control became a major issue for those who considered Brotherhood rule to be a replication of the old regime's tactic of muzzling the media for its own benefit. Yet, the same angry voices rejoice at the return of the traditional role of Egyptian journalists: a messenger of the regime and its loyal guardian.

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In the aftermath of the military coup, the wave of populist propaganda swamping national media, state and private, is not only a result of the direct intervention of the military apparatus in media content. This media U-turn, from fiercely attacking Morsi's presidency to enthusiastically praising the military, has its roots primarily in the perception among these journalists that their role is that of guardians of 'the State,' – 'the regime' – against its enemies – the regime's enemies –. Journalists' self-identification as advocates for the 'national interest,' translated into the defence of the regime's survival, and prevailed over the timorous movement among journalists after the uprising who lobbied for independent and professional journalism. The widespread intimidation and pressure inflicted by the military-backed government is not to be underestimated in forcing journalists back to self-censorship. The scope of state repression regarding any kind of criticism of its policies, which demonstrates "zero tolerance for any form of dissent," is unprecedented in the country's history. (Human Rights Watch 2014).

The advocate journalism model is mainly led by the prominent talk show hosts, whose role was crucial in the popularisation of information delivered from the elite to the masses under the Mubarak regime. This advocate role was amplified by the struggle between

liberals and Islamists under Brotherhood rule and extended to shaping the political arena. These talk show programmes played a major role in fuelling popular anger against the Brotherhood's rule by systematically disseminating rumours of an alleged decadence of state institutions under Morsi. Some of these talk show hosts, known for having been vocal against the Brotherhood, were honoured by the military-backed government for their role in supporting the so-called June (2013) 'revolution,' which led to the ouster of the Brotherhood President.

In his book entitled *Les nouveaux chiens de garde* [the new watchdogs], Serge Halimi (1997) describes the subtle and complex relationship between the political regime and the media elite in France. The author records the details of this solid alliance between the some thirty leading journalists and the political and economic systems, which includes the blackout of important information, the systematic invitation of the same guests to comment on events and personal relations between prominent media figures and politicians. This organic solidarity among media 'stars,' and between them and the political system, makes them the 'princes' of their profession, allowing them to publish print editorials, present TV and radio sequences, in national and regional media outlets, as well as publish books, produce films and engage in other artistic expressions. "For them, the sun never sets," writes Halimi (1997:76).

While the connection between the Egyptian media elite and the regime is accepted by the community of national journalists as normal practice, these leading media figures are no less influential than their French counterparts in stabilising the regime, instead of questioning its practices. However, this function currently stretches to the extent of creating a paranoid environment, with warnings of alleged foreign conspiracies against Egypt. These media campaigns disseminate as 'information' some extraordinary rumours that stretch logic and reason and yet are discussed vehemently by media professionals and their audiences as solid facts that need no verification.

The examples abound: the daily *al-Wafd* – although a respectable print publication – published a front page headline claiming that the US President Barak Obama is a secret Muslim Brotherhood member[3]. An

[3] See the link to the front page of the Egyptian daily http://blogs.aljazeera.com/topic/egypt/egyptian-media-says-obama-muslim-brotherhood-member.

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advertisement by a mobile phone operator featuring the popular puppet, Abla Fahita, was accused of containing subversive messages calling for terrorism. The debate on the alleged terrorist actions of the puppet swamped talk shows. In the end, the mobile phone company had to deny the allegations that the advert contains a coded message aimed at destabilising the State in a press release (The Economist, Jan 2014). A few months later, an army doctor announced that the military had developed a cure for the virus that causes AIDS, as well as hepatitis C, one of Egypt's main health threats. The announcement framed in a simplistic manner as well as the low-key competencies of the so-called 'doctor' prompted a tough reaction from some prominent Egyptian scientists, who called the so-called achievement a "scandal for Egypt" (Faheem and El-Sheikh, Feb 2014). Yet, national media launched fierce campaigns in praise of the so-called 'doctor,' attacking his critics, including those known for being well-respected scientists in the country.

Conclusion

News or rumours? It is difficult to answer this question today in assessing the credibility of information disseminated by Egypt's mainstream media. Most importantly, those responsible for editorial decision-making in these media are not willing to make this distinction. A few limited exceptions do provide counter narratives, although they are unable to counterbalance the strong wave of propagandist narratives. Egyptian media have returned to their 'natural' role: that of a mouthpiece tasked with replicating the regime's message with no possible input of their own. However, Egyptian journalists are for the most part embracing their old role willingly. The alleged terror threat is an excuse for all kinds of abuses of rights and freedoms. The role of journalists is no longer to decry these abuses but to lessen their impact and scope by presenting them to audiences as

'necessary measures' in this particularly fragile phase of the country's history. The alliance between the Egyptian media elite and the regime is as organic as it is fundamental for the survival of the two parties, and goes much further than the simple political parallelism described by Hallin and Mancini. The leading media stars, mainly from the private sector, are bound to the regime by a complex system of clientelism, making them one of its most efficient components. The uprising did not lead to questioning this established identity of the journalist as guardian of the regime. On the contrary, the complexity of the political transition with its extraordinary developments consolidated this perception. The excessive manipulation of national media, to the extent of using it as a 'black box' to de-legitimate any critical voice, including media and revolutionary figures, is proving a powerful tool for applying pressure and hampering any initiative for media and political reform.

Most importantly, this connivance between national media and the new military-backed regime is imposing a blackout on alarming human rights abuses, even when these abuses are committed on a large scale. What happened during the bloody dispersal of pro-Brotherhood demonstrators by security forces in the so-called Rabea al-Adaweya sit-in? (14 August 2013) What about the daily arbitrary arrests in the streets and torture in prisons? What is the story on those 'honourable citizens,' as described by the media and regime, whose good deeds entail arresting and sometimes attacking fellow citizens in the street if they suspect they are from the 'terrorist camp'? What about the operations against terrorism in Sinai? Who are those alleged terrorists? What about the civilian casualties?

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Most of these topics are simply ignored by the media. This blackout is imposed by means of the re-

gime's monitoring tools, with media editors and media professionals themselves convinced these topics are not suitable for debate. Neither does the intimidation spare foreign media: the arrest of journalists from the al-Jazeera network on politicised charges for the 'crime' of doing their job (Human Rights Watch, 2014) is a strong message to the community of international media to stop reporting facts from Egypt, in order to leave media narratives as hostages of the regime.

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