

Guest Editors' Introduction: Media, Accountability, and Dissent in the Middle East and North Africa

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With the ongoing protests in Algeria and Lebanon, and violence in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, scholarly and policy attention remains firmly fixed on regime development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). While debate still rages over the applicability of the term “Arab Spring,” few specialists and scholars question the enduring legacies this unprecedented wave of unrest has had on specific countries and the region more broadly. Indeed, the tenth anniversary of the ousting of Tunisia’s President Ben Ali recommends a fresh look at what has happened in the region in the intervening years.

Accounts and analyses of regime development in the region tend to fall into one of two categories: structural or actor-centered. Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. *Structural* approaches, as Tolstrup (2013: 717) notes, “are useful for explaining *interregional* differences,” but often struggle “to address the cases that do not adhere to the overall structural pattern—that is, *intra-regional* differences.” *Actor-centered* approaches, on the other hand, “cannot produce the same compelling parsimonious explanations of clear-cut regional patterns” but can often capture “some of the *intra-regional* differences that puzzle the structuralists.” This tension helps explain why so many scholars and specialists of the region were taken aback by the developments of the past decade. While many structuralists missed the subtle on-the-ground shifts that meant that these protests did not resemble the many that had taken place previously, many actor-centrists missed some of the key regional dynamics that help explain the starkly different outcomes between countries that ostensibly share many similarities.

This special issue is an attempt to bridge the divide between these two positions. It is also an attempt to put flesh on the bones of a set of key actors that is often highlighted but less frequently studied by regime transition scholars: the media. The media has

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long been recognized as vital to the effectiveness of opposition politicians and movements (Bellin 2012; Volpi 2017). The better able opposition leaders and parties are to access and secure favorable coverage in local, national, and international media outlets, and the better able these outlets are to report on the activities, beliefs, plans, and programs of these leaders and parties free from state and regime interference, then the more level a country's political playing field can be said to be and the greater the chances of a peaceful, democratic transfer of power. Scholars and analysts, therefore, dedicate substantial attention to a regime's capacity to influence and control journalists, editors, and media outlets. This requires a focus not only on the laws that govern what the media can do and say, but also on who can own what outlets, the personal liability of editors and reporters, and the regime's control of essential infrastructure (e.g., newsprint) and revenue sources (e.g., advertising), as well as its willingness to use legislation relating to terrorism and espionage to silence and intimidate journalists.

The media, therefore, is often portrayed as the subject of regime control. It is examined for the role it either can or cannot play in the country's transition. Less attention is paid, however, to what different outlets actually *say* and how what they say frames political discourse including support for, and opposition to, a regime and its opponents. And even less attention is paid to the interdependence of different types of media, to how the actions of particular outlets and certain types of outlet shape and influence the behavior of others. Two of this special issue's core themes, therefore, are media *framing and interdependence*.

In focusing on these themes, this special issue seeks to combine the most useful and instructive elements of both the structural and actor-centered approaches. That is, its papers highlight both regional patterns of behavior *and* country-specific dynamics. The contributions presented here identify and examine some of the key media trends in the MENA since the wave of protests a decade ago while also contextualizing what they mean in specific countries in different parts of the region. They also expand the analysis of the media to examine how media cultures, media landscape, and types of outlets are framing political discourse in the region, thus shaping the views of citizens and constituencies toward their governments and regimes. These insights form part of the issue's originality and contribution to the existing literature.

The Media as an Actor in Intraelite Struggles

Absent from the current literature is the role the media currently plays in the struggle between new and old elites in transformational movements. In contrast, the predominant focus has been on the role of technology in these movements (see Diamond 2010; Howard and Hussein 2013). This imbalance is preventing more holistic approaches aimed at bringing about coherent and empirically rich conceptual frameworks in which the effects of communication on political change are examined through wider lenses that take into consideration the hybridity of practices and interactions between new and old media (Chadwick 2017). Beyond simplistic dichotomies of old and new media, democratic and authoritarian regimes, opened and closed processes, the communication space in which transitional conflicts are enacted presents

a multilayered and complex media ecology where the notion of power is fluid, volatile, and ever changing.

While existing research has focused on established elites and their role in bargaining and contestation processes, the struggle over the control of narratives about the “normal politics,” or the conflicts “that are associated with the transformation of power and citizenship in the aftermath of regime change” (Voltmer et al. 2019: 2) remains largely understudied. The experiences of democratic transitions demonstrate the ambivalent role the media plays by both facilitating and obstructing democratic change (see Lynch 2015; Randall 1993; Rozanova 2007; Schoemaker and Stremlau 2014; Voltmer 2013; Voltmer et al. 2019; Zielonka, 2015; Wasserman 2018). Mirroring the nature of the new polity in transitions, the communication landscape, transformed by these movements, is hybrid and colored by the struggle between continuity and change. Against a perception of the media’s total subservience to politics, the political and media reforms are marked by complex alliances, declared or implicit, in which they engage in interdependent dynamics. This complex interface in which technical, cultural, and professional hybridity thrives, demystifies the notion of the dominance of political power over media actors and operations. As demonstrated through several case studies in this special issue, the media-politics nexus is colored by confrontation, but also by adaptation, negotiation, and cooperation, in the struggle for control over the media narratives in these transformation processes. The democratization conflicts are fought in the media arena as well as in political institutions, which makes it even more urgent and relevant to unpack the dynamics of the interplay between the media and political elites in shaping the outcomes of democratization processes (see Rodney-Gumede 2017; Voltmer 2013; Wasserman 2018).

The Hybrid Journalistic Cultures

The complexity of the media-politics nexus is marked by the hybridity not only of the structures, but also the practices of agents engaged in the battle to control the story about this change. The experiences of journalists demonstrate that they are not simply extensions of political elites, but full actors in their own right, engaging in a relationship of interdependency rather than dependency to political power. The ambiguity of the hybrid media systems reflects the features of political regimes but also shapes them, as politicians and the media are involved in a “complex web of interactions and negotiations over aims, procedures, and, ultimately, the control of the public agenda” (Voltmer 2007: 10).

The emphasis on the liberal Western model of impartial journalism as the normative standard of “good” journalism struggles to take account of the complexity of journalists’ roles and their personal involvement in the events that they cover. This is especially true when they deal with extraordinary developments including contested, often violent political change and/or severe polarization between competing groups. The thin line separating journalism and activism is difficult to acknowledge when the reporters of conflict, both violent and nonviolent, are themselves citizens belonging to communities involved in this struggle and subject to retaliation, loss, and emotional

consequences (see Russell, 2016). In these cases, neutral reporting is almost impossible. Al-Ghazzi (2021), for example, describes the traumas witnessed by local Syrian reporters of the country's civil war, when proximity makes them struggle to reconcile their emotional entanglement with their obligation to report on events, as detachment is perceived as the cornerstone of professional journalism.

The boundaries are also blurred in the case of Palestinian reporters whose position in reporting news stories in which they are emotionally involved mean that they may be accused of bias, thus negating the complexities of their conditions and their relationship to the stories about which they are experts (Bishara 2013). Research on journalists' perception of their roles indicates a blend of journalism and activism in reporting exceptional upheavals inherent to regime change or a major conflict in which they are engaged as citizens (Aşık 2019; El Issawi 2016a, 2016b). Professional identity is inseparable from political loyalties, personal backgrounds, and the place journalists see for themselves in the power struggle over the new state identity.

Furthermore, the model of impartial journalism fails to grasp the increasing labor precarity for journalists, especially in the Global South, because of structural volatility and uncertainty around their jobs and personal safety. In their analysis of the precariousness of Syrian journalists based in Turkey, Badran and Smets (2021) reflect on how exiled journalists can negotiate several layers of insecurity, while their newsrooms act as a site of voice and agentic political subjectivity. This precariousness is acknowledged as the new face of contemporary journalism, in view of the casualization of news work, failing traditional business models, digital competition, and changing relationships with audiences (see Fuller 2010; Matthews and Onyemaobi 2020; Meyer 2006; Van der Haak et al. 2012; Waisbord 2019). The profession's increasing vulnerability is even more impactful for journalists reporting on fluid and sometimes violent political scenes that form a main feature of their working conditions and their citizenship. Importantly, the ideals of objectivity and neutral reporting are being increasingly questioned as a universal model of good journalism, regardless of the context in which the professional practice takes place. Wahl-Jorgenson (2019) discusses the "emotional turn" in journalism, while Lashmar (2018) describes the nationalism of British journalists in reporting on the "other" on the occasion of the 7/7 London bombings. He notes that "editors often refer back to some mythical national and 'better' time with validating tropes like conjuring up 'the blitz spirit' and 'they will not change our way of life'" (2018: 1319). If objectivity and neutrality are being questioned in the established liberal democracies where they were invented and developed, then there is all the more reason to doubt their applicability, at least as dominant professional standards and normative criteria, in other regions that feature different histories and characteristics.

The popular categorization of the professional practice into rigid models in which the liberal model is considered superior fails to reflect the complexity of the practice and its various mutations (see Mellado et al. 2017; Papacharissi 2015; Waisbord, 2013; Zelizer 2015). In a large comparative study of journalistic roles and performances, Mellado (2020) addresses the divide between the ideals and practices of good journalism, and the impact of local contexts in shaping the cultures of news

production. The study challenges the presumptions that one main role dominates the journalistic practice in any particular system, while conceding that normative ideals rooted in the Western notions of objectivity and independence represent an aspiration for most journalists. The diversity of the professional practice is also explored in Hanitzsch et al.'s (2019) study of journalism models around the world. Once again, their research confirms that context matters and that there should be room for more than one model to define a practice in a particular context. This quantitative study identifies seven areas of journalistic practice including editorial autonomy, role orientations, and ethical considerations. However, political system differences are presented as the main source of variation in the journalistic practice: journalists in developed democracies face much less political influence on their work compared to their peers in African countries, Turkey, some South American countries, and Asia, who confront strong political influences (Blumler 2020).

Structural Uncertainty and Media Systems

Journalism has undergone drastic changes in the last decades eroding the stability that used to define Western media. Technological innovation, changes in patterns of consumption, the growing economic vulnerability of modern newsrooms, the failure of alternative business models to fund sustainable forms of journalism, have all made the future of journalism increasingly uncertain. Waisbord (2019) lists four major drivers of vulnerability: the transformations in the economic foundations of the news industry, the increased insecurity of labor conditions, the upsurge of antidemocratic forces, and increases in antipress violence. This uncertainty was recently aggravated with the global health pandemic and its implications on the journalistic practice and market economics. However, this uncertainty was always a defining feature of the practice of journalists in the MENA region, intensified by a fluid and fragmented political landscape and growing state control over the economic resources of the press.

This special issue is an attempt to understand the interplay between media and politics beyond normative theories and approaches based on Western models. Research has showcased the limitations of applying the underlying logics of media systems used to understand political communication in established Western democracies (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 2012) to contexts outside the Western world in which the media and politics operate in closed or hybrid political regimes and where journalistic practices are governed more by uncertainty than stability. Research, including articles in this special issue, indicates that journalists increasingly seek to orient public opinion by framing news stories with the aim of mobilizing audiences to adopt certain views of the political change they may struggle to understand. By adopting these practices, journalists partly renounce the function of neutral conveyers of information and act as active creators of political messages (Cook 1998) while continually adapting this role to the many barriers that limit it. The rituals that characterize journalistic practice in Western newsroom, forming a so-called "media logic" (Tuchman 1972; Ryfe 2016), do not offer a solid framework journalists can rely on in non-Western contexts. While some newsrooms in emerging democracies have developed new traditions, this

emergent culture of production is fragile and easily challenged, as journalism remains largely an interpretative activity.

Capturing the complexities and fluidity of the media industry's practices and structures in their struggle with multiple risks and uncertainty requires us to further develop the systems' categorization beyond existing, often normatively informed theorizations, to bring to the fore potential new variables that could help develop a better understanding of journalistic practice based on empirical investigations (see Rodney-Gumede (2020) and Shome (2016) on the use of postcolonial theory in comparative media systems studies to understand African journalism, Hadland (2012) on Africanizing media systems, and Zhao (2012) on understanding China's media system, and Voltmer (2012)). The collusion between the media and political agendas, labelled as political parallelism, can explain some of the important dynamics in these media industries. However, the clientelist instrumentalization of the media in new democracies and hybrid regimes for the service of shifting loyalties is most common, as demonstrated by various articles in this issue. These influences exacerbate the fragility of journalists' independence, making them less trustworthy in the eyes of the public. In restricted media and political environments, the hybridity of the journalistic practice—where some topics are open to discussion and others are considered taboo—does not offer stability. Regimes do not provide clear definitions of what is allowed and what is forbidden with the aim to further weaken journalists' agency to rebel against what the regime sees as the key red lines (El Issawi 2021).

As the example of Tunisia shows, legacies of autocracy continue to shape the media's structures and practices after regime change. As the articles in this special issue highlight, changes in cultural values constitute the most difficult challenges after regime change. What is decided on paper often does not happen in practice. Media freedoms and rights are acknowledged in most constitutions but denied in the press and penal codes or legislation dealing with combating terrorism. Chaotic marketization and state control of financial resources, either directly through state subsidies or indirectly through commercial advertisement, makes the financial sustainability of media outlets producing dissenting or alternative narratives almost impossible (El Issawi 2017; Tunç 2015). Two case studies in this special issue—from Turkish and Egyptian media landscapes—demonstrate how manipulating media ownership and advertisement revenues hinder the development of a plural media scene.

The capture of media outlets by the regime is most serious in closed or hybrid political systems (on media instrumentalization, see Mancini 2012). An Open Society Foundations' study found that in thirty-one out of fifty-five countries worldwide, the government used state funding to manipulate media especially in the regions of Eastern Europe, former Soviet Union, and the Middle East (Dragomir and Thompson 2014). While this manipulation is mostly informal and hard to trace, the number of media outlets with government-friendly editorial coverage and the lack of transparency on their funding support these suspicions. Dragomir (2018) identifies four main categories of financial strategies and tactics that authorities use to dominate the media sector: public funding for state-administered media, state (or official or public) advertising, state subsidies, and market-disruption measures. The latter

tactic, aimed at distorting the market logic by bankrolling critical media and flooding the market with new media projects with a bias toward the government, can be considered as the most vicious tool to inhibit genuine diversity in the media landscape (see Lansner 2013; Papathanassopoulos 2013). This funding is rarely transparent as information on government advertisement spending is rarely disclosed and interferences before private advertisers, direct or indirect, are not acknowledged. In Algeria, manipulation of state subsidies and intervention in the private advertisement market is far from a secret. A representative of the ministry of information admits they ask advertisers to fund what he sees as good media, “a circle of virtue—good money for good media” (El Issawi 2017: 14). A combination of legal pursuit and economic boycott led to the closure of most Moroccan critical media, unable to survive such pressures (see El Issawi 2016a, 2016b; Benchenna et al. 2017).

This Special Issue

Most of the articles in this special issue were first delivered as presentations at the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies’ annual conference on “The Media, Politics and Dissent in North Africa since the Arab Spring” held on 25 September 2019 at King’s College London. These submissions draw together some of the most interesting and important elements of the debate over the relationship between incumbent and opposition politicians and parties, the media, and regime development and resilience. The remaining submissions all contribute to this debate, not least by broadening it out to other parts of the Middle East. Indeed, one of our key ambitions is to produce a special issue that speaks, as far as possible, for the wider region.

Each of the seven contributions tackles a different issue in a different country. Two case studies reflect on the structural barriers toward effective plural media. Zahraa Badr’s paper on media diversity explores the links between newspaper ownership and news content in Egypt. She shows that, despite the emergence of new owners and different ownership models, the state continues to exercise significant control over media outlets, including those that are partly or completely privately owned. The article concludes that Egypt’s media still represent a narrow range of political views and options. Servet Yanatma’s contribution analyses how Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (PJD) has used advertising revenue as a way to influence and control the country’s newspapers, including outlets that are nominally independent of the state. This analysis charts the weakening of Turkey’s democratic structures and processes, and its transition into competitive authoritarianism.

Three case studies from Tunisia and Lebanon media and politics depict the dynamics of interdependency between the media and politics based on large empirical investigations. They aim to respond to the scarcity of empirically informed research on the interplay between media and politics while avoiding normative assumptions. These studies capture the hybridity of practices, values, and structures and how various agents engage with it. Francesco Cavatorta and Nidhal Mekki’s paper on the Tunisian media’s influence on the country’s post-Arab Spring political developments highlight a direct link between what outlets report and how they report it, which has

implications for the health of the country's democratic process. Yet the authors conclude that the importance of these links must not be overstated, as individual political actors still have significant agency over the portrayals of their public personas and messages. Katrin Voltmer and Kjetil Selvik also focus on political hybridity. Their article on informational uncertainty in Lebanon and Tunisia sheds light on the opportunities and incentives political hybridity offers journalists to develop new outlets and revenue streams and thereby contribute to liberating the media from regime control. El Issawi's article on media diversity in postrevolutionary Tunisia questions the perception of journalists' dependency toward politics, as the media/politics nexus seems to be organized around adaptation, competition, and a shared responsibility over the outcomes of the transition.

Finally, two articles approach this hybrid landscape from a different focus, looking at social media as a site of political propaganda and the factors that explain the public's trust in media. Cristina Moreno-Almeida's and Paolo Gerbaudo's article examines Moroccan Facebook meme pages that share ultranationalist content and construct a scapegoating narrative of the "enemy of the nation" by using symbols from the past. The authors chart the evolution of the political far-right through online memes and the influence of these virtual developments on everyday mainstream politics in the country and the wider region. Finally, Jed Melki's and Claudia Kozman's article examines selective exposure and trust in the news media through a survey on how the Lebanese public used traditional and social media during the October 2019 uprising. The authors revisit classic notions of issue publics and selective exposure to explain how the public's choices are made and how trust is confirmed or questioned.

We hope that this special issue adequately captures the richness of the debates and discussions these papers helped spark at the King's conference. We are grateful to the contributors for all their help and support, and for making the editorial process as smooth and enjoyable as it has been. We would also like to thank the small army of reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive comments which have helped bring the best out of the papers both individual and collectively.

Looking Ahead

Since this project began two summers ago, the world has undergone unprecedented and profound change. All political regimes are struggling to cope with the new COVID-generated reality, including those of the MENA. The social, economic, and cultural changes forced upon us by this malady have added a new layer of complexity to the ongoing debates over the conduct and direction of the region's regimes and governments. Indeed, the success with which those in charge are taking care of their citizens is informing political debate. The quotidian challenges of providing healthcare, education, and employment have become a lot harder. There is a new desperation to ordinary people's demands for competent, responsive, and fair government.

The ongoing health crisis has also led to the introduction of fresh restrictions on personal liberties. For legitimate reasons, but not necessarily with good intentions, the region's governments have sought to control where people can go, who they can

meet with, what they can do, and what they can say. And while not all of these restrictions apply to journalists, editors, and media outlets, they have undoubtedly made the task of reporting the news even harder. Also affected are researchers and scholars of government and the media. It is only with great difficulty that academics and students can undertake research in and on the region. Innovative project design and methodology will prove essential to any future projects. This special issue may well be the last of its kind for a little while to come.

Yet the need for new research has seldom been greater. As the regimes, governments, and peoples of the MENA adapt to the new normal, there is an urgent need to identify and understand the roles played by the media both new and old. This special issue paves the way for future contributions that would further investigate the multiple forms of hybridity in the emerging media and political landscapes, continuously rebranded by the waves of revolts or street protests (*hirak*), and particularly their significance for a potential democratic future for the region. The excessive focus on digital activism and on political elites and structures has produced a fractured image of these movements and the complex interplay between media and politics, failing to capture the hybridity of the new landscape and the limitations and opportunities it brings for social and political change.

We hope this special issue will inspire further research in the field that would test new approaches to understand media's effect on politics and the society during the upheavals of a contested change. We hope such research takes into consideration the competition and tensions between structures, legacies, agency, and external influences in shaping journalistic practice within the particular contexts in which it is enacted. Contextualizing this practice while taking into consideration the hybridity of its forms, platforms, values, and limitations would enable a deeper appraisal of journalism's role and its significance beyond the simplification of binary categories that are still common in the literature. The scarcity of interdisciplinary analyses that bring together elements from media and politics in understanding the Arab revolts makes it even more urgent to expand the diversity of research in the field and acknowledge the political role of media, through multiple platforms, and how it contributes to the intrastruggle between elites, creating new forms of business instrumentalization but also confrontation between journalism and those who attempt to manipulate it from the political sphere. As much as political dynamics are shaping media practices, the latter are also active in defining the features of the new (or old) political sphere, supporting openness or further repression.

We also hope this special issue will inspire new research directions and questions in understudied fields such as the ethnographic studies of the community of journalists, interactions between journalists and social media platforms, activism in journalism and its implications on the professional perceptions of good journalism, the role of transnational TV channels in shaping the postuprising contexts and lessons learned from these upheavals, among other topics that remain ignored to a large extent. Diversity in methodological approaches is also sorely needed. Using mixed methods in research is another urgent challenge, especially given the difficulties of conducting empirical research under the growing authoritarianism in the region and the additional

burdens imposed by the global pandemic. Being able to generalize our findings, beyond the scope of case studies, is important to understand trends in the region, which is why cross-country comparative research will also be essential.


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