

# Shifting journalistic roles in democratic transitions: Lessons from Egypt

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## Abstract

While in the case of the Arab Spring the focus of research and debate was very much on the role of social media in enabling political change both during the uprisings and in their immediate aftermath, the impact of traditional national mass media and journalism on framing this political change has been less addressed. In this article, we investigate the role of Egyptian journalists in shaping Egypt's complex and fast-moving political transition. Based on a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews and a conceptual framework building on Christians et al.'s normative roles of the media, it can be concluded that the monitorial and facilitative roles, which were prevalent in the early stages of the post-Mubarak era, were quickly overturned in favor of a radical and collaborative role. Egyptian journalists working in private media thus demonized their political adversaries, mainly the Islamists, transforming this political 'other' into the ultimate enemy. At the same time, the new military regime was being revered and celebrated. This arguably contributed to further destabilize the fragile transition to democracy. It is furthermore concluded that for democracy to succeed in an Egyptian context, antagonistic political conflicts need to be transformed into agonistic ones both at the level of political culture and media culture.

## Keywords

Conflict, democratization, journalism, media ownership, private media, transition

## Introduction

From the 1970s onward several so-called waves of democratization have occurred, starting in Southern Europe and subsequently spreading to Latin America, some parts of Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa (Hollifield and Jillson, 2000; Huntington, 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). Given these various democratization waves in other parts of the world, it is not entirely surprising to observe heightened resistance against the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world in recent years.

Many of these earlier democratization processes were deemed to be following the pathway of a gradual transition comprising (1) a *liberalization* period in which the old regime opens up, (2) a *democratization* phase whereby the old regime breaks down and new democratic institutions are built, and (3) the further *consolidation* or stabilization of the democratic order, culminating in a peaceful transfer of power from one party/elite to another and back (see Karl and Schmitter, 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Schneider and Schmitter, 2004).

There are, however, serious issues with these rather linear transition models. On one hand, they are very Western-centric in terms of how democracy is being defined. On the other hand, as Voltmer (2010) also points out, 'democracy is not a one-way road' (p. 137) – that is, democratization processes are never smooth or conflict-free.

Furthermore, besides the gradual pathway described above, a revolutionary overthrow of an authoritarian regime by a panoply of oppositional groups has considerable historical salience too. The precise outcome of a revolution is never really certain, and the lack of a gradual liberalization process can lead to violent clashes between various political forces. Indeed, as the old regime crumbles, the

‘chain of equivalence’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 127) between the multiple and at times contradictory oppositional groups tends to break down, often leading to a re-fragmentation of the political.

The precise role of media, journalism, as well as communication tools and counter-hegemonic discourses in the run up to and during democratization processes and their ability to promote as well as potentially stifle democratization have been and are still today the object of much academic debate and research (Bennett, 1998; Gunther and Mughan, 2000; Randall, 1993; Skidmore, 1993; Splichal, 1994; Voltmer, 2013; Waisbord, 1995). Given the ubiquitous role media, communication, and journalism play in modern life, many observers have highlighted the pivotal role of media and especially communication tools in relation to processes of democratization as well as identified particular constraints.

In this article, we aim to assess how journalists’ views on the roles they fulfill in society shift and change in periods of transition with a focus on Egypt in the post–Arab Spring period. This is done through a thematic analysis of more than 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Egyptian journalists and editors conducted before and after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime by the Egyptian military in July 2013. First, we will briefly review the literature on journalistic roles and the relationship between media, communication, and democratization after which we turn our attention to the literature on Arab media and the particularities of the Egyptian media.

## Journalism and normative theories

The media and journalists occupy a particularly sensitive and important role in society. However, the precise nature of this role is not similar in different contexts. At the level of theory, we can also denote divergences. A functionalist approach will focus more on the aims and objectives of journalism in a social system, emphasizing, for example, the reporting of the day’s events or providing accurate and reliable information to citizens. A normative/critical approach focuses more on the duties and responsibilities bestowed on journalism such as protecting democracy, holding the powers that be to account, representing minorities fairly, or providing a context to the day’s events. It is above all this latter – normative/critical – approach that is used here.

By building on, as well as critiquing, the classic normative theories of the press (see Siebert et al., 1956), Christians et al. (2009) argue that media and journalism tend to fulfill four core-normative roles, namely, a Monitorial, a Facilitative, a Radical, and a Collaborative role. These roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but do point to different ways in which journalism is positioned in society:

1. The *monitorial* role refers to the classic liberal role of a neutral and objective media watching the powers that be, but at the same time the media is very much part of the very power-structures they are supposed to critique.
2. The *facilitative* role refers to the need for more independence from power-structures as this refers to the media’s role to provide a platform to citizens and to enable political participation of ordinary citizens through the media.
3. The *radical* role is fulfilled by oppositional forces that challenge those in positions of power, even to the extent of delegitimizing those that are in power and calling for systemic change.
4. The *collaborative* role is taken up by those media and journalists who operate and act unequivocally to protect and safeguard the interests of those in power.

This model, proposed by Christians et al. (2009), is deemed to be a useful analytical tool to assess and discuss shifts as well as continuities when it comes to the particular context of Egypt and the role of journalism in the post-revolutionary period, especially since these four roles can also be mapped onto a temporal dimension from the post-revolutionary period to the restoration of military power.

## Media and democratization processes

Having discussed issues relating to the normative roles of journalism, we will now address some contentious issues regarding the actual role of media in democratization processes in relation to these normative roles. The need for a truly independent, ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ media inherent to the monitorial role is already very questionable in mature Western democracies (Carpentier, 2005; Entman, 2007). It is thus not entirely unsurprising that this is also often very problematic in countries that have just emerged out of authoritarian rule, especially since local political elites tend to reject the principle of an adversarial press as they are used to expect a loyal and ‘collaborative’ media.

Democratization processes are therefore often marred by open as well as latent conflicts between the political and media elites over the extent of press freedom or conversely over the nature of government intervention in the media. As a result of this, a duality can be observed between, on one hand, ‘patterns of deference and even subservience’ – that is, a collaborative journalism toward ideological friends – and, on the other hand, a radical oppositional journalism toward ideological enemies; the latter often ‘takes on an extremely polemic tone and often uses rumors and fabricated accusations’ (Voltmer, 2010: 141).

The liberalization or ‘freeing’ of the media in transitional democracies, which is often seen as one of the pre-conditions for democratization, tends to go hand in hand with a (further) commercialization or privatization of the media. This invokes issues of media ownership and media concentration. For example, Waisbord (2010) asserts that despite political democratization, the media in Latin America remains highly vulnerable to both market and state capture, leading him to conclude that in Latin America ‘democratic rule has not significantly altered the historical structural relations among media, state, and market’ (p. 311).

As a result of all this, the social responsibility invested in the media and mainly their facilitative role – that is, the need to act in the interest of all citizens and the common good, to protect and to advocate democratic values, to provide a platform for all different voices in a society – tend to be compromised as the liberalization and privatization of the media might lead to a highly fractious media landscape. In such a context, various political forces, religious, ethnic, or sectarian groups seek to control parts of the media, resulting in a lack or marginalization of genuinely independent media (monitorial) and a reduction of the public interest (facilitative) to partisan, religious, or ethnic interests (radical/collaborative).

In journalism studies, the notion of professionalism is increasingly contested (cf. Waisbord, 2013). New journalistic practices such as citizen or grassroots journalism challenge professionalism and threaten ‘the jurisdictional claims of professionals’ (Lewis, 2012: 850). In recent years and especially in emerging democratic contexts, citizen journalists using blogs and social media play an increasingly important role. This leads not only to tensions but also to collaborations between non-professional and professional journalists.

Concerning the collaborative and radical roles, it is clear that a complete lack of balance or of a certain degree of respect for ideological difference and for political opponents can foster antagonisms that are potentially destructive for democracy and for civic cultures. For democracy to work, Mouffe (2005) argues, a hegemony of democratic values is essential: ‘A democracy cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries’ (pp. 120–121). We therefore need, Mouffe contends, a ‘consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all, dissent about their interpretation’.

Furthermore, if we accept that irreconcilable conflicts are a feature of all society, the crucial question becomes how these irreconcilable conflicts are dealt with and pacified in a democracy, if only partially or temporarily. Mouffe (2005) argues that the main role of a democracy and of all political elites should be to revert antagonistic conflicts whereby the ideological ‘other’ is articulated as an enemy who’s repression is legitimated into agonistic conflicts whereby the ideological ‘other’ is positioned as an adversary, that is, legitimate to exist, but also to disagree with.

Before analyzing the Egyptian journalistic context post-uprisings by assessing the nature of the four core-normative roles of journalism, as identified by Christians et al. (2009), the Egyptian media context will be contextualized first.

## **The past and present Egyptian media context**

Although heavily state controlled, Egyptian media was by far the most diverse and developed of the North African Arab media landscape before the uprisings. The decision by the second Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser to nationalize the entire Egyptian media sector in 1956 made the state-owned media into a pivotal tool ‘to educate the masses’ but also to control them. With the launch of radio services directed to the wider region, it was also a way of asserting the leadership status of Egypt in the Arab world.

The print sector, the oldest of the state media sectors, comprises six publishing houses commonly known as ‘the national press’. These prominent publication houses<sup>1</sup> were mainly used by those in power as platforms to celebrate their rule and to critique their opponents (Attalah and Rizk, 2011; Khamis, 2011). Their ownership structure linked them solidly to the political system and made editorial independence a sheer illusion. The Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), the state-owned

broadcaster, has developed tremendously over the years to become an inflated structure employing approximately 43,000 employees in 30 TV television and nine radio networks (The Arabic Network of Human Rights Information, 2013). Even today, ERTU is still managed directly by the Minister of Information.

The expectation that journalists fulfill a collaborative role, providing support to state discourse, was traditionally very strong, backed up with pervasive government censorship and control of media content (Hamdy, 2012). This was particularly the case for radio and television journalism (Amin, 2002: 126). This decades-long tradition of serving the regime led to the edification of a strong sense among journalists that they need to defend those in power rather than questioning or challenging them.

State control over media was relaxed under the presidency of the late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, with the legalization of the partisan press leading to the emergence of the so-called independent press. During the Mubarak regime, this openness was extended which enabled private TV and radio stations to emerge. This move had as main aim the countering of the powerful Arab satellite television stations. This independent press was allowed as long as the companies were owned exclusively by Egyptians, with no one person owning more than 10 per cent of the overall capital (Mendel, 2011).

The gradual introduction of private media challenged the monotone and uniform content of state media. However, the restrictions in terms of the ownership of these so-called independent media outlets made sure that these private media were solidly linked to the interests of the regime (Attalah and Rizk, 2011). This led to the emergence of a private media sector in Egypt in the hands of a few wealthy businessmen who severely restricted its margin of advocating for change.

The post-revolution era did initially give rise to a flourishing of new private media including the introduction of new players such as the religious channels. These channels were, however, immediately shut down after the military coup, confirming again the strong link between media and politics in Egypt (see El Issawi, 2014). The private media industry continued to grow post-uprising but without any transparency in terms of the funding of these new media conglomerates.

In the immediate aftermath of the uprising journalists started tackling topics that used to be strictly forbidden. Talk show hosts became bolder in challenging officials in their studios, abandoning their reverential style and shifting from a collaborative role to a more monitorial one. This change was even more evident in state media where opposing views were heard for the first time. However, this period of contestation did not last for long, nor did the political revolution lead to a newsroom revolution. What journalists understand by professionalism and how this then translates into journalistic practices did not alter that much, as will be shown in our analysis below.

Furthermore, a repressive regulatory framework was and still is another useful tool to limit the media's ability to operate freely (Blumenthal, 2013). This represents a major obstacle hampering an inclusive and democratic reform of the media sector. Although freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution, there are approximately 35 articles in various laws that prescribe penalties for offenses relating to the profession of journalism, including prison sentences. In addition to the restrictions imposed by various press laws, the Egyptian Penal Code imposes prison sentences for offenses considered criminal, such as criticizing the president or a foreign head of state as well as the publication of certain media content that could be considered as defamatory or constitute a threat to 'national security' or 'social peace' (Freedom House, 2011). The vague formulation of these legal provisions makes them powerful tools to silence dissenting voices in the media and all other channels of expression, especially the coverage of news related to the military is heavily controlled. The law prohibits the dissemination of any media content on the armed forces without a written prior approval from the military intelligence services (Iskandar, 2012).

After the military coup that brought a tough autocratic regime back into power, the debate on professional journalism is not relevant anymore, even for journalists. It is replaced by a populist propaganda approach to the role of journalists in line with a reverential collaborative role. As a result of this, practically all media platforms praise the military institution and call for repressive measures against their political opponents who are systematically labeled as 'the terrorists'. The diversity and plurality enjoyed by Egyptian media under the Brotherhood rule faded quickly and were replaced by a unique voice propagated by all media platforms glorifying the army and the military-backed regime.

In relation to the normative roles identified above (Christians et al., 2009), it also has to be noted that a temporal dimension can be mapped onto these four roles, starting with the democratic hopes that were voiced immediately after the collapse of the Mubarak regime. Hence, first the monitorial role will be addressed, with reference to the notion of objectivity as well as issues of media ownership. Second, the facilitative role is highlighted in terms of providing a platform for debate and the interactions and tensions between citizen journalism and professional journalists. Third, the radical role will be related

to the oppositional stance of journalism. Finally, the collaborative role refers to the traditional position of the media in Egypt, namely that of conforming to the interests of particular political masters. Before analyzing these various roles in the context of the Egyptian context post–Arab Spring, we will briefly outline the methodology of this study.

## **Methodology**

The empirical analysis in this article relies on the findings of a broader research project conducted in Egypt between 2012 and 2014 (El Issawi, 2014). The study covered a sample of 50 journalists interviewed using a semi-structured topic-guide. A list of contacts was built through meticulous monitoring of the media in order to guarantee that the sample provided a wide and balanced representation of the Egyptian media industry taking into consideration age, gender, media genres, and position within the institutional hierarchy. The interview guide focused on topics such as professionalism, relations of journalists to their news sources, their relation to their institutions and professional bodies, and issues of regulation.

The interviews focused on the personal stories of the journalists, allowing them to reflect on their professional journey from before to after the Arab Spring. Journalists were also asked to reflect on their role and perception of it and their relations to political power including the military and topics of censorship and self-censorship. Journalists were given the opportunity to reflect on these issues while referring to practical examples from their own career and daily practice. These interviews were mostly conducted in Cairo in June 2012 and March 2013. Additional follow-up interviews were conducted via telephone after the military takeover in July 2013.

In order to analyze the interview transcripts, thematic analysis was used. This method of analysis enables to make connections between statements of various interviewees centered around the topics in the interview guide, as well as identify emerging unanticipated themes (Guest et al., 2012). The primary focus in this article is on private media. This is justified given the very prominent role played by privately owned media in the post–Arab Spring period.

## **The monitorial role: Objectivity and media ownership**

The liberal model emphasizes the need of journalism to act as a watchdog, to be independent and critical of the powers that be. In the immediate aftermath of the uprising, a growing sense of empowerment among Egyptian journalists emerged to the extent of tackling topics that used to be strictly forbidden under the former regime. This statement of a journalist of a private newspaper is reflective of this liberating trend that was arguably short-lived:

I could experience the satisfaction of real journalism. I wrote on the poor representation of Coptic Egyptians in state institutions and on the struggle between the ministry of foreign affairs and the secret services [...] I knew this phase of unlimited freedom would be short. This is why I fully enjoyed it. (June 2012, personal interview)

However, increased personal expressions of political views on media platforms transformed the national media into a ‘Hyde Park corner’, as pointed out by a representative of the journalist union: ‘It became common to see a TV presenter slamming his/her management and presenting his/her demission to the audience directly on air’. (June 2012, personal interview)

Traditionally, Egyptian state media<sup>2</sup> has always been an accomplice in misleading the population and spreading the regimes’ propaganda (Mellor, 2005). The emergence of an ‘independent’ private media therefore contributed to extending the limits of what could be said and what was tolerated, introducing a set of counter-narratives without, however, breaching the major taboos or so-called red lines such as critiquing the military institution and the person of the president.

However, the ownership structures of these private media outlets and the prevailing editorial practices are the main challenges for this private media industry to act as real watchdogs of the political sphere. Traditionally, editorial policies and positions are highly vulnerable to the political interests of the owner in an Egyptian context. An editor of an independent newspaper describes the impact of media owners on the media content as follows:

There is no legal framework establishing boards of trustees who will define editorial policies of these newspapers. The private press are treated as investment companies. However, we are not selling sugar; our product is contributing immensely to the formation of public opinion. (June 2012, personal interview)

At the same time, it could be observed that the personal agency of prominent talk show hosts could mildly challenge the owners' interests given their popularity and their subsequent ability to attract large advertising revenues to their programs. The post-uprising phase witnessed a growing empowerment of the role of talk show hosts leading in some cases to an implicit and at times explicit power struggle between, on the one hand, these prominent talk show moderators engaged in a strong advocacy role (cf. below) and, on the other hand, the media owners. Take the example of ONTV channel, where two prominent hosts decided to halt their program after an alleged interference of the management in the content of their programs. A director of the TV station explained,

During the presidential elections, presenters told us 'we want to express our views'. We told them to leave this to the viewer, that we could no longer lead the streets. We told them that Egyptians are divided, and that we don't want to aggravate the situation. We are in a learning period. (March 2012, personal interview)

The proliferation of views on media platforms post-uprising did not extend to challenging the authority of the media owners to define the limits of press freedom. The reaction of a media owner to the question as to whether he intervenes in media content is illustrative in this regard:

I choose carefully my people, those who really care about our interests and that of the TV station. I have principles such as avoiding causing sectarian strife, or attacking the security forces. (March 2013, personal interview)

In addition to issues of private media ownership, the legacy of deference by journalists is another serious challenge to the development of investigative reporting and the monitorial role. The lack of professional skills to conduct investigative reporting should also not be underestimated. All this had a negative impact on the way in which the complex and fast-moving political transition from authoritarian to democratic rule was reported by Egypt's journalists. A former editor-in-chief of an online platform, one of the major providers of investigative reporting post-uprising, puts it as such:

Topics are endless such as torture in prisons or the killing of demonstrators; traditional media could expose all these cases. However, we don't have the required media skills and media managements are not willing to invest time and money for this kind of reporting. (June 2012, personal interview)

This is echoed by a representative of the journalist union who considers that

[n]ational media was not able to benefit from the high ceiling of freedoms, professional capacities were gravely diminished under the Mubarak regime, media is unable to develop its own tools for professional advancement. (June 2012, personal interview)

This lack of investigative reporting was confirmed by an earlier study on the roles favored by Egyptian journalists (Ramaprasad and Hamdy, 2006). Although the study demonstrated high levels of support for sustaining democratic values in the practices of these journalists, they mainly translated this in terms of encouraging debate rather than investigating and examining the government's policies. This is explained by the weak traditions of investigative journalism given the history of control and prevailing restrictions on press freedom.

## **The facilitative role: Public debate and citizen journalism**

One of the major gains realized by the Egyptian media in the immediate aftermath of the January 2011 uprising was the expansion of the diversity of political views expressed on a variety of media platforms, even on state-owned media.

This new trend was further tested by media actors openly challenging the intimidations exerted by the interim rule of the military council (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces -SCAF, February 2011–June 2012) and its active intervention in the media content. The statement below from a senior member of the Middle East News Agency (MENA), Egypt's national news agency, describing how the internal dynamics changed post–Arab Spring, is reflective of this short-lived openness. Finally, a limited degree of critique on the military became possible:

After the fall of the Mubarak regime, we witnessed an unprecedented level of publishing news on various topics. The relative red line was SCAF as we were reluctant to openly criticise the military council. But this was not as sacred as it used to be under Mubarak's regime. (December 2013, personal interview)

This is echoed by the representative of the journalist union, who used to be banned from state media platforms. He said on this openness:

I could not even dream of walking by the national TV headquarters under Mubarak and now – after the uprising – I am so frequently called onto its platform, so much so that I've spent a whole day there. (June 2012, personal interview)

The Internet, mainly blogs and social media, represented another important way through which the public space was enlarged and public voices increased (Daoudi and Murphy, 2011). This also led to more interaction between online and mainstream media. Almost all journalists interviewed confirmed using social media tools in connecting with their audiences, although most of them said they are not interested in responding to all comments they receive and they tend to not take it into account when producing their media content.

However, besides the opportunities this created, there were also critiques of the ways in which these interactions between blogs, social media, and mainstream media legitimated a media style based on rumors leading to further confusion. Some considered the increased reliance on social media as a source of news a regression in professional standards. An editor-in-chief of a newspaper under the Mubarak regime argues that

I can publish a few lines on my Twitter account in the morning. These lines will be published by a low key online website and later discussed in talk shows. Important political institutions will be dragged to comment on it. But, at the start, the journalist who published my tweet did not take the effort to check the information. (June 2012, personal interview)

This concern is echoed by a writer and journalist who connects this to the changes in the political landscape post-revolution and argues that these changes left journalists in a state of confusion as to how they should define media professionalism:

Media staff lost their compass. Under the former regime, the relationship between the political system and the media was clear and stable, whether it was positive or negative. This solid structure no longer existed. (June 2012, personal interview)

The emphasis on diversity and on the facilitative role in representing a variety of political views suffered from the attempts of the Brotherhood government to use the repressive legal framework and the old tools of censorship to silence critical voices. This resulted in a fierce reaction from the private media, which takes us to the next section, the radical role played by Egyptian journalists in the raging ideological battle between the Brotherhood government and its opponents.

## **The radical role: Attacking the ideological 'other'**

Journalists' role as political activists came to prominence during the Brotherhood government in conjunction with the flourishing of private media outlets and the growing appetite to invest in media as a platform for political lobbying.

One clear manifestation of this was the expansion of the role of the talk shows as the most popular and vibrant arena for political debate (El Issawi, 2013). In order to increase their popularity, the personality of the talk show hosts and their political stances became the main focus of the TV shows. Egyptian talk show hosts evolved into genuine celebrities, which came with considerable financial benefits. The prominence of these debate platforms and the growing popularity of talk show 'stars' were accompanied by the emergence of two contradictory journalistic roles: the *attackdog* journalist, aligning with the radical role, and the *lapdog* journalist, concurring with the collaborative role. The main function of the latter is to legitimize the political camp he or she is supporting, and the role of the former is to mobilize against the ideological 'enemies' to the extent of spreading fabricated news, rumors, and misinformation. These two journalistic roles co-existed in the practice of the same professional group and sometimes even in the practices of the same media professional.

Under the Brotherhood government, private media led a fierce battle against what they considered to be an attempt by the Islamic group to 'brotherhoodize' the state institutions in the interest of implementing their conservative and religious policies. The alleged struggle between the Islamic government and the so-called deep state – the apparatus of civil servants with decades of loyalty to the old regime (Momani, 2013) – was also reflected in the media through a radical attackdog journalistic style directed at the Muslim Brotherhood. The hostile relationship between the popular talk show hosts and the Brotherhood government extended to the point of direct attacks between the (in the mean time deposed) president, Mohamed Morsi, and some of the most prominent media figures (Fawzy, 2012).

In this highly contentious context, the Western ideals of objectivity, impartiality and fairness in representation, as prescribed by the liberal normative model, were seen to not be compatible with what Egyptian journalists considered to be their duty, namely to take a stance in the ongoing political struggle. The answer of a talk show star on his understanding of objectivity and his role as a journalist is illustrative in this regard:

I don't like the expression objectivity. I am not objective. I am not a simple reader of news. My talk show is my article produced for the TV so it is normal that it is reflecting my views and opinions. (June 2012, personal interview)

Most of the journalists interviewed expressed their difficulty in drawing a line between their personal political positioning and their professional role. While this activist style was praised as an expression of national or revolutionary 'duty' by a number of journalists interviewed, from the perspective of democratization this radicalization is potentially highly damaging.

The attackdog media style used by activist journalists and pertaining to the radical role systematically portrayed the Islamic government as non-patriotic, as in the service of foreign regimes, aiming of destroying the state, selling out its heritage, and so on. Through the dissemination of information on dangerous plots and alleged conspiracies by the Brotherhood leadership against the state, often based on confidential documents selectively leaked by the security apparatus, the liberal media – which in an Egyptian context refers to the non-Islamic media or media with an anti-Islamic agenda – became an important actor in the attempts to delegitimize the fragile newly democratically elected government. The most prominent platform to delegitimize the government policies was the program of the satirist Bassem Youssef, who consistently ridiculed the government to the extent of accusing it of planning to rent out some main touristic monuments to the Qatari government (al-Arabiya, 2013).

In reaction to this, the Muslim Brotherhood government resorted to the restrictive legal provisions that prevailed under the Mubarak regime to silence criticism, leading to an unprecedented wave of legal pursuits against journalists based on an article in the Penal Code that criminalized insulting the person of the president. There were around 30 similar cases against media staff and writers during the first 8 months of Morsi's rule according to a report by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) (The Arabic Network of Human Rights Information, 2013). At the same time, Islamic media, especially online, were spreading a similar message of exclusion and antagonism against prominent liberal journalists media and liberal, that is, anti-Islamic, political leaders (Khondker, 2011).

The Egypt-based pro-freedom of speech NGO Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (2013) counted 28 cases of abuses and forms of retaliation against journalists and staff ranging from referral to the Public Prosecution and administrative investigations to arbitrary salary deductions. Sanctions included suspension from work, prohibition of access to the workplace, cessation of a program, or change of its identity.

This political activism against the Muslim Brotherhood government was led first and foremost by the elite of journalists, talk show hosts, and opinion writers. Asked about their role in fueling political tension, most senior journalists interviewed claimed a role going beyond informing to advocating for political change. Asked whether national media was shaping politics, thus contributing to the further social and political polarization, an editor-in-chief of a private newspaper proclaimed, 'This is a war we did not chose'. For him, the role to be played by journalists was to provide privileged access to all actors opposing the new regime, which aligns with a radical/oppositional role:

There are various groups impacting upon public opinion, mainly the new political movements, the impact of the Brotherhood policies, the revolutionary leaders, the professional groups, and the Coptic Church. The media is playing an extremely important role as it is the platform enabling all these forces to have a say. (March 2013, personal interview)

This view is echoed by a former editor-in-chief known to be close to the military establishment. Asked about the role of national private media in the overthrow of the Brotherhood rule, he said, 'We were the spearhead of the battle to topple the Muslim Brotherhood by uncovering their failures'. In response to the question how they uncovered their alleged failure, he responded, 'We did not create it. This was their reality'. (September 2013, personal interview)

The ideological polarization of media is of course not unique to the Egyptian context. It could even be argued that the emergence of very polemic TV hosts and polarization of US media is not that much different. In that regard, Ayish (2002) notes that there is a trend for Arab journalists to adopt an American-style journalism in Arab television through what he describes as the 'liberal-commercial pattern' (p. 137), a dominant mode of shaping the framing of events and issues in Arab television.

However, such a fierce attackdog journalism toward ideological enemies akin to the radical role in a context where democratic institutions are still fragile and coping with low levels of public support and legitimacy is potentially very harmful for a democratization process. It could even be argued that this ultimately led to a further erosion of the public support for democracy. This concurs with Bennett's (1998) insight regarding revolutions:

it turns out that what sustains successful revolutions, whether the armed or the velvet variety, is the same thing that can discourage the subsequent formation of stable democratic institutions. (p. 201)

In other words, the very forces that propel revolutionary change are not necessarily conducive to or embedded in democratic values to begin with. This takes us to the final section exploring the collaborative role played by Egyptian journalists, locating it in the historical relationship between Egyptian media and the power structure.

## **The collaborative role: Reactionary restoration**

The military coup (in July 2013) leading to the overthrow of the Brotherhood was the impetus for the flourishing of a new form of 'patriotic' activism in defense of the state against the alleged terrorists. In the aftermath of Morsi's removal from power, private media unequivocally reverted to praising military rule and slamming its opponents – the so-called terrorists. This again confirmed the difficulties for private media to act as a provider of independent media counter-narratives in an Egyptian context. A general trend of compliance with 'national security' requirements could be observed among most journalists. The following statement from an editor of a private newspaper illustrates this new 'activism' in the name of national interests:

[...] we are with the state and against terrorism. Our policy is not to give much platform for accounts or statements against the army. (September 2013, personal interview)

Even the private TV station ONTV, which was largely seen as the voice of the revolution, conformed to the trend of praising the military in a clear shift of the channel's identity. Asked about this shift, a director of the channel provides an unequivocal answer:

We are in a state of war against terrorism. We have to take a side. Can we logically give a platform to terrorism? (September 2013, personal interview)

This is echoed by an editor-in-chief of a private newspaper known for providing some space for critical voices. He argues,

We started verifying the content of articles in order to make sure that there is no defamation that could bring legal retaliation against us. It is hard to be balanced. [...] I cannot publish communiqués of dodgy groups; I don't want to give them a platform. (September 2013, personal interview)

Radical critical voices are not tolerated anymore, even when they are expressed by prominent opinion writers. For instance, the prominent writer and activist Belal Fadl, who was among the very few to be able to express criticism of the new regime, was banned from publication (Mada Masr, 2014).

Likewise, the decision to halt the production of the program of the satirical comedian Bassem Youssef despite its large popularity for airing mild criticism of the military regime post-Brotherhood is also highly illustrative in this regard (Ahram Online, 2013).

It is important to stress that this form of 'patriotic' activism in support of the military regime is not new for Egyptian journalists for whom attacking 'traitors' for the sake of protecting national identity and security is generally perceived as 'a duty'. Under the Mubarak regime, some state media outlets, such as the newspaper *Roz el-Youssef*, were used as a platform to defame opposition figures including opposing journalists. A journalist who used to be one of the targets of this form of media-sponsored defamation recounts:

They published a full page on me with fabricated stories on my family and personal life in a specific page in *Roz el-Youssef*. This was the main task for this specific page, to defame critical voices. (June 2012, personal interview)

After challenging some taboos in the aftermath of the uprising, such as critiquing the person of the president, mainstream journalistic discourse and practices quickly reverted back to their traditional collaborative role of being a mouth-piece of the powers that be. As such, they became a vehicle to disseminate the military regime's propaganda, portraying the 'other' in an antagonistic way as the ultimate 'enemy', as 'the terrorists' (Ibrahim, 2013). It is thus fair to say that lack of media reform in Egypt is intrinsically linked to the failure of the political democratization process in the country.

## Conclusion

The analysis presented above shows how Egyptian journalists struggled to incorporate the monitorial and facilitative normative roles in their daily practices post-Arab Spring. The radical/oppositional role against the Muslim Brotherhood government suited them much better, after which most Egyptian journalists re-assumed their traditional collaborative role in the service of the ruling (military) regime.

The monitorial role was understood by these journalists as the need to liberate themselves from the dictates of official discourse as well as from the interference of media owners. However, this was not realistic due to the lack of a tradition of investigative reporting, poor professional skills, and a legacy of reverential journalism. This was furthermore exacerbated by the strong links between the owners of private media and the political/military elites. Private media are in other words not independent media.

In this regard, it also needs to be recognized that a tremendous degree of state and military control continued to be asserted over the media through an oppressive regulatory framework which imposes restrictions on independent reporting. For instance, the putting on trial of journalists was not only a frequent practice under the Mubarak regime but was also prevalent under Muslim Brotherhood rule as well as under the current military-backed government (Amnesty International, 2014; Fahim, 2014).

The facilitative role emerged through various attempts to tell stories from different angles and to bring political opponents onto the same debate platforms. This was also short-lived. As a result of the increased polarization of the political scene post-revolution, ideological opponents of the political agenda supported by the media outlets were more and more portrayed as the ultimate enemy, as 'terrorists', legitimate to destroy. As such, the emergence of a variety of new media players post-Arab Spring led to a fractious and chaotic media landscape which privileged a radical role.

Controlling this fractious landscape became a major site of political struggle between the different political forces in Egypt. The extremely polemic tone adopted by journalists, of being reverential toward their ideological friends and scathing toward their ideological enemies, extended to the dissemination of all kinds of rumors and misinformation, creating great confusion among the public. From this perspective, the emergence of an aggressive radical/oppositional style of journalism against the Muslim Brotherhood can be explained more as an expression of 'collaboration' with the traditional political and military elites rather than a deliberate strategy to critically 'monitor' the new regime of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Arguably, the activist or radical role taken up by Egyptian journalists also fueled the political fragmentation of Egyptian society, worsening tensions between the Islamists and their rivals, which in the end proved to be detrimental to democracy and to civic and journalistic cultures. In this regard, we must return to Mouffe (2005) and her argument that for democracy to work a hegemony of core-democratic values among political actors is required.

This was and is, however, lacking in Egypt, and because of this it is also not surprising that the various media organizations as well as the journalists that work for them became instrumental to the

competing political forces in Egypt, to glorify ‘the Self’ and to demonize the ‘other’. Moving on from this, ideally, what is then needed in Egypt would be the transformation of these engrained antagonisms into agonism within and through the media and embodied by journalism. However, in the current context of military rule and the suspension of democracy all together, this can only be an idle hope for the time being.

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## Notes

1. *Al-Ahram, al-Hilal, Roz el-Youssef, al-Akhbar, al-Tahrir, al-Qawmiyya lil tawziee* (The National [Company] for Distribution).
2. It is not possible within the remit of this article to discuss the complex situation of the Egyptian state media in great detail (see El Issawi, 2014 for this).

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