Media and Communication
Open Access Journal | ISSN: 2183-2439

Volume 9, Issue 4 (2021)

# Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation

Editors

Hanan Badr and Lena-Maria Möller

COGITATIO

Media and Communication, 2021, Volume 9, Issue 4
Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation

Published by Cogitatio Press
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,
1070-129 Lisbon
Portugal

*Academic Editors*
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The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is supporting the thematic issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation,'' edited by AGYA alumna Hanan Badr (Gulf University of Science and Technology, Kuwait) and AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The authors remain solely responsible for the content and recommendations provided in this publication, which do not reflect the positions of AGYA or any of its funding partners.

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## Table of Contents

**Beyond Mainstream Media and Communication Perspectives on the Arab Uprisings**
Hanan Badr and Lena-Maria Möller 260–263

**Understanding Emerging Media: Voice, Agency, and Precarity in the Post-2011 Arab Mediasphere**
Yazan Badran 264–274

**A Case Study: *Mada Masr*—A Progressive Voice in Egypt and Beyond**
Nadia Leihs 275–285

**The Subtle Dynamics of Power Struggles in Tunisia: Local media since the Arab Uprisings**
Noah Bassil and Nourhan Kassem 286–296

**The Role of Media and Communication in Reducing Uncertainty During the Syria War**
Claudia Kozman, Rana Tabbara and Jad Melki 297–308

**The Voice of Silence: Patterns of Digital Participation Among Palestinian Women in East Jerusalem**
Maya de Vries and Maya Majlaton 309–319

**From Chiapas to Palestine: Historicizing Social Movement Media Before and Beyond the Arab Uprisings**
Gretchen King 320–330

**How Do Chinese Media Frame Arab Uprisings: A Content Analysis**
Shiming Hu, Weipeng Hou and Jinghong Xu 331–344

**Mediatizing Slum Relocation in Egypt: Between Legitimization and Stigmatization**
Hassan Elmouelhi, Martin Meyer, Reham Reda and Asmaa Abdelhalim 345–359

Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)
2021, Volume 9, Issue 4, Pages 260–263
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.5151

Editorial

# Beyond Mainstream Media and Communication Perspectives on the Arab Uprisings

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Submitted: 29 November 2021 | Published: 17 December 2021

**Abstract**
This editorial argues for more research connecting media and communication as a discipline and the Arab Uprisings that goes beyond the mainstream techno-deterministic perceptions. The contributions in this thematic issue can be summarized around three central arguments: First, mainstream media, like TV and journalism, are central and relevant actors in the post-Arab Uprisings phase which have often been overlooked in previous literature. Second, marginalized actors are still engaged in asymmetric power struggles due to their vulnerable status, the precarious political economy, or a marginalized geographic location outside centralized polities. Finally, the third strand of argument is the innovative transnational geographic and chronological synapses that studying media and Arab Uprisings can bring. The editorial calls for more critical and interdisciplinary approaches that follow a region marked by inherent instability and uncertainty.

**Keywords**
Arab Uprisings; critical research; interdisciplinary; journalism; media asymmetries; power dynamics; transnational comparison

**Issue**
This editorial is part of the issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by Hanan Badr (Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait) and Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany).

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## 1. Introduction

Initial research on media and communication and the Arab Uprisings, a wave that quickly subdued in our discipline, highlighted the connection between (social) media and mobilization, attributing digital media a central role in the public's empowerment. Unlike other disciplines, such as political studies and anthropology or Middle East studies, what happened after the initial mobilization moment remained unaddressed from a media and communication studies perspective. However, media have been crucial during the disruptive and self-reflective processes in this turbulent decade of political, social, and cultural upheaval. In this thematic issue, we investigate what happened after the initial moment of mobilization. We want to provide scholarship that does not reconstruct the Arab Uprisings from a predominantly Euro- and US-centric theoretical perspective that puts democratization, security concerns, and economic consequences in the foreground, without critique and contextualization.

Therefore, we are particularly proud that the thematic issue introduces fresh perspectives on the Arab Uprisings that go beyond the binary of romanticized or gloomy depictions: Instead of reducing the Arab Uprisings to a moment of disruption for activism, media, and politics, the contributions nuance the societal, cultural, and political interdependencies, beyond techno-deterministic logics acknowledging the process character. We are glad that the thematic issue brings

together several intersections of geographic peripheries in Tunisia, gender marginalization in Palestine, and progressive journalists in highly constrained contexts in Egypt. The contributions retrace the interactions and negotiation processes between media, society, and politics across the chronological arc of 10 years. The selected articles uncover several terrains of media interaction with politics, societies, and histories in the Arab countries ranging from Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestine. They also investigate regional, transnational consequences in neighboring non-Arab countries such as Turkey. We would have liked to receive contributions on the second wave of the Arab Uprisings in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, or Lebanon: protest waves that remind us that the so-called stability of the Arab region is fragile and not always sustainable.

The contributions express three central arguments that are innovative and multi-faceted: First, journalists are still central and relevant actors in the post-Arab Uprisings phase that show nuanced struggles often overlooked in previous studies. Second, marginalized actors are still engaged in asymmetric power struggles due to their vulnerable status as refugees, the precarious political economy, or the marginalized geographic locations. Finally, the third strand of argument highlights the innovative transnational geographic and chronological synapses that studying media and Arab Uprisings can bring.

## 2. Traditional Media and Journalism Still Matter in the Post-Arab Uprisings Phase

The contributions in this thematic issue show how diverse and rich the scholarly interpretation of media and Arab Uprisings can become when we move beyond the over-researched and simplistic media-mobilization analysis. Some contributions highlight the ongoing negotiation processes in professional journalism amid constraining and fragmenting shifts in the media spheres. Journalists as actors are a common theme in this thematic issue, where some contributions investigate patterns of agency of professional and non-professional media actors. Yazan Badran (2021) argues in his article "Understanding Emerging Media: Voice, Agency, and Precarity in the Post-2011 Arab Mediasphere" that several emerging Arab media organizations in Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia represent specific interventions into the politics of voice in their respective national and local contexts. A critical perspective on the political economy questions the precarity and complex interactions between political and professional agency in terms of voice (actors, issues, discourses) and modalities of voice (organizational models, values, and production value). Another contribution advances our understanding of how progressive media has engaged with, reconsidered, and re-articulated voices amid a turbulent transformation beyond the mobilization moment. In her case study on "A Case Study: *Mada Masr*—A Progressive Voice in Egypt and Beyond," Nadia Leihs (2021) articulates that the Egyptian political context forces journalists to adapt to their surroundings, as was clear during the turbulent transformation path from 2011 until 2015. Through qualitative interviews, she concludes that *Mada Masr* had offered a new model that struggles to stay and make use of a new space of expression despite the constrained political framework. Leihs details how *Mada Masr* implements innovative ways of producing content, securing funds, and reaching out to its readers as a community.

Connecting media studies, audience studies, and social psychology, Claudia Kozman et al. (2021) offer in their contribution a comprehensive cross-sectional survey of displaced and non-displaced Syrians living in four countries: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Examining the uncertainty reduction theory during war, the study assessed people's emotions and their media use patterns as methods for reducing uncertainty to cope with the stressful situation under which they found themselves during the Syrian civil war. Connecting the Syrians' exposure to legacy media, social media, and interpersonal communication and their feelings of uncertainty and anxiety shows the primacy of TV during the crisis (and establishes a relationship between exposure to this dominant legacy medium and the tendency of audiences who gain a sense of certainty from TV content and post more on social media.) This finding is tightly related to legacy media consumption, further signaling the role traditional television still plays in people's lives during uncertain times.

## 3. Marginalized Struggles in Asymmetric Power Dynamics

Another strand of the contribution goes beyond classic phenomena to highlight marginalized actors caught in asymmetric power struggles. Noah Bassil and Nourhan Kassem (2021) followed the ebb and flow of the vibrant post-2011 local media scene in Tunisia. In a centralized, tightly controlled country under Ben Ali before 2011, the flourishing of local media in the provinces increased pluralism, freedom, and participation, allowing the expression of the voices and grievances of Tunisians outside the capital. In this contribution, the authors do not replicate the euphoric Tunisian exception hypothesis; they nuance the dilemmas and trajectories of a comprehensive overview of local media that challenge the strong oligarchic centralization of the media in Tunisia. The authors argue that local media have the potential to empower local communities and promote democratization from below, but they face structural and political challenges in the fields of independent political economy and viable business models.

Another contribution that sheds light on the everyday grievances of the people and clashing public perceptions of governmental projects is offered by Hassan Elmouelhi et al.'s (2021) article "Mediatizing Slum Relocation in Egypt: Between Legitimization and

Stigmatization." By investigating two media-prominent slum relocation projects Al-Max and Al-Asmarat, the article shows the contrasting media portrayals in mainstream and social media. The article argues that the state narrative legitimized its rule by mediating urban development as a human right to live in dignity and have a clean, safe environment. The public expressions rather focused on the need for participatory self-determination and to avoid the state imposing a stigmatization narrative on the relocated inhabitants.

One central endeavor of this thematic issue was not to replicate the hypothesis of a Facebook revolution. Indeed, Maya de Vries Kedem and Maya Majlaton (2021) show in their article "The Voice of Silence: Patterns of Digital Participation Among Palestinian Women in East Jerusalem" how Palestinian women in the distinctive occupied context of East Jerusalem chose avoidance instead of defiance in their Facebook use. Multiple layers pushed them towards digital silence: state control, kinship control, and self-control shaped their digital participation and avoidance decisions. While it does not explicitly mention Palestinians' digital rights, the contribution touches on the everyday women's communicative agency in contested territories within conservative cultures.

## 4. Transnational Chronologic and Geographical Synapses

The contributions in this thematic issue not only reconstruct and reflect on a turbulent chronological arc of 10 years since 2011, but they also go further to historicize social movement media across time and space and build transnational synapses across geographies. In her innovative contribution, Gretchen King (2021) historicizes the social movement media before and beyond the Arab Uprisings by comparing the Zapatistas and the Palestinian struggle to build networked and independent media as a tool to resist state power, capitalism, and colonialism effectively. The author develops a transnationally valid political economy framework that offers a promising heuristic model that can be adapted in other struggles for self-determination and dignity beyond the Arab Uprisings.

Similarly crossing geographies, Shiming Hu et al. (2021) offer an original perspective answering how Chinese media and foreign policy constructed the Arab Uprisings in its coverage. Taking a long-term reconstruction of media discourses through a comparative framing analysis of the Arab Uprisings in two influential Chinese media over 10 years, *People's Daily* (the official organ of the ruling Communist Party) and *Caixin Net* (a commercial paper), the contribution shows how the interest in the region declined over time. In line with research on foreign coverage, the article showed that the overall framing followed the strategic Chinese foreign policy towards the Arab region. However, frames differed according to media ownership as the private *Caixin Net* diverged from the official policy, nuancing what we know of how China views the Arab region.

## 5. Conclusion

As we are writing this introductory editorial to our thematic issue 10 years after the Arab Uprisings, the Arab region is still experiencing ripples of effect since the first uprising moment in 2010/2011: upcoming elections in Libya, upheavals in Sudan, and an ongoing civil war in Syria. It is therefore not easy to find one summarizing argument for such rich contributions that cover a vast region with different theoretical lenses and methods. Reflecting on 10 years of media and Arab Uprisings changes over an arc means uncertainty, not only for the livelihoods in the region but also the research results. The thematic issue cannot and does not want to offer definite answers because of the shifting and inherent instabilities. We still need answers on how media and journalism are relevant to the post-Arab Spring phase and beyond the massive disruptive processes around 2010/2011 and 2018–2021.

Revisiting media and the Arab Uprisings after 10 years encouraged critical-reflective articles that dared interdisciplinary modes of analysis, building connections to neighboring fields such as social psychology, political sciences, and urban studies. Several contributions underlined the transnational interconnected dynamics. This only proves how fertile the field of bringing Arab Uprisings and media and communication studies together can be beyond the classic linear transition paradigm. Paying attention to old and new media equally opens the door for more contextualized results that do not neglect the mainstream media such as TV and journalism. The broad range of themes in this thematic issue is proof of two things: that the upheavals and media in the Arab region need more systematic research and that the differentiated body of literature shows the possible research beyond the paths trodden so far.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2021, Volume 9, Issue 4, Pages 264–274**
**https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4475**

Article

# Understanding Emerging Media: Voice, Agency, and Precarity in the Post-2011 Arab Mediasphere

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Submitted: 3 May 2021 | Accepted: 26 July 2021 | Published: 17 December 2021

**Abstract**
The decade following the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings saw a flourishing of emerging media organisations across the region. The most recognisable examples of these new independent media actors include *Enab Baladi* in Syria, *Mada Masr* in Egypt, and Inkyfada in Tunisia. However, this phenomenon comprises a much more diverse set of actors from small-scale associative radio stations in Tunisia to numerous exilic Syrian media outlets. Building on previous research as well as recent fieldwork in Tunisia and Turkey, this article is an attempt to make sense of the genesis, development, and relevance of this new class of media actors. We argue that these emerging media organisations can be seen to represent specific interventions into the politics of voice in their various national and local contexts, but ones that share similar logics. To elucidate this argument, we propose a multi-dimensional understanding of these interventions that brings together voices (actors, issues, discourses), modalities of voice (organisational models, values, production value), and the underlying political economy of these emerging media (funding, institutionalisation). However, the article also argues that these interventions, and the logics they share, themselves belie a complex interaction between the political and professional agency and precarity of these media organisations and the individuals, and groups, behind them. We believe that combining these two perspectives is a necessary step for a more nuanced understanding of the nature and practice of these emerging media organisations.

**Keywords**
Arab uprisings; emerging media; institutionalisation; media development; MENA; politics of voice; professionalisation

**Issue**
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## 1. Introduction

The decade following the 2010–2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) saw a flourishing of emerging media organisations across the region. The most recognisable examples of these new independent media actors include now-established outlets such as *Enab Baladi* in Syria, *Mada Masr* in Egypt, and Inkyfada in Tunisia. This phenomenon, however, comprises a much broader class of actors across the region. These actors vary widely in size, reach, style, and medium; from small-scale local associative radio stations in Tunisia to the numerous exilic Syrian media outlets. To a significant extent, the emergence and development of these media actors is a response to particular dislocations, opportunities, and crises of mediation following the uprisings in their own (often national) contexts. While acknowledging this, this article is an attempt to zoom out of the local scale to make sense of the broader and shared logics underlying this decade of emerging media.

The argument presented herewith builds on the author's previous research into emerging media, including recent on-site fieldwork in Tunisia—focusing on associative radios—and Turkey—focusing on exilic Syrian media. The fieldwork across Tunisia combined field visits to 11 local associative media organisations and 20 semi-structured interviews with editors and journalists of these media, as well as representatives from

institutional actors involved in the field of associative media (see Badran et al., 2021). The fieldwork in Turkey entailed three months of participant observation at the newsroom of *Enab Baladi*, a Syrian exilic media outlet based in Istanbul, as well as 18 semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors (see Badran & Smets, 2021). Finally, the insights from these two studies were complemented by in-depth interviews with editors from emerging media in Egypt (*Mada Masr*) and Jordan (7iber; pronounced "Hiber").

The media organisations featured in this study encompass a range of political contexts, mediums, and organisational models. The insights gained from this diverse field are used in this article to reflect on the entanglement with voice that these emerging actors collectively represent; to propose a tentative framework that can be used to analyse this entanglement. The article also aims to historicise these different projects and contexts of emerging media by placing them in conversation with one another, and with developments and changes in the journalistic field more broadly. The framework we propose to make sense of emerging media centres the notion of voice as a possible entryway to conceptualising their genesis and development, and a perspective through which we can provide a more complex analysis of their practices and trajectories.

## 2. Voice and Its Politics

The question of voice is at the heart of the emergence and development of these organisations as well as that shared generative political moment of 2011 and its aftermath—which for some represented an absolute point of genesis, e.g., *Enab Baladi*, while for others one of important inflexion and re-constitution, e.g., 7iber. Across the region, polities that, at least partly, built their stability upon an acute denial of voice (see, for example, Badr, 2021, on Egypt; Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012, on Tunisia; Wedeen, 1999, on Syria;), and a constant (and in human terms, brutal) management of the conditions of "muteness and ventriloquism" (Watts, 2001), were unequivocally repudiated by the crowds amassed in Tunis, Cairo, Homs, and Manama, to mention but a few. Their rebuke was an undeniable act of voice that demanded and compelled a response.

Voice here, at a most basic level, should be understood as both the process (and ability) of engaging in self and collective narratives of one's life as well as the conscious valuing and privileging of such process (Couldry, 2010). In Couldry's (2010) account, voice is a form of "reflexive agency" that is grounded in (public) relations of sharing and exchange in the social world and one that is dependent on material and narrative resources for its efficacy. Indeed, as Manyozo (2016, p. 57) notes, voice is not a product that "can be packaged" as such, but a communicative act, "a form of lived reality, a critical actuality, a conversational and dialogical pathway through which the oppressed question their socio-political and economic reality." Voice's transformative potential—and indeed its ability to function as a (communicative) proxy for political and moral agency—lies in that dialectics of exchange where individuals and groups learn of themselves and others (Couldry, 2010; Manyozo, 2016).

As a reflexive agency, voice is also a quintessentially ethical proposition in that it centres "the problems and obligations incumbent in community building and arouses in persons and groups the frustrations, sufferings, and joys of such commitments" (Watts, 2001, p. 185). This nuance is important if we are to delineate an engagement with voice that goes beyond a unilinear account of voice (as an expression) and integrates the questions of recognition and listening (Couldry, 2009; Dreher, 2009; Schmoll, 2021). Couldry's bifurcated approach to voice (as both a process and a second-order value) opens the door for establishing a more ecumenical framework of voice, which is at least as concerned with how voice is recognised and made effective, as it is with the practice and ethics of speaking up.

Analytically, centring the engagement with voice in our understanding of emerging media is an attempt to refract the (academic) gaze to peer through the perspectives of these actors, and in so doing, interrupt some of the dominant perspectives on the role and nature of mediation in the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings and their aftermath. In this, we follow in the footsteps of Hirschman (1970), Watts (2001), Couldry (2010), and others who explicitly engage with voice as a way to displace and interrupt certain dominant rationalities (the economic rationality of "exit" in Hirschman's classic account, 1970, or neoliberal rationality in the case of Couldry, 2010).

In our case, centring the notion of voice in our account propels us to interpret and evaluate the discourses, practices and structures of these actors as (contingent) frameworks for the selection, amplification, and privileging of certain voices and the modalities to make these voices more effective. On one level, it allows us to interrupt the technocentric analysis of these actors. Such accounts of the Arab uprisings and their aftermath (e.g., Howard & Hussain, 2013) tend to subsume the different (and messy) processes of voice—where the dialectics of exchange, for example, become subsumed into the abstract notion of "circulation" (see Dean, 2010)—into a reified sense of technology which becomes the central articulation and the way we make sense of the agency of these actors.

On another, it allows us to complicate and challenge functionalist approaches that privilege a hegemonic (and often linear) model of democratisation (famously critiqued by Carothers, 2002) as the lens through which to understand the role played by these actors. In these accounts, often dominant in technocratic policy prescriptions and development programmes (see, for example, Norris, 2008), the media's role is circumscribed to that of the guarantor of "good governance" and "democratic transition." But as Teti and Gervasio (2021) show in the

case of Egypt, the EU's broader discourse on democracy promotion in the region has also tended to "delegitimise both the conception of democracy" held by the indigenous populations, as well as their concrete "political and socioeconomic demands" (p. 1), thus completely obfuscating the question of voice in the process.

A shift in the perspective towards voice means centring, above all else, the actual processes of exchange of narratives, their underlying modalities and resources, and the changes, evolutions, and contestations in these processes, as well as how we make sense of the agency of these actors.

## 3. Emerging Media as an Intervention

In the following sections, we elucidate a different understanding of emerging media as representing *specific* interventions into the politics of voice in their various national and local contexts, but which nonetheless share *similar* logics. We propose a multi-dimensional understanding of these interventions that brings together voices (actors, issues, discourses), modalities of voice (organisational models, norms, production value), and the underlying political economy of these emerging media (funding, institutionalisation).

### *3.1. Voices*

Perhaps the most recognisable and intuitive dimension of the intervention constituted by emerging media organisations is the range of voices, discourses, and actors they channel into the public sphere. The heterogeneity and diversity of these voices are, if anything, a testament to (and a function of) how deeply controlled and sanitised some of these media landscapes were before the 2010–2011 uprisings (Cavatorta & Haugbølle, 2012; Wedeen, 1999). Indeed, as Wessels notes in her study of Syria's video-activist collectives, these actors represented a movement from a politics of simulacrum—of "As If" (Wedeen, 1999)—to an attempt to document "life and politics 'As It Is,' in a realistic cinema of facts" (Wessels, 2017, p. 169).

The overwhelming majority of the founders of these media outlets, as well as the journalists that make up their ranks, were not socialised in the mainstream media sector of their countries (whether state media, large private media or pan-Arab media). Indeed, many of them actually transitioned into journalism by way of their activism before or during the protests, or in response to the opportunities that opened up shortly in their aftermaths, often developing their journalistic skills in concert with the maturing of their respective media outlets. Even notable exceptions such as Lina Attallah, founder of *Mada Masr*, or Lina Ejeilat, co-founder of 7iber, who were established journalists before 2011 (working for *Egypt Independent* and Reuters, respectively), were far more well-known to English-speaking audiences. Examples of these new actors abound across the region, whether in Tunisia (Badran et al., 2021; Mezghanni, 2014), Libya (Wollenberg & Pack, 2013; Wollenberg & Richter, 2020), Syria (Issa, 2016; Wall & el Zahed, 2015) or beyond.

What makes this an important intervention into the politics of voice in the region is not simply the influx of new actors alone, but how this voice is "translated" at the level of representation and the cacophony of new discourses and debates these actors bring with them. The rise of Kurdish-language journalism in Syria post-2011, after nearly a half-century of a state-sanctioned policy of linguicide (Hassanpour et al., 2012), is emblematic in this regard (Badran & De Angelis, 2016). So is the rise of associative media in Tunisia and its deep articulation with issues of regional marginalisation and inequality in the country (Badran et al., 2021).

These emerging media actors became important vehicles for in-depth critical reporting in contexts where state and private media are largely co-opted by the regime. *Mada Masr*'s in-depth reporting on the military establishment's entanglement within, and capture of, different economic sectors in Egypt under President Abdelfattah el-Sisi became an important resource for researchers and the public alike, despite the incessant harassment of the regime (Badr, 2020). Similarly, 7iber's coverage of the 2014 Israeli–Jordanian gas deal (for the archive see "What we know about," 2016) and the intricacies of the special agreement on border delineation between the two states (see, for example, Jarrar, 2018), helped galvanise a popular movement in the country in opposition to these deals (Ryan, 2018).

The expansion and pluralisation of voices facilitated by emerging media organisations is also visible in their openness to covering and hosting conversations on several political and social taboos that had hitherto been absent, or heavily sanitised and instrumentalised, in traditional media coverage—including, but not limited to, sectarianism and sectarian belonging (Badran & Smets, 2018), gender (Chancellor, 2020; Charaf, 2014), LGBTQ politics (Saleh, 2020; Sbouai, 2015), and sexual violence (Zaki, 2021). Just as important is their responsiveness to more prosaic, but no less pressing, concerns such as in *Enab Baladi*'s in-depth coverage of property rights and housing for displaced people (for the archive, see Enab Baladi, n.d.), or the centring of the quotidian in the critique of regional inequality in Tunisian associative media (Badran et al., 2021).

### *3.2. Modalities*

The second dimension on which we can observe a shared logic among these emerging media actors is an explicit orientation towards the professionalisation of journalistic work. Much of the early accounts of the mediatised dimension of the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings, and their aftermaths, centred on and emphasised the role and impact of "citizen journalists" and "media activists," in particular how their user-generated content spread over social media and/or was integrated into mainstream

media coverage. This approach built on existing scholarly interest triggered by the blogging wave that spread across the region in the 2000s (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2013; Radsch, 2008; York, 2012).

The amalgamation of networked protests and media activism, during and immediately following the Arab uprisings, was largely seen through the lens of Castells's "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009), privileging a mode of communication that is " 'self-generated,' 'self-directed' and even 'self-selected' in its reception" (Wall & el Zahed, 2015, p. 722). Such an approach to communication emphasised the movement away from "professional" production towards a celebrated "amateur" aesthetic (Russell, 2016), away from hierarchical structures and organisations towards networked individualism. Key to this is also the supposed empowering effect these shifts have in terms of civic engagement and democratisation (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2013; Shirky, 2009).

Emerging media organisations, we argue, show a movement in the opposite direction. Broadly speaking, from a celebration of the amateur to an emphasis on professionalisation, and consequently, away from the centring of individual contributors towards more elaborate organisational and institutional structures. The transition of 7iber from an open platform of citizen journalism to a full-fledged media organisation focused on in-depth reporting is indicative of this shift. As co-founder Lina Ejeilat reflected:

> We started feeling that if this project is to grow, we need to be dedicated full-time….Opinions are important, and having spaces for opinion is important, but what is genuinely missing and needed is in-depth journalism that contributes to knowledge production. This was our approach from mid-2012. We left our other jobs, and we became engaged in the project full-time. (Personal communication, 2019)

This transition in the Syrian context was even more dramatic and pronounced. User-generated content disseminated by activists and citizen journalists in the early months of the uprising were instrumental in communicating its developments and showcasing the brutal and repressive tactics of the Syrian regime, especially in the context of a blanket ban on foreign reporters (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Salama, 2012). Nevertheless, this celebrated horizontality and openness also created conditions of fragmentation, political manipulation, and epistemic insecurity as the sheer volume of content shared was impossible to verify, contextualise, and curate (Al-Ghazzi, 2017; De Angelis, 2011; Della Ratta, 2018; Wedeen, 2019). The emergence and proliferation of media outlets and platforms that emphasised and re-centred editorial processes (e.g., verification and selection) and structures is arguably a response to these outcomes, and an attempt to reclaim the power of narrative, of voice, that seemed to dissipate amid an atmosphere of "permanent digital suspicion" (Della Ratta, 2018, p. 121).

Professionalisation in this sense, we would argue, is seen in the orientation towards more centralised organisational structures and editorial processes, a critical engagement with journalistic norms, and a focus on craft and higher production value. Organisationally, we witness a pronounced movement towards formally and publicly constituting the organisation as a registered (non-profit, in most cases and where it is possible) entity (Badran, 2020; Badran et al., 2021). This is accompanied by a growing emphasis on editorial oversight and an elaboration of editorial policies and processes—e.g., with regards to sourcing, language/vocabulary, gender, etc. (see Brownlee, 2020, pp. 178–182; Tatomir et al., 2020).

These developments on the editorial level are constructed through an explicit engagement with and adaptation of mainstream journalistic norms and vocabulary. The diversity of contexts and types of media necessarily means that the way these norms are understood and operationalised in-situ differs accordingly. In a local associative radio station in Tunisia, objectivity is understood in terms of transparency, integrity, and lack of political bias (for example in national or local election coverage), while sometimes acknowledging that it has limited purchase when it comes to advocating for the region's development. In the newsroom of *Enab Baladi*, however, objectivity—understood in terms of balance and the inclusion of multiple points of view, but also differentiated from "neutrality"—is seen as an essential component of the journalist's professional identity and practice.

Nevertheless, whether in the local associative radios in Tunisia's marginalised towns or in *Enab Baladi*'s elaborate newsroom in Istanbul, the workers in these media outlets make their claims to authority first and foremost in their capacity as "professional journalists" rather than as citizens or activists. *Mada Masr*'s editor-in-chief, Lina Attallah, in reflecting on this says that she saw their role as "restoring the very classical role of journalism as an act of bearing witness, of witnessing and telling what you've just seen" in a polarised environment that had become increasingly dominated by the regime's media machine (Hafez, 2015). The irony, however, as expressed by 7iber's Lina Ejeilat, is that "professional journalism" in contexts of authoritarianism becomes itself a form of activism:

> In practice, what is journalism?….You go down and you examine, and you become a witness to what is happening. But bearing witness in countries and societies that want to hide information, want to hide the truth, and disfigure the narratives is also an act of activism. (Personal communication, 2019)

The development and refinement of journalistic craft and output are seen as important aspects of this process of professionalisation—and in claiming authority on that basis—in emerging media. For example, in *Mada Masr*,

the basic competence of professional newsgathering was seen as key:

> We thought we needed to do newsgathering—this operation that is monopolised by large organisations with big newsrooms, or the big TV stations with live studios and equipment, it should not stop there, because there was horrific distortion at this very level of information. We felt that before analysis, opinion, reflection, and unpacking, we needed to provide the information itself. (Personal communication, 2019)

While *Enab Baladi*'s training programme for aspiring journalists places emphasis not only on the quality and clarity of writing, and respect for established journalistic norms, it is also underpinned by a rigorous deference to classical journalistic forms and content genres (news items, reports, human interest stories, etc.).

The intervention that emerging media organisations articulate in terms of the modalities of voice-making entails a diverse and heterogeneous array of concrete practices that correspond to the diversity of actors and contexts. But the underlying logic of these practices is an orientation towards the "professionalisation" of journalistic work at different levels, and the valorisation of those practices, values, and organisational models seen to embody this process of professionalisation.

### 3.3. Political Economy

The third dimension lies in shifts at a structural political-economic level that accompanied and were co-constituted by emerging media organisations. These shifts are seen in the new economic opportunity structure that underlies this new class of actors, as well as in the new institutional arrangements and practices they experiment with.

Economically, the MENA uprisings and the collapse in statist logics and control, to varying degrees, opened the door to new modalities of sustaining and funding nascent media organisations (see, for example, Sakr, 2016). The most prominent and consequential of these support mechanisms has been direct (financial and professional) support from media development actors (El-Issawi & Benequista, 2020; Tatomir et al., 2020). Media development flows into the MENA region increased from 18,7 million USD in 2010 to 106,7 million USD in 2019, an increase of nearly 600% (based on OECD official development assistance data, see Badran, in press).

Due to the contexts in which these media organisations operate, attaining financial self-sufficiency is an extremely arduous task. By and large, this is due to political pressure that forecloses the possibility for autonomous commercial operations for independent media (see Sakr, 2016). But even in contexts where such political pressure is attenuated (as in the case of Tunisian associative media), worsening economic conditions across the region post-2011 has meant that such funding streams are extremely narrow (Badran et al., 2021).

Thus, media development aid, whether through direct grants and project funding, equipment and material, or workshops and training, functions as an essential lifeline for emerging media organisations. Moreover, in a region where investments in media are often confined to state actors and associates favoured by a system of nepotism (e.g., Della Ratta et al., 2015), and thus seen as largely corrupting, this alternative model of funding lends credibility to emerging actors as independent media makers.

The integration of media development aid into this field of media actors is deeply interlinked with the other shifts described herewith. The ability of such media actors to professionalise their operations—provide full-time employment, develop editorial policies and enforcement, develop elaborate organisational and administrative structures, support content production and skill development—is decidedly dependent on this support and its persistence thus far (see Breiner, 2019).

Seen from a different perspective, these shifts are also deeply shaped and influenced by this support. The workshops and training offered by media development organisations and their interlocutors were a factor in circumscribing the professional identity of these journalists and media makers as they developed their craft (again, in divergent and differentiated ways across contexts and actors). One associative radio journalist in Tunisia, in reflecting on the establishment of the radio and her trajectory there, put this in stark terms:

> These training courses helped us understand what it means to be a media worker, how to be a professional, how to deliver the information accurately, not to have bias. We learned what media is. We learned about professional ethics….We became media workers, and we think of what we are producing. (Personal communication, 2019)

On an institutional level, the proliferation of different experimentation with new institutional settings and structures constitutes another important facet of the development of emerging media. The Ethical Charter for Syrian Media, for example, is a collaborative effort by its members—26 Syrian emerging media outlets—to establish a binding media regulation body for the sector (see Sarkisjan, 2021). Other such experiments in (parallel-)institution building include the Syrian Journalist Association (formed as a labour union to represent Syrian journalists who were excluded from the Syrian Journalists Union, controlled by the regime), and the Syrian Female Journalists Network (Tatomir et al., 2020). Similar experimentation on a sectoral level can be seen in Tunisia where different associative media actors cooperated in establishing two institutional bodies to represent them and advocate on their behalf (Badran et al., 2021).

These institutional arrangements, collaborations, and networks proliferate at different levels. The Syrian Network for Print Media, for example, pooled together resources from several print media to organise a joint print and distribution operation for member organisations (Tatomir et al., 2020). On a regional level, the February Network (see "How do we continue?," 2019) brought together different emerging media organisations from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt to organise and establish a year-long training programme for aspiring journalists under the name Alternative Academy for Arab Journalism (see https://caforarabjournalism.com). On an international level, emerging media organisations have become increasingly integrated into independent and investigative journalism networks such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and Global Investigative Journalism Network.

These different experiments in institutional and coalition building combine a top-down encouragement from media development donors—whose funding makes these initiatives possible—and bottom-up collaboration from emerging media actors. More importantly, however, they reflect a deep awareness among emerging media organisations of their role, and that of other emerging media outlets—both individually and collectively—as representing a unique class of actors within their own contexts and the region.

**4. Voice, Agency, and Precarity**

Thus far, our analysis has mapped out the logics that underlie these interventions into the politics of voice of the region represented by emerging media organisations. However, we should be careful in ascribing a linear directionality or unproblematic inevitability to these interventions. Indeed, they belie a complex network of choices, contestations, and contradictions that reflect the interaction between the political and professional agency and precarity of these media organisations, and the individuals and groups behind them.

Media development funding is in many ways a condition of possibility for the persistence and survival of these actors. However, and perhaps because of that, it also represents a deeply contested and ambiguous terrain with implications on other dimensions (see Brownlee, 2017). Political and institutional logics embedded in such funding programmes (e.g., subordination to foreign policy considerations of donor countries, aid-dependency, short-termism, and choice of indicators) represent significant challenges for their eventual beneficiaries (see Badran, in press; Brownlee, 2017; Noske-Turner, 2014; Waisbord & Jones, 2010). These challenges, and the choices made in responding to them, have direct and indirect implications for emerging media's engagement with the question of voice. Emerging media organisations, in dealing with the political and economic implications of this funding model, have to manoeuvre themselves in two different directions.

Firstly, they have to manage how this funding might impact their public legitimacy. As one Tunisian journalist reflected, "There is a stigma when you say this project is done in partnership with this or that donor. There is a lot of suspicion. For whose benefit are you working?" (Personal communication, 2019). Beyond matters of perception, there are also ethico-political choices that need to be made as Lina Attallah of *Mada Masr* makes clear:

> There is a limit to what kind of funding we accept. We obviously do not take state funding from the US or the UK for example, which have been directly involved in screwing our people, in very, very direct ways. We prefer to work with more independent media development organisations. (Personal communication, 2019)

Secondly, they have to manage the dependency this funding model creates and the stark power imbalance between them and their international interlocutors. By 2016, the protraction of the Syrian conflict significantly shrunk the amount of media funding available and spurred a collapse and consolidation of the emerging media sphere into a handful of outlets (Badran, 2020). But it also crystallised some successful strategies for managing these contingencies, for example in the case of *Enab Baladi*, by spreading the risk across different donors and different sections of the organisation, thus attenuating the inherent imbalance of power with international media development organisations—albeit at the cost of growing administrative and bureaucratic complexity (Badran & Smets, 2021).

These are questions and dilemmas that emerging media actors are acutely aware of and have to navigate daily as this editorial on SyriaUntold makes clear. The authors describe a double-bind between a powerful Western gaze in mainstream media that obscures local narratives (for example in covering the destruction of Palmyra or environmental degradation) and an opposite pressure (operationalised in funding priorities) that might valorise these emerging indigenous voices but only in certain circumscribed spaces and modes of visibility—what the authors called the "Palmyra Syndrome":

> For non-profit organisations, including SyriaUntold, which mainly relies on NGOs to produce content, it is not easy to find funding to cover certain issues, such as the environment. Sometimes such proposals are turned away with answers such as: "We are not sure Syrians would be interested" or "could you instead give us a proposal on human rights, or more political issues?" (Youssef & De Angelis, 2021, para. 18)

Thus, grant funding, should not only be seen as liberating emerging media actors from the pressures of market and state in their restrictive environments (an enabling function), but also as presenting them with several dilemmas and challenges in terms of their internal/external legiti-

macy as well as balancing editorial independence with a condition of aid dependence (restrictive function). Grant funding, in a sense, also distorts the "emerging media market" by artificially privileging certain organisational models over others (e.g., ability to register the organisation in Europe or the US), rewarding actors who are better able (and willing) to respond to changes in donors' preferences and concerns (e.g., through thematic funding channels), as well as rewarding increased investment in administrative functions (e.g., monitoring and reporting, grant writing) as opposed to editorial functions.

The challenges of balancing an array of ethico-political and professional choices in the context of a political economy constituted by development aid are not limited to emerging media in the MENA region; analogous examples from Burma/Myanmar (Brooten, 2016), Nigeria (Myers, 2018), and other countries (Cook, 2016a, 2016b) reflect similar dynamics and challenges. More broadly still, the questions faced by these actors on issues from editorial independence, financial viability, and the increased precarisation of journalistic work echo contemporary debates in the field of journalism writ large (Deuze & Witschge, 2020; Waisbord, 2019; Zelizer, 2015).

Moreover, these dilemmas and challenges are not only exogenous in nature, but they also arise internally in dealing with any number of issues related to representation and participation (see, for example, Matar & Helmi, 2020; Saleh, 2020). Indeed, as the professionalisation process of these actors proceeds towards the constitution of elaborate organisational and administrative apparatuses, it brings with it a more profound sense of the responsibility to define the type of workplace it constitutes:

> What is that curatorial process of putting together an institution that acts as an ecology of care to its team members?….How do you invest in proper healthcare insurances? How do you organise sabbaticals? How do you deal with burnout? How do you think of wellness and well-being? (Personal communication, 2019)

In *Mada Masr*'s case above, the challenge is thus twofold (though intricately interwoven): dealing with the political precarity associated with journalistic work in an authoritarian context, as well as negotiating economic precarity in neoliberal times. Different contexts and actors have to face up to these same questions, albeit under different guises. *Enab Baladi*, for example, has to negotiate the different layers of precarious labour and precarious life within a specific condition of displacement and exile (Badran & Smets, 2021). While associative radios in Tunisia have to engage with questions about the balance of volunteer and remunerated labour in a context of worsening economic conditions (Badran et al., 2021).

The answers to these questions are seldom straightforward in their implications. *Enab Baladi*, for example, can be seen to protect its editorial and financial independence (e.g., in opting for smaller grants, from diverse sources) by cascading the sense of precarity down to the staff (e.g., in the form of low remuneration), which in turn brings about other unintended consequences (e.g., in the form of high rates of staff turnover and lack of institutional continuity; Badran & Smets, 2021).

Finally, a similar set of dilemmas emerge in the competition between these media actors themselves for the scarce (and increasingly unpredictable) funding within that closed system, the inequalities this competition creates, and what implications that has on the plurality of voices in this sphere.

These questions, and the experimentation in engaging with them, necessarily straddle both the endogenous and particularistic (geographical and political) contexts of dislocation, as well as exogenous pressures and dislocations in the field of journalism more generally. Delineating and engaging on this level of analysis—the underbelly of the phenomenon of emerging media organisation—is directly related to our understanding of these media in terms of their intervention into the politics of voice and the limitations of that intervention. Taking these considerations into account is necessary to understand the nature, extent, and limits of these interventions. Indeed, it not only allows us to nuance and complicate our account of emerging media organisations but also to de-essentialise and historicise them and to place them in conversation with analogous actors and developments more globally.

## 5. Conclusions

The aftermath of the Arab uprisings presents a highly variegated regional context stretching from fundamental state reform in Tunisia, to state collapse in Syria and authoritarian retrenchment in Egypt. Thus, the particular political, economic, and social contexts in which these media actors emerge and attempt to ply their trade are highly divergent. Nevertheless, this article aimed at making an argument for a broader understanding of post-2011 Arab emerging media beyond the particularities of their national and local contexts, by placing them in conversation with one another, and with developments and changes in the journalistic field more broadly. It does so by centring the notion of voice as the lens through which to interpret and evaluate the discourses, practices, and structures of these emerging media actors.

The thesis we propose is that emerging media organisations represent specific (multi-dimensional) interventions into the politics of voice in their various national and local contexts, albeit ones that share similar logics: pluralisation of voice, professionalisation, and relative (economic) independence from market and state. Different contexts necessarily mean that the operationalisation of these logics differs accordingly—e.g., the pluralisation of voices in Syria can be seen in the rise of Kurdish journalism, while in Tunisia, it can be seen in the proliferation of local associative media and their articulation with longstanding regional marginalisation.

Similarly, at the level of modalities, we see a diverse and heterogeneous array of concrete practices. However, the underlying logic of these practices, we argue, tends towards a valorisation of the "professionalisation" of journalistic work (in terms of structures, values, and craft). The political economy underlying this sphere of emerging media, largely underpinned by grant funding from media development organisations, also shows a shared tendency towards institutionalisation (at different levels). The different experiments by emerging media in building sectoral or regional institutions reflect a deep awareness of themselves (and of each other) as representing a unique class of actors in their own contexts and the region.

Finally, we also show that these interventions, and their underpinning logics, belie a complex dynamic between the political and professional agency and precarity of these media organisations and the individuals and groups behind them. Indeed, far from suggesting a teleological essence to the interventions described above, we emphasise that they are a function of contingent, and sometimes contradictory, external and internal pressures, whilst also representing the unique and context-specific responses of emerging media actors themselves to such pressures. Seen through a critical framework of voice, this dynamic illustrates both the limits and robustness of these interventions. More broadly, to paraphrase Watts (2001, p. 185), it also evokes the problems and obligations incumbent in an engagement with the politics of voice, as well as the frustrations, sufferings, and joy of such commitments.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my immense gratitude to the journalists, editors, and media outlets interviewed and investigated in the course of this research. I would also like to thank my academic hosts for the fieldwork in Tunisia (Centre d'Etudes Maghrébines à Tunis) and Turkey (Kadir Has University, Istanbul). My gratitude to the editors of this thematic issue, and the anonymous reviewers, for their constructive and detailed comments. I am also thankful to Omran Shroufi for his feedback and corrections on an earlier version of this text. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Kevin Smets and Dr. Jan Loisen for their continuing support and invaluable counsel throughout this research. This work was supported by a PhD fellowship of the Research Foundation—Flanders (FWO): (grant number 1172019N).

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Disclaimer

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is supporting the thematic issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by AGYA alumna Hanan Badr (Gulf University of Science and Technology, Kuwait) and AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The authors remain solely responsible for the content and recommendations provided in this publication, which do not reflect the positions of AGYA or any of its funding partners.

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2021, Volume 9, Issue 4, Pages 275–285**
**https://doi.org/10.17645/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4492**

Article

# A Case Study: *Mada Masr*—A Progressive Voice in Egypt and Beyond

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Submitted: 8 May 2021 | Accepted: 5 October 2021 | Published: 17 December 2021

**Abstract**
This article questions the role of the media in times of political transformation. In doing so, it draws on theories on the interconnectedness of the different fields of society to explain the sets of roles that media outlets and journalists adopt during phases of transition. Before 2011, the Egyptian media mostly acted as collaborators of the ruling regime and rarely as an agent of change. Journalists took over the latter role more often following the advent of privately-owned media outlets, thus helping to pave the way for the events of the so-called Arab Spring. This case study focuses on the development of the online news portal *Mada Masr* and therefore traces the development of two newsrooms. Starting as the English edition of a privately-owned Arabic newspaper in 2009 and changing its status to an independent news outlet in 2013, *Mada Masr* is one of the few voices which still openly criticise the Egyptian government. Founded in a time of political turmoil and struggling against an increasingly authoritarian environment, the outlet implements innovative ways of producing content, securing funding, and reaching out to its readers. A group of young Egyptian and international journalists make use of new spaces for expression that have opened through the global changes in communication infrastructure while struggling with frequent attacks by representatives of the ruling regime. As such, *Mada Masr* is a role model for small and regime-critical media outlets.

**Keywords**
alternative media; Arab Spring; authoritarianism; Egyptian media; Mada Masr; media systems; media transitions; online journalism

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by Hanan Badr (Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait) and Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany).

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## 1. Introduction

The development of the Egyptian media scene reflects the political power struggles in Egypt since long before the so-called Arab Spring. While the legal system, ownership structures, and direct interference by representatives of the ruling regime work against the principles of media freedom, single journalists and media outlets like *Mada Masr* act as agents of change in a repressive environment. The journalists working for the bi-lingual news portal are constantly negotiating the limits of what can be published and have carved out a niche of their own after being forced to leave the mainstream media infrastructure in 2013. In contrast to Egypt's highly uniform mainstream media, *Mada Masr* gives voice to the powerless and covers underreported topics. In the meantime, experiments to increase its outreach involve collaboration with other media outlets as well as non-journalistic partners across national borders or a membership program. In moving from being the English-language online section of an Arabic newspaper to an autonomous organisation the news outlet underwent shifts in its structure, rearranging its hierarchy and routines.

*Mada Masr* presents itself as an actor instead of a mere observer and narrator, a role that in contrast to many of their Western colleagues, Egyptian journalists have since long claimed for themselves. In the case of *Mada Masr*, its staff had been part of the progressive movements that enabled the events of 2011 and has since continued to fill the gaps left by the lack of an

assertive political opposition. Conducting an analysis of its agency aims to outline what tools and strategies the news outlet uses to defy power structures, resist and cope with threats by security forces, and survive despite the hostile conditions created by the oppressive political regime.

This theory-informed case study builds on a combination of different materials, including primary sources such as newsroom observation, interviews conducted with members of the editorial team, and monitoring of the content of the analysed publications as well as secondary sources such as research or journalistic reports. Fieldwork was conducted in Cairo during several stays between March 2011 and December 2013. As part of a larger study, six semi-structured interviews with members of the newsrooms *Al Masry Al Youm English Edition* (later: *Egypt Independent*) and *Mada Masr*, and informal interviews with a former copy editor were conducted in English by the author. The interviews took place in different newsrooms and, except for the informal interviews, were audio-taped and transcribed. The interviewees occupied different positions in the newsrooms and were all in their twenties at the time of the interview. In order to minimise the risk of bodily or other harm due to the heightened political repression in Egypt, the full names of the interviewees will not be disclosed. Material from later periods was collected through publications of the news outlet itself, journalistic reports, and academic literature.

In its first part, this article discusses the role of the media in societal transformation processes, taking into account the interdependency of the different social systems. This is followed by an outline of the development of the outlet during a decade of significant change in the Egyptian media, and a closer look at its journalistic self-image and production structures and routines.

## 2. Media and Transformation

The transformation of a media system takes place in parallel to a panoply of transformations in other parts of society. While all of a society's parts, be it the media, the economic, or the political system, share the same framework based on common historical roots, they mutually shape their development and their relationships with each other (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 46).

Social norms and values result from socially negotiated processes and are therefore changeable and sometimes even contradictory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 106). How the media reflects change in its environment is highly dependent on its role in society and how social and other transformations are accepted and supported by the social system. Due to the dynamic relationships between all parts of society, the media system not only is shaped by but also affects its surrounding environment (Hafez, 2014, p. 244; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, pp. 69–72). Change must be understood as sequences of subtle shifts during which actors are constrained by their surroundings while concurrently transforming them (Roudakova, 2011, p. 252). The impact of the media on social or political transformation processes is therefore not unambiguous.

While some parts of the media act as pioneers and press for further change, often the media is accused of maintaining "a system of control and reproduction of the dominant ideology" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 65) and as such is seen as an obstacle to social or political change. However, when the struggle over the preservation of hegemonic structures and the pursuit of social change reaches the public arena, the media will reflect the conflict between order-maintaining and order-eroding forces, and especially independent media can become "inherent sources of instability" and as such, drive change (Roudakova, 2011, p. 250). Research indicates that regardless of the political or social context, media can act positively as agents of change during times of transformation by enhancing citizens' understanding of democratic values and processes (Voltmer, 2013, pp. 110–114).

Change in a media system alone cannot cause transformation in other fields such as the economic or the political system but must be accompanied by enabling factors in its environment (Hafez, 2014, pp. 235–236). Transformations in media systems have often been predated by politically supported decentralisation and privatisation, which opened the media market to more competition and, as a result, to the publication of a wider variety of voices and opinions.

In Egypt, privately-owned newspapers such as *Al Masry Al Youm* (The Egyptian Today) were not the only new players in the media scene that since the last decade of the 20th century competed successfully for impact, advertising money, and readership, and had to be taken seriously in the newsrooms of state-owned media houses. The pressure to include previously taboo topics and dissident perspectives grew with the tremendous success of pan-Arab media such as *Al Jazeera* (The Island) and new communication channels such as blogs and social media (Elmasry, 2009, pp. 113–115; Fandy, 2000, p. 389). The scope of political protests in early 2011 must be explained by many factors, not the least by the opening of the media scene (Khoury, 2012, p. 80; Rinke & Röder, 2011, pp. 1276–1278).

On the other hand, the unaccustomedly outspoken media outlets often were owned by members of the political and economic elite. Ownership structures ensured that the media only acted as a safety valve and did not cross the red lines of those in power, and as such, were an obstacle to efforts for a real transformation of the media (Richter, 2011, p. 81). Additionally, journalists had to cope with restrictions and intimidation from authorities, difficulties in accessing information, and a limiting mindset brought from senior editors who had learned their profession in the state-owned media (UNESCO, 2013). Therefore, editorial censorship and self-censorship remained a part of journalists' work

in Egypt, although it was often disguised as responsible reporting (El Issawi, 2020, p. 638; El Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016, p. 556; Sakr, 2013, pp. 160–161).

One difficulty for transforming media systems lies in the heritage of ingrained organisational structures and professional practices and values; they shape its inner workings and the power relations that connect it to other institutions and frame the outcome of all transformative efforts (Downing, 1996, p. 203). Only if problematic aspects of its heritage, be they its structures, values, or practices, are addressed and tackled, can sustainable change take place. This might involve debate over the degree of press freedom, the extent of government influence, or the professionalisation of journalists. Conflicts between journalists and political actors, for example, can lead to the publication of biased reports favourable to ideological friends and thus ultimately form an obstacle to fruitful discourse about the future of society (El Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016, p. 552).

Since 2013, and after the ousting of President Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood's party *Hurriya wa Adala* (Freedom and Justice), the Egyptian media has become less free than ever (Badr, 2017, p. 138), even though a specious plural media scene with media outlets run by state authorities, parties, and private investors was sustained. The regime, being ruled once again by a military man, cracked down on political opponents and the media alike. Violence, imprisonment, and show trials were used to enforce submission from outspoken national and international journalists (Richter, 2015, p. 131). In addition, the regime geared up legal provisions and its technical ability to monitor digital communication channels (Hamoud, 2019, p. 129). In June 2020, at least 549 national and international media portals were blocked and placed out of reach of Egyptian citizens (Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, n.d.).

Borrowing from political science, Jones (2002) developed a theoretical model for the transformation of media systems consisting of four ideal stages of transformation shifting from a hard form of authoritarianism to a democratic press system. As Jones (2002) demonstrates, part of these developments is the multiplication of forces influencing the media organisations as well as the individual journalist and the journalistic content in general. Transformation is not a linear process but is very likely to show parallel, sometimes even contradictory trends, with the ever-present risk of regression (Jones, 2002, pp. 66–72, 488–496).

## 3. *Mada Masr*: A Case Study

### 3.1. A Short History of Two Egyptian Newsrooms

*Mada Masr* was founded in 2013 by staff from the English edition of the Egyptian newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm*. The term *Mada* "is the Arabic word for range, scope or span, but it is also the spot where a stone is placed on a ring, a symbol of taking a position" ("And we're back," 2013), the word *Masr* translates to Egypt.

Founded in early 2009, the English edition published translated pieces from its parent paper as well as its own reporting online. Translations often were amended with contextual information for an audience that was not overly familiar with Egyptian politics, geography, or history (personal interviews). Led by the journalist Fatemah Farag, approximately ten experienced media professionals ran the newsroom. Some of its original stories on human rights issues were eventually translated and featured on the pages of *Al Masry Al Youm* (Abdallah, 2014; Sandels, 2009).

The team enjoyed a wider margin of acceptable topics than their colleagues at the Arabic language daily, but conflicts about administrative issues and journalistic content between senior editors of both outlets occurred frequently. This led to the walk-out of three leading editors in May 2010, the changing of its name to *Egypt Independent* in November 2011, and the halting of news production and the resignation of most of its staff in January 2013.

From early on, it was clear to Farag and her team that "we have our red lines too" (Sandels, 2009). Although the staff of the English edition refused to censor themselves, they carefully weighed the risks of reporting. By reading through the coverage of other Egyptian media, they assessed how and around which topics the red lines of reporting fluctuated. Its professional standards were informed both by journalistic practices and routines stemming from its authoritarian surroundings and Western journalistic cultures. Editors and contributors were young, educated, liberal-minded, and well connected to the political opposition groups that had been involved in the run-up to the massive protests of January and February 2011.

In a time of political turmoil, having witnessed the ousting of long-time president Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the first free elections in Egyptian history and the media wars that followed in 2012, and with the deposition of President Morsi looming, the dismissed staff decided to found a new media institution. The website went online one day before the massive demonstrations of June 30th, 2013, which led to the military-backed ousting of Morsi. There was no coincidence in coming back on that particular day, but rather a conscious decision: "We wanted to re-appropriate our journalism on this heated day because it is through the prism of this craft that we engage with politics and activism" ("And we're back,'' 2013).

*Mada Masr* reported extensively about the demonstrations and sit-ins of the following weeks as well as the violent break-up of the pro-Morsi sit-ins in August 2013, delivering vivid descriptions and glimpses of the mindsets of protesters from both political camps as well of those living in the surrounding areas. Their reporting referenced past political developments as part of the causes for the current upheaval and depicted the

heterogeneous reasoning on both sides of the political conflict. From early on, *Mada Masr*'s authors drew its audience's awareness to the dwindling space for alternative voices outside of the mainstream, describing the spiralling polarisation and predicting further violence. To create the new media institution, the editors occupied positions traditionally not connected to the professional life of journalists and experimented with new journalistic formats and forms of funding, deepening their connections to like-minded local and international communities. It was, however, mainly the technical opportunities of digitalisation and a strong interest of philanthropists in media development that enabled the outlet to survive and thrive.

Since May 2017, *Mada Masr* has had to circumvent a cyber-attack that has kept its Egyptian audience from accessing the website directly (Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, n.d.; "Becoming 'legal,'" 2018). Several Egyptian authorities denied responsibility, and no official explanation has yet been given as to why the page was blocked ("Neither victory nor defeat," 2018). Back in 2017, a "high-level security source" confirmed to the media that the block was aimed at pages that published "contents that support terrorism and extremism and deliberately spread lies" (Hamama, 2017). In response to the blocking of their website, the news outlet had to develop new ways of reaching out to their Egyptian audience—among them the set-up of mirror pages, frequent change of their addresses to avoid further blocking, and the increased use of its social media channels. The constant attacks also led to a different perception of technology: "The internet is going from being a home to being the new state….We are fighting a legal and technological battle using the same tools that are made to oppress us" (Attalah, 2017). According to a newsletter to its members, the website came under "major DDoS attacks since December [2020]," which forced the outlet to upgrade its servers (*Mada Masr*, 2021).

Following legal reforms in summer 2018, *Mada Masr* applied for a publishing licence with the Supreme Media Regulatory Council in October ("Becoming 'legal,' " 2018). As of today, no decision has been made, while Egyptian authorities have given contradictory statements on the legality of the newsroom's operation (Fahmy, 2019).

Events such as the widespread protests in early 2011 and mid-2013 marked the shift from a system of soft authoritarianism through a phase of transition and the backsliding to a form of hard authoritarianism in the present (Jones, 2002, p. 64). During these different phases of political transition, journalism in Egypt was faced with varying challenges and opportunities. Badr (2020, p. 226) observes that throughout the Egyptian media scene, the "desire for autonomy exists in various forms." But while most Egyptian newsrooms consist of subgroups divided over the best approach to achieve independence from external forces, the team of *Mada Masr* presents itself as a rather homogenous "single community" (Badr, 2020, p. 224). Despite staff changes, the alternative media outlet kept following a journalistic approach "outside the realm of mainstream media" (Badran & Smets, 2018, p. 4321). It covered sensitive issues such as worker's protests—thus pushing for change—from its foundation in 2009, providing in-depth analysis and reporting on the different political players during the transition phase from 2011 to 2013. Furthermore, they adhered even more strictly to professional norms such as balanced reporting and fact-checking as a part of their strategy to challenge the tightening grip of the increasingly hostile political regime following the ascent of current president Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi (Badr, 2020, p. 223). Despite being in a constant legal and financial limbo and facing further attacks such as a raid of the newsroom in 2019, the arrest of several staff members in 2019 and 2020, travel bans, expulsions, and the self-imposed exile of several staff members, *Mada Masr* today is internationally acknowledged as a beacon for freedom of speech in Egypt. In 2019, the news outlet was named Free Media Pioneer by the International Press Institute (International Press Institute, 2019). *Time* magazine chose recurring chief editor Lina Attalah as a Next Generation Leader in 2017 (*Time*, n.d.) and considered her among the 100 Most Influential People of 2020 (Ressa, 2020).

### *3.2. Journalistic Roles in the Newsroom of* Mada Masr *and Beyond*

Extensive knowledge of the English language had been key to becoming a member of the editorial team before 2013. Consequently, the Egyptian staff of the English edition of *Al Masry Al Youm* had been recruited from other Egyptian English-language outlets, international media, and graduates from English-language education institutions, in addition to foreign journalists living and working in Egypt (Chang, 2015). This prerequisite naturally restricted recruitment and simultaneously shaped the newsroom as a space occupied by liberal-minded journalists, who were invested in (human rights) activism (Dean, 2017, p. 13; see also Chammah, 2011). While embracing professional standards of Western journalism such as factuality and balance, operating in an authoritarian environment transcended the staff's perception of journalistic objectivity with staff not viewing themselves as purely neutral observers who must simply deliver both sides of a story. Talking about her first day in journalism in 2002, a senior reporter recalled: "And it was my first time to get exposed to violence that comes along demonstrations in Egypt….It was quite an eye opener, like I tapped into this other world of activism and politics" (personal communication).

The editorial staff of both outlets had relationships with and partially became part of the liberal Egyptian opposition (Attalah, 2017; Attalah & Mossalam, 2014), which consisted of formal organisations such as unions or political parties as well as informal interest groups

(Wackenhut, 2019). While being guided by professional standards mostly assigned to monitorial and facilitative roles, objective and neutral reporting, and the enabling of political participation (El Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016, p. 551), having to cope with increasing authoritarianism inevitably led staff to take an adversarial position toward the ruling powers. When military-backed protests forced then-president Morsi out of office in 2013, the staff tried to do "the basics of journalism: objective reporting, both sides of the story," but became a "de facto opposition organisation" due to the lack of voices opposing the violent crackdown against members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood (Dean, 2017, p. 11).

Consequently, founding a media outlet as "a political project, with a mission and a responsibility" was born out of individual interests as well as of political circumstances: "It was perhaps a return to the position we had before the revolution, the margin, as the place of the unorthodox, the unconventional and the critical" (Attalah, 2017). In Western, namely US-American journalism, adversarial journalism has clearly increased from 1982 to 2013, while the interpretative and the disseminator function are still considered dominant (Weaver et al., 2018, p. 17). In 2018, *Mada Masr* stated: "Our goal has always been to produce adversarial journalism" ("Becoming 'legal,'" 2018). The staff is aware of its double-role as journalists and politically involved individuals and, through its writings, makes the struggle between personal investment and professional conduct transparent:

> Part of the job has become to fight off that nagging voice in the back of my head: does it even matter?….Seeing injustice rise to unprecedented heights and mainstream media become a synchronised state-worshipping orchestra, the need for journalists who attempt to report the truth, broken and demoralised as we may be, is more evident than ever. While the joy of journalism may have momentarily escaped me, the sense of purpose is stronger than ever. (Afifi, 2014).

Journalism became vital, a means of survival, a life purpose. "I think if *Mada* didn't exist, I would be very reluctant to stay in this country," Attalah said in an interview (Chang, 2015). A few years later, she described journalism as "a highly political act of contention" in the face of repression and journalists' role as "political agents" (Attalah, 2019, p. 2).

Rejecting the role of a neutral, detached observer is not an exceptional perception of professional values and standards among Egyptian journalists who, in discussion with scholars, have stated that they follow a "professional bias" (El Issawi, 2020, p. 640), "managing my bias" (Harb, 2018, p. 12), or otherwise taking a political stand instead of striving for objectivity (personal interviews in different Egyptian newsrooms). Politicised journalism isn't new to the media in Egypt as it for long had been in service of the ruling powers and, as such, had distributed government propaganda and often adopted a collaborative role (El Issawi, 2020, p. 629; El Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016, p. 553; Elmasry, 2009, p. 8). Political lines became blurred between 2011 and 2013, with the Egyptian media "torn between high-flying hopes and persisting constraints" amidst the power struggles between the old guard, Islamist currents, and liberal forces (Vladisavljevic & Voltmer, 2017, p. 20). During the transitional phase of 2011 to 2013, many journalists practised an interventionist role (El Issawi, 2020, p. 632), embracing a "hybrid identity of the journalist-activist" (El Issawi, 2020, p. 629) and adapting the "personalized and emotional style of bloggers" (El Issawi, 2020, p. 639). Early on, during the short rule of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi, the movement and its party were framed by many mainstream media outlets as dangerous power grabbers unfit to rule the country. By taking over the "activist or radical role….Egyptian journalists also fuelled the political fragmentation of Egyptian society" (El Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016, p. 563).

Even though it is clear that the Egyptian media wars of 2012 and 2013 were not solely the cause of the disruption of the political transformation (Badr, 2017, p. 157), the majority of the Egyptian media was not fit to facilitate a reasoned debate about the course of the political transformation. In the summer of 2013, protests by Morsi supporters were unanimously demonised as illegitimate by the Egyptian media; its violent dispersal was greeted by most journalists and commentators as an inevitable strike against terrorists (El Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016, pp. 554–561). Many media outlets allied with the Muslim Brotherhood were closed immediately, while most Egyptian newsrooms fell into line with the official "War against Terror" (Richter, 2015, p. 137). Blacklists of unwanted voices and topics became a common routine again (Hill, 2013). In the aftermath of the events of summer 2013, "journalists adapted again to editorial 'orders' in the name of 'exceptional' conditions" and returned to "their identity as guard of the regime" (El Issawi, 2020, p. 639).

Despite most of the Egyptian mainstream media falling in line, studies indicate a "hybridity of roles and professional norms" (Harb, 2018, p. 14) and a "nuanced agency" among Egyptian journalists (Badr, 2020, p. 226). Dissident journalists turned to publishing reports through their personal accounts on social media and in alternative media such as *Mada Masr* to counter the censorship by editors in the newsrooms of the state-governed and privately-owned media (Harb, 2019, p. 6). Journalists in mainstream media outlets often form a set of "diverse and shattered subgroups" (Badr, 2020, p. 224) and are able to "swiftly move from one political camp to another to secure the continuity of their media presence" amidst the changing dynamics of alliances between media owners and political actors (El Issawi, 2020, p. 634).

Although the alternative media scene itself certainly is not homogenous (Badran & Smets, 2018, p. 4243),

the team of *Mada Masr* possessed a "sense of collective and of being 'part of a minority community'" (Sakr, 2016, p. 12; see also Badr, 2020, p. 224) and of being connected through mutual political convictions and professional values. Although accustomed to a higher degree of editorial freedom, the editors of *Mada Masr* did exercise caution. One journalist reported not having identified herself as a member of *Mada Masr* for some time when talking to sources out of fear of putting the whole media outlet at risk (Chang, 2015). During editorial meetings, discussions regularly evolved around the balancing act of reporting all issues the journalists wanted to address without endangering the future of the news portal (Schröder, 2015, p. 28). Furthermore, being confronted with an ever-rising threat of harassment, and worse, by state authorities, the team applied "survival strategies" such as "rigorous fact-checking… and even omitting carefully researches pieces" (Badr, 2020, p. 223) to protect the outlet from being shut down.

### *3.3. Producing* Mada Masr

Breaking away from its parent paper did open up new opportunities to produce different content, reach out to a wider readership, and include new voices. Although the portal started its publication with English-only articles, publishing in Arabic was "at the core" of the new media operation from the beginning (personal communication). In an interview, Lina Attalah described the opportunity to publish in Arabic as "one of the liberating thoughts" after having been kicked out by *Al Masry Al Youm* because "[w]e always felt that what we were writing was not necessarily directed to foreigners" (Hagmann, 2013). Although pieces from the English edition occasionally had been translated and printed in the Arabic parent paper, the hierarchical and administrative structure did not allow for autonomous decisions by the English editors on which pieces to publish in Arabic.

Becoming a bi-lingual online news portal also allowed the inclusion of authors who could not be published before as their knowledge of the English language was too limited to write complex news articles and analyses. Today, *Mada Masr* publishes more content in Arabic than in English, such as a daily bulletin with local and international news. While parts of their reporting are translated to English, pieces directed mainly to the Egyptian audience, such as current reporting on accidents, cultural events, or service pieces, are published in Arabic only. Often, the English translations are published a few days after the Arabic article; translations range from longer analyses, opinion pieces, as well as soft topics on well-being and cooking. Attalah explained in an article discussing the relevance of *Mada Masr*, the Jordanian *7iber*, and *al-Jumhuriya* (an online outlet run by Syrian exiles, on a pan-Arab level) that:

> Translating some content into English, and, to a lesser extent… generating original content in English, [is] all with the interest of being part of the global conversation. Throughout, we have been exposed to the woes of translation, and have grappled with how often part of the original essence is lost. (Attalah, 2019, p. 12)

Despite the expenditure, *Mada Masr* continues to publish in both languages as "there is more attention paid towards the English-speaking media, specifically the international media, just because of how they can embarrass our regime" (Hussein, 2019).

*Mada Masr* continuously addresses contentious issues which are omitted by the majority of the Egyptian media, such as the ongoing suppression of political dissent. One outstanding example of its efforts to provide alternative perspectives certainly is the reporting of the ongoing clashes between terrorist groups and the Egyptian army in North Sinai and their toll on its civil population. Although journalists' access to the region is restricted, *Mada Masr* has frequently reported since 2017 and introduced a weekly bulletin in April 2019.

In 2015, *Mada Masr* published in-depth reports on several documents revealed by WikiLeaks on the influence of Saudi Arabia on Egyptian politics (Abdelhadi, 2015). In 2019, it shed light on the reporting of the death of former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi in a courtroom ("42 words on page 3," 2019). Producing a daily review of the Egyptian media had been introduced back when the news portal was still a part of *Al Masry Al Youm*, and—under the title of Daily Digest—this has become one means of securing the outlet's budget. Other rather sensitive issues range from labour conflicts to forced disappearances and the circumstances of (political) prisoners in Egypt, or the taboo subject of sexuality, including the situation of Egypt's LGBT community or victims of sexual violence.

Additional formats are constantly developed: Since May 2019, an Arabic-language daily news bulletin has covered a broad spectrum of national and international news with only a small portion of its contents translated to English. In August 2019, a bi-lingual weekly bulletin with lifestyle content such as book, film, or music recommendations followed suit.

Being originally a news outlet addressed at foreigners and readers in the diaspora, the editorial team never focused on an instant reporting of events but rather aimed to provide in-depth journalism with analysis and background information. This still rings true as the journalists employ "data-powered investigations, ethnographic reportage, and fact-based analysis… while staying relevant, and not falling into a sort of lazy elitism that this form of production can risk" (Attalah, 2019, p. 7).

Compensating for the effects of being blocked in Egypt, *Mada Masr* intensified its use of social media and registers constantly rising numbers of followers (see Table 1). The social media team posts and tweets headlines and summaries of currently published pieces along with the current address of the mirror page, which allows readers from Egypt to access the webpage in Arabic and

**Table 1.** Followers and subscribers of *Mada Masr* on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

| Social Media Channel | 2018[1] | 2019[2] | 2021[3] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Facebook | 209,337 | 215,000 | 303,301 |
| Twitter | 111,939 | 114,000 | 192,224 |
| YouTube | 21,568 | 22,260 | 62,000 |

Sources: [1] Media Ownership Monitor Egypt (2018), [2] "How necessity drives" (2019), [3] data from *Mada Masr* social media channels compiled in 2021 by the author.

English. In addition, social media is employed for solidarity campaigns and advertisements for additional services or special events. Among the videos posted on its YouTube channel, the satirical series *Akh Kebir* (Big Brother) attracted a wide audience nationally and regionally before author and caricaturist Andeel stopped it in August 2019 due to security concerns ("Wrestling in Egypt," 2018).

Since 2013, *Mada Masr* has run a Soundcloud account, promoting local artists, sharing editors' favourite music, and posting interviews and audio features. Since April 2021, members can access a special Soundcloud channel with recordings of discussion rounds on current topics from parliamentary sessions to cybersecurity.

The team established and developed different event formats to build a lasting relationship with their audience that extends from the political to the private and the popular. Starting with a party to generate enough money to save *Egypt Independent* from closing in 2012 (Dean, 2017, p. 9), members of the newsroom took part in gatherings such as marketplaces, concerts, film screenings, or panel discussions. In doing so, *Mada Masr* attempted to strengthen the bond with its audience as well as with local musicians, artists, and entrepreneurs. Many of these events were developed in collaboration with local organisations such as Megawra, which links questions of housing with those of cultural heritage and social responsibility.

Understanding its audience as "a means to build power" (Attalah, 2017), the editors address Egyptian readers as well as the "broader, transnational community that empowers us" ("Wrestling in Egypt," 2018) and has attracted "more mainstream audiences over the years" (Hussein, 2019). Although audience research in Egypt is scarce, the *Mada Masr* team has stated in interviews that while the outlet's Egyptian audience tends to read both the English and the Arabic version of the portal, its Arabic audience is more diverse than its English readership (Sakr, 2016, pp. 15–16). While it is beyond the scope of this article to research the impact of the outlet's content on its audiences' belief systems, it can be stated that *Mada Masr* acts as an "alternative forum" (Harb, 2019, p. 4) delivering "counter hegemonic discourses and identities' " (Badran & Smets, 2018, p. 4321). In addition, some of *Mada*'s reporting has been further circulated by other Egyptian media (Sakr, 2016, p. 15). Therefore, the outlet contributes to a diversification of perspectives in an increasingly homogenous media market, thus helping to "foster political engagement by increasing citizens' knowledge of current issues" (El Issawi, 2020, p. 633) by creating opportunities for agonistic debates necessary for future developments towards democratisation.

From early on, *Mada Masr* collaborated with non-journalistic individuals as well as organisations and other media outlets to broaden its reporting and outreach. Its acquaintance with the like-minded editors of the Jordanian *7iber* started in 2011, but Mada Masr has been a part of the Arab bloggers and techies' community from even further back (Attalah, 2019, p. 13). Since 2016, *Mada Masr* has been part of the network Independent Media of the Arab World (Orient XXI, 2018). The most recent examples of producing high-quality, relevant content in a collaborative effort are a visual reconstruction of the 2020 Beirut port explosion with Forensic Architecture (2020) and the 2021 webinars about the Covid-19 pandemic with the Arab Reform Initiative (2021).

Having decided against implementing a paywall and being unable to attract large amounts of advertisement, *Mada Masr* has set up a membership programme to secure some of its funding. It offers four tiers, with the cheapest aimed at Egyptian readers and the most expensive at well-funded international organisations and wealthy supporters. As of 2017, about one-third of the paying subscribers to its daily press review Morning Digest were located abroad, while the majority of readers was based in Egypt (Tesdell, 2017). In addition, the team offers services such as translation or editing as part of their business model.

However, about 80 percent of its funding still is provided through grants by foundations and other philanthropic organisations (Chaudhary, 2019; "How necessity drives," 2019; Tesdell, 2017), such as the Prince Claus Fund or International Media Support. It does share this fate with many other non-profit media outlets around the world, such as the highly successful US-American *Texas Tribune* or *ProPublica*, who similarly have not yet found a sustainable business model that might compensate for the collapse of the advertising-based revenue models.

## 4. Conclusion

Tracing the development of *Mada Masr* against the background of different phases of transition in the

Egyptian media scene provides insight into the mechanics of transformation. In the Egyptian case, the transformation process towards a freer media was halted by a multitude of factors, among them increased political pressure, ownership structures, and inherited newsroom practices.

The outlet came to life during an opening up of the Egyptian media scene, marked by the growing influence of newly founded and privately-owned media outlets that pushed the lines of what could be reported in tandem with a lively blogosphere and pan-Arab television channels which highlighted corruption and abuse by state authorities. During this onset phase to further political transformation, the newsroom of *Al Masry Al Youm*'s English Edition certainly played a role as a dissenting voice and an agent of change.

With the massive uprisings of early 2011, triggered by the ousting of long-time Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the country underwent a shift from soft authoritarianism into a transition phase. Similar to phases of political transition in other countries, the development of the media in Egypt was not only an indication of that shift, but that the media had itself become an actor (Jones, 2002, p. 452). New media outlets and news formats flourished, journalists pushed the red lines even further, and discussions about the future of Egyptian media ensued (Jones, 2002, pp. 455–459). In the case of Egypt, counter-attacks by former regime members and a lack of professionalism in journalism (Jones, 2002, p. 456)—among a multitude of other factors—led to vicious media wars over the progress of the country's transformation. Consequently, after the summer of 2013, the country relapsed back to an authoritarian regime that cracked down hard on any dissent and increased its tools for controlling the media further to the point that made "the margin of manoeuvre for genuine change almost impossible" (El Issawi, 2020, p. 642).

The staff of *Al Masry Al Youm*'s English edition had been involved in the run-up to the events of January 2011 by maintaining personal relationships with political activists striving for democratisation and reporting on the growing dissent, protests, demonstrations, and transgressions by state authorities. During the transition phase, the newsroom made use of the larger margins of freedom, reporting on the struggle for political power, tapping into additional sources of information and tackling issues that had previously been off-limits. Simultaneously, the outlet reached a wider impact by preparing to publish a weekly printed edition while adhering to the professional standards that had guided its professional practice since its foundation. Their understanding of journalistic professionalism stemmed from the personal experiences of the inherited practices and structures of other newsrooms, thus combining values of Western journalism with the necessities of manoeuvring in an authoritarian environment.

At the peak of the political confrontation in spring 2013, the leadership of the Arabic mother paper decided to shut the newsroom down. Its comeback in summer 2013 as the news outlet *Mada Masr* was timed to cover the massive protests of both political camps that eventually led to the ousting of then-president Morsi and the seizure of power by members of the former political forces. Although the claim to produce truthful, progressive journalism did not change; the staff had to adapt its practices and newsroom structure according to the changing economic and political circumstances. This not only included taking over responsibilities other than journalistic work and negotiating its working relationships anew. It also meant a sharpened awareness of its role as one of the few remaining dissident voices, of journalism as an act of political contention, and of themselves as adversarial watchdogs. Finding themselves a target of increasing political oppression required the outlet's staff to not only acquire and implement a deeper knowledge of digital security but also to rigorously implement professional norms as well as self-censorship to protect the outlet. In its pursuit of truthful journalism, the small news outlet widened its outreach and scope of production and made itself part of different communities that provided a support system as well as a purpose. However, despite being well-connected agents of change who stubbornly and creatively defy the limitations of their surroundings, its status is fragile.

Nevertheless, its strategies for survival make *Mada Masr* a role model for media outlets that navigate in authoritarian environments as well as for those who struggle with the massive transformations of the profession worldwide.

**Acknowledgments**

Due to the political repression in Egypt and in order to minimise the risk of bodily or other harm, the names of the interviewees are not disclosed. Fieldwork was conducted in Cairo between March 2011 and December 2013.

**Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Disclaimer**

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is supporting the thematic issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation,'' edited by AGYA alumna Hanan Badr (Gulf University of Science and Technology, Kuwait) and AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The authors remain solely responsible for the content and recommendations provided in this publication, which do not reflect the positions of AGYA or any of its funding partners.

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COGITATIO

**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2021, Volume 9, Issue 4, Pages 286–296**
**https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4452**

Article

# The Subtle Dynamics of Power Struggles in Tunisia: Local media since the Arab Uprisings

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Submitted: 29 April 2021 | Accepted: 4 November 2021 | Published: 17 December 2021

**Abstract**

This article contributes to the analysis of local media and democratic transformation in Tunisia since the Arab Uprisings. It aims to assess the extent to which pluralism, freedom of expression, and participation—central tenets of democratisation—are evident at the local level. Tunisian local media, unlike the national media, is relatively free of governmental control. Local media is also decentralised. It is this autonomy from the government which makes the analysis of local media fundamentally important for understanding politics in Tunisia. While national media is linked to the most powerful elements in the country, the diversity of voices within the media at the local level provides an opportunity to grasp the grievances, struggles, and agency of people in Tunisia, especially the most marginalised communities. This article will detail the changes in the media landscape, especially for local media, in Tunisia and connect our analysis of local media to better understand the Tunisia that has developed between dictatorship and democracy and the extent that the fledgling Tunisian democracy can withstand its most recent test.

**Keywords**

Arab uprisings; democratisation; local media; MENA; proximity journalism; Tunisian media

**Issue**

This article is part of the issue “Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation,” edited by Hanan Badr (Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait) and Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany).

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## 1. Introduction

Tunisia’s reputation as the only Arab state to make genuine headway towards democracy in the 10 years following the Arab Uprisings appeared to have been invalidated when President Kais Saied, on July 25 2021, evoked Article 80 of the Constitution, sacked the prime minister, and suspended parliament. Since Saied’s capture of government, there have been mass rallies across the country supporting the President’s actions. Saied’s actions are seen by many in the country as necessary to address critical problems associated with the political stalemate that has hampered the democratic transition. A nationwide poll conducted by Emrhod consulting in the days immediately following the takeover highlighted the popularity of the President and his decision to assume temporary unilateral power (Abueish, 2021). The President’s actions and the popular response from Tunisians, given the chaotic nature of politics and the economic and health crises engulfing Tunisia since the emergence of Covid-19, are not entirely unsurprising.

The fears that Tunisia, a country of 11,8 million people, would slide into dictatorship heightened even further after security forces stormed and shut down *Al Jazeera*’s office in Tunis on July 26, 2021. At the time this article was written on October 26, 2021, the government had given no reasons for the raid on *Al Jazeera* or for the fact that *Al Jazeera*’s Tunis office still remained

closed, with its equipment confiscated and reporters working remotely. The Syndicate National des Journalists Tunisiens, an independent civil society group set up following the 2011 revolution, reported a worrying rise in intimidation and violence against journalists since Saied's takeover. It is not surprising that these attacks against the media are raising questions about Saied's commitment to democracy. Media freedom and the independence of the press is widely agreed upon as foundations upon which democratic societies stand (Keane, 1991, 2013; Mughan & Gunther, 2000).

While, as Dennis and Snyder (1998) have expressed that the media plays a vital role in promoting democratic societies, Bogart (1998, p. 5) makes the crucial point that "any answer to the question of whether media serve democracy must be qualified: which media, and among what parts of the public?" In this article, we aim to look at local media as part of Tunisia's democratic transition. Much has been written about the media in Tunisia since the fall of the dictatorship, including the common theme that the post-authoritarian period has been marked by gains and challenges for freedom of expression and plurality (El-Issawi, 2012; Miladi, 2021). As expected, much of this focus has been on national politics and the national and international media. Without ignoring the importance of the national, and for that matter, the international, contexts, we focus our attention on the under-researched local community media that has emerged in the period since the revolution. Our major research question is what insight about change in a transitional democracy does an analysis of local media provide for researchers' understanding of politics in Tunisia, and how does researching local media inform our understanding of democratic change in a country such as Tunisia where freedoms of expression have long been denied by colonialism and dictatorships? This article aims to fill some of the deficit in the literature on local media. Drawing on content from four local media outlets in regions of Tunisia that are marginalised and under-represented, both politically and as producers of media, we will aim to contribute to a better understanding of the role of local media in a country transitioning from dictatorship to democracy.

In this article, we will detail the change in the media landscape, especially for local media, in Tunisia. Then we will aim to connect our analysis of local media to the political struggles that have shaped Tunisia since the fall of Ben Ali. In this way, we hope to provide new insights from the local level of politics and society to better help understand the Tunisia that has developed between dictatorship and democracy and the extent that the fledgling Tunisian democracy can withstand its most recent test.

## 2. Local Media, Politics, and Tunisia Since the Revolution

In the wake of the revolution, much has been written about social media and its impact on the Arab world (Zayani, 2015, pp. 7–8). Global and national media in Tunisia have also been a subject of much interest to scholars (Ghazali, 2015, pp. 6–22). Local media remains less researched, as Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller argue, because there is little appetite for research on the relationship between politics and media at the local level (2016, p. 8). Where there is interest in the local media, it is largely in the developed world where local media is under pressure from economic and technological changes and where the loss of local media is seen to be detrimental to democracy and social cohesion (Hayes & Lawless, 2018; Nielsen, 2015). In Tunisia, as this article will show, despite the existence of many of the same economic and technological pressures facing local media elsewhere, the revolution provided an opportunity for local media to emerge from decades of governmental control and shape the post-revolutionary outcomes (Voltmer, 2013). Yet, few studies have focused on local media in Tunisia.

In *Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism*, published in 2020, there is not one mention of Tunisia. Nouredinne Miladi's excellent account of media in Tunisia after the revolution has little to say about local media (2021, pp. 276–284). As far as we can tell, there is no research published in English that has undertaken empirical research of the content of local media for a better understanding of the changes that have occurred in the regional, especially marginalised regions, of that country.

This article applies observation and critical review of four local media formats that have emerged in the period since the Arab Uprisings. Utilising survey material from Open Sigma (2017), we were able to establish the popularity of local media in regional parts of Tunisia. The media that were analysed were *Nefzwa Journal*, *R*adio Nefzawa, Radio Gafsa, and Radio Mines FM. *Nefzwa Journal* and Radio Nefzawa were chosen because they are representative of the Amazigh, who are considered a significant ethnic minority in Tunisia. Radio Gafsa and Radio Mines FM are both located in Gafsa. Radio Gafsa is a public radio station, while Radio Mines FM receives funding from UNESCO and emerged after the revolution as a voice from, and for, the mining communities of Gafsa. Gafsa is in central-western Tunisia, where mining communities have challenged poor working conditions, underdevelopment, and poverty. In 2008, an uprising in Gafsa was brutally suppressed by the government of Ben Ali. These issues remain of major concern for the people of Gafsa. We collected primary evidence from the four local media above. We also collected 862 programs and stories for analysis as part of the research. We used this data to ascertain whether analysis of the content of local media provided offers opportunities to make claims about the changes to Tunisia in the post-revolutionary period. We also utilised a number of locally produced studies of post-revolutionary media in Tunisia written in Arabic (Abou Arief, 2014; Zran & Sedraoui, 2019). Unlike most research that has focused on the national level, this research aims to

investigate whether the marginalised and previously silenced regions of Tunisia are now engaged in the national debate and the extent of the democratic effect in regional Tunisia. In addition, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the rich diversity and the multiplicity of the Arab world that challenges one-dimensional, homogeneous tropes centred on the incompatibility of Arabs and Muslims with democracy.

**3. Local Media, Democratisation, and Tunisia in the Global Context**

Local media is noted amongst media scholars as pivotal in the development of informed civics and social cohesion (Hayes & Lawless, 2015; Leupold et al., 2018; Meijer, 2010; Snyder & Stromberg, 2010). Tunisian Professor of journalism Jemal Zran and Nabil Sedraoui, the manager of local community broadcaster, posit that the term local media is derived from the concept of the local community. Local media is defined as an institution or media broadcasting dedicated to taking "care" of the local community (Zran, & Sedraoui, 2019, p. 371). Saima Saeed (2009, p. 470), focusing on community media, specifically community radio in India, provides a succinct approach to community media as media that is "produced by the local community in their own language for their own consumption on issues that they themselves deem relevant to their needs." Carpenter et al. (2003), drawing on Laclau and Mouffe (1985), also posit that community media offers an opening for counter-hegemonic discourses to be produced and heard. The common aspect of these positions towards local and community media is that it provides opportunities for local actors and marginal groups to participate in public discourse and potentially influence public opinion and policy-making; both of which are vital ingredients in the development and consolidation of participatory democracy (Cherni, 2014; Zemni, 2021). In the Tunisian case, local media, especially local media in marginalised regions of the country, are vital aspects of the transition from dictatorship and the emergence of a post-dictatorship society. Prior to the fall of Ben Ali, Tunisian media was centrally controlled and managed by the regime. It was "a system of governance, establishing complex and ingenious mechanisms to lock down the space for media and information and to control, with an iron fist, all means of communication, public and private" (Buckley et al., 2013, p. 15). In the peripheral south of the country, Noureddine Miladi explains that the media landscape was not only censored but long has been dominated by media from the richer, more developed coastal areas (2021, p. 269). Miladi, furthermore, emphasises the underlying and pervasive regional divide for any understanding of the politics and culture of Tunisia more broadly.

An informed and engaged polity is a central feature of democratic theory (Hayes & Lawless, 2018, p. 333), and the media is at the forefront of providing information and promoting citizen engagement (Voltmer, 2013). Manyozo (2012, pp. 15–20) pointed to three approaches for analysing local community media. The first approach looks at the processes of reporting as well as communicating development in which media constitute the key strategy in public communication, campaigns, and advocacy on and about development issues. The second approach revolves around securing the free flow of information with all it requires for supporting and building the capacity of policies, structures, and sponsorship as means of good governance. The third approach stems from UNESCO's conception of dialogical communication among people and focuses on community-based involvement by which development stakeholders facilitate participatory communication so that they can author development from below.

The importance of studying the impact of transnational and national media is well established, and in the case of the Arab world, the absence of independent media and the democracy deficit have been linked (Springborg, 2007, pp. 235, 237; see also Lynch, 2015). The MENA region continues to lag behind other regions on the World Press Freedom Index. While many Arab countries remain poorly placed in the Index, Tunisia was ranked 74th in the world in 2020, rising almost 100 places in the 10 years since the fall of Ben Ali (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). This improvement for media, and journalists, appeared to mirror the progress towards democratisation in Tunisia compared with the rest of the region where authoritarianism and repression dominate. We are not venturing into the facile arguments that one leads to the other, and to quote a scholar of social media, independent media "does not necessarily spread freedom, nor is it an antidote to tyranny" (Zayani, 2015, p. 8). However, the fact that pluralistic voices prevail in any society is not irrelevant when determining the extent to which democratisation has progressed. Weak democracies and authoritarian governments are, typically, amongst other features, characterised by the absence of an active press and strict government control of media.

The problems of authoritarianism and media repression that exist in the Arab region should not be decontextualised from wider global trends that undermine democracy, including increased antagonism towards journalists and attacks on the freedom of the media (Kenny, 2019). As Kenny highlights in a study of 91 countries from 1980–2014, the resurgence of authoritarianism and the assault on the media are not an Arab, or even post-colonial, phenomenon even if those issues have a particular history in the Arab world. The study shows that populist movements are responsible for declining media freedom. A 2019 report by Freedom House not only finds that there have been "concerted attempts to throttle the independence of the media sector," they link this trend to declining levels of freedom, especially democratic freedoms (Repucci, 2019). Alongside the government attacks on the media, the amplification of the

corporatisation of the media and concentration of media ownership, linked to neoliberalism, has had a profound impact on the capacity of the fourth estate to hold elites to account (Phelan, 2014). McChesney (1997, p. 2) views the media as complicit in undermining democracy, claiming that "the wealthier and more powerful the corporate media giants have become, the poorer the prospects for participatory democracy." Renowned scholar of democracy, John Keane, also known for coining the term "refolution" (Keane, 2011) to define the Arab Uprisings when a majority of others were declaring them as revolutionary transformations, has made numerous connections between the role that a pluralistic media has in the defence of democracy (Keane, 2013). John Keane argues that for all of democracy's shortcomings, it is still worthwhile defending, which is a sentiment that many in Tunisia have also expressed in the days and weeks following Kais Saied's takeover of government.

The anxieties that scholars have expressed about the capacity of the media to act as the fourth estate flow down to the level of local or community media as well (Hayes & Lawless, 2018, p. 323). Since news is sometimes defined as the first draft of history, we could claim that none is more so than local news. Being first on the scene requires proximity and an ear to the ground. Local journalists have both. They are usually members of their communities; they have unparalleled access to and awareness of local issues and events and have built up the trust of many members of their communities. They concentrate on local subjects within their communities. These journalists can have the advantage of being able to uncover events that are mostly neglected on the national level due to a lack of accessibility to identify or report them. There is no substitute for this advantage (Akhtar, 2019, p. 8).

While national and global media remain attractive to large corporations and private equity, local media and news outlets suffer from a different fate. They are rarely profitable, and where they are, they rely mostly on advertising and infotainment rather than on journalism and on reporting on local matters of importance to the community. Nielsen says that local newspapers have been extremely hard hit by the digital revolution as "readership is eroding, advertising declining, and overall revenues plummeting" (2015, p. 3). As the Columbia Journalism Review pronounced in 2018, "America's local news has reached its death spiral" (Pope, 2018). The impact of the decline in local media on democracy is also a matter of major concern. Local media is an important element ensuring the honesty of local politicians, business people, and authorities. In a 2003 study, it was found that there was a direct correlation between active local journalism and lower levels of corruption by local elites (Adsera et al., 2003). More so, local media can play a prominent role in promoting local initiatives, health and education outcomes, and can empower marginal groups (Birowo, 2011). In Kevin Howley's view, local or community media "are popular and strategic interventions into contemporary media and culture committed to the democratisation of media structures, forms and practices" (2005, p. 2) and cannot be ignored despite the paucity of attention that has paid to media at the subnational level (Howley, 2013).

The implications of the crisis of the media, including the local media, on democracy cannot be overstated. One of the most important arguments that we will make is that while the struggles in Tunisia parallel much of what has been described above, there are aspects of Tunisia's post-2011 political dynamics, some at the national level and at the understudied local level, that push strongly against global and regional trends. Badran et al. (2021) argued that Tunisia is exceptional in the MENA region for opening up media freedom. These dynamics, most specifically at the local level, may provide insight into the extent to which Tunisians have embodied "democracy" despite universal and nationally specific de-democratising pressures that have been pushing against the gains made since the 2011 revolution.

## 4. Media in Tunisia Before the Revolution: The Era of the Padlock

Prior to independence, publications and broadcasts in Arabic, Italian, and French were prevalent (Smati, 2010, p. 13). In the period of French occupation (1881–1956), over 100 newspapers were available in Arabic alongside more than 10 published in French (Miladi, 2021, p. 269; Zran & Sedraoui, 2019, p. 372). Up until 1911, Miladi informs us that many of these publications were involved in the anti-colonial struggle. In 1911, the colonial government commenced a phase of censorship and control of the media that came to characterise Tunisia for a century. This policy was continued after independence when the government of Habib Bourguiba issued a decree to reinforce its monopoly on broadcasting (Miladi, 2021, pp. 268–269). With Zine El Abidin Ben Ali's ascension to power in 1987, there appeared to be a liberalisation of the media as a number of private media stations came into existence. However, as Zaid (2018) argues, partial privatisation of the media was mostly a transfer of ownership to close associates and members of the regime, especially members of Ben Ali's family (Miladi, 2021, p. 272). What appeared to be the liberalisation of the media was, in fact, the opening up of the media economy to Ben Ali's family members and those closest to the regime, which had the effect of tightening government control of the media.

Despite monopolisation, repression, and censorship, there were a few attempts to establish local community media prior to the revolution. Radio6 was founded in 2007 in Tunis, and Radio Kalima was also established in Tunis the following year. Both broadcasters exerted tremendous effort to develop these platforms. Major topics of discussion were those of citizenship and human rights. The broadcasts were made by political activists and media figures such as Sihem Bensedrine.

Both platforms were broadcast on the internet amid the absence of any legal, administrative, or financial support. Nevertheless, they faced interference and surveillance, and both broadcasters were banned by the Ben Ali government (Mezghanni, 2015, p. 195).

The other defining feature of Tunisia's media landscape was the regional divide. The paucity of regional media in the interior has been a distinguishing feature of Tunisia, mirroring the uneven development between more affluent coastal regions and the marginalised and impoverished North-West, Central-West, and South-West. The first private regional journal, *Al Qanal*, was issued in the Bizerta governorate, northeast Tunisia, in 1967. In addition, there were a handful of journals that were issued with partial support from the government to appear to international observers that the Tunisian government encouraged culturally, politically, and regionally diverse journalism. Most of these journals ceased, such as *Al Mithaaq* which was issued in Sousse, *Hadramawt* in the same city, besides *Chams al Janub* in Sfax, *Mir'at al Wasat* as well as *Baraaem al Wasat* in Sidi Bouzid, *Aljazeera* in Djerba, and *Al Ithaf* in Siliana. These journals were established with limited support and were seldom legalised (Smati, 2010, p. 13). These efforts at establishing local community media failed because they were not supported by the government and lacked the financial resources to remain active (Smati, 2010, p. 15).

In 1977, Monastir broadcasting was established to provide broadcasts to the middle and coastal parts of the country: Tunis, Zaghouan, Nabeul, Sousse, Monastir, Mahdia, and Kairouan. In the period from 1990–1993, three other broadcasters also emerged, with each covering three governorates/states at the same time (Homid, 2012, pp. 100–101). Regardless of the increase in the number of broadcasters, the regime controlled the media to ensure that the news and entertainment produced and communicated in Tunisia served its interests. The peripheries were politically and economically marginal and culturally silenced, not least because of the absence of platforms for locals to raise their voices. The uprisings of 2011 were a moment when the peripheries were not silenced. The following sections of this article aim to show how the changes that have occurred since 2011 have opened up opportunities in regional Tunisia that were denied by the censorship and control of the media by successive colonial and post-colonial governments.

## 5. Media in Tunisia After the Revolution

Even with the events of July–August 2021, it is not inaccurate to claim that Tunisia's record regarding the treatment of journalists and freedom of the press has improved since the fall of the dictatorship. The revolution provided the impetus for the establishment of numerous newspapers, radio broadcasters, and news websites, but as early as 2012, UNESCO reported that due to a problem not unique to Tunisia or the Arab world, the failure to raise sufficient revenues meant that many of them ceased to operate (UNESCO, 2012). They further reported that as early as October 2012, only 10 months after the fall of Ben Ali, that government attacks on freedom of expression had resumed. In February 2012, Nasreddine Ben Saida, general director of Arabic daily newspaper *Attounissia* was the first journalist to be jailed since the revolution. While, as Layli Fouradi from Tunisian web magazine Inkyfada interviewed by Jon Alsop for an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2021 states, "Freedom of expression is one of the gains of the revolution in 2010… fear that once reigned has truly dissipated" (Allsop, 2021), there is no doubt there is an ongoing struggle to defend those gains. Reports such as one by Reuters in 2017 detailing efforts to use the "state of emergency that allows officials to curtail some rights in the name of national security" and a report that "41 local and foreign journalists were beaten by police, harassed, insulted or treated aggressively" reveal the extent that government efforts to censor and intimidate the media continue ("Tunisia tightens restrictions," 2017). Alongside the abuses, legislative efforts to protect the media and widen participation are equally evident features of the post-revolution period.

In 2011, the National Authority of Information and Communication (INRIC) was set up by the interim government to assist in the freeing up of Tunisian media. Decree No. 10/2011 (2 March, 2011) was mandated to protect the Tunisian people's right to a free, diverse and fair media (Tunisian Government, 2011). Alongside the struggle for media reform and defence of the freedom of expression, sensitivity was shown to the question of the pluralism of voices. Recognising this, the Tunisian Constitution apportioned the entirety of Chapter 7 to "Local Authorities." Allocating a whole chapter of the constitution to discuss local governance has, in the same way as it did with the main traditional branches (executive, legislative, and judiciary), symbolically and literally conferred on the local authorities the explicit legal power to be the fourth branch in the constitutional authorities' arsenal.

Furthermore, within the space of a year of its establishment, INRIC had handed down a major report and had received applications for licenses from 74 radio and 33 television channels. On September 20, 2011, the Tunisian interior minister declared that 187 periodicals made up of dailies, weeklies, bi-monthlies, and magazines had obtained legal identification (Abou Arief, 2014; Touati, 2012, p. 146). Efforts to open broadcast media were, as stated by INRIC chair, Kamel Labidi, hampered by the combined acts of interference by media barons linked to the old regime and the governing party En Nahda's delaying tactics aimed to allow time to set up party-owned Islamist channels (Labidi, 2017, pp. 126–127). Cooperation among various civil society organisations paid off, and after almost a decade of campaigning, the Press Council was created in September 2020. The council's main purpose is to

maintain self-regulation for different media outlets to protect freedom of the press and Tunisian citizens' right to access information (Miladi, 2021, p. 272).

Radio Tunisia, in 2021, reported that there are more than 70 Tunisian broadcasters, including public, private, associational, regional, and local broadcasters. Table 1 details the expansion of local broadcasting in Tunisian regions since the fall of Ben Ali.

Additionally, there were numerous electronic journals in Zarzis, Djerba, Medenine, and Tataouine. The Media Development Centre in Tunisia maintained that the north-western region in Tunisia, which entails four governorates—Kef, Siliana, Jendouba, and Beja—did not experience any associational or commercial broadcasts in comparison with the other regions in the country. What we can find in this region with its four states are some web-based broadcasts that were launched and have a significant online following. Although later on, the Tunisian ministry of youth and sport sponsored a project to support a broadcast in these governorates, these broadcasts usually transmit musical content (Moalla, 2019, pp. 18–19).

## 6. Subtle Dynamics of Local Media Power: Harbingers of Change

In the aftermath of the revolution, international development agencies, funders, as well as media reform experts quickly responded to the call for support of the democratic transition in Tunisia. They aimed to change the practices of Tunisian journalists, hoping to produce quality information. Within this framework, the African Center for the Development of Journalists and Communicators was created to support civil society and the democratic transition in Tunisia. The objectives of this group were to share information, promote synergies between support partners, and foster dialogue with national actors. The experience of associative media has met with enthusiasm from international actors who supported the idea on two levels: the capacity building and developing media structures through technical, logistic, as well as managerial support (Ammar, 2018, p. 6).

That helps to explain the variety of local community media launched after the revolution, especially after the foundation of the independent body responsible for reforming information and communication in post-revolution Tunisia. This organisation's laws were incentives for establishing different and varied media platforms in a country whose capital was the compass for the flow of information. In that respect, citizens found themselves in front of various communicational local outlets that talk about their youth unemployment, their stolen fortunes, and their martyrs. Although there were several private commercial broadcasts before the revolution, such as Express FM in Grand Tunis and Sfax, they were limited in terms of geographical extension. Moreover, they were largely considered mouthpieces of the ruling regime (Zran & Sedraoui, 2019, p. 376).

Alongside a rise in the number of local platforms, there has been a qualitative shift as well. Under Ben Ali,

**Table 1.** Expansion of local community radio in Tunisia since the revolution.

| Region | Local Media Broadcaster | Date of Release |
|---|---|---|
| Djerba | Ulysse FM | June 2012 |
| Qabès | Oasis FM | December 2011 |
| Gafsa | Sout ElManagem or Radio Mines FM | 8th February 2011 |
| Tozeur, | Djerid FM | 18th April 2011 |
| Kébili | Nefzawa net | 23rd July 2013 |
| Kasserine | Houna El Gassrine<br>Radio K-FM | 12th March 2012<br>7th January 2011 |
| Sfax | DIWAN FM | 2013 |
| Nabeul; | Radio Med<br>Cap FM | 27th April 2015<br>24th March 2012 |
| Kairouan | Sabra FM<br>Dream FM (the city of Hajeb El Ayoun) | 29th January 2010<br>6th April 2014 |
| Sousse 2011 to 2017 | Nejma FM<br>Knooz FM<br>Msaken FM<br>MFM (serves Mahdia, Sousse and Monastir)<br>Jawhara FM | 10th November 2015<br>September 2014<br>2015<br>2nd August 2012<br>Created in 2005 then turned to serve the whole country in 2017 |

local journalists who worked for international news agencies enjoyed some freedom of expression while being cautious about not transgressing editorial redlines set by Ben Ali's regime. These taboos were like investigating the deteriorating internal condition under Ben Ali, the latter's family corruption, wealth maldistribution, and the spread of poverty in the country (El-Issawi, 2012, p. 5). The ceiling of public liberties, especially in the media sphere, witnessed a boost and transformation that directly affected the topics the media could publish or broadcast. In that sense, we noticed that the editorial lines of the media delved into different topics and covered issues that were previously marked in the past as red line topics that no one should approach without permission from the centre. National media outlets were not entirely uncritical, but since they had been intertwined with the political and economic interests of those in power, they often failed to offer the fresh perspectives that people desired. In that respect, we highlight what was then a new turn in local community media that moved away from perpetuating the status quo to one that provided critical and fresh perspectives. This new approach was new not only for audiences and local authorities but also for the correspondents. In addition, many local broadcasters and their editorial teams adopted the new approach of pluralistic editorial lines that were free from any political, syndicalist, or social power pressures (El Bour, 2016, p. 3).

In other words, one characteristic of the post-revolution era has been an increase in the number of local community media providers and their role as the main source of information of regional matters for the national media still centred in Tunis. El Bour's field study in which she interviewed 16 local correspondents is indicative of this empowerment of local media in post-revolutionary Tunisia:

> The working conditions today illustrate the new working environment. One notable change concerns the relationship with the regional power represented by the governor "when we cover protests and sit-ins, we give the citizens a voice and we go to the governor for the other story. When he refuses to comment… we report it." (El Bour, 2016, p. 8)

Local media proved its primacy in covering the different strikes and demonstrations that flooded the country after the 2011 Revolution in different cities and regions away from the capital Tunis. Furthermore, local platforms showed a high level of professionalism when covering the events of the Libyan wars that exploded on the Tunisian borders, providing centre-media with the required information on a daily basis that was on-time and live. This was especially the case for the Tataouine broadcast, which held the responsibility of reporting Libyan disputes that took place near the Tunisian borders (Zran & Sedraoui, 2019, p. 385).

## 7. Local Media: Opening Spaces for Minority Voices and Issues

According to a survey run by Sigma Company in 2017 to measure the popularity of media platforms and broadcasts in Tunisia, local community media platforms were rated as very popular. In the southwest and southeastern regions of Sahel and Sfax, local community media broadcasts occupied higher positions above the centre-sponsored media. This was true everywhere except for the Northern area where the first private national radio station Mosaique FM is most popular. By examining audience statistics from the different broadcasters, it is evident that five out of eight regions demonstrate the supremacy of local media. In the three regions of Sfax, Gafsa, and Tataouine regional radio stations outperformed national and international broadcasters in audience share, with 170,000, 73,000 and 108,000, respectively. In most of these regions, private local or associational broadcasts ranked second most popular. Furthermore, among the six broadcasts that the survey covers, we notice a presence of some local regional broadcasts such as Diwan in Sfax, Nefzawa in southwest, as well as Oasis FM in Qabès (Open Sigma, 2017).

Before the revolution, national television transmitted programmes that centred on the capital and the national elites in Tunis, to the exclusion of regional actors. In so doing, they further marginalised the regions from national debate unless individuals travelled to the capital. Local media was partly responsible for changing a landscape that had largely been unresponsive to the needs of local populations. Minorities had no voice either. Since the revolution, there is evidence that this has changed. One example of the newfound space for minorities is the establishment of local media that represent the Amazigh people of Tunisia.

The creation of the Amazigh *Nefzawa Journal* and Radio Nefzawa has been an advance for minority rights in Tunisia. Prior to the revolution, Amazigh associations were banned, and any efforts to create an independent Amazigh voice were severely punished. Since the revolution, both platforms have been active in promoting the views and culture of the Amazigh people. Both the journal and the radio station ran stories on both the defence of Amazigh language, which is not recognised as an official language of Tunisia, and Amazigh culture more broadly. Radio Nefzawa declares its mission is to be a voice for *baladeyaty* (Arabic for "my land") and to act as a channel between the region and the state. One of the most interesting and revealing findings from the analysis of the content of Radio Nefsawa was the extent that local issues of underdevelopment were evident. In the period from 2016, we found regular stories and programs focused on local underdevelopment, poverty, unemployment, and the environment. This is evidence of what Badran et al. (2021, p. 2) argue is where the local community media have also "contributed to re-centring issues of (regional) inequality."

Since the revolution, Radio Mines FM has run extensive coverage of the revolt in the Gafsa mining basin. Strikes in the mining region of southwestern Tunisia, which consists of four cities—Mdhilla, Redeyef, Moularès, and Métlaoui—intensified in 2008, leading to a crackdown by the government. All of these cities are administered under the Gafsa governorate that lies 350 kilometres southwest of Tunis. Starting in 2008, strikes in Gafsa occurred in January each year. However, despite the significance of these strikes, prior to the revolution, little attention was paid to them by the government-controlled Tunisian media. However, the creation of local media in Gafsa has allowed the issues of the mining communities to be voiced both locally and nationally in ways that were not possible before the revolution.

After the revolution, activists such as Nour Eddin Hani, who is a member of the local civil society in Gafsa, were able to use the newly emergent local media in ways that were not previously possible. Hani (Afdal, 2016) and his comrades were optimistic after the revolution that their demands would be heard, and that the government would respond. One of the main features of local media after January 2011 is its tendency to create new interactional relationships with local, civil, syndicalist, and political actors. Such relationships have been vertical for a long time prior to January 2011. In more recent years, local community media has been responsible for connecting politics in the regions with politicians in Tunis. A response did eventually come. The local representative of the Islamic movement and leading party in the Parliament En Nahda, Reda Samauiy, responded to the heated situation in the area in 2016 and met with some of the protesters. Also, the local representative of the Popular Front, Habib Tabasi, was able to utilise local media to connect the several waves of protests in this area due to its problems of poverty and unemployment (Afdal, 2016).

Our analysis of the four local media supports the claim that events arising from local communities reached unprecedented levels, and that this newly flourishing landscape has changed people's lives in a number of ways (Mezghanni, 2015, pp. 205–207; Zran & Sedraoui, 2019, p. 381). Radio Gafsa and Radio Nefzawa transmit stories by women for women. Indeed both stations have a notable number of female reporters and broadcasters presenting news and other programs. Our research also demonstrates that they are all communicating national and international news to their local communities from their own perspective. Local actors are now translating and interpreting national and international events through local perspectives and positions. In turn, this allows local community media to articulate what local communities feel, aspire, and believe in a limited geographical space.

## 8. Conclusion: Local Community Media and the Future of Tunisian Democracy

In this article, we have analysed the local media kaleidoscope in Tunisia. Tunisia witnessed a democratic transition where local community media platforms have come to play a role in fostering the democratic transition, shedding light on local communities' situations and demands as they represent the core element of any real democracy. Democracy is at a crossroads everywhere, including in Tunisia. For many scholars of democracy, it is no coincidence that media is also facing a watershed moment. Corporatisation, financial crisis, the phenomenal changes attributable to digitalisation, and increasing authoritarianism are all factors that impact democracy and the state of media.

Tunisia has not been immune to these forces and, at the same time, the 2011 revolution unleashed pent-up frustrations and mobilised strong democratic trends that have pushed back to ensure that the authoritarianism, government repression, and censorship do not whittle away the hard-won freedoms of 2011. The national media in Tunisia has not entirely broken free of its past close connections to the political and business elite who have bought into the democratic transition only as far as "the more things change, the more they stay the same." The extent that the national media, then, contributes to the democratic transition is uncertain given that, as Farmanfarmaian (2014) has said, the "power of media barons is immense." However, as this article has argued, local community media in Tunisia demonstrates the potential of local community media to empower local communities and promote democratisation.

Local media in Tunisia is not without its own challenges. Poorly funded, often reliant on volunteer labour and faced with pressure from the age of the internet, local media exist on the precipice. Yet, as the data from the Open Sigma survey illustrates, and our analysis of local media content demonstrates, local media in regional parts of Tunisia are popular and provide a platform for articulating the daily struggles for recognition and relevance of people in the peripheries of the country. This aspect of local media may serve to further the democratic transformation in a country in transition as much as, or more than, parliaments and national elections in an era where political and economic elites have captured the institutions of the demos (Fraser, 2020).

The future of Tunisian democracy and Tunisia's fledging local community media is uncertain. What is more certain is that the fate of both is intertwined. As globalisation, especially the Anglo-American model that emerged from the Cold War, is seen as the only alternative, and national institutions are tainted with, or captured by, authoritarianism—the local level might be the site where democracy is to be saved. As this article has shown, in Tunisia, at least, one vehicle to promote and defend democracy under assault is local community media.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Disclaimer

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is supporting the thematic issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by AGYA alumna Hanan Badr (Gulf University of Science and Technology, Kuwait) and AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The authors remain solely responsible for the content and recommendations provided in this publication, which do not reflect the positions of AGYA or any of its funding partners.

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Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)
2021, Volume 9, Issue 4, Pages 297–308
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4352

Article

# The Role of Media and Communication in Reducing Uncertainty During the Syria War

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Submitted: 8 April 2021 | Accepted: 21 June 2021 | Published: 17 December 2021

**Abstract**
Ten years after the uprising in Syria, millions of its citizens remain displaced and uncertain about their fate. Throughout that period, media coverage about the ensuing civil war played a major role in informing Syrians and contributed to altering their levels of fear and anxiety about their country's future and their survival prospects. This study examined the role of legacy media, online media, and interpersonal communication in increasing or reducing uncertainty among displaced and non-displaced Syrians. Through a revised construct of uncertainty reduction theory within the context of a civil war, we assessed the relationship between exposure to these media sources and feeling anxious, uncertain, angry, and in danger, and whether these feelings influenced information consumption trends. We also probed the connection between their anxiety levels and sharing information, both interpersonally and on social media. The study surveyed 2,192 Syrian adults (95% CI, ±2.5) living in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, both inside and outside refugee camps, using a random multi-stage cluster sampling technique. The findings revealed a strong relationship between positive emotions and time spent on legacy and online media. The more secure, proud, and hopeful people felt, the more likely they were to spend time on media sources. This relationship, however, was moderated by the perceived importance of these sources. Feelings of pride, security, and hopefulness generated by television and online media correlated with the time people spent on these media sources, and the perceived importance of such media further strengthened this relationship. A different picture appeared in the relationship between positive emotions and interpersonal communication, where the perceived importance of talking to people not only significantly moderated the relationship but also canceled out the main effect of positive emotions on the time people spend communicating with others. The findings also indicated that feelings of uncertainty about these sources may stand in the way of sharing information about the war on social media.

**Keywords**
Arab media; crisis communication; media and war; media exposure; media literacy; uncertainty reduction

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by Hanan Badr (Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait) and Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany).

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## 1. Introduction

The uprisings that took the Arab region by storm in 2011 quickly reached Syria and unraveled what was the beginning of years of strife between the government and its opposers. Faced with life-changing instances, the Syrian people strove to make sense of the traumatizing context, seeking to reduce the uncertainty that is bound to accompany distressful times. Considered as the fuel that drives information seeking, uncertainty arguably motivated people to obtain such information through interpersonal and mediated sources (Baxter & Wilmot, 1984). Responses to political and social changes, however, are bound to vary depending on individuals' coping mechanisms and

experiences (Boyle et al., 2004). Although not all Syrians have undergone life-threatening circumstances, when a nationwide conflict occurs, most civilians experience the war through the media (Boyle et al., 2004). Nevertheless, this indirect mediated experience of the crisis could generate honest emotions (Smith et al., 2001).

However, research is yet to explore how individuals' emotions during wartime shape their media behavior. To fill this gap in the literature, this study examines negative and positive emotions concerning information pursuit during wartime through the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT). It also tests whether uncertainty about media and interpersonal communication sources is related to individuals' sharing of information on social media. Given the profusion of news and information dissemination from both citizens and the government (Powers & O'Loughlin, 2015), making Syria history's "most digitally documented war" (Lynch et al., 2014), the country serves as an ideal case to examine the relationship between uncertainty reduction and media exposure during wartime.

Assessing the Syrian people's coping mechanisms through the media—whether it is for survival, defiance, or uncertainty reduction during the height of the war—further allows us to build on URT and its applicability beyond its traditional contexts. Initially established to research interpersonal communication, URT has been primarily used in relationship, workplace, and health communication studies. However, we contend that the logic of the theory can also be applied to media research, as it was successfully adopted in research related to political candidacy (Pfau et al., 1997) and media coverage of distressing events, such as space shuttle crashes, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and hurricanes (Boyle et al., 2004; Kubey & Peluso, 1990; Procopio & Procopio, 2007). The significance of this study rests upon its contribution to the extant literature in two ways: it introduces war as a new context area in URT, and it provides insight into how citizens in war-torn countries use media as a form of survival that reduces their negative emotions.

The study encompassed a survey of 2,192 Syrians living in Syria and displaced in the three neighboring countries: Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. The data were collected in 2014, a year that marked the peak of uncertainty in Syria. During that year, Syria witnessed the highest death toll (76,268 killed), a surge in the numbers of displaced people ("Syria conflict," 2015), and the rise of Islamist groups—such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS; Melki & Jabado, 2016).

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### *2.1. Uncertainty Reduction Theory*

Social psychologists have employed social identity theory to understand intergroup relations, at the core of which are two individual-level motivations (Reid & Hogg, 2005): Tajfel and Turner's (1979) self-enhancement motive that people use "to maintain or enhance their self-esteem" (p. 40) and Hogg's (2000) uncertainty reduction, "an epistemic motive that reflects a need for meaning, knowledge, and understanding of self and the social world" (Reid & Hogg, 2005, p. 804). Scholars have agreed that uncertainty is a basic human condition, and subsequently, the management of uncertainty, a basic human activity (Goldsmith, 2001). People's need to feel certain about their environment is important since it gives them the confidence to know how to act and what to expect from their surroundings (Hogg, 2000). As such, uncertainty is a negative feeling (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Neuberger & Silk, 2016) because it is associated with reduced control (Hogg, 2000). The theoretical framework that has informed this line of research is Berger and Calabrese's (1975) URT. Although URT was initially "proposed to explain how people manage uncertainty in initial interactions" (Stefanone et al., 2013, p. 62), media scholars adapted it to mediated situations, making it "an important motivational construct for communication theories" (Hogg, 2000, p. 228). Their conviction is based on one of the seven axioms that Berger and Calabrese (1975, p. 103) devised as constructs of URT, and which states, "high levels of uncertainty cause increases in information-seeking behavior. As uncertainty levels decline, information-seeking behavior decreases.''

The literature on uncertainty reduction, however, has been fraught with competing stances and alternatives, which mainly stem from communication scholars' interest in explaining the information-seeking process (Afifi & Weiner, 2004). Most research in this area has lamented the narrow scope of the theory (Bradac, 2001), contending that uncertainty reduction is not the only solution people seek (Brashers, 2001) and that experiencing uncertainty is not necessarily an uncomfortable situation they need to diminish (Brashers et al., 2000). While it is probable that people might want to reduce anxiety for proper decision-making, others might seek to increase uncertainty (Brashers et al., 2000; Ford et al., 1996) or simply maintain it as a form of optimism or hope (Brashers, 2001). In essence, uncertainty management theory argues that people experiencing uncertainty sometimes avoid information instead of seeking it if they perceive the information to be overwhelming or difficult to accept (Brashers, 2001), as in the case of health communication (Lerman et al., 1999). Other contentious stances that have challenged URT have centered on the predicted outcome value theory, which suggests the goal of individuals in initial interactions is to maximize relational outcomes and not necessarily to reduce uncertainty (Sunnafrank, 1986), as well as the URT's presumed role of motivation in uncertainty reduction (Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990).

### *2.2. Uncertainty Reduction Theory: Role of Motivation and Affect*

In the original conceptualization of the theory, Berger and Calabrese (1975) contended that the level of

uncertainty, by itself, serves as a determinant of various communication behaviors. Although people might naturally try to explore what they do not know, this rationale, Kellermann and Reynolds (1990, p. 67) argue, "assumes that persons *want* to acquire the information." Integrating the concept of motivation to reduce uncertainty within the axioms of URT, Kellermann and Reynolds (1990) found that concern for uncertainty reduction—and not level of uncertainty—to be a critical determinant of information-seeking behavior. In other words, lack of knowledge is not enough for someone to seek information, but how much one *wants* to know is what carries the person to obtain knowledge. The "desire to obtain information," Lachlan et al. (2009, p. 102) contend, significantly increases to "understand the situation and take appropriate actions." Applying this rationale to a wartime situation supports the idea that in times of danger, people would want to know what is going on around them and would thus seek information.

Factoring in the role of affect could provide us with more information about the willingness to reduce uncertainty during crises and conflict situations. Although Berger and Calabrese's (1975) model for URT views uncertainty in terms of cognition, others have explained the role of negative emotions in uncertainty reduction. Nabi (2003) found that when emotions are induced, people become guided by relevant actions in the process of acquiring information. For instance, they might abstain from seeking knowledge if such actions "reveal bad news, heighten vulnerability, threaten identities, incite feelings of hurt, and/or damage relationships" (Knobloch, 2015, p. 11). Within the context of political communication, in general, and political judgments, in particular, research on emotions has revealed the nuanced effects different emotions have on people (Huddy et al., 2005). According to Marcus et al.'s (2000) theory of affective intelligence, anxiety is positively related to political interest and could encourage people to seek out political information. Anxiety and threat, two negative emotions, were also found to be heightened when people are exposed to terror, with anxiety leading to risk aversion and threat leading to retaliation (Huddy et al., 2005). Perceiving a situation as susceptible is yet another instance that causes anxiety in people while perceiving a situation as severe leads to fear (So et al., 2016). Taken together, the complexity of the above findings further highlights the significance of measuring the role of emotions in media consumption during crises.

Other studies found people who reported experiencing strong emotional reactions to bad news, such as the case of the 1986 explosion of the Challenger space shuttle, were more likely than others to spend more time following TV news and talking to others (Kubey & Peluso, 1990) or share information about the event (Riffe & Stovall, 1989). Affect was also found to drive interest in gathering information during turmoil, particularly during the 9/11 attacks where people who experienced negative emotions exerted more effort to learn about the attacks by seeking the media for information (Boyle et al., 2004). Studying the same context, Lachlan et al. (2009) contended that people who were suffering from negative emotions may have sought the media to reduce stress, considering those individuals who spent more time on media believed them to be useful, and might thus believe they would make them feel better.

Based on the reviewed studies, it seems plausible that individuals who want to reduce uncertainty tend to seek information from outside sources (media and people). If these sources cause negative feelings, they will avoid them, and vice versa. The first set of hypotheses tests this assumption about media sources and interpersonal relationships:

H1a: The more negative emotions individuals attribute to the media they follow, the less they will seek them for information.

H1b: The more negative emotions individuals attributed to talking to others, the less they will seek them for information.

While people in a conflict situation are expected to experience negative emotions, such as hopelessness, anxiety, and uncertainty, war might also stimulate positive emotions. The media and/or interpersonal relationships may bring people together to create a sense of community, inspiring pride and security in the efforts to overcome the conflict (Boyle et al., 2004). The second set of hypotheses tests the correlation between positive emotions and media uses and interpersonal relationships:

H2a: The more positive emotions individuals attribute to the media they follow, the more they will seek them for information.

H2b: The more positive emotions individuals attribute to talking to others, the more they will seek them for information.

For a more direct test of uncertainty and its relation to information-seeking, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1a: Is higher uncertainty about media related to less media exposure?

RQ1b: Is higher uncertainty in talking to people related to less time talking to them?

### *2.3. Involvement, Information-Seeking, and Media Usefulness*

The importance of information access is fortified during times of war, especially for those directly involved. During crises, people resort to easy-to-reach communication channels to gather information. However, if these

channels were deemed insufficient, people would turn to other sources and/or resort to official sources (Stiegler et al., 2011). In such situations, people are willing to use any available media channel for information retrieval. This allows them to be aware of urgent events, trace family, and reduce uncertainties (Stiegler et al., 2011).

Several models have established the reasons behind individuals' information-seeking behaviors. Developed by Griffin et al. (1999) and supported by Kahlor (2007), the risk information seeking and processing model explains that people tend to acquire and process information based on the following characteristics: information gathering capacity, potential hazards, beliefs, emotional response, and perceived usefulness of the information. Moreover, research on cognitive involvement has revealed involvement and uncertainty to motivate information acquisition (Heath & Gay, 1997). Studies show that highly involved people will actively seek out information and apply strategic tactics to obtain information that would help them develop a stronger base about a particular topic (Aldoory & Austin, 2011). Involvement, in this sense, could equate to Kellermann and Reynolds' (1990) concern for uncertainty reduction. Stated differently, those who are concerned about reducing their uncertainty, that is those who *want* to know, are those who are involved enough to seek information. Considering that people in unstable situations tend to be more attentive to information that could potentially help them cope with their situation (Driskill & Goldstein, 1986), we can expect Syrians to be highly involved in their wellbeing. Thus, they want to know about the situation they are in, and in turn would be more attentive to information about the war.

People highly involved in an issue and who perceive their self-interest to be at risk not only seek information (Grunig, 1997; Heath & Gay, 1997) but also gravitate toward more authoritative media and interpersonal sources (Heath & Gay, 1997; Heath et al., 1995). Here, it is important to understand the role of credibility and usefulness of the source. Goldsmith (2001) argued that Berger and Calabrese's (1975) original model of URT did not consider "the quality of information-seeking behavior and the quality of the information obtained" (p. 518). This suggests that how respondents perceive the media's importance in fulfilling their information-seeking behavior would influence whether they would choose these media to reduce their uncertainty. Neuberger and Silk (2016) also reveal that uncertainty alone does not motivate people to seek information, but rather the perception that the information would be of value is the prime motivator to obtain information. This idea gains traction when we consider that time spent on media is positively related to people's perception of these media's usefulness, indicating people believe these sources could make them feel better (Lachlan et al., 2009). Syrian citizens, however, relied on additional factors to gauge media importance, depending on their perception of the conflict (Kozman & Melki, 2018; Melki & Kozman, 2021). Based on this rationale, we posit that the process of seeking media for information to reduce uncertainty is moderated by individuals' perceived ability of the media to help. Hence, the following hypotheses emerge:

H3a: The relationship between positive emotions and media exposure is moderated by the perceived importance of the media.

H3b: The relationship between positive emotions and talking to people is moderated by the perceived importance of talking to people.

### *2.4. Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Social Media Posting*

People's interest in social media can be understood through the context of social capital (Stefanone et al., 2013), or the idea that "involvement and participation in groups can have positive consequences for the individual and the community" (Portes, 1998, p. 2). Social support, defined as "a process of using communication and other sorts of behavior to help another person manage problematic integration" is one form of social capital that facilitates coping through uncertainty reduction (Ford et al., 1996, p. 191; see also Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). Although the concepts of social capital and social support are not new, they have gained revived attention in the age of social media. In this context, URT has been successful in explaining information-seeking and uncertainty reduction through social media encounters (Antheunis et al., 2010). Due to social media's ability to represent "a face-saving avenue for uncertain or apprehensive communicators," online information seeking becomes "an effective method for gaining confidence about the world and future interactions" (Stefanone et al., 2013, p. 62).

Focusing on the conditions that exist before uncertainty reduction, scholars posited that people use passive, active, and interactive strategies to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Bradac, 1982). Of particular importance to this study are the active and interactive strategies. In the active strategy, people seek information about a situation through indirect means, such as the media, to reduce uncertainty. In the interactive strategy, individuals engage in direct communication with others, including through social media and mobile telephony. In fact, information-seeking through conversation with another person is an option for people facing uncertainty in a social situation (Berger & Kellermann, 1994; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). Social media and mobile phones have facilitated such interactions with individuals and extended them to effective interactions with groups. When people use social media during crises as a source of information, they cultivate relationships and provide reciprocal communication, which are two characteristics of URT (Merrifield, 2011).

With regards to the media landscape, TV and online news websites are prominent information channels in

Syria, where most TV stations are owned by the government and adopt a pro-government agenda (Trombetta & Pinto, 2018). The pro-government station Sama TV is ranked as the most viewed channel (Fiedler et al., 2016). Among the pan-Arab stations watched by the Syrians, Al Jazeera and Al Arabia are anti-government, whereas Al Mayadeen is pro-government concerning Syria (Trombetta & Pinto, 2018). During the Syrian conflict, the government and revolting citizens engaged in what Shehabat (2012, p. 1) called the "first social media cyber-war." In November 2012, the Syrian Electronic Army launched multiple campaigns against local and regional television stations and media outlets that supported the rebels (Shehabat, 2012). This disrupted several TV channels and online outlets and led many to engage in online information dissemination (Setrakian & Zerden, 2014). Given the relationship between interactive uncertainty reduction strategies and social networks that can alleviate uncertainty during wartime through social support and a sense of community, we would expect people to post more on social media when they are uncertain. Thus, we raise the following research question:

RQ2: Is uncertainty toward media and people related to a higher tendency to post on social media?

## 3. Method

This study is based on a cross-sectional survey of 2,192 Syrian individuals living in Syria, as well as Lebanon (28%), Jordan (24%), and Turkey (8%), the three countries that hosted the largest number of displaced Syrians during the conflict (Connor, 2018). The sample size was based on an estimated population of 22,5 million (95% CI, ±2.5) and divided proportionally across Syria (40%), Lebanon (28%), Jordan (24%), and Turkey (8%) based on the estimated proportion of refugees in these countries and according to UNHCR numbers in January–February 2014 when the fieldwork was conducted. Overall, 80% of participants were living outside of refugee camps and 20% were living inside of refugee camps, while 9% were internally displaced. Of those outside Syria, 30% lived in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. After discarding incomplete questionnaires, a total of 1,820 cases were analyzed.

### *3.1. Sampling Procedure*

Because Syrians inside refugee camps tend to be organized in a relatively discernable distribution, a weighted multistage cluster sampling technique was used for recruitment. Multistage cluster sampling is a common method used in refugee camps, especially when a simple random sample is not possible, and a sampling frame is not available. Refugee camps are organized into clusters, with each of these clusters containing several "households." We first selected a random sample of clusters from each camp. Then we selected a random sample of households from each cluster. Within each household, one person was interviewed following a selection protocol that ensures diversity: the oldest male under 65, then (in the next household visited) the youngest female above 18, then the youngest male above 18, then the oldest female under 65, and so forth.

As for displaced Syrians living outside camps, these so-called socially invisible communities tend not to be registered and widely dispersed in homes of relatives and friends and hotels and privately rented apartments across each country (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011). The best method of recruitment for such a population where no adequate sampling frame or contact lists exist is a snowball sampling technique with multiple entry points. To reduce selection bias, researchers used multiple and diverse entry points, using a small number of links from each entry point. Researchers used their significant list of Syrian contacts as entry points, including Syrian researchers, students, and colleagues, as well as various Syrian NGOs. Additionally, aid organizations (International Rescue Committee, UNHCR) provided information about potential participants who approach them for registration. Within each family or household, the same selection protocol used inside refugee camps was implemented to ensure diversity.

Due to varying degrees of literacy among the participants, researchers used a researcher-administered questionnaire approach to ensure higher reliability and more complete information. Additionally, the study used hard-copy questionnaires instead of online questionnaires to limit sampling bias against participants who are not computer literate. The survey questionnaire was in Arabic, comprised 35 close-ended questions, required approximately 15 minutes to complete, and generated 185 variables, of which 67 are related to this study.

### *3.2. Sample Demographics*

The sample consisted of adults between 18 and 65 years old, 54% of whom were males. Four demographic measurements were controlled for gender, age, education, and income. Most respondents were between 25 and 34 years old (35%), followed by those between 18 and 24 (27%). As for education, approximately three-quarters of the sample indicated they had at least completed high school, while less than a quarter (22%) had a bachelor's degree, and only 3% had a graduate degree. Among the respondents, half reported making between $75 and $350 per month, while 18% reported a monthly income of less than $70.

### *3.3. Measurements*

Four variables measured media exposure: newspaper, TV, radio, and online media (news websites, blogs, and social media). Each variable measured time spent on that media for news on a typical day. Respondents indicated

how much time they spent talking to others on a typical day. Responses were measured on a 6-point scale (0–1hr, 2hr, 3hr, 4hr, 5hr, 6hr or more). In addition, respondents were asked to write down the TV station they follow the most.

Four variables measured emotional reactions about negative emotions and four about positive ones as they relate to media sources. Answers were measured using a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *less*; 4 = *more*). For negative affect, participants were asked whether each of the four media—and whether talking to people—makes them feel more or less anxious, uncertain, angry, or in danger. An index was then created by averaging the four negative emotions for each type of information source. Reliability of each index was measured using Cronbach's alpha with the following results: TV = .718; radio = .806; newspapers = .783; online media = .774; talking to people = .780. For positive affect, respondents were asked about feeling secure, proud, aware, and hopeful. The variables related to emotions were retrieved from previous studies as follows: (a) Feelings of anger, pride, and hopefulness were used in Boyle et al.'s (2004) study on emotional reactions and consumption behavior after the 9/11 attacks; (b) feelings of danger and security were reported by the Syrians themselves in Melki and Kozman (2020); and (c) anxiousness and awareness were included in Berger and Calabrese's (1975) study on the development of interpersonal communication. To these, "feeling uncertain" was added as a direct measure of uncertainty in URT. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for positive emotions of each index are: TV = .703; radio = . 823; newspapers = .840; online media = .745; talking to people = .730.

To measure the perceived importance of information sources, respondents indicated the level of importance they consider the media and interpersonal relationships to have for daily news about Syria. Response choices were based on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not at all important* to *very important*.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Emotions and Media Uses

H1a, which posited a negative correlation between negative emotions connected to the media people follow and time spent following news from these media, was not supported for any of the four media types ($r_{TV}$ = .01, $p$ < .30; $r_{radio}$ = −.02, $p$ < .35; $r_{newspapers}$ = .08, $p$ < .09; $r_{online}$ = −.01, $p$ < .33). Similarly, H1b, which predicted a negative correlation between negative emotions caused by talking to people and time spent talking to people, was not supported ($r$ = −.02, $p$ < .30).

H2a, which hypothesized that positive emotions connected to the media people follow are positively correlated to the time they spend following news from these media, was supported for all four media. Pearson's one-tailed correlation tests revealed a significant relationship between people's positive emotions toward television and the time they spend receiving news on television, $r$ = .16, $p$ < .001. The relationship was also significant for radio ($r$ = .24, $p$ < .001), newspapers ($r$ = .10, $p$ < .05), and online media ($r$ = .22, $p$ < .001). H2b, which posited that the positive emotions caused by talking to others are positively related to the time individuals spend talking to others, was also supported ($r$ = .09, $p$ < .001). We also tested the relationship between individual emotions and time spent on information sources. All individual positive emotions were significantly related to all four media sources and people. For negative emotions, none of the individual emotions were significant for TV or for talking to people, but they were all significant for newspapers. For radio, only feeling in danger was related to time spent on the medium, while feeling angry was related to time spent on the internet.

### 4.2. Uncertainty and Media Uses

RQ1a, which examined the relationship between uncertainty connected to media exposure and time spent on these media, was not supported for any media source ($r_{TV}$ = −.01, $p$ < .69; $r_{radio}$ = −.05, $p$ < .27; $r_{newspapers}$ = .06, $p$ < .28; $r_{online}$ = −.05, $p$ < .15). Similarly, RQ1b was not supported for interpersonal communication ($r$ = −.02, $p$ < .34).

### 4.3. Positive Emotions and Perceived Media Importance

H3a, which hypothesized that the relationship between positive emotions and media uses is moderated by the perceived importance of the media used, was supported for TV and online news. To test this hypothesis for each medium, we conducted an analysis of covariance where time spent on media was the dependent variable, the index of positive emotions toward the media was the independent variable, and the perceived importance of media individuals considered for daily news about Syria was the covariate. To create the fixed factors needed to perform the analysis of variance, the index of positive emotions was recoded into an ordinal variable with three levels: low, medium, and high positivity. In the case of TV, the covariate was significantly related to time spent on TV, $F(1, 1{,}642) = 90.9$, $p$ < .001. As for online media, the covariate was the index of three variables: perceived importance of news websites, blogs, and social media for daily news about Syria (Cronbach's alpha = .714). The covariate was also significantly related to time spent on online media, $F(1, 935) = 65.01$, $p$ < .001. The moderators for radio and newspaper exposure could not be tested because both dependent variables were not normally distributed. Data transformation also did not normalize the data. Due to the presence of many outliers, we deemed it inappropriate to delete all those cases. Regardless, newspapers and radio had few followers in Syria to start with.

H3b, which predicted that the perceived importance individuals have about talking to people about

Syria moderates the relationship between positive emotions and media, was supported. The covariate was significantly related to time spent talking to people, $F(1, 1{,}619) = 45.9$, $p < .001$. Entering the covariate in the model, however, rendered the previously significant effect, $F(2, 1{,}643) = 7.15$, $p < .002$, of the main independent variable of positive emotions non-significant.

### 4.4. Uncertainty and Posting on Social Media

To test RQ2 concerning the correlation between uncertainty and frequency of posting on social media, we created indexes for uncertainty and social media posting. The uncertainty index was created by averaging six questions about uncertainty toward TV, radio, newspapers, online media, mobile phones, and talking to people (Cronbach's alpha = .645), while the social media posting index was the average of three questions asking respondents how often they post news and information about Syria on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Cronbach's alpha = .639). Pearson's correlation analysis indicated a very weak negative correlation, where the less uncertain (the more certain) individuals are, the higher their tendency to post on social media, $r(1{,}435) = -.046$, $p < .05$. Testing the relationship between posting and uncertainty toward each of the six sources revealed the significance is due to the presence of TV. In other words, the more certain (the less uncertain) respondents were from watching TV news, the more they posted on social media ($r_{TV} = -.06$, $p < .05$). All other source types were not significant ($r_{radio} = .03$, $p < .47$; $r_{newspapers} = -.02$, $p < .71$; $r_{online} = -.01$, $p < .97$; $r_{mobile} = .02$, $p < .62$; $r_{interpersonal} = -.01$, $p < .68$).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined URT during wartime through a cross-sectional survey of displaced and non-displaced Syrians living in Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. The study assessed people's emotions and their media uses as methods for reducing uncertainty to cope with the stressful situation under which they found themselves during the Syrian civil war. The findings show a positive relationship between positive emotions and time spent on media. The data also demonstrate that the perceived importance of the media moderates the relationship between positive emotions towards these media and time spent on them, particularly TV and online media. The same applies to interpersonal communication. In other words, time spent on TV, online media, and interpersonal communication is influenced by people's perception of how important these sources are in providing news about the Syrian conflict. Finally, a significant relationship between (un)certainty towards TV and posting on social media indicated that the more some people are certain about TV, the more likely they are to engage in social media posting. However, our findings show no correlation between negative emotions connected to media uses and interpersonal communication, on one hand, and time spent on these media and on talking to people, on the other. In addition, the data show no relation between uncertainty connected to media uses (or talking to people) and time spent consuming information from these media (or interpersonal communication sources).

The positive, albeit weak, relationship we found between positive emotions attributed to the media and information-seeking, could mean the more secure, proud, and hopeful people feel, the more likely they are to spend time on television, radio, newspaper, and online media. The same pattern appears in interpersonal communication, only when people perceive it to be important. These findings agree with Brashers' (2001) notion that people seek information to sustain feelings of optimism or hope. We conclude that people use different forms of communication to reassure themselves during a crisis, perhaps seeking more positive information and hope. During a war that is as long as the Syrian experience, it seems people look for information that reaffirms their positive feelings and brings them hope. This supports Tajfel and Turner's (1979) concept of self-enhancement as a motive, whereby people want to sustain if not intensify their self-esteem.

This study also addressed Goldsmith's (2001) criticism of the original model of URT that failed to account for the quality of obtained information, by testing the perceived importance of information sources. Findings reveal the relationship between positive emotions and media uses was moderated by the perceived importance of TV and online media, which include news websites, blogs, and social media. In other words, feelings of pride, security, and hopefulness that TV and online media generate in people determine the time they spend on these sources, where the perceived importance of these media is an important but not essential determinant to the equation. The findings are consistent with those of Neuberger and Silk (2016), who suggest how respondents perceive media's usefulness influences whether or not they choose these media to consume information. This goes hand in hand with the risk information seeking and processing model, which suggests people tend to acquire information and process it based on characteristics that include perceived usefulness of information (Griffin et al., 1999; Kahlor, 2007). During the Syrian uprising, the credibility, usefulness, and importance of the medium were highly important, specifically because most traditional news media were in the hands of the government. The same could not be said about the relationship between positive emotions and time spent talking to others, where the moderating role of perceived importance of talking to people about Syria canceled out any initial effect positive emotions generated. Thus, feelings of pride, security, and hopefulness generated by talking to others are not related to time spent talking to them. Rather, the perceived importance of human interactions determines how much time people spend talking to one another about Syria.

In contrast to the significant link between positive emotions and time spent on certain media, this study found no evident relationship between these media uses and negative emotions. These findings run contrary to previous research that determined individuals put more effort into getting information when they experience negative emotions (Boyle et al., 2004; Lachlan et al., 2009), among which is uncertainty (Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990). Although it is plausible that people would seek to reduce negative feelings to be able to reason and reach proper decisions (Brashers et al., 2000; Ford et al., 1996), the evidence in these studies contradicts ours possibly because protracted war is marked by different circumstances than relatively short, violent incidents such as the 9/11 attacks. As the current study was conducted several years into the conflict, it is apparent Syrians were exhausted from the negativity and war trauma, and thus, any negative feelings regarding media or interpersonal sources did not translate into seeking or avoiding them for information. We would have expected these negative feelings to prompt media and information avoidance in a manner similar to the effect of compassion fatigue (Moeller, 2002), but the findings do not point in that direction either. Perhaps the importance of seeking information during wartime counterbalances the need to avoid painful feelings generated from media and people alike.

Finally, the question of whether uncertainty toward media and interpersonal communication is related to a higher tendency to post on social media revealed the opposite, where those who posted frequently were less uncertain than others. This finding is consistent with the relationship between positive feelings and time spent consuming media. These social media activities could also be explained through the context of social capital (Stefanone et al., 2013), where people's participation in the community can have positive outcomes and social support—the process of using communication to aid others (Ford et al., 1996). Additionally, people cultivate relationships and provide reciprocal communication when they use social media during crises (Merrifield, 2011). Given that legacy media were controlled by either the Syrian government or the rebels, some people may have taken upon themselves the responsibility of sharing information on social media and were more likely to do so when they felt certain about the information they got from legacy media. Sharing material on social media exposes new facts not covered in legacy media but also promotes certain news already disseminated in dominant legacy media (Lynch et al., 2014). In fact, our findings revealed that the significance between posting and uncertainty is mainly due to TV. The less uncertain respondents were about watching TV news, the more they posted on social media, while the relationships with all other media were not significant. This confirms the primacy of TV during a crisis (Melki & Kozman, 2020; Melki et al., 2020; Spence et al., 2007) and establishes a relationship between exposure to this dominant legacy medium and the tendency of audiences who feel certain about it to post on social media. This finding is important given that global news media outlets were highly dependent on user-generated content during the Syria war (Hänska-Ahy & Shapour, 2013). Based on our data, such content is tightly related to legacy media consumption, further signaling the role traditional television still plays in people's lives in uncertain times. It is possible that regions where different media dominate would also witness a significant link between user-generated content and certainty toward these media. Also important to note is the significant differences between the countries housing Syrians in terms of TV following. Although in the sample Al Arabia ranked first (n = 407), followed by Al Jazeera (n = 264), pro-government Syrian channel Sama TV (n = 140), pan-Arab channel Orient TV (n = 137), Lebanese channel Al Jadeed (n = 103), and pan-Arab channel Al Mayadeen (n = 103), we found these choices to differ based on the host country, $x^2(15) = 645.48$, $p < .001$. Al Arabia was still the most followed channel in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as Syria, where respondents equally followed Sama TV (n = 123 and 124, respectively). In these countries, the second most-watched channel was either a local channel (as in the case of Lebanon) or Al Jazeera (as in the case of Jordan). In Turkey, the most followed channels were Syrian Orient TV and Al Jazeera, respectively. These numbers highlight the nuances attached to a medium of preference, leading us to refrain from making broad generalizations about a specific channel.

In sum, this study challenges some established premises of URT, particularly in the context of protracted war. The discrepancy between our findings and extant research is most likely due to the differences in the time element. While the studies we have referred to focused on uncertainty reduction, emotions, and media use in the direct aftermath of catastrophic events, the current research measured these relationships years into the war. Based on Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's (1976) dependency theory, people seek information more frequently in the early stages of a particular event. It is arguable, then, that individuals would change their behavior after significant time has passed. People living in extended circumstances of negativity and surrounded by negative news, as in the case of this study, become either overwhelmed by such negativity and try to avoid exacerbating it with further negative news, or such circumstances become the norm and audiences become numb to additional doses of negativity. Regardless, for audiences living through war, the feeling of uncertainty is not a trigger for more media exposure. On the other hand, positive emotions attract more media exposure, thus audiences living in war prefer to increase positive emotions, which in return may minimize negative emotions, including the feeling of uncertainty. By joining both lines of thought, we can conclude that people indirectly reduce uncertainty when there is an opportunity to maximize positive emotions but do not seek to reduce it

through additional exposure to media, about which they are uncertain. In other words, during extended crises, people aim to maximize positivity, exposing themselves to sources they associate with positive emotions.

Although the findings demonstrated the critical role media and interpersonal communication play during war, we highlight some limitations that may be addressed through future research. Our snapshot survey data may have led to different findings if the fieldwork had taken place at different periods of the war, indicating the benefit of longitudinal data collection and comparisons over time. Regarding individual motivations, research has demonstrated that people who are highly involved in politics are active consumers of media and purposely seek information (Chaffee & McLeod, 1973; McCombs, 1972; Melki & Kozman, 2020). Thus, future research can differentiate between highly motivated consumers and individuals who are less or not engaged politically. Finally, the limitations related to researching war conditions include limited access to dangerous areas and regions experiencing active conflict, particularly regions controlled by ISIS. In addition, the lack of a sampling frame made probability sampling impossible, preventing generalizations to the Syrian population. Nevertheless, these allow the generalization to the common conditions of populations living under war conditions.

**Acknowledgments**

This work was supported by Media in Cooperation and Transition and the German Federal Foreign Office.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Disclaimer**

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is supporting the thematic issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by AGYA alumna Hanan Badr (Gulf University of Science and Technology, Kuwait) and AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The authors remain solely responsible for the content and recommendations provided in this publication, which do not reflect the positions of AGYA or any of its funding partners.

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Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)
2021, Volume 9, Issue 4, Pages 309–319
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4391

Article

# The Voice of Silence: Patterns of Digital Participation Among Palestinian Women in East Jerusalem

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Submitted: 21 April 2021 | Accepted: 5 October 2021 | Published: 17 December 2021

**Abstract**
Facebook is one of the world's largest social networks, with more than 2,7 billion active users globally. It is also one of the most dominant platforms and one of the platforms most commonly used by Arabs. However, connecting via Facebook and sharing content cannot be taken for granted. While many studies have focused on the role played by networked platforms in empowering women in the Arab world in general and on feminist movements in the Arab Spring, few have explored Palestinian women's use of Facebook. During and after the Arab Spring, social media was used as a tool for freedom of expression in the Arab world. However, Palestinians in East Jerusalem using social media witnessed a decrease in freedom of expression, especially after the Gaza war in 2014. This article focuses on the Facebook usage patterns and political participation of young adult Palestinian women living in the contested space of East Jerusalem. These women live under dynamic power struggles as they belong to a traditionally conservative society, live within a situation of intractable conflict, and are under state control as a minority group. Qualitative thematic analysis of 13 in-depth interviews reveals three patterns of usage, all related to monitoring: state monitoring, kinship monitoring, and self-monitoring. The article conceptualises these online behaviours as "participation avoidance," a term describing users' (non-)communicative practices in which the mundane choices of when, why, and how to *participate* also mirror users' choices of when, why, and how to *avoid*.

**Keywords**
Facebook; Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Jerusalem; participation; women

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by Hanan Badr (Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait) and Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany).

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## 1. Introduction

Ten years after the Arab Uprisings (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011), it seems that these events are an area upon which expressing one's political opinions or participating in political activities depends on context, circumstances, and gender. Critical perspectives point to networked platforms as sources of constant surveillance and control (Lyon, 2007; Morozov, 2012), emphasising the extent to which networked platforms are intertwined with the power structures in which they operate, thus emphasising the limited opportunities for political mobilisation while the offline circumstances of asymmetrical power relations remain unchanged (Dahlgren, 2013). More so, the increasing public discourse about surveillance and the "death" of privacy among internet users is leading to what Gillespie (2018) terms "moderation," in which access to content is limited by content moderators who censor or promote it.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has witnessed waves of escalating violence for more than 100 years (Bar-Tal, 2007). In recent years, especially since the 2014 Gaza war, discourse about the conflict has been accompanied by a heated debate regarding the role of social media as a tool for the mobilisation and participation of both Israelis and Palestinians (Al-Masri, 2015); in Israel,

this issue reached a climax when new legislation was advanced to remove offensive content from social media sites in cooperation with Facebook, including digital profiling on the lookout for indications of potential violent attacks (Hirshauga & Sheizaf, 2017). Restricting policies and practices of Israeli and social media companies, especially Facebook, have led to the continual censorship and take-down of Palestinian content, leading to reduced freedom of expression for Palestinian activists (7amleh—The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, 2019). Following heavy monitoring by Israeli authorities, Facebook removed two major pages operated by East Jerusalem Palestinians. Moreover, 250 Palestinians were arrested in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Nazareth (a Palestinian city located in the north of Israel), during the period October 2015–December 2016, because of political posts that were interpreted as incitement ("Daring to post," 2016). However, recent events in East Jerusalem concerning evictions from properties in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood were heavily broadcast through social media platforms, especially Instagram and TikTok (de Vries, 2021; Leshem, 2021). The broadcasting was part of a digital campaign and activism of local and international people (e.g., Mona al Kurd's Instagram profile). Sheikh Jarrah's hashtag demonstrates the intensive online solidarity with the families who were at risk of eviction. The social media platforms had to host the virtual struggle of the Sheikh Jarrah eviction with all sorts of content. Such extensive online political participation of Palestinians has somewhat posed a different reality than our initial study proposed. Against this backdrop, we re-established contact with three of our interviewees, asking them about the latest events, and we incorporated their responses in the finding and the conclusion sections.

The main focus of our article is the Facebook usage of young adult Palestinian women living within the contested space of East Jerusalem. We ask: Why do these women prefer not to participate online, and what are their (non-)communicative practices? Delving into these queries, the article further discusses the patterns of digital participation and avoidance which emerged, focusing on the interviewees' mundane choices of when, why, and how to *participate* as reflecting choices of when, why, and how to *avoid*.

Before going deeper into the findings, we frame the case study considering the local geopolitical context and a theoretical overview focusing on networked platforms and online participation. A discussion about the broader implications of digital media usage by underprivileged groups in contested spaces will be found at the end.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### *2.1. The Contested City of Jerusalem*

The city of Jerusalem has been considered contested since the end of the 1967 War, when the Israeli government voted in favour of annexing the Jordanian part of Jerusalem to the Israeli western part of the city, in the face of condemnation from the international community (Benvenisti, 1996). However, according to international law, East Jerusalem is an illegally occupied city, and the international community and any final resolution should be taken as part of an Israeli-Palestinian negotiation (Klein, 2008; United Nations, 1997). The Israeli and Palestinian narratives are intertwined like a "double helix" (Rotberg, 2006, p. 205) but should be acknowledged as separate (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Maoz, 2011), especially when it comes to Jerusalem/al-Quds: A city that evokes national and religious feelings in both people. It is our objective in this study to look at the Palestinian narrative of East Jerusalem. The power relations between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem are asymmetrical. Israelis are full citizens whose status and residency cannot be revoked; the Palestinian residents who remained in the city after the war were given the status of "permanent residency," enabling them to work within and move around Israel and to receive social rights such as welfare and health insurance, but this permanent resident status is contingent upon proving continuous physical presence in the city (Shtern, 2016).

The number of Palestinians living in the city has increased from approximately 68,000 people in 1967 to 341,453 in 2019 (Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2019). The Palestinian community conforms to one-third of the city's population, alongside the Jewish community. This community, which is a poor, neglected, and marginalised group, is a cause of concern to the authorities (Appadurai, 2006). Civil society in East Jerusalem has become weaker in recent years, specifically since the outbreak of Al-Aqsa Intifada in the year 2000. Poverty, crime, and violent resistance have increased (Alyan et al., 2012; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011). This has been exacerbated by the fact that official and formal Palestinian institutions are prohibited from operating in Jerusalem, leaving Palestinians in East Jerusalem with nowhere to turn in times of trouble (Cohen, 2011; Dumper, 2011; Klein, 2001; Tamari, 2003). Furthermore, the construction of the separation barrier, also called the "Wall," around Jerusalem has had a fundamental impact on the functional and economic viability of East Jerusalem as a regional metropolitan centre (Cohen, 2011; Shtern, 2016). The palpably tense relationship between their status as semi-citizens of Israel and their Palestinian national identity is reflected in this study.

### *2.2. Internet in East Jerusalem*

There is very little research into the internet infrastructure in East Jerusalem, as most of the corpus refers to the West Bank and Gaza. In the Oslo Peace negotiations, there was an attempt to establish a Palestinian telecommunications platform (Ben-David & Bahour, 2009; Khoury-Machool, 2007). However, it was not an independent Palestinian communication network

as it was conditional upon the consent of Bezeq—Israel's national communications company (Aouragh, 2011; Ben-David, 2012). We embrace Aouragh and Chakravartty's (2016) approach about communication's infrastructure as *both* the material stuff of cables and wires that have long been seen as modern public goods as well as the "soft" and more amorphous networks of cultural exchange shaped by colonial powers (Aouragh & Chakravartty, 2016, p. 564). Hence, existing landlines or Wi-Fi networks in Jerusalem are an integral part of the internet infrastructure of the Palestinians living in the city. As Palestinian institutions and companies are prohibited from operating in Jerusalem, Palestinians there have no choice but to use an Israeli-owned internet network. During the Oslo talks, the Israelis refused to allow Palestinian telecommunications infrastructure into East Jerusalem, and the Palestinians refused to wire a separate network if East Jerusalem is not included (Ben-David et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank are considered heavy internet users, and in 2016, 62.7% were connected to the internet (Internet Live Stats, 2016). According to the digital report in Palestine, conducted by Ipoke (2020), 76.9% of the participants declared that Facebook was their favourite platform, making it the most popular network platform for Palestinians. Women users of social networks in Palestine constitute 46.8% of the total. They also constitute 46% of the total Facebook users in Palestine (Ipoke, 2020). From looking at these two statistics alone, we can understand that Facebook use occurs daily. However, the conception of scholars, politicians, and "ordinary users" that Facebook helps to promote democracy has been undermined recently, as Israeli surveillance of Facebook and other social media platforms has become more sophisticated and effective (Gillespie, 2018; Hirshauga & Sheizaf, 2017; Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014; Yaari, 2017). Moreover, while looking on Twitter, Siapera (2014) demonstrated how online news sharing about the Palestinian struggle and the calls to action co-construct homophily instead of engagement with opponents. Also, there are questions regarding young Palestinian activists' use of social media for campaigns and protests due to Palestinian politics developing outside the structures of official parties and formal political organisations (de Vries et al., 2015; Dwonch, 2017). While most of these researchers referred to Palestine as a whole, in this article, we discuss these issues from an as yet under-researched perspective, that is, of Palestinian women.

### *2.3. The Use of Networked Platforms by Arab Women*

Women in the Arab world use social networks, but the number of users is relatively low. For example, in 2017, only 32.3% of Facebook users in the Arab world were women (Salem, 2017), while more than 50% of Facebook users in Western countries, such as the United States, Britain, and Spain, were women (Al Omoush et al., 2012). One of the main reasons for this inequality and the gendered digital gap between men and women in the Arab world is the social and cultural norms in Arab societies that construct the roles and expectations of women. Another major reason is family pressure and monitoring of how women use social media (Choudhury & Al-Araj, 2018; Odeh, 2018).

However, most reports and studies dealing with the use of social networks do not emphasise the gender aspect, making it difficult to obtain statistical data regarding the use and online activities of Arab women (Sreberny, 2015). Other studies have focused on the role of social networks in promoting and empowering Arab women, and on feminists' and feminist movements' use of social networks during the Arab Spring (Mourtada & Salem, 2012). As the patriarchal and conservative Arab society and the presence of authoritarian regimes in some countries restricted the freedom of expression of Arab women, they expressed their identities, views, and positions on social media because they had no other place to do so (Radsch & Khamis, 2013).

During the Arab Spring, they used social networks to disseminate information, encourage participation in protests, and highlight the desire to bring about political change. In addition, they used them to raise citizens' awareness of issues related to human and women's rights (Odine, 2013). The identities of some of these Arab users were known, but others preferred to share content anonymously, meaning they often used fake names for safety whilst hiding their political participation on social networks from their families (Radsch & Khamis, 2013).

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2017), women constitute approximately 48% of the total Palestinian population living in Jerusalem. Palestinian women living in Jerusalem have low participation in the workforce: only 22% in 2016. Their low employment rate is recognised as one of the main causes of the high poverty rate within the Palestinian population in Jerusalem (Naftali, 2018). Women have limited access to education, less chance of gaining fair employment conditions, and they also face the conservative expectation that women should stay at home to take care of the housework and children (Alyan et al., 2012; Berger, 2017). There is little research about Palestinian women and social media (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011); hence we aim to broaden the knowledge about online participation, or the lack of it, by this specific group.

### *2.4. Online (Non-)Participation*

Networked platforms have opened a window onto examining practices of online participation. Jenkins (2006) describes a set of digital tools and skills based on different modes of participation in media cultures. One of the salient features of online participation is political action and activism (Boulianne, 2015); "ordinary" users can take an active part in creating political campaigns and mobilising people to participate in various forms

(Gerbaudo, 2012; Gillespie, 2018; Lim, 2012; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). The platforms' affordances allow users to convey information and potentially raise social awareness (Vraga et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, the same affordance that potentially renders Facebook for political expression may also pose challenges, as expressing political views may result in polarised debate and damaged relationships with friends or family (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Mor et al., 2015).

Zuckerman (2014) suggests looking at online participation as a *continuum* as individuals switch between modes of participation throughout the day according to the user's political circumstances, conditions, and social structure (Fuchs, 2014; Pearce et al., 2014; Rosenbaum, 2019). An "extreme" decision is that of disconnectivity (Light, 2014) based on a social critique of media use known as "media refusal" (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). The recent political events in East Jerusalem were, and still are, accompanied by local and global digital activism, mainly on Instagram and TikTok (de Vries, 2021; Leshem, 2021). We are not sure why these events were characterised by increased online participation; is it the mimetic element of TikTok (Hautea et al., 2021)? Is it the timing of evictions and the 2021 Gaza war that put the Palestinian struggle in the headlines? As we attempted to understand media within the context, we tended to answer "yes" to all of the above; thus, we determined Instagram and TikTok to be the best platforms to examine.

With this context in mind, we now turn to the online practices of East Jerusalem Palestinian women, revealing what is left out of the Facebook feed. In what follows, we hope to shed light on the continuum of online participation deriving from the socio-political conditions in East Jerusalem.

## 3. Methods

The research population comprised 13 Palestinian young adult women interviewees, recruited for the research through social and professional networks at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. All interviewees are residents of East Jerusalem; their ages range from 20 to 36. The small sample of interviews is related to the challenge of reaching out to interviewees. Individuals were afraid to talk about their social media usage habits; it was just too risky to share such information at that time. Knowing this is not a representative sample, this research draws on these as a set of narratives expressing individual experiences (Salem, 2017). But even these narratives, which we describe below, should be read with caution as our stance as academics is that research in itself is a powerful intervention, even if carried out at a distance. When conducting research, whether across cultures or within a minority culture, researchers must recognise the power dynamics rooted in the relationship with their research subjects (Smith, 1999). All the interviewees either hold an academic degree or are studying towards one. Interviews took place in 2016 and 2017, following the 2014 Gaza war and violent clashes in East Jerusalem in 2014–2015; this period was not characterised by an escalation in the ongoing conflict. We conducted them very carefully, as the political situation in East Jerusalem is violent as this is an occupied territory and there are periods when violence escalates, as frequently happens in intractable conflicts (Kriesberg, 2007). Although the time frame when the interviews took place was not particularly close to that of the Arab Uprisings, their relevance becomes clear if we consider the Palestinian context. Here, the Arab Uprisings were certainly an important event, but the political structure of the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian internal division kept the "Revolution" afar (Dorra, 2014).

All interviews were held at a location chosen by the interviewee, either at a café located in East Jerusalem or at the Hebrew University. Meeting at participants' homes was not a preferred choice of the interviewees, presumably for privacy purposes, as they all lived with their families. It was not easy to find women who were willing to talk with us freely at that time: they were suspicious, mainly because of the research topic. The first part of the interview was open and dealt with the interviewee's individual story, while the second part addressed the topics of social media usage and online participation (Briggs, 1986). The one-and-a-half-hour interviews were conducted in Arabic or English, according to the interviewee's preference. The option of English was offered as one of the authors is not a native Arabic speaker. Three of the interviews were conducted in English, and 10 in Arabic. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed by both authors. All interviewees were presented before the interview with a consent form written in Arabic clearly explaining the research, stating that their anonymity would be maintained and that they did not have to answer any questions that caused them any inconvenience. In addition, interviewees received the authors' contact details and had the opportunity to contact us directly with any request or query concerning the research and their interview.

The initial analysis revealed numerous thematic categories emerging from each interview (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After rereading a given interview, the number of categories was reduced by combining similar categories and focusing on those emerging as most relevant. Next, the various interviews were integrated via categories they had in common. These categories were scrutinised again for centrality, for the connections between them, and their relevance to the subject of the study. The analysis process revealed three major themes, presented in the following section.

## 4. Findings

Qualitative thematic analysis of 13 in-depth interviews reveals three patterns of usage, all related to monitoring: state-monitoring, kinship-monitoring, and

self-monitoring. The article conceptualises these online behaviours as patterns of digital participation, describing users' (non-)communicative practices in which mundane choices of when, why, and how to *participate* also mirror users' choices of when, why, and how to *avoid*.

*4.1. State Monitoring*

By state monitoring, we mean the political regime's control over the freedom of speech and expression of its residents, citizens, and others, including that of social media platforms specifically and internet content in general. We could have referred to it as state censorship, but we see the penetration and control of the state as a long-term method to oversee the activity of its citizens; hence, the notion of monitoring was chosen as it includes observation over a period of time. It is one of the central themes that emerged and is related to the notion of online self-censorship. As reflected in the quotes below, interviewees describe practices of choosing *not* to engage with politics online from a young age. These practices are mainly described as a reaction to Israel's internet monitoring and surveillance.

Najwa (F, 23) said: "I don't write anything political on Facebook; I have been aware of this since I was a child and since I opened my Facebook [account]. We are not allowed to go into anything political. Anything!"

Fatma (F, 25) described the effect of the monitoring on her online participation action: "Recently many friends and people I know have been arrested because of posts they wrote on Facebook. My mother warned [me] not to write anything. And I also didn't want to write anything.''

Dana (F, 22) has concerns that posting political content on Facebook will indirectly or directly harm her academic studies and later also her livelihood and future, so she refrains from sharing political content:

> I believe that the content that people post on Facebook can harm them, especially the political content. I am always hesitant about whether to publish certain content, for example, whether to publish a post about a protest, because I believe that such a post could harm me as a student at the Hebrew University [an Israeli university]. I also know people who were not hired for certain jobs because of the content they posted on Facebook. Sometimes we decide not to post certain content or to express our opinions because we are aware that this content can severely damage our lives.

Maisa (F, 22) stressed that the period in which some young Palestinian women began to use Facebook was a period of political tension, which led the parents and teachers of these young women to warn them against using it:

> When we [women in their 20s] started to become aware and started using Facebook and social networks, it was in a time of war in Gaza. During this time, our parents and teachers and most people we know warned us about Facebook. They believed that liking a particular post could endanger our lives and that comments on Facebook were sometimes considered as support of a particular party.

According to the digital report on Palestine (Ipoke, 2020), 76.9% of the respondents said they were aware of Israeli security control over social networks. 66.1% of them said that they took into consideration the Palestinian security control over social media sites.

The theme described above is consistent with these findings; it demonstrates how users are aware of the blurred lines between their online and offline activity, thus stressing the importance of the political context when examining social media. Such heavy surveillance is fully discussed within the family, indicating that elders are also aware of the risks of publishing political content. Despite arguments made by scholars such as Castells (2007) on how user empowerment undermines the authority of traditional media hierarchies and the state hierarchy, users rarely have any measure of control over information flows (Proferes, 2016). Nonetheless, in the quotes above, we see that users are more informed about this situation and that although they choose to remain on Facebook, they either do not write about politics or they moderate their content.

Maisa's (F, 22) choice of how to write about politics is interesting: "I do not directly share posts about political or military topics and events, but I do address the human side of these events."

These mundane, minor actions of avoiding any writing about politics online may indicate a situation in which users are taking control of their personal opinions and information. It does not mean that they have lost their political views or activism; they simply do not share their views or their activism online, as might be expected. By doing so, they may alter, in a small way, the social structure in which they operate. Furthermore, as observed in places such as Mardin, Turkey, social media reflects the strategies of political "silence" already developed offline (Miller et al., 2016). Hence, when the online context correlates with the offline one—in terms of political and sociological power relations—communicative actions may become non-communicative ones, thus limiting Facebook as a platform for social or political change (de Vries et al., 2015, 2017; Nemer, 2016). Where the above theme shows how interviewees perceive the state as a dominant actor in the online sphere, the second theme demonstrates another aspect of online control that comes from the interviewees' families.

*4.2. Kinship Monitoring*

Kinship monitoring is the family and relatives' unofficial guardianship. In our case, it is when family and relatives closely monitor and control the activity of family

members and the content they share on social media. Family members and relatives also influence individuals' actions and choices. All interviewees reported that they had blocked or even unfriended family members: This was usually because they were unwilling to have their privacy disrupted by their relatives' supervision or because they were trying to keep their family members safe.

Eman (F, 23) said she was very careful with her posts: "You have to be careful with what you write. Mostly I am careful with what I write because I am trying to be sensitive toward my parents."

Yasmin (F, 20) noted that she opened a new Facebook account, reclaiming her privacy:

> I do not remember why, but I still have access to it [her old Facebook account] and can open it, but I do not. Maybe because I had many relatives on it: I had the entire family on my friend list, all my cousins—and as you know, the family is always watching you.

Dana (F, 22) is uncomfortable when using Facebook. She felt stared at by her many relatives on the platform, so she shared little information:

> I have many relatives on Facebook. I feel that they are always watching over me: this makes me feel uncomfortable, so whenever I want to share something that I prefer them not to see, I choose the option to hide the post from them.

In some cases, Palestinian women are subject to patriarchal authority in the virtual space, limiting their freedom of expression and shaping their interaction within this circle (Odeh, 2018). This is the case with Dana, who tries to maintain a conservative social behaviour and attitude on Facebook. To cope with the family's close control, she makes every effort to ensure that the content of her Facebook activity complies with the roles and expectations of a Palestinian woman. She adapts to the cultural and social norms that were constructed in Palestinian society over the decades: "I usually try to make the content I post on Facebook compatible with the values of Palestinian Arab society. I consider that we are a conservative society."

Razan (F, 21) notes that if she publishes content that does not match society's values, she will be exposed to a lot of criticism and opposition. As a result, she ultimately decides not to publish such content:

> I express my opinions on social issues. A lot of people do not accept it and criticise me because I criticise the values of our society. So sometimes, I hesitate whether to publish content specifically related to feminism that arouses religious sensitivity in some people, as if I am criticising the religion. This content may provoke strong opposition and criticism, and in the end, I decide not to publish.

The quotes above show how interviewees attempt to regain control over their privacy, as there is always some information they wish to hide from their family. It is important to mention that family members watching over other family members via Facebook is not unique to the Palestinian society; boyd (2014) reflects on this issue extensively in her research into the internet usage of youngsters. Furthermore, this theme indicates that social media platforms such as Facebook can be seen as ultra-conservative platforms for their users (Al-Maimani, 2021; Ghannam, 2011; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011). As demonstrated here, in certain instances, women are obligated to hide or moderate their online activities, even while participating anonymously, in order to create a sense of safety and freedom for themselves (Al Omoush et al., 2012; Radsch & Khamis, 2013).

*4.3. Self-monitoring*

Self-monitoring is people's control of their own discourse and behaviour in different social media platforms over a period of time. The third theme raises another aspect of online avoidance in which interviewees use practices of filtering content, either their own content or that of others that appears on their Facebook feed, even at the cost of disconnecting from their online friends. Such actions thereby create a new "personal public sphere" (John & Gal, 2018), following the notion of online participation as a continuum, and adhering to what Gillespie (2018) frames as digital moderation. Amal and Rabab describe such self-monitoring and its implications:

> No, I'm not like the rest. I prefer posting pictures of people who are alive, because it's not respectful to post photos of them dead, and I posted a lot about this and some friends blocked me. (Amal, F, 36)

> We saw people burned and distorted bodies, body parts, hands, legs, and children under attack. Look at how mentally distorted we have become. I talked about this with my friends, how wrong this is for us to become a part of it. I see myself as responsible, and I have intelligent followers who trust me and my news. I will never share such photos, even if they are influential. (Rabab, F, 25)

Eman (F, 23) raises another issue relating to Facebook as a platform and to the ethical dilemmas of fake news and unfiltered content: "First, I do not trust them [Facebook pages], and second, I don't like seeing that on my page, like you know the bleeding: every time something happens, they post the picture with no filter."

These actions of self-monitoring may create a unique world moderated by its user, as explained by Razan (F, 21): "I feel like I can post what I want on Facebook; I can create a world that suits me."

More so, by avoiding emotionally disruptive content, the interviewees also indicate a larger problem of ethical

standards faced by networked platforms, thus revealing their own ideological stance and their functioning as self-sufficient trackers, and to some extent, they fulfil the role of a monitor, but of themselves. Further, the quotes above may provide a partial explanation of why 37% of Palestinians surveyed about their social media usage considered closing their Facebook account at least once in 2015. Does self-monitoring empower our interviewees? We will discuss this in the following sections.

## 5. Discussion

Summarising the findings, three themes were identified as driving the cautious behaviour of online avoidance: state monitoring, kinship monitoring, and self-monitoring. The first two themes concern the interviewees' adoption of online avoidance techniques and self-censorship based on the power structure relations in which they operate—Israeli state monitoring and the dominance of the family structure and conservative social bonds. The interviewees' behaviour suggests that the Facebook platform has become, in certain ways, a dangerous space where anything posted may come back to haunt the user. The third theme stresses the social price that comes with the act of filtering and moderating content on Facebook.

This study aims to shed light on one of the most contested and sensitive areas in the Middle East, the city of Jerusalem, focusing on young adult Palestinian women. By presenting some of the online practices of the women we interviewed, we can understand how this population, which belongs to a marginalised and vulnerable group, uses Facebook in the context of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The findings provide us with an opportunity to contemplate the role of networked platforms in women's lives, thus rethinking concepts such as democratisation and liberation, which were, and to a certain extent still are, connected to networked platforms.

### *5.1. Limited Freedom of Expression*

It emerged from the findings that the interviewees try to use Facebook as a space for expressing identity and expressing opinions regarding social topics and issues (Al Omoush et al., 2012). However, as our findings point out, there are also social and political restrictions on Facebook use which restrict individuals' freedom of expression, especially women. It was clear that the interviewees are expected to behave conservatively while using Facebook, so they are expected not to share content that contradicts the patriarchal values which women in Palestinian society might experience (Odeh, 2018). Sharing content that does not conform to the community's cultural values is highly likely to expose them to criticism and opposition. The interviewees unequivocally stated that they refrain from sharing content that contains public political statements, as a result of both state digital monitoring of political content posted by Palestinians (de Vries et al., 2015) and of their families' monitoring of their political content due to a fear of consequences; thus, they are in effect monitored both by the state and the family. Therefore, their political freedom of expression on Facebook has become very limited (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2011).

### *5.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

Despite the importance of our findings to the understanding of Facebook and other networked platforms as limited spaces for expression, this study also has certain limitations. First, the research is limited because it is built on one case study based on a small number of interviews. Further research should broaden the number of interviews, thus exploring more diverse practices of non-participation among other marginalised groups to better understand the inherent tension facing social media users living in asymmetrical conflict and within contested spaces. More so, as recent events in East Jerusalem reveal, other networked platforms such as Instagram (another platform now owned by the Facebook corporation) are increasingly used by young Palestinians; according to 7amleh—The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media (2019), 45.7% of the Palestinian youth use Instagram. Nevertheless, we hope that this study will contribute to the emerging discourse focusing on non-participation and digital moderation as a continuum of options (Gillespie, 2018)

## 6. Conclusions

This specific case study demonstrates that users understand the impact of these platforms. They adopt a critical perspective toward the platform, based on the incursion of reality into their digital spaces (Benkler, 2016) and thus employ different kinds of online participation—such as *not* posting, *not* sharing, and moderating political content—which all involve avoidance of participation. While choosing to engage in non-communicative behaviour in the digital age is becoming more and more prevalent, not long ago it was considered subversive (Portwood-Stacer, 2013).

Whereas research about online participation has focused on the importance of "having a voice," Crawford (2009) offers the metaphor of listening as a productive way to analyse the forms of online engagement which have been overlooked. She also suggests these listening practices as a part of a continuum of online participation, as it is not a binary situation of only two options—having a voice or being silent. We adhere to Crawford's distinction, thus suggesting that our interviewees adapt their voices according to the bindings of the structure within which they operate, deciding when to be heard and when to be silent.

But it is also an individual choice of the cost a person is willing to pay, whether now or later. The cost that an individual will pay can vary; a person will have to

bear the consequences of challenging their society, such as exclusion. Arrest is another possible price an individual might pay when challenging the authorities. Looking at the recent events in East Jerusalem, we also think that choosing to participate online is also a matter of the relationship between an individual and the collective. Perhaps, collective action is the motive in this case. Participating in an activity that contributes to a common community goal makes it easier to bear the consequences. We conducted three brief follow-up interviews to examine how virtual avoidance was shaped in the light of recent events. The three interviewees explained that they did not share any political content on Facebook; they even said they had begun to reduce their participation on Facebook. This was clear from Maisa's words: "I still don't share any political content on Facebook, I have also started reducing my Facebook activity." They started using other platforms such as Instagram more frequently. Dana confirmed:

> The platform I use most nowadays is Instagram. I have been sharing political content on Instagram for a while; I believe that it's important to share this kind of content. It's important to state that my family and I are enthusiastic about sharing certain political content on Instagram because Instagram stories are deleted within 24 hours.

In addition, looking back, a decade ago at the Arab "Spring" uprisings, it is common to say these events produced modest political and economic changes and gains for some of the region's inhabitants (Robinson, 2020). Nevertheless, the continuum of online participation and digital activism, as our case study presents, may contribute to the ongoing struggle against constructed sociopolitical inequalities, pointing to how networked platforms are not the only cause of the Arab uprisings and other online struggles, and to how they contribute to the counter-revolutions till today.

**Acknowledgments**

The authors wish to thank Prof. Ifat Maoz for her guidance throughout the writing of this article, as well as the Swiss Center for Conflict Research, Management and Resolution at the Hebrew University for its support. In addition, the authors wish to thank Prof. Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and inspiring comments on earlier drafts of this article.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Disclaimer**

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is supporting the thematic issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation,'' edited by AGYA alumna Hanan Badr (Gulf University of Science and Technology, Kuwait) and AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The authors remain solely responsible for the content and recommendations provided in this publication, which do not reflect the positions of AGYA or any of its funding partners.

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COGITATIO

Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)
2021, Volume 9, Issue 4, Pages 320–330
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4455

Article

# From Chiapas to Palestine: Historicizing Social Movement Media Before and Beyond the Arab Uprisings

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Submitted: 30 April 2021 | Accepted: 26 October 2021 | Published: 17 December 2021

**Abstract**
Critical scholarship investigating media and the Arab uprisings has called for "a return to history." This article argues that researching the contemporary constraints and opportunities of social movement media in the Arab region requires historicizing such practices. Reflecting on the role of media activism within the Arab uprisings necessitates broadening the historical context of social movement media in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region by investigating the diversity of media tactics and alternative political economies mobilized to resist the military-industrial communications complex. This article develops a political economy framework to historicize social movement media practices from Chiapas to Palestine and provides a critical reflection on the use of media for revolution before and beyond the Arab uprisings. Learning from the long and global history of revolutionary media struggle is beneficial to media activists and researchers working in the MENA region.

**Keywords**
Arab uprisings; Chiapas; media activism; MENA; Mexico; revolution; Palestine; political economy of communication; social movement media

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by Hanan Badr (Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait) and Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany).

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## 1. Introduction

Research facilitated within social movements drawing on practitioner knowledge complements critical scholarship on media practices and the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings that have called for "a return to history" (Matar, 2012). Armbrust (2012) noted that historical media research is needed specifically in the Middle East and North Africa (or MENA) region to rethink the role of digital platforms, such as satellite and Internet, within a broader and more "social history of media" (p. 170). He recommended a research agenda that documents the adaptation of different media practices over time (such as radio and television broadcasting) to contextualize contemporary uses of so-called new media tools. Matar (2012) agrees, calling for scholars to situate media activism during the uprisings within "ongoing historical processes and conjunctures" (p. 75). She argued, "there is a need to re-historicize, or to re-introduce history, in our discussions of media in order to interrogate the boundaries of how we conceptualize the 'now' and the 'here' without losing sight of their positionality in specific historical formations" (p. 78). Both Armbrust and Matar's emphasis on knowing history to understand the present and think about the future is an important lesson for scholars, journalists, and media activists working in the Arab region and beyond.

This article argues that researching the contemporary constraints and opportunities for social movement media in the Arab region requires historicizing movement media-making to learn how such practices have long been used to challenge the monopoly over communication wielded by states and capitalism. In the literature, social movement media have been defined as the "outward-directed" practices by movement actors that engage publics through mass media and the

"inward-directed'' practices of movement media-making that mobilize movement actors (Rucht, 2004, p. 32). Critical scholars researching the Arab uprisings and subsequent movements have documented online and offline media strategies, noting that effective movement media-making embraces a diversity of media practices that are typically participatory and seek to amplify action for both inward and outward audiences (Costanza-Chock, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2012). Researching contemporary movement media practices, including media activism during and since the Arab uprisings, requires historicizing the diverse ways in which social movement actors used the Internet long before the development of blogging or other forms of social media.

For example, the first "social netwar" took place in the early 1990s, as stated in a report contracted by the US military (Ronfeldt et al., 1998). On January 1, 1994, Mayan indigenous guerrillas known as the Zapatistas took over the capital of Chiapas along with five other towns in southern Mexico to resist colonization and capitalist globalization, specifically the North American Free Trade Agreement, which the government of Mexico had endorsed without the consent of the indigenous population. The Zapatistas coordinated with media activists, who circulated the manifesto The First Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle over email, listservs, and online forums, sending the message around the world and effectively breaking the silence of hegemonic media in Mexico and international news media that had previously ignored the indigenous peoples' concerns about NAFTA (Padgett, 2017). The results were tangible: local and international media covered the Zapatistas' armed uprising, protestors pressured the government to negotiate, and a truce was signed by January 12, 1994 (Halkin, 2008). Since then, along with guns, the media became part of the Zapatistas' "arsenal" (p. 161).

Yet, the international media and colonial media in Mexico continued to neglect the Zapatistas' narrative. In late 1997, paramilitary forces trained and deployed by the Mexican government massacred nearly 50 indigenous people, mostly women and children, in the village of Acteal which was aligned with the Zapatistas. Local and international media reported the government's narrative that the murders resulted from inter-community conflict, thereby absolving the Mexican authorities of any complicity (Halkin, 2008). Such coverage motivated the Zapatistas to create their movement media for both inward and outward audiences. By 1998, the Chiapas Media Project began building regional media centers within Zapatista communities to produce and circulate multimedia content (Halkin, 2008).

Long before social media and two decades before the Arab uprisings, the Zapatistas recognized the need for networked and independent media as a necessary tool to be able to resist state power, capitalism, and colonialism effectively. Subcomandante Marcos detailed the media strategy of the Zapatistas. He said:

> In August 1996, we called for the creation of a network of independent media, a network of information. We mean a network to resist the power of the lie that sells us this war that we call the Fourth World War. We need this network not only as a tool for our social movements but for our lives: this is a project of life, of humanity, humanity which has a right to critical and truthful information. (Indymedia, 2017, para. 1)

According to the Zapatistas, such a network was needed, not just in Chiapas, but as a global resource for social movements.

The social movement media strategy of the Zapatistas and the call for the creation of a network of independent media communicated by Subcomandante Marcos inspired media activist projects around the globe. In 1999, the Independent Media Center was established in a storefront in Seattle to share social movement media coverage of the World Trade Organization protests through an open-source website built for activist-produced multimedia content. At the time, media and technology activists behind the Independent Media Center's social movement media infrastructure did not know they were creating "the building blocks of the modern web: content management systems, blogs, and user-generated content" (Indymedia, 2017, para. 13). Within a few years, the Indymedia model spread like wildfire, establishing over 100 "open publishing" websites launched in more than 70 countries, some of which also opened local media centers, including in Palestine and Lebanon (Indymedia, 2017). Open publishing at Indymedia was not just for tech-savvy activists, but rather the platform enabled users with minimal computer skills to click a few buttons and contribute to their movement's media-making. Indymedia effectively mobilized new social movement media technology, but the Independent Media Center's open publishing architecture would later be commodified by capitalist social media (Costanza-Chock, 2014; Indymedia, 2017). Such media history, told from the point of view of social movement actors, is necessary to contextualize contemporary media activism.

This article asks: How does historicizing movement media-making help to understand the present as well as consider the future constraints and opportunities for social movement media in the MENA region? To answer this research question, this article mobilizes a political economy of communication framework to historicize social movement media practices from Chiapas to Palestine before and beyond the Arab uprisings. Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, Palestine did not witness mass mobilizations in public spaces during the 2010–2011 wave of popular protests. However, this article argues that analyzing social movement media within the long history of resistance in Palestine to colonial militaries and state power can benefit research on media and the Arab uprisings from the early 2010s, as well as future mobilizations in the MENA region. Mosco (2009) observed that a "good" political economy approach

within communication research requires "an historical dimension" (p. 110). Sakr (2011) suggested that a political economy approach to historization within Arab cultural studies can help identify "the unequal distribution of communicative resources" (p. 227). Concerning scholarship on media in the MENA region, Khiabany (2011) also noted that a political economy approach critiquing Eurocentrism and global capitalism is necessary for the move towards de-Westernizing communication studies. Thus, this article challenges Western "normative liberal frameworks" in media research (Rodny-Gumede, 2020, p. 1) by developing a critical political economy framework to historicize social movement media with attention to capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism.

This framework will then be used to draw insight from scholarly and grey literature gathered about social movement media practices from Chiapas to Palestine and beyond. Additional data analyzed for this article include journalistic interviews conducted during the Fall of 2020 with Palestinian media activists as part of a podcast on media and Palestine, as well as the archive of an international workshop held in Salvador, Brazil, during the 2018 World Forum of Free Media, about the Radio Free Palestine project. To investigate the current context, further open-access information was collected from websites and social media accounts of Palestinian social movement media and media activists during April–May 2021. Analyzing these data within a political economy of communication framework seeks to transcend the narrow Arab uprisings moment and promote South to South learning by drawing lessons from the social movement media practices of indigenous peoples from Chiapas to Palestine. With this approach, this article aims to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities for media activists today working in the Arab region and beyond who are building new platforms, practices, and networks that resist state power, capitalism, and colonialism.

## 2. Palestine and the 2010–2011 Arab Uprisings

Under both the Ottoman and British authorities, Palestinians organized for independence and self-determination. When the League of Nations imposed the British Mandate over historic Palestine in 1922, four centuries of Ottoman rule ended. Later, in 1947, when the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 181 (II), the non-binding motion was opposed by Palestinians because it suggested that Jews, who were one-third of the population, could carve a "Jewish state" on 60% of the land. After the British withdrawal, Zionist militias attacked the largely unarmed Palestinians, and by May 15, 1948, more than 700,000 Palestinians (half the indigenous population) were ethnically purged from the land, and Israel declared itself a state in control of 78% of historic Palestine. This date has since been commemorated by Palestinians as the Nakba or catastrophe (Abdo-Zubi & Masalha, 2018; Khalidi, 2020; Pappe, 2006). Today, Palestinians make up the world's largest refugee population, with the majority living inside historic Palestine or in neighboring countries (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 2019). This article's focus on Palestine addresses a gap in existing media studies on the Arab uprisings that overlooks the rich history of revolutions and uprisings in Palestine.

In addition, some saw in the revolts of 2010–2011 that took a stand against state power and repression a reflection of the resistance and steadfastness (or *sumoud*) of the Palestinian Intifadas (Farsakh, 2012), and others describe the Intifadas as a pre-cursor to the MENA popular uprisings (Aouragh, 2012a). Inside Palestine, the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt inspired the March 15 youth movement to mobilize under the slogan "The People Want the End of Divisions" (El-Sakka, 2016, p. 88). Youth-led protests in Palestine were followed by an agreement between Fatah and Hamas to reconcile differences, and later, the Nakba anniversary demonstrations held on May 15, 2011, saw protestors mobilize from the Occupied Territories, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt to the Israeli borders and checkpoints (El-Sakka, 2016). Concerning the resonance of the Arab uprisings in Palestine, al-Masri (2011, para. 3) asserted that the "impact will multiply since Palestine, the land of revolutions and uprisings for more than 130 years, cannot be immune to this spirit." Observing that Palestinians have continuously engaged in movement media-making in response to colonialism and imperialism as well as part of protesting the failed strategies of Palestinian political and economic elites, scholars interested in social movement media in the Arab region should also look to Palestine.

Scholars such as Khalidi, reflecting on the uprisings, also note that despite Arab public opinion overwhelmingly being in support of Palestine and against normalization with the "apartheid regime" in Israel (Robbins, 2020; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2017), the normalizing positions of some states in the region that pre-dated the 2010–2011 uprisings have become emboldened in the aftermath. He said, "The outcomes of the uprisings have made the status quo relations come out" (Jadaliyya, 2021). Khalidi noted the example of Raytheon, an Israeli company that is working with Arab states across the region and which built the missile defense system over Abu Dhabi, a partnership that began in 2006 (Jadaliyya, 2021; Raytheon, 2015). He offers an important assessment on the outcome of the uprisings for democracy in Palestine, illustrating that the work of the uprisings and social movement media in the region is unfinished or in the words of Khalidi, "This is not the end of the story, the march of democracy continues" (Jadaliyya, 2021).

Finally, in April 2021, "Ramadan Intifada" was in the headlines (again), and #JerusalemUprising was trending on Twitter. After weeks of increasing Israeli military and settler attacks on Palestinian worshippers during Easter and Ramadan as well as on Palestinian protestors resisting expulsion from their homes in Jerusalem, on May 10, rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip and Israel

bombarded the blockaded Gaza Strip with airstrikes that subsequently killed over 100 civilians including 66 children (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs—Occupied Palestinian Territory, 2021). In response, on May 18, 2021, a general strike was organized across Palestine and the Dignity and Hope Manifesto of the so-called Unity Intifada circulated, calling for the "reunification" of Palestinian society to have a common "political will and means of struggle in the face of Zionism, in all of Palestine" (Mondoweiss, 2021, para. 4). A ceasefire ending the escalation was announced on May 21, 2021. Drawing on this moment for data collection helps to analyze the constraints and opportunities for social movement media using the political economy framework for social movement media developed in the next section.

## 3. Precizing a Political Economy of Social Movement Media

This article uses the lens of political economy of communication to historicize social movement media from Chiapas to Palestine. Within political economy studies of media, much of the literature focuses on hegemonic media and not on social movement media. Just before the Arab uprisings, Downing published an edited volume offering an *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media* (2010) to document the "dizzying variety" and to fill the gap in social movement media research created by a Eurocentric orientation towards the global North (p. xxv). Afterwards, in a 2012 lecture to scholar-activists, Downing called for a political economy approach to study social movement media that should investigate "not only how to dissect the dynamics of global capital and the state, but equally to understand social movement media projects as potential agents of a democratically generated critical political economy and critical cultural analysis" (2013, p. 23). Taking up Downing's call, this section develops a political economy framework to historicize social movement media practices in Palestine and to provide a critical reflection on the use of media for revolution before and beyond the Arab uprisings.

Briefly, the study of political economy of communication draws on Marxist theories and analysis techniques to examine how capitalism shapes political and economic contexts that impact media institutions, production practices, and the experiences of users or audiences, focusing on the implications for social relations, culture, and power (Fuchs, 2016). Where political economy of communication scholars typically investigate the economic practices of hegemonic media and the ideologies they communicate, the political economy of social movement media is understudied. Researchers studying social movement media practices in Canada (Jeppesen, 2018; Jeppesen & Petrick, 2018) used a feminist political economy framework to investigate how autonomous media projects challenge capitalistic hegemonic media practices by organizing alternative or social economies that mobilize material and immaterial resources in a variety of anti-capitalist ways. The alternative political economies documented by Jeppesen and Petrick among social movement media in North America include securing funds from users or audiences to remain independent of corporate or state funding agendas and providing labor by organizing media spaces as community-owned workers co-operatives or collectively-run (Jeppesen & Petrick, 2018). More recently, Artz (2020) employed a political economy framework to study "ownership ~ production practices ~ content for social use" (p. 1391) among social movement media in Venezuela. Conducting political economy of communication research within the "socialist-leaning" state, Artz argued that social movements had produced a "parallel political economy of public, community media" (p. 1393). He observed media laws that affirm communication rights, including "active participation and oversight of citizens in all the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of media messages" (Artz, 2020, p. 1391, from the Venezuelan National Assembly 2004 Law on Social Responsibility of Radio and Television). As a result, the state licensed and resourced almost 1,200 community-based radio and television production and broadcasting studios by 2011, providing widespread public access to community-controlled media that challenge hegemonic media practices by broadcasting revolutionary content.

Scholars working in the MENA region have observed that the political economy of media is influenced not only by capitalism but also colonialism and imperialism. Since the 1970s–1980s, political economy scholars have studied how colonialism and imperialism shape media ownership, production, distribution, and reception (Mattelart, 1979; Smythe, 1981). Few media scholars researching the MENA region or the Arab uprisings use a political economy of communication approach to study the influence of colonialism and imperialism. Aouragh and Chakravartty (2016) observed that despite imperialist wars in South Asia and the MENA region, the field of media studies suffers from "a visible dearth in scholarship and discussion on the topic of US Empire or issues of empire" (p. 561). The authors call for a return to studies of empire, especially after the Arab uprisings, which unmasked the complicity of telecommunications and social media companies in following "military regimes or US imperial interests" (p. 565).

A sub-field of political economy in media studies has examined the beneficial role of communication companies in war as well as the historical relationship between media and the military, which Schiller (1969) coined as the "military-industrial communications complex." Studying internet use in Palestine and in the diaspora, Aouragh (2011, 2016) used political economy of communication frameworks to investigate how Israeli military practices shape online and offline activism. She observed that Palestinian activism online is structured by the military-industrial communications complex that benefits technology companies and Israel, sparking a "cyber

Intifada" that includes a diversity of tactics Palestinian use to engage technology as "an integral part of political activism" (2016, p. 137). Based on her research of internet activism in Palestine as well as across the MENA region, Aouragh concluded that the political economy of media "in the MENA region often comes down to colonialism and imperialism" (2012b, p. 527). In Tawil-Souri and Aouragh's (2014) research of Palestinian online activism, the authors draw on a political economy approach to analyze how the Israeli military and global capitalism (through "cyber-colonialism'') affect both the Internet and offline/online activism in Palestine (p. 116). Concerning social media in Palestine, Kuntsman and Stein (2015) documented the "digital militarism" of Israel whereby social media platforms are used as tools of war. This work illustrates the need for a political economy approach that analyses how the military-industrial communications complex, underpinned by capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, shapes social movement media in Palestine. Such an approach builds on Downing's wish for scholars to document the history of diverse media practices deployed by social movement actors in resistance to hegemonic media practices and to investigate the local contexts determined by state and corporate (including media and technology companies) surveillance and enforcement practices (2013, pp. 24–27).

Advancing the above literature, this article historicizes social movement media from Chiapas to Palestine before and beyond the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings using a political economy approach. Where the study of the political economy of communication generally focuses on how capitalism shapes media, research mobilizing a political economy lens in the MENA region should also historicize the impact of colonialism and imperialism on social movement media practices. Within the literature reviewed above, scholars documented media strategies that facilitate alternative political economy practices (i.e., mobilizing resources guided by anti-capitalist or revolutionary socialist politics) and embrace a diversity of tactics (i.e., circulating media using digital or legacy or multimedia platforms, building community-run production facilities, etc.). The next section uses a political economy framework to provide a case study of movement media-making by historicizing the ownership, production, and content practices in Palestine. By doing so it shows how social movement media practitioners use specific media strategies that produce alternative political economies through the use of diverse media tactics for both inward and outward audiences. Such actions resist the military-industrial communications complex which is shaped by capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, including state and corporate surveillance and enforcement practices.

## 4. Historicizing Social Movement Media from Chiapas to Palestine

The following case study of movement media-making from Palestine also draws on examples from Chiapas and beyond using a political economy of communication framework for historicizing social movement media with three goals. The first aim seeks to investigate social movement media strategies (i.e., ownership, production, and content practices) mobilized over time, the second goal will analyze how movement media-making also produces alternative political economies, and the final objective will consider how social movement media practices resist the military-industrial communications complex. The data used for this case study draws together scholarship, grey literature, and practitioner knowledge, the latter of which includes interviews with Palestinian media activists.

### *4.1. A Brief History of Social Movement Media in Palestine*

The history of Palestinian social movement media predates the Nakba. Since the printing press arrived in Palestine in the early 1900s, the indigenous population has used every communication medium as a tool for amplifying resistance to dispossession, genocide, and occupation (King, 2021b). Throughout the 1930s, Palestinian revolutionaries published newspapers to circulate information about the struggle for national liberation and support actions for self-determination against British colonial rule, including running articles calling for general strikes and reporting on revolts (Omer, 2015). After seeing newspapers shut down in Palestine by the British during the First World War, Palestinians also turned to small-scale broadcasting through radio stations like Sawt Al-Falestin which broadcast in resistance to radio programming from British authorities (such as the BBC's Empire Service) and Zionist colonialists (Boyd, 1999). In Algeria, the use of radio by the Voice of Free Algeria was similarly part of the tools of resistance used to challenge the French occupation, as documented by Fanon (1994). The Zapatistas' Radio Insurgente also enabled the peoples of Chiapas to hear programming produced by indigenous people and in their languages for the first time (Costanza-Chock, 2014), much like the experience in Algeria and Palestine.

During the Nakba in 1948, Zionist militias occupied communication infrastructure and destroyed the media sector of Palestine, taking over radio stations, shutting down newspapers, and expelling journalists (King, 2021b). Afterward, Palestinians in the diaspora used radio and television during the 1950s–1980s to broadcast social movement media across the borders erected by the Israeli military (Bishara, 2009). Throughout the First Intifada, when newspapers were heavily censored by the Israeli military, students and youth organizers in Palestine resorted to graffiti and fliers to complement the radio and television broadcasts coming from the resistance in the diaspora (Bishara, 2009). Reflecting on the First Intifada, the Palestinian journalist and media activist Daoud Kuttab recalls that "Palestinians watched news. We never made news." At that time, he added,

television broadcasting produced inside of Palestine was made by Israeli media or the foreign press. Kuttab organized television trainings at the Institute of Modern Media based at Al-Quds University and, in 1993, produced the first experimental TV broadcasts presented by Palestinians inside Palestine (Kuttab, 2020). The Oslo Accords began shortly after and resulted in tangible communication gains for Palestinians inside of the Occupied Territories, including granting rights to the Palestinian Authority to issue licenses for radio and television broadcasting as well as access to spectrum for Internet use (King, 2021b). The subsequent development of the media system in the Occupied Territories was rapid, and social movement media benefited from these developments. By the start of the Second Intifada, Palestinian media activists had better access to mobile phones and the Internet, but these tools did not replace their use of legacy media. Rather, Palestinians still produced reports for radio and television while using the Internet to distribute this content across the globe.

### *4.2. Embracing a Diversity of Tactics*

Further exploring this broad history requires investigating media strategies (i.e., ownership, production, and content practices) within a specific social movement media organization in Palestine. During the Second Intifada, the International Middle East Media Center (IMEMC, www.imemc.org) was founded in Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem in the West Bank, by Palestinian media activists who were part of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). As a Palestinian-led direct action movement, the ISM began in 2001 to bring activists from around the world to promote and support nonviolent action in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The IMEMC was officially organized as a project of the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement, a non-governmental organization registered in 1988 that spearheaded nonviolent resistance in Palestine throughout the First Intifada, including the 1989 tax strike called under the slogan "No Taxation Without Representation" (Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement, 2020). Today, the IMEMC remains a non-registered organization and continues to exist as a project of the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement. Thus, the project is owned by its team made up of volunteers and a small staff who take decisions together. This ownership model contrasts with hegemonic media in Palestine that are typically owned by the state, political parties, or private companies and run hierarchically (CEO, editor-in-chief, etc.).

Journalist and activist George Rishmawi was part of founding the ISM and after the IMEMC. He explains why the IMEMC was created:

> Through our activities in the ISM, where international peace activists were present in several locations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, we noticed that many of the news and events, especially by Israeli settlers, do not get reported anywhere in the international media. Therefore, we used the fact that we have people on the ground there who can report in English, so they started taking photos and sending us news updates. That was in 2002 before starting IMEMC. At that point, we created Pal Media Alert or Palestine Media Alert… a simple website just to post the information. Then when we saw this is really needed, very important, and provides a good deal of information that people do not ever get on their news outlets, we thought this needs to become a professional news service. So we decided in 2003 to start the IMEMC. (Rishmawi, 2020)

The IMEMC quickly expanded from posting alerts to circulating news online in multiple media formats, including text, video, and audio reports, the latter of which were broadcast by radio stations in the diaspora. The initial production practices of the IMEMC aimed to bring together Palestinians and international volunteers who would collaborate to produce reports in English. When the volunteer base of the IMEMC expanded, reports in Spanish were added. Similarly, the Zapatistas also connected with audiences globally through shortwave radio broadcasts in Spanish and archived audio content on its website (Radio Insurgente, 2017).

Not only did the media circulated by IMEMC seek to amplify the actions of the ISM for both inward and outward audiences, but the IMEMC's reporting also sought to fill a gap in the international media produced from Palestine that silenced the Palestinian narrative. To ensure IMEMC content depicted the Palestinian narrative, a "journalist handbook" was created as a manual for volunteers producing content for the IMEMC. Rishmawi explained that the handbook includes content standards, such as preferred terms to ensure the Palestinian narrative is centered in IMEMC reports:

> At the IMEMC, you will notice we use the term abduct. We use it to replace the term arrest. Because in the US or in Canada or in Europe, when they read "arrest," what they have in mind is a police force, maybe a police officer would stop somebody, read them their rights, arrest them, and they will have a lawyer, etc. But what happens in Palestine is different; it is the military and not the police. The military go from one area to another area that has civilians from a different country and just takes them and puts them somewhere in an unknown destination. This is an abduction or a kidnapping, to be more precise. So we avoid the term "arrest" and use "abduction" or "kidnapping" so people will have a closer image of actually what happens on the ground. (Rishmawi, 2020)

The IMEMC, as an example of social movement media, maintains content practices and policies that focus, according to Rishmawi, on telling "the other side of the story" (Rishmawi, 2020).

Similar to the media strategy of the Zapatistas that aimed to break the silencing of indigenous peoples and network social movements worldwide, the IMEMC was founded to report news from the Palestinian perspective and sought to connect media activists worldwide with the nonviolent resistance movement inside Palestine. In 2008, the IMEMC expanded this network and connected with community radio stations, social movements, and media activists across several continents to produce Radio Free Palestine, initiated as an 18-hour collaborative radio broadcast held on May 15 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Nakba. Radio Free Palestine was launched to expand the few broadcasting spaces for the Palestinian narrative in the diaspora by filling the void with a marathon of non-stop radio programming in Arabic, English, Spanish, and French about the Nakba and news from the annual commemorative demonstrations held in Palestine (Marouf, 2018). Radio Free Palestine continues as a 24-hour broadcast, last collaboratively produced and hosted in 2019 by radio stations across Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. The content practices of Radio Free Palestine mirror the production practices initiated by the IMEMC that invite internationals to join Palestinians in making media that centers on the Palestinian narrative and amplifies social movements for Palestinian human rights.

### *4.3. Mobilising Alternative Political Economies*

De-development in Palestine has constrained the economy (including the media economy), and a large majority of households live below the poverty line, resulting in projects (media and non-media) in Palestine having to rely on funding from international sources (Turner & Shweiki, 2014). As a project that spans nearly twenty years, the IMEMC remains active because it relies predominately on volunteer labor. As such, the IMEMC has not been challenged by the NGO-ization of social movements in Palestine, whereby social movement agendas become projects run by a "professional elite for the purpose of accountability vis-à-vis foreign donors" (Jad, 2008, p. 2), or the professionalization of social movement media as documented by Costanza-Chock (2014). Both the Chiapas Media Project and Indymedia have resisted the agendas of donors, the former creating a policy to "apply for grants as long as there were no strings attached and no political agenda of the foundation that conflicted with our/the community's agenda" (Halkin, 2008, p. 70) and the latter rejecting a $50,000 grant from the Ford Foundation for similar reasons collectively deliberated (Jeppesen & Petrick, 2018).

Rishmawi explains that the IMEMC works with "minimal resources." He said:

> One of the main challenges is financial resources….It is still functioning because we are running with minimum budget. A great deal of volunteerism in this project is what is keeping this project running for the last 17 years otherwise we would have shut down. We had to shut down the audio reports "Palestine Today" and "This Week in Palestine" for lack of financial resources. We don't sell any information; we don't get any money in exchange of the news that we provide. We want it to be free, we want it to be available for everyone. (Rishmawi, 2020)

The IMEMC is circulating social movement media free of charge, yet they do not seek donations from users. The IMEMC does receive a small annual donation (with zero obligations) from If Americans Knew, a charitable research organization based in the US, that pays the salary of the one staff member that IMEMC has today (Rishmawi, 2020). Other social movement media in Palestine do accept donations from users, like the popular Quds News Network founded by youth activists in 2012 that distributes movement media content in Arabic and English on its website and across social media, but Quds News Network only accepts donations that have no conditions from the donor (Quds News Network, 2021). Rishmawi (2020) noted that at the IMEMC:

> Nobody ever asked us to remove anything, and if they did, I don't think we would. One of the good things of not having funding is that you have no donor or funder to force you to do anything. So this is one of the difficulties, but this has its positive sides, which is that you are also free, fully independent, and nobody can dictate to you what to write, what to say, what to have there or what to remove.

The internal policies and decisions of social movement media reflect alternative political economies that resist capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Donor funds may come with foreign or for-profit agendas that center on one issue (such as women's rights) over others (such as national liberation, see Jad, 2008). Costanza-Chock (2014) notes that donor funding often results in the professionalization of social movement media whereby "private foundations often push organic movement networks toward issue-based policy advocacy, professionalization, and clear brand identity, all of which require top-down communication strategies and tight control over messaging and framing" (p. 192). However, in Palestine, the alternative political economies of social movement media are primarily impacted by the Israeli military that restricts access to much-needed material and immaterial resources, for example, barring volunteers, media equipment, or even donations from crossing the borders and checkpoints (Rishmawi, 2020).

### *4.4. Resisting the Military-Industrial Communications Complex*

Media, technology companies, and military forces comprising the military-industrial communications complex have had a beneficial relationship in Palestine since the

British established the first radio station serving all of historic Palestine in 1936. Today, the Palestinian media system, from broadcasting to telecommunications, across historic Palestine is restricted by the Israeli military. For example, the Israeli military regularly targets Palestinian media workers and infrastructure, as was the case during the last bombardment of the Gaza Strip in May 2021 when Israel leveled more than a dozen media offices (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). Social movement media also face targeted attacks by the Israeli military. Rishmawi (2020) recalled a raid on the offices of the IMEMC: "Once the Israeli forces invaded our office and took all of our equipment and computers in May 2003. This was mainly because of our involvement in ISM… and this was just after [ISM activist] Rachel Corrie was killed in Gaza" by the Israeli military. Not long after, the IMEMC began reaching thousands of website visitors per day, followed by continuous cyberattacks on IMEMC servers. In response, the IMEMC backs up its website across several servers (Rishmawi, 2020). To avoid paramilitary raids, the Zapatistas' Radio Insurgente broadcasts from secret locations across Chiapas (Woodman, 2018).

Social movement media in Palestine also face censorship online for using tools like social media. Unit 8200 is the largest battalion within the Israeli military that monitors the communication of Palestinians across all cellular and digital platforms (Tawil-Souri, 2017). A 2018 report revealed that social media platforms complied with 90% of requests from the Israeli military to censor Palestinian content (Human Rights Watch, 2021). More recently, Facebook appointed a former Israeli military censor to its oversight board (Nassar, 2020). In May 2021, more than 500 takedowns and censoring of Palestinian content were recorded across Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (7amleh, 2021). The IMEMC's page on Facebook is currently threatened with suspension, and no information has been provided by Facebook as to why their page was flagged. According to Rishmawi (2020):

> Facebook says we are violating "community standards" and one of our volunteers has communicated with Facebook, and they have failed to give one clear reason of how IMEMC violated any community standard. So, for now, the Facebook page is still flagged, and we are trying to remove the flag. I think this is part of the pressure that we are having at IMEMC.

Quds News Network has also faced censorship on Twitter when all of their verified accounts with almost a million followers were suspended without explanation for nearly two years. Quds News Network's accounts have since been restored on Twitter, but the news outlet maintains backup accounts for all its social media pages.

The military-industrial communications complex in Palestine is maintained by the Israeli military through beneficial relationships with US-based social media companies whose censorship policies are "fundamentally anti-Palestinian" (King, 2021a). Indeed, social media censorship is the epitome of the military-industrial communications complex where corporate interests overlap with American imperialism and Zionist colonialism. Social movement media strategies in Palestine include finding new ways of resisting the military-industrial communications complex as evident during the Unity Intifada. Dashes masking words started appearing in social media posts in English and Arabic, the latter of which also appeared without vowel markings. Additionally, a campaign was organized to protest against censorship on Facebook and Instagram (also owned by Facebook) by targeting the former with one-star reviews in the Apple App and Google Play stores, sinking the platform's ratings (Lyons, 2021). These are some of the resistance strategies, along with the diverse tactics reviewed above concerning ownership, production, and content practices of social movement media in Palestine and beyond, that are generating alternative political economies and effectively opposing the military-industrial communications complex.

## 5. Learning from Social Movement Media

Historicizing movement media-making using a political economy framework, as represented by Table 1, can help to understand the present strategies as well as to consider the future constraints and opportunities for social movement media in the MENA region. Where social movement media in the MENA region often uses global communication resources such as radio and Internet platforms, historicizing affords media activists and researchers the opportunity to learn movement media-making strategies from across borders. Importantly, Artz notes that the revolution in Venezuela resulted in over a thousand community-run TV and radio facilities, adding "revolutions everywhere can learn from precedents. Each revolutionary struggle also can contribute further lessons" (2020, p. 1403).

However, social movement media is challenged by memory. This is because when projects are no longer sustainable, websites, archives, training tools, and collective histories of movement media-making disappear. Additional research is needed to historicize social movement media, but also to learn with movement media practitioners in ways that benefit future media activists. Diraya (2020) is one such platform that provides case studies of media activist practices across the MENA region, including the IMEMC, and offers media literacy resources that build on these practices. Studying the military-industrial communications complex structured by capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism requires learning from the long and global history of revolutionary media struggle, from Chiapas to Palestine, about the many alternative political economies and diversity of tactics used to break through the silence imposed by hegemonic media.

**Table 1.** Strategies of social movement media from Chiapas to Palestine.

| Political Economy Framework | Chiapas | Palestine |
|---|---|---|
| Historicizing social movement media | Communiques from EZLN circulated online by media activists in the 1990s, followed by EZLN beginning radio broadcasting and video production in the 2000s, also using shortwave radio and the Internet to share this content worldwide. | Palestinian newspapers began circulating in 1908 and radio began broadcasting by the 1930s, television and radio from diaspora aired throughout the 1950s–80s, followed by graffiti and fliers during the First Intifada, and launching radio and television from Palestine in the 2000s and using the Internet to share news and content globally. |
| Diversity of tactics | Multimedia, multiplatform, community-run spaces, content guidelines to center indigenous narratives, indigenous-international networks among audiences and media activists | |
| Alternative political economies | Minimal resources, volunteer power, free from donor or funder agendas | |
| Military-industrial communications complex | Backup servers and accounts, masking words in social media content, production and broadcasting facilities in secret locations | |

**Acknowledgments**

This article was made possible with research assistance from Christina Cavalcanti. Data was made available, in part, through the Media and Palestine course podcast that was co-produced with Master's students studying multimedia journalism at Lebanese American University, including Dalia Attar, Jana El Amine, Rayan Haidar, Ghiwa Haidar Ahmad, Ahmad Karakira, Hussein Kassab, Ayman Lezzeik, Raghda Mugharbil, Fatima Takash, and Yara Yatim.

**Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Disclaimer**

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is supporting the thematic issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation,'' edited by AGYA alumna Hanan Badr (Gulf University of Science and Technology, Kuwait) and AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The authors remain solely responsible for the content and recommendations provided in this publication, which do not reflect the positions of AGYA or any of its funding partners.

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COGITATIO

**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2021, Volume 9, Issue 4, Pages 331–344**
**https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4466**

Article

# How Do Chinese Media Frame Arab Uprisings: A Content Analysis

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Submitted: 30 April 2021 | Accepted: 2 November 2021 | Published: 17 December 2021

**Abstract**

Employing content analysis, this study compares the coverage of the Arab uprisings by the *People's Daily* (the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China) and *Caixin Net* (a typical commercial media) with statements from the Chinese Foreign Ministry in the last decade. It shows that the overall attention given to Arab uprisings in the *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net* declined during the period, but there were shifts in the framing of the conflicts, presentation of issues, and positions. The article demonstrates and analyses how the approach and outline of the conflicts in the *People's Daily* changed from disaster to criticism, and then to comparison—its position towards the events generally negative—and how *Caixin Net* moved from a disaster to a contextual framing of the events, its position tending to be neutral.

**Keywords**

Arab uprisings; Chinese media; content analysis; news framing

**Issue**

This article is part of the issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by Hanan Badr (Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait) and Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany).

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## 1. Introduction

As Halbwachs (2020) said:

> Memory is not to preserve the past, but to reconstruct the past with the help of material relics, rituals, scriptures, and traditions left by the past, and with the help of recent psychological and social materials, that is to say, the present.

Ten years passed since the Arab uprisings broke out, making it possible to look at this critical event objectively and rationally. Baum and Potter (2008, p. 49) said that "the media play a vital role in collecting, constructing, and disseminating information" and, as "the main link between leaders and the public, [they play] the core role in the foreign policy market." Cohen (2015, p. 13) said that "the [media] may not be able to tell readers what to think successfully, but it is surprisingly successful in telling readers what to think"; especially when readers don't have foreign contacts or do not understand important external context, they are more significantly influenced by the media (Kelly & Smith, 2013). Research shows that the media played a vital role in the Arab uprisings of 2011 and subsequent social movements (Cottle, 2011), being held responsible for escalating unrest and for giving different explanations of the uprisings (Karyotakis et al., 2017).

According to Entman (1993, p. 52), "framing essentially involves selection and salience." Several studies have attempted to examine differences in how China and the US frame international issues (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 1998; Wu, 2006; Yin, 2007). Although some studies have examined differences between Chinese and Western media coverage of the Arab uprisings over some time (Du, 2016; Ha & Shin, 2019; Karyotakis et al., 2017; Tzogopoulos, 2014), there is a lack of rigorous and in-depth analysis of China's views on Arab uprisings. In this article, we analyse how the *People's Daily* (the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China) and *Caixin Net* (a typical commercial media) covered

the Arab uprisings. Since the political and social environment of a country inevitably influences its media, we propose Chinese official foreign policy tendencies as essential background, which expands the analysis beyond the Global North and reconstructs the disruptions while challenging normative models of media systems (Rodny-Gumede, 2020).

This study is of merit for several reasons. First, ten years have passed since the Arab uprisings in 2011 and the world has witnessed a great change, so it is time to reconsider the event. This is particularly true given that there has been an over-emphasis on the role of the state, ruling elites, and traditional political and civil society actors, which—it is assumed—operate to the detriment of societal forms of unstructured mobilisation such as non-traditional, leaderless, and horizontal social and political actors (Aarts & Cavatorta, 2013). This research focuses on how *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net* had organised the coverage on the Arab uprisings during the past ten years. Results demonstrate that the framing of *People's Daily* changed from disaster to criticism and then to comparison, and that its position towards the events was generally negative. The framing of *Caixin Net*, on the other hand, changed from disaster to contextual framing, and its position tended to be neutral.

Second, this study also provides another perspective from which to view the uprisings. A study that conducted a keyword search of "Arab uprising" in Arabic, English, and French (excluding blogs, newspapers, and books), showed that the majority of articles on the Arab uprisings were produced outside the Arab world, with most of them being written in English (AlMaghlouth et al., 2015). Our research coming from China offers a diverse perspective and frame from the Global South.

Third, scholars have found that media framing cannot be detached from socially and politically dominant ideologies and rather tends to reflect the prevailing values of its society (Tuchman, 1978). This study explores several factors that may influence the framing of the Arab uprisings in the context of social media: ideology, geopolitics, and the particular media environment. Therefore, our research also contributes to a continuous observation of the changes in "framing" in social media environments.

## 2. Literature Review

Goffman (1974) defined "the frame" as the organising principle of news; it can be understood as an ideological and interpretive frame that enables journalists to report on issues or as a way for media to report on certain events, groups, individuals, or institutions with positive or negative attributes (Fourie, 2001). The news frame affects the definition of problems, provides causal explanations, and puts forward moral evaluations and suggestions (Entman, 1993). Some believe that the frame is also regarded as an essential "central idea" in understanding and describing the relevant events of a problem and indirectly suggesting how it should be dealt with (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The media frame specifically refers to "continuous cognitive, interpretive and presentation patterns, including selection, emphasis, and exclusion, through which news editors usually organise discourse" (Gitlin, 2003, p. 7). Therefore, news frames are susceptible to ideology and one-sided news/media organisations (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

Newspapers are considered a suitable medium for framing analysis (Linstrom & Marais, 2012) and the portion of the media most responsible for a society's culture and emotion (Reah, 2002) as well as for the discourse that power holders (Fairclough, 2013) use to express the culture and events of a specific society. Newspapers construct and disseminate various news through frames to enhance readers' social and political awareness (Fowler, 2013; Van Dijk, 1993).

### *2.1. Media and the Arab Uprisings*

The Arab uprisings refer to a series of anti-government movements with the themes of "democracy," "people's livelihood," "citizen empowerment," and "overthrowing authoritarian governments" in Arab countries in the early 2010s, which has had a far-reaching impact on the Arab world, as well as the international geostrategic pattern (Badr, 2021; Derichs & Demmelhuber, 2014; M. Lynch, 2013). The political power of some relevant countries is still in turmoil, and everything has not yet completely ended.

There are two kinds of research on media and the Arab uprisings: One kind discuss media and mobilisation. Some argue that digital media technology has played an essential role in the communication, coordination, and guidance of this rising tide of opposition (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2015; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Papacharissi, 2016). Others argue that the role of social media should not be overemphasised, and the impact of social media must be related to how such media platforms adapt to the broader media ecology and social and political structures (Hamanaka, 2020; Robertson, 2015). Some studies have found that the changes in the information environment have changed individual competencies, the ability to organise for collective action, and the transmission of information from the local to the international level. The new and old media are interrelated (M. Lynch, 2013), and the coverage transferred the issue's salience from new media into mainstream media, thus reaching wider non-politicised audiences (Badr, 2021). The long-term evolution of a new kind of public sphere may matter more than immediate political outcomes (M. Lynch, 2011).

Another strand of literature identifies reporting on the revolutionary movement and studies how different countries and media have framed Arab uprisings (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). The state as a frame of reference is important for understanding the nature of political change (Derichs & Demmelhuber, 2014). The results show that different media have

chosen different reporting frames (Bruce, 2014). Some examine how traditional and non-traditional media reported on Egyptian protests to determine whether the media influenced the protests (Harlow & Johnson, 2011). Others explore the differences between media in Western countries and that in other regions regarding how they covered news on Arab Uprisings and what frames they used.

### *2.2. China's West Asia and North Africa Policy and Chinese Media*

Echoing China's cultural tradition of having a peaceful and harmonious civilisation (Qin, 2018) and the peaceful rise strategy, the core idea of China's foreign policy is guided by principles of trust, forbearance, reciprocity, and equity. China still adheres to the basic principle of non-interference in its foreign policy (J. Zhang, 2015). In the era of President Xi Jinping, the "One Belt, One Road" initiative has become one of China's major diplomatic strategies (S. I. Chan & Song, 2020). There is widespread cooperation between China and West Asia and North Africa (WANA). The conflicts in the Arab world put China's political relationships at risk and threaten its economic interests (Singh, 2016).

The WANA region has always been a key strategic focus of the US, Europe, and Russia, while to China, it is not as crucial as its neighbours in the Asia-Pacific and other regions (Chaziza, 2013). Although China's foreign policy towards WANA has undergone several significant changes since 1949 (Horesh, 2016), the country's relationship with states there is now pragmatic. China's WANA policy highlights the country's persistence in identifying as a state of the Global South (Liu et al., 2020) and has played as a regional conflict mediator (Chaziza, 2018). China has always stood for a non-interference policy, advocating political dialogue and the peaceful settlement of relevant issues (Bai, 2012). This kind of intervention in WANA conflicts is mainly related to keeping the peace, managing conflict, and securing regional security (Shichor, 2013).

For a long time, reporting on international issues has often been regarded as a barometer of China's internal affairs and diplomacy, highly tied to national diplomacy and external publicity (Shen, 2004; Shirk, 2007; H. Wang, 2003; J. Wang & Wang, 2014; S. Zhao, 2013). Although it has been loosened in recent years, its characteristics have not changed. In addition, Chinese media reports on WANA are deeply influenced by ethnic groups, religions, class struggles, international relations, and revolutionary theories. They are related to geopolitics, economy, and regional security (Cheng & Shi, 2009; d'Hooghe, 2007; Meidan, 2006; Sun & Zoubir, 2018).

### *2.3. Chinese Media and the Arab Uprisings*

Literature on China's media system and communication process include the Chinese system of propaganda and media control (Brady, 2009; Qiu, 1999; Shambaugh, 2017), the fusion of party–state powers and market rationality in the Chinese media (Barmé, 1999; T. V. Lee & Li, 2000; Y. Zhao, 2009), the emergence of China's "civil society" and the pursuit of news specialisation (J. M. Chan et al., 2004; D. C. Lynch, 1999; Pan & Chan, 2003; Pan & Lu, 2003), etc.

According to the Cyberspace Administration of China (2017), Chinese media are regulated by the government to some extent (Guo, 2019). Official news venues such as the *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency are the mouthpieces of the Communist Party of China, representing the views of national leadership (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). *People's Daily* is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. Because of this status and the special relationship between government and Central Committee, documenting the frequency and content of articles in the *People's Daily* is considered an effective means of gauging the current leadership's level of interest and views on a particular topic (Hoddie, 2006).

Business portals and social media generally have national audiences and are not very different from news websites and social media in other parts of the world (Kilgo et al., 2018). Since 2010, major commercial news sites have expanded their editorial teams by recruiting many senior editors and journalists from traditional media. Editors of commercial news websites publish or report on user-generated content from other online platforms or contribute original news stories by directly interviewing online users. Due to the financial independence (S. I. Zhang, 2012) of these portals and social media platforms, their news reports may deviate from official discourse to some extent (C. C. Lee et al., 2007). *Caixin Net* is a well-known financial and economic news website that is supported by subscriptions and professionally operated to satisfy the social elites' information needs (Ji et al., 2016). *Caixin Net* was founded by Ms Hu Shuli and officially launched in 2010. Publicly available information shows that the largest shareholder of *Caixin Net* is a private enterprise, accounting for about 23.4% of its shares (Tianyancha, 2021).

Some argue that from the very beginning, Beijing tried to curb the spread of information to its people through the Internet, which is interpreted as the government's efforts to prevent what was happening in the Arab uprisings movement from happening in China (Ha & Shin, 2019). However, the frames of the Chinese media seem to be inconsistently portrayed in many studies. One study showed that mainland Chinese media chose not to take a news perspective that was favourable toward the Arab uprisings (Du, 2016). Another piece of research showed that compared with Al Jazeera and the BBC, China Daily's website, without relying exclusively on the content of the official press agency of the People's Republic of China, Xinhua News Agency, acted like a Western-type news media (Karyotakis et al., 2017). A study stated that China Daily used the protest paradigm to belittle

the importance of the Arab uprisings (Ha & Shin, 2019). These different conclusions make this study even more valuable, begging the question: Why do Chinese media have such different views on the Arab uprisings? Are there political considerations behind these views?

## 3. Study Aim and Research Questions

As Graber (2003, p. 140) pointed out, "many extensive and clear judgments about the substantive content of mass media are still made without analysing the actual content of these media." This study investigates the frame used to report the uprisings in the past ten years. It discusses the position of this topic in the public discourse system and how the frame represents Chinese media, Chinese people, and the Chinese government. Based on the above information, the research questions we posed are:

1. How did selected Chinese media frame the Arab uprisings?
2. What are the differences between *People's Daily*'s and *Caixin Net*'s reporting on the Arab uprisings?
3. How have Chinese "media frames" changed over the decade, from 2011 until 2021?
4. What is the relationship between Chinese media coverage of the Arab uprisings and the Chinese government's WANA policy?

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Media and Material Samples

The material samples include all journalistic articles such as news stories, editorials, interviews, feature stories, columns, and commentaries published from *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net*, and statements from the Chinese Foreign Ministry from December 2010 to March 2021. Using the words "Arab uprisings," "Tunisia," "Egypt," "Mubarak," and "protest" as keywords, we searched the *People's Daily* database and obtained valid samples (n = 77). We searched the *Caixin Net* database and acquired valid samples (n = 148). We analysed relevant statements by the Chinese Foreign Ministry to explore the government's foreign policies and practical actions in the WANA during the Arab uprisings. We chose Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria as related countries because Tunisia experienced the first outbreak of the Arab uprisings, followed by Egypt, one of the most prominent countries in the WANA region. Since 2011, Syria and Libya have been in an ongoing armed conflict and civil war. Searches for the four countries were conducted on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, and valid samples (n = 131) were obtained after screening.

### 4.2. Coding

Two researchers screened and categorised articles according to coding themes. The coding book contains variables that considered the basic data of the articles, e.g., the frame, issue, news type, news source, subject, and position of the articles, making a total of six variables. Each story was coded as one of 4–5 possible categories outlined in previous studies (Groshek, 2008; Natarajan & Hao, 2003; Weaver et al., 2009). The variables and categories are shown in Table 1.

According to the coding book, the coding results of *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net* are described in Table 2.

Concerning statements by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, we chose the policies, subjects, issues, and propositions of the material, making a total of four variables as shown in Table 3. In short, policies include positive, neutral, and negative ones; subject included international organisation, the ruling party, the opposition, and the political situation; issues included the economy, politics, security, and people's livelihoods; propositions included peaceful settlement, political consultation, mediation, anti-violence, and rebuilding.

### 4.3. Reliability

Two coders were trained before jointly coding the first 20% of the materials and used a formula to test the reliability. Intercoder reliability scores were calculated using Holsti's coefficient of reliability (Holsti, 1969) for coding outcomes. The scores ranged from 90% to 100%, with Holsti's, indicating high coding reliability. When different codes appeared, the coders chose a more suitable code after discussion and modification.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Declining Media Attention to the Influence of Arab Uprisings

Overall, the attention of the Chinese media to Arab uprisings has declined over the past ten years. The number of sources in the three groups all showed downward trends (see Figure 1). The number of sources from *Caixin Net* and the Chinese Foreign Ministry showed the most obvious decline. The number of reports from *Caixin Net* (n = 148) is almost twice that of *People's Daily* (n = 77).

*People's Daily* emphasised the grand narrative of the change in the Arab region and attributed the movement to politics, economy, and human rights (see Figure 2). It mainly reported on Arab uprisings using disaster framing (37.66%) and contrasting framing (23.38%), with small variations over time in the number of articles using these types of framing. *People's Daily* hardly described the mass movement directly in the first two years. On August 29th, 2011, the first report in *People's Daily* that directly mentioned "Arab uprisings" used "uncertainty," "impossible to predict accurately," and "worrying" to express concern about this mass revolutionary movement (Zhong, 2011). When discussing the practical significance of political system reconstruction in WANA, *People's Daily* took the Western-style

"democratic system'' as contrast and put forward the viewpoint that "a specific political system is the product of a specific cultural soil" (Zhong, 2011, p. 3).

*Caixin Net* used the movement as the background. Over the past ten years, *Caixin Net*'s reporting has mainly used contextual framing (79.05%), followed by disaster framing (12.84%). In contrast, *Caixin Net* reported the Arab uprisings from a specific and personalised perspective and attributed the mass movement to "people's dissatisfaction with living standards, police violence, high unemployment rate, and poor human rights situation" (Yu, 2011, p. 1).

### *5.2. Framing and Balance*

The two media mainly focused on political issues (see Figure 3). Security issues were the second focus of *People's Daily*, while economic issues were *Caixin Net*'s second focus. *Caixin Net* consistently focused on political issues, while the focus of *People's Daily* varied.

**Table 1.** The category and description of coding.

| Category | | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Frame | Contrasting frame | Emphasising the differences between the Chinese and the international systems |
| | Disaster frame | Emphasising violent regional conflicts and the destruction of people's lives |
| | Critical frame | Focusing on an issue that was wrong and needed to be changed or supervised/monitored |
| | Accountability frame | Emphasising that China should learn from the experiences and lessons regarding certain topics |
| | Contextual frame | Presenting historical events as a background |
| Issue | Economy | Involving economic issues, economic conferences held by the government and business enterprises, and daily production and operation activities |
| | Politics | Involving political reform, political systems, geopolitics, and ideology |
| | Security | Involving regional wars, armed conflicts, illegal immigrants, and refugees |
| | People's livelihoods | Including human rights issues, civil rights, and the fight for the rights of vulnerable groups |
| News type | News | Which is short in length and reports on events within the last two days |
| | News story | Including news about influential and famous people and events in local areas in which journalists often report details and changes in Arab uprisings by collecting materials and selecting typical examples |
| | In-depth report | Involving reporters deeply immersed in the local scenes to investigate and selectively expose the complex relationships among different news reports |
| | Commentary | Articles written by observers, including the dialogues and interviews of scholars |
| News source | Foreign government/ organisation | |
| | Foreign media | |
| | Local people | |
| | Chinese journalists | |
| | Scholars/researchers | |
| Subject | International subjects | |
| | National subjects | |
| | Enterprises | |
| | People | |
| | Politicians | |
| Position | Positive | Supporting, affirming, and praising the Arab uprisings |
| | Neutral | No apparent positive or negative position or the position is impossible to judge |
| | Negative | Expressing opposition or criticism towards Arab uprisings and arguing that it had adverse consequences |

**Table 2.** The coding of data from *Caixin Net* (n = 148) and *People's Daily* (n = 77).

| Coding | | *Caixin Net* (number, percentage to the total) | *People's Daily* (number, percentage to the total) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Frame | Contrasting frame | 2 \| 1.35% | 18 \| 23.38% |
| | Disaster frame | 19 \| 12.84% | 29 \| 37.66% |
| | Critical frame | 1 \| 0.68% | 13 \| 16.88% |
| | Accountability frame | 9 \| 6.08% | 13 \| 16.88% |
| | Contextual frame | 117 \| 79.05% | 4 \| 5.19% |
| Issue | Economy | 32 \| 21.62% | 14 \| 18.18% |
| | Politics | 89 \| 60.14% | 35 \| 45.45% |
| | Security | 5 \| 3.38% | 18 \| 23.38% |
| | People's livelihoods | 22 \| 14.86% | 10 \| 12.99% |
| News type | News | 10 \| 6.76% | 4 \| 5.19% |
| | News story | 88 \| 59.46% | 22 \| 28.57% |
| | In-depth report | 8 \| 5.41% | 11 \| 14.29% |
| | Commentary | 42 \| 28.38% | 40 \| 51.95% |
| News source | Foreign government or organisation | 43 \| 29.05% | 8 \| 10.39% |
| | Foreign media | 4 \| 2.70% | 6 \| 7.79% |
| | Local people | 4 \| 2.70% | 9 \| 11.69% |
| | Chinese journalists | 61 \| 41.22% | 12 \| 15.58% |
| | Scholars/researchers | 36 \| 24.32% | 42 \| 54.55% |
| Subject | International subjects | 79 \| 53.38% | 35 \| 45.45% |
| | National subjects | 33 \| 22.30% | 19 \| 24.68% |
| | Enterprises | 4 \| 2.70% | 3 \| 3.90% |
| | People | 16 \| 10.81% | 20 \| 25.97% |
| | Politicians | 16 \| 10.81% | 0 \| 0% |
| Position | Positive | 3 \| 2.03% | 0 \| 0% |
| | Neutral | 102 \| 68.92% | 22 \| 28.57% |
| | Negative | 43 \| 29.05% | 55 \| 71.43% |

**Table 3.** The coding of statements of the Chinese Foreign Ministry (n = 131).

| Category | | Chinese Foreign Ministry (number, percentage to the total) |
|---|---|---|
| Policy | Positive | 50 \| 38.17% |
| | Neutral | 68 \| 51.91% |
| | Negative | 13 \| 9.92% |
| Subject | International organisations | 29 \| 22.14% |
| | The ruling party | 36 \| 27.48% |
| | The opposition | 10 \| 7.63% |
| | The political situation | 56 \| 42.75% |
| Issue | Economy | 5 \| 3.82% |
| | Politics | 104 \| 79.39% |
| | Security | 15 \| 11.45% |
| | People's livelihoods | 7 \| 5.34% |
| Proposition | Peaceful settlement | 34 \| 25.95% |
| | Political consultation | 29 \| 22.14% |
| | Mediation | 17 \| 12.98% |
| | Anti-violence | 26 \| 19.85% |
| | Rebuilding | 25 \| 19.08% |

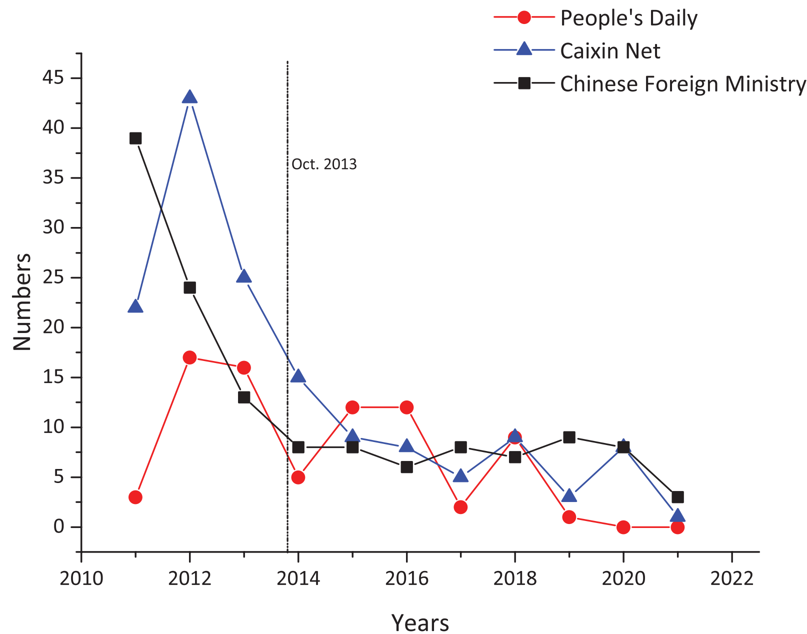


**Figure 1.** Changes in the number of articles from the two media platforms and of statements from the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

The two media platforms consistently but infrequently covered economic issues. Finally, *People's Daily* was more focused on security and livelihood issues than *Caixin Net*.

*People's Daily* emphasised the regime's subversion by the Arab uprisings and the breaking of the Arab world's original regional and political order. The security issues (23.38%) show more concern about the chaos and bloodiness of the movement. People's livelihood issues (12.99%) mainly describe the difficulty of life from the residents' perspectives.

In contrast, *Caixin Net* reports on the political issues (60.14%) of the Arab uprisings mainly focus on two aspects. The first is as the background element of the evolution of political patterns in the WANA region. The second is a tool to measure the positions of global politicians. The second issue is the economy (21.62%), which mainly involves global energy problems and economic recession. In addition, it also reports the gap between the rich and the poor and income problems within Arab countries.

As shown in Figure 4, *People's Daily* paid more attention to the impact of the Arab uprisings on local people. *Caixin Net* was more inclined to cover politicians. At the beginning of the Arab uprisings, both media were more likely to publish articles about international subjects than towards the end of the study period, as *Caixin Net*'s coverage of such subjects gradually decreased, while that of the *People's Daily* varied.

As shown in Figure 5, *People's Daily* took a negative position towards the Arab uprisings (71.4%), especially after the Chinese government publicly stated its position,

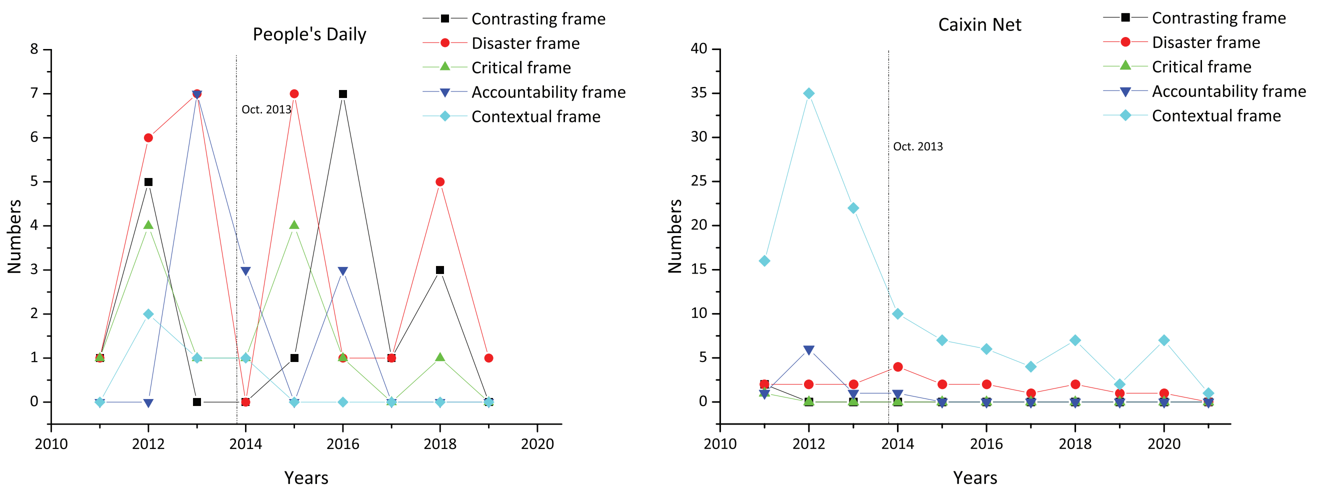


**Figure 2.** Comparing the coverage frames in *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net*.

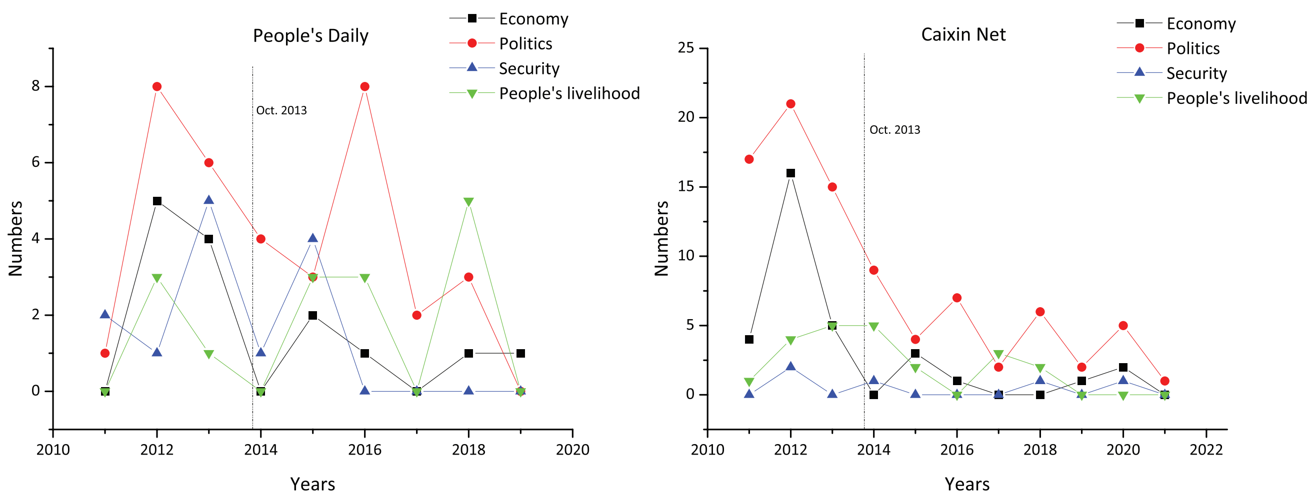


**Figure 3.** Changes in the number of issues reported on by the *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net*.

emphasising the social unrest and sustained economic decline brought about by the Arab uprisings. *Caixin Net* was more neutral, emphasising that the Arab uprisings had brought about significant changes and greatly influenced life in the Arab world while avoiding obvious positions (68.9%). The only three articles that reported positively on the Arab uprisings were from *Caixin Net* and quotes from foreigners.

### *5.3. The Media Agenda in Relation to Geopolitics in WANA (2011–2021)*

The media agenda is closely related to Chinese politicians' internal affairs, diplomacy, and geopolitics. From the perspective of China, on January 19th, 2012, Premier Wen Jiabao attended the fourth China-Arab Business Conference in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, and systematically explained China's neutral policies towards the turmoil in the WANA region for the first time. Both *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net* had similar positions in 2012. From January to March 2012, *People's Daily* published nine articles that took a neutral position when analysing the Arab uprisings and the reasons for its outbreak.

On May 13th, 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab uprisings movement, and met with Tunisian President Essebsi and Prime Minister Essid. Following his visit, Minister Wang Yi accepted an exclusive interview with the media and talked about WANA. This also set the tone for the content of subsequent reports published by the *People's Daily*. China hopes to establish long-term cooperative relations with the Arab region and maintain stable economic exchange.

From an international perspective, a "colour revolution" broke out in Ukraine in 2014. *People's Daily* cited common patterns in these changes and negatively stated international support for these activities. In 2015, coverage of Arab uprisings increased again. The primary reporting frames were disaster and criticism, and the coverage included political and regional security issues. In 2015, a civil war broke out in Yemen, and the Chinese government and the People's Liberation Army carried out a large-scale evacuation of Chinese nationals living

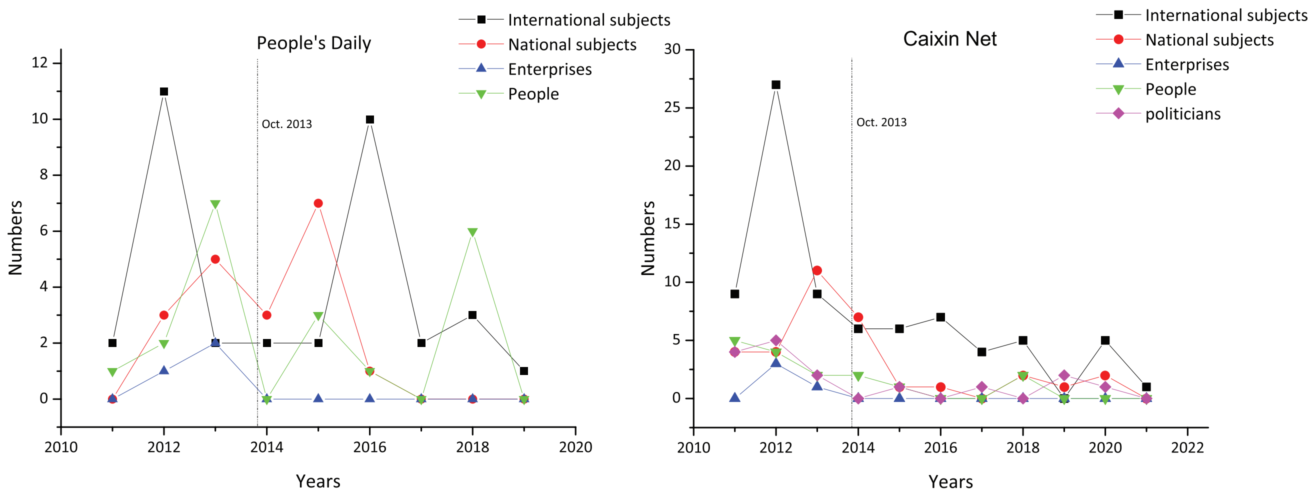


**Figure 4.** Changes in the number of subjects covered by the *People's Daily* and *Caixin Net*.

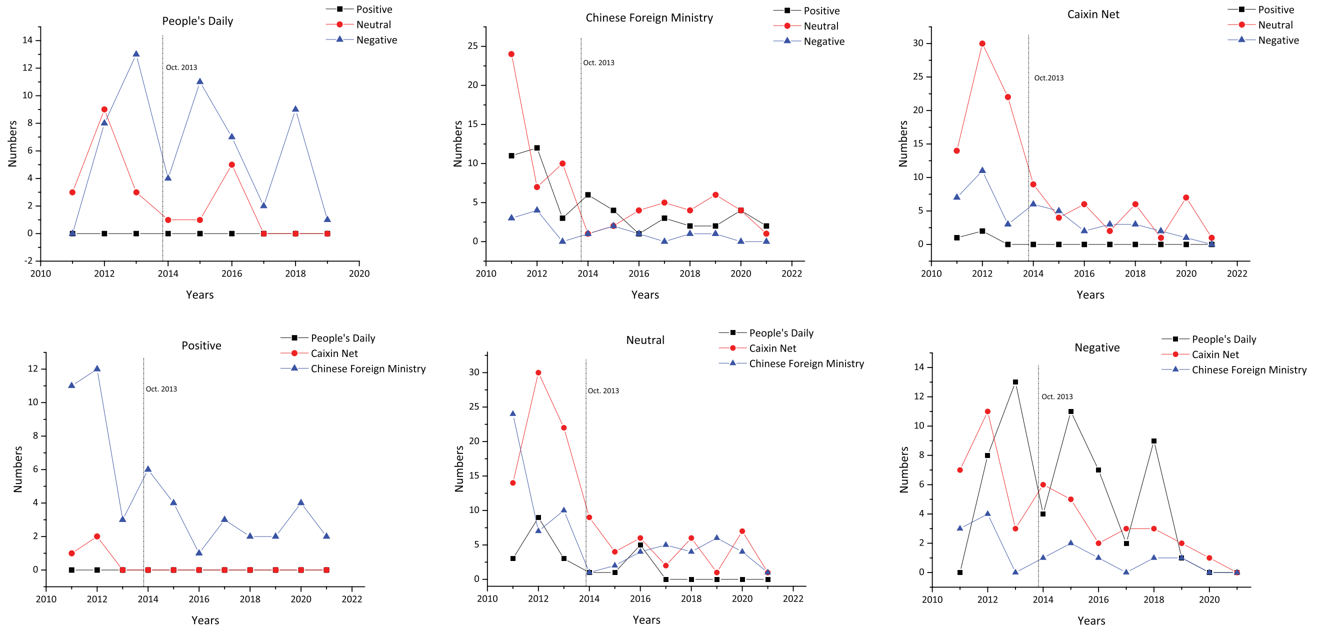


**Figure 5.** Positions towards the subjects discussed in the *People's Daily*, *Caixin Net*, and statements from the Chinese Foreign Ministry from 2010 to 2021.

in the country. The main findings can be summarised as follows: The social movement profoundly impacted the regional situation and political environment, but regional economic development and individual people's lives were not improving.

At the end of 2018, US President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of troops from Syria. Syrian refugees living in foreign countries began to return home. Although the reporting frame was still dominated by a disaster and contrast frame during this period, following the war, people accounted for a more significant proportion of the news sources and subjects of news articles, and the Chinese media were more inclined to explore the Arab uprisings from the refugee perspective.

In fact, unlike the strategic contraction of the US and the active involvement of the European Union in the Arab region, China still adopts a longer-term and more basic strategic means for Arab countries and only wants to maintain friendly relations with countries in the Arab region and expand its right to express its views.

### *5.4. Chinese Media and the Statements and Agenda of the Chinese Foreign Ministry*

Content of the Chinese Foreign Ministry statements can be identified into four categories: policies, subjects, issues, and propositions. As shown in Figure 6, the issues and policies differed most between the two media. There were five subcategories of propositions, and the statements most frequently covered social movements, including "anti-violence" (21.4%) and "peaceful settlement" (24.4%), which revealed China's consistent

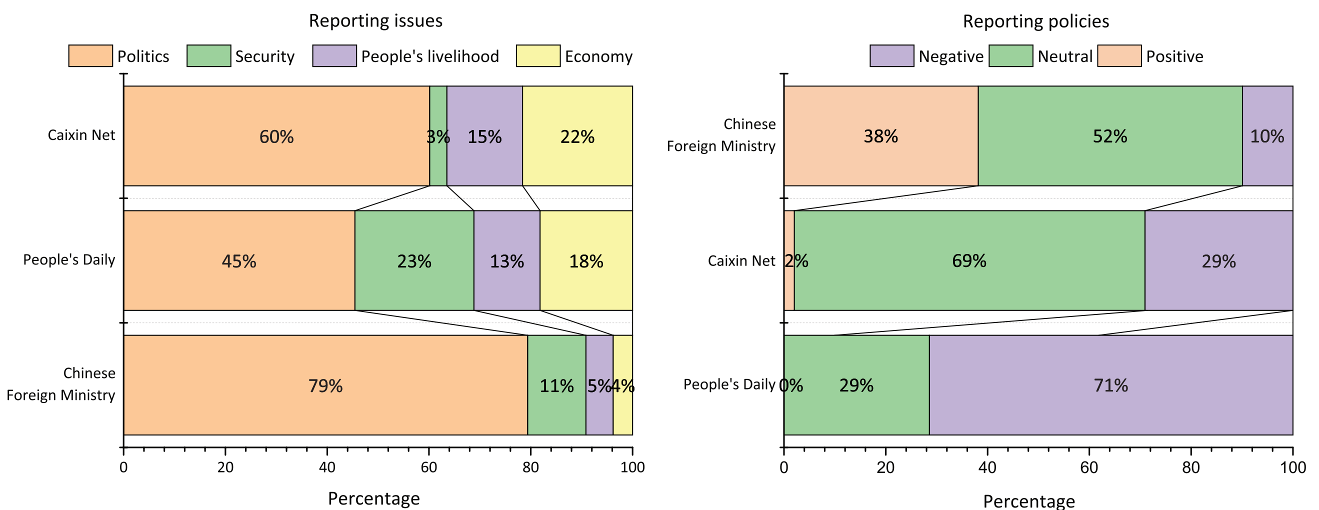


**Figure 6.** The percentage of reporting issues and policies of *People's Daily*, *Caixin Net*, and the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

position in dealing with foreign affairs. The ministry's statements also discuss specific measures such as political consultations (20.61%) and mediation by international organisations such as the United Nations (12.98%).

Among the four subcategories of the statements' subjects, political situations account for the most proportion (42.75%), followed by the ruling party (26.72%), and international organisations (22.14%), which once again shows that the regional political situation is the focus of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's attention. Only 6.87% of the statements dealt with opposition parties, showing that the Chinese Foreign Ministry has little direct interest in opposition parties in the WANA region.

Concerning issues, political issues were the most commonly discussed (79.39%), followed by regional security issues (11.45%), livelihood issues (5.34%), and economic issues (3.82%). This shows that among the issues in the Arab region, especially from 2011 to 2013, the Chinese government was most concerned with political issues.

Regarding policies, neutral/concerned policies accounted for the most significant proportion of policies expressed in the statements (51.91%), followed by positive (38.17%) and negative policies (9.92%).

Through cross-analysis, one can see that the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the *People's Daily*, and *Caixin Net* had significant correlations in terms of the issues ($\chi^2$(df = 6) = 50.936, p < 0.05) and the policies (total > 320 (356) for 4 df, $p < 0.05$). It shows that Chinese media follow the statements and agenda of the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

To test whether changes in the Chinese government's policies influence the way Chinese media reported on the Arab uprisings, we examined Chinese policies before and after October 2013 when China proposed the "One Belt, One Road" initiative officially, to find that the government responses and news reporting showed no obvious change.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The study selected the most influential official media (*People's Daily*) and one influential commercial media (*Caixin Net*) to analyse China's coverage of the Arab uprisings. We conducted a content analysis of 356 separate documents to identify and categorise the way stories were framed. More specifically, our analyses focused on four aspects: the general way in which the uprisings were framed; the differences between Chinese media reporting on the uprisings; how the frames have changed over a decade from 2011 until 2021; the relationship between Chinese media coverage of the uprisings and the Chinese government's WANA policy.

We found that the number of reports on Arab issues by the two media was correlated. Both them and the Chinese foreign ministry show a decreasing trend over the past decade, focusing mainly on the international and domestic subjects related to political issues. However, there are differences within Chinese media. First, the *People's Daily* has a small amount of information, which may only account for 20–30% of *Caixin Net*. Second, *People's Daily* used the disaster frame while *Caixin Net* mainly used the contextual frame. Third, the position and tendency of *People's Daily* were close to the official policy and mainstream ideology advocated by the government, and *Caixin Net* is more independent. This difference is mainly due to the reform of the cultural system, especially the transition from cultural institutions (*shiye*) to commercial industries (*chanye*; see Keane & Zhao, 2014).

Chinese media are different from Arabic and Western media in observing and explaining the Arab uprisings (Du, 2016; Guzman, 2016; Halverson et al., 2013; Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). This difference is reflected in the initial characterisation of the movement and the frame and narrative discourse. Specifically, it is mainly reflected in two points:

First, the belief and value shaping in Arab Uprisings are different. CNN and Fox News described the Arab Uprising as involving "people seeking democracy" (Guzman, 2016), some Arab media described it as "forces for social mobilisation and political change" (Halverson et al., 2013, p. 312), whereas Chinese media described it as "causing great damage to the economy" (Jiao et al., 2012, p.23). Frames are powerful because they impart meaning (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). All of them are aimed at making the reports resonate effectively in their regions and strengthening their legitimacy and attractiveness. By choosing some aspects of revolutionary reality, the media text limits the audience's interpretation. Especially in international conflicts, the national media may have different interpretations for the audience.

Second, the scheme descriptions of Arab uprisings are different. Chinese media did not mention the specific strategies of the uprisings. However, social media and independent media from Arabic more clearly described the protest and reform scheme, scale of mobilisation, and specific movement slogan (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). Western media believe that the Arab uprisings is the product of "resentment against the government" (Lim, 2012). This long resentment encourages individuals to get together, protest against the status quo and find a way out. The appeal of this mass movement was constructed as a request for a thorough change in the whole social structure, and there was a political appeal from the beginning (Smith & Fetner, 2009).

As Fenton (2008) thinks, it combines many vital elements, such as cultural resonance, the historical narration of inheriting a common heritage, and efforts to solve the past moral, ethical, and national crises. Media provide communication opportunities, necessary connections, and shared political imagination. We believe that this difference originates from cultural, regional politics, and other factors.

Media representations are complex social constructions (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013), and it is likely that multiple factors, including source selection, first-hand

experience, and political ideology shaped media frames of revolution participants (Guzman, 2016). This study demonstrates that Chinese media portrayals of the WANA region are simultaneously dynamic. The Chinese media's shaping of the Arab uprisings depends on China's diplomatic stance and international political image and is influenced by international public opinion. In the post-Arab uprisings stage, Chinese media are generally pragmatic and more concerned about reconstruction, political stability, social security, and the recovery of people's livelihoods.

**Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank Raquel Silva, academic editors Hanan Badr, Lena-Maria Möller, and the reviewers for their valuable support. This article has been produced as part of the major project of the National Social Science Fund of China, Research on the Establishment of Omnimedia Communication System (Grant No. 20ZDA057).

**Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Disclaimer**

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is supporting the thematic issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation,'' edited by AGYA alumna Hanan Badr (Gulf University of Science and Technology, Kuwait) and AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The authors remain solely responsible for the content and recommendations provided in this publication, which do not reflect the positions of AGYA or any of its funding partners.

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)**
**2021, Volume 9, Issue 4, Pages 345–359**
**https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4491**

Article

# Mediatizing Slum Relocation in Egypt: Between Legitimization and Stigmatization

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Submitted: 7 May 2021 | Accepted: 15 November 2021 | Published: 17 December 2021

**Abstract**
In Egypt, the relocation of residents of informal areas of housing into "proper" living environments is presented as a major political achievement offering citizens a much-improved quality of life. Therefore, it is not surprising that, following the Arab Uprisings, the current regime is widely publicizing relocation projects as success stories on TV and social media. As a way of garnering legitimization and securing stability, this official representation is reshaping the residents' urban life and evoking narratives of slum dwellers' transformation into respected citizens. Tackling a new area of interdisciplinary research between urban studies and media and communication studies, this article investigates the portrayal in mainstream media channels and social media platforms of two relocation projects (Al-Asmarat in Cairo and Al-Max in Alexandria), contrasting them with the residents' perceptions of their new homes and their efforts to produce counter-imagery. The authors argue that both the state-dominated representation of the Al-Asmarat resettlement as an ideal solution to the crisis of informal settlements, as well as the more bottom-up construction of the Al-Max community as a picturesque fishing community, do not reflect the material experience of the inhabitants—despite it being presented as such in nationwide reporting. The effective centering of the public debate around the mediatized images has thus deflected criticism and enabled urban development projects to be positioned to legitimize the current rule despite the shortcomings of their implementation.

**Keywords**
informal settlements; legitimization; mediatization; relocation; social media; urban development

**Issue**
This article is part of the issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation," edited by Hanan Badr (Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait) and Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany).

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## 1. Introduction

Egypt has a long-standing tradition of instrumentalizing urban development and housing projects to garner political support and demonstrate the government's capacity to improve the citizen's livelihoods—which in turn legitimizes the regime. Prominent examples are Downtown Cairo, a prestige project by Khedive Ismail (Abu-Lughod, 2018; Sims & Abu-Lughod, 2010) and the various generations of new towns such as 10th of Ramadan and 6th of October under Sadat, New Cairo, Sherouk, and Badr under Mubarak, the New Administrative Capital and the fourth generation of new towns under El-Sisi's administration (Elmouelhi, 2019; Sims & Abu-Lughod, 2010). While these examples mainly target the middle classes and have been propagated as such, they are linked to the question of informal settlements, the right to decent housing, and social justice, which have been key issues of the 2011 uprisings. Slum clearance has been widely discussed in Egyptian media, often with a strong

bias against informal areas and the patronizing figure of the "slum-dweller." In 2018, President El-Sisi declared to free Egypt from "*ashwa'eyat*" by the end of the following year (Karima, 2018). The term *ashwa'eyat*, meaning haphazard or spontaneous, is widely used in Egypt and Arab countries for informal settlements. El-Sisi launched an ambitious program of eliminating unsafe areas and relocating their inhabitants to new housing complexes. Resettlement and upgrading decisions of *ashwa'eyat* are based on the Informal Settlements Development Fund (ISDF) classification of informal settlements into "unsafe" and "unplanned areas." Unsafe areas are again subdivided into two grades: grade one being "life-threatening" areas from which inhabitants must be relocated, and "grade two" areas which allow for either relocation or in-situ resettlement (Abdel-Moneim et al., 2021; Khalifa, 2011, 2015).

In the context of the relocation, different media formats are essential to the communication between the regime and the Egyptian people. Egyptian media can be categorized into the official state-owned channels (e.g., *Al Ahram* newspaper, official Egyptian TV channels) and privately-owned news channels, which are often under considerable government influence (e.g., *Alyoum Alsabea* newspaper and CBC and DMC TV channels). Since the Arab Uprisings, the successive Egyptian regimes have taken steps to limit freedom of expression and control the narrative in Egyptian media coverage (Abdulla, 2014). The "Media Ownership Monitor 2018/19" assesses the media landscape to have a "medium to high risk of (political) control over media outlets and distribution networks" and "high political control on media funding," among other factors (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

After the 2011 uprising, alternative media with its decentralized content creation and ability to evade government control had offered a new window of opportunity to express opinions, at least for a period of time. However, the view of the Arab Uprisings as a "Facebook Revolution" is a simplified interpretation of the events and interactions between media and politics (Badr, 2019b; Richter & Badr, 2017). Before 2011 and until 2013, newly established private media drew on blogs and social media platforms to publish on marginalized issues, helping diverse social groups to raise concerns that otherwise would not have had a public platform. Starting in 2013, however, there has been a crackdown on the internet and all alternative spaces of expression, leading to increased political leverage on the media landscape in Egypt (Abdulla, 2014; Badr, 2019a; Iskander, 2011; Richter & Badr, 2017).

### 1.1. Research Problem

The mediatization of urban planning projects and real estate projects in Egypt has so far received little academic attention. Hendawy and Stollmann (2020) declare a "visual culture of Egypt's urbanization" but cover only a small segment of projects relevant to the affluent middle and upper classes. Wahba (2020) explored the mediatization of the Maspero triangle and how this urban development project was presented in the current socio-political context. A systematic analysis of government-led mediatization for the urban development of informal settlements—especially with regards to the imageries and identities envisioned and enshrined in both official and non-mainstream media after the Arab Uprisings—is still missing. This article investigates the official narrative vs. the residents' perceptions through two case studies. Aiming at bridging the two disciplines of urban studies and media and communication studies, we explore how media plays a role in forming residents' perception and their habitats, weaving narratives that are simultaneously in- and excluding the residents themselves and show how political communication regarding those projects carries lasting embedded messages of stigmatization for the residents even after relocation.

### 1.2. Methodology

The interlinkages between urban projects, politics, and media are often overlooked in the literature on the new Arab urbanism after the Arab Uprisings. This article uses an exploratory approach, aiming to give an insight into the narratives of official media on relocation projects and to contextualize them within the broader hybrid media context and the power struggles in Egypt after the Arab Uprising, especially in recent years (2018–2021). Agreeing with other studies on authoritarian regimes and media (Badr & Demmelhuber, 2014), the authors build on the hypothesis that professional and social media channels are utilized by different actors to produce identities and narratives centered around relocation (Richter & Badr, 2017).

Relocation projects are discussed via two case studies in Cairo and Alexandria using qualitative analysis of different media (Table 1), participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and the replication of statements made through Facebook (Table 2). Al-Asmarat in Cairo is the largest Egyptian relocation project with about 18,300 families as beneficiaries and resembles a gated community for the lower classes. The Alexandrian case study of Al-Max portrays the relocation of a fishing community into apartment buildings, resulting in a widespread backlash in alternative and social media for ignoring the fact that direct access to the sea is a basic need to sustain the people's livelihoods.

The discursive recount of media material produced through governmental news channels and private media outlets is contextualized with a qualitative analysis of the residents' perception of their original habitat and their new destination. For Al-Asmarat, non-probability sampling was used to select the interviewees to represent the main three places of origin and the proportion of their numbers. Furthermore, they had to be older than 16, have spent two years in the new destination,

**Table 1.** Overview of analyzed media.

| | Used media | Date released | Media type | Date retrieved | The identified media is used for |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Professional media | *Holm Gedeed* [New Dream] | 30 May 2016 | Youtube documentary | July 2021 | Analysis (mediatization and the perception of relocation projects "Al-Asmarat") |
| | *Man Ahyaha* [Who Brings it to Life] | 12 February 2021 | Youtube documentary (DMC channel) | July 2021 | Analysis (stigmatization of informal settlements, mediatization and the perception of relocation projects Al-Asmarat) |
| | *Bolteya El-Ayma* [Swimming Bolteya] | 2008 | Movie | July 2021 | Analysis (stigmatization of informal settlements, mediatization and the perception of relocation projects "El-Max") |
| | *Elyoum* | 2016–present | Online newspaper | June 2019 | Analysis (mediatization and the perception of relocation projects Al-Asmarat) |
| | *Alsharq Alawsat* | 2007 | Newspaper | May 2020 | Analysis (mediatization and the perception of informal settlements El-Max) |
| | Tadamun | 2017 | Website | August 2021 | Analysis (stigmatization of informal settlements/mediatization and the perception of relocation projects) |
| Social media | *Al-Asmarat tatahadth* [Al-Asmarat speaks] (Page: 56,594 likes); | | | August 2021 | |
| | *Al-Asmarat Mubasher* [Live from Al-Asmarat] (Page: 28,698 likes); | | | August 2021 | Analysis (residents' opinions about relocation projects, reflections, personal experiences) |
| | *Al-Asmarat Today* [Al-Asmarat Elyoum] (Group: 27,600 members); | 2016–present | 4 Facebook groups/pages | August 2021 | |
| | El-safha El-rasmya le Hay Al-Asmarat [Al-Asmarat neighborhood official page] (Page: 6,300 followers) | | | August 2021 | Analysis formation (official news and updates) |
| | (From a total sum of 45 groups) | | | August 2021 | |

and lived in an unsafe area for more than five years. For Al-Max, relocation happened in two stages: the first in February 2018 and the second in early 2020. The selected sample for interviews covers both stages and the key user groups: housewives, children, shop owners, fish vendors, and fishermen. The number of interviews in each case was 25, which proved a sufficient sample size to produce theoretical saturation during the limited timeframe of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Based on secondary resources and primary data collected in fieldwork between 2019 and 2020, a deductive qualitative analysis was conducted for each case study, using coding for the content analysis of the interviews and the text of the comments (Saldaña, 2016). The portrayal of the media material published on Facebook

**Table 2.** Overview of interviews.

| | Al-Asmarat | Al-Max |
|---|---|---|
| Interviewed sample size | 25 | 25 |
| Timeframe of the interviews | 2019 | 2020 |
| Location | Cairo | Alexandria |
| Selection of the population sample | 1. Permanent resident in El-Asmarat for a minimum of two years<br>2. Former permanent resident in informal settlements for a minimum of five years<br>3. Age of 16 years or older | All of them have been relocated from Al Max to the new project |

related to relocation contrasts with the residents' perception and its representation in and through social media. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Arabic to English are by the authors.

*1.3. Mediatization, Social Space, and the Built Environment*

To bring together the concept of mediatization and the materiality of a produced built environment, it is useful to turn to Henri Lefebvre's notion of "social space." According to Lefebvre, "(social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre, 1992, p. 26). In other words, the materiality of space is irrelevant outside of its realization and interpretation as a social space, but it can also not be disconnected from it (cf. Löw et al., 2008, p. 52). For analytical purposes, Lefebvre proposes three distinct components that collectively construct social space as a landscape of human interaction—spatial practice, representations of space, and representational (or lived) spaces. Spatial practices subsume the space as shaped by the dominant system of (re-)production and the everyday interaction with the physical environment. Representations of space refer to concepts of space and the imprint of power structures on our understanding of space. Representational or lived spaces, however, are the spaces as they present themselves to the subject, a physical space superimposed with meaning and symbols, a sort of creative or subversive annotation of spaces of representation (Lefebvre, 1992, pp. 33–38; Löw et al., 2008, pp. 52–53; Schmid, 2008, pp. 28, 36–38).

Both representations of space, as well as spaces of representation, offer a way to link media and the practice of mediatization of political activity with the general production of social space and the institutionalized practice of urban planning. At the very least, we should expect the phenomena described by Schulz as "amalgamation" and "accommodation" to be observable as features of mediatized urbanism (Schulz, 2004, p. 89). Amalgamation refers to media slipping into the everyday and becoming a crucial element in the perception and interpretation of our surroundings, as we document in the case study of Al-Max, where residents compose the imaginary of their home village partly based on existing film projects. This can be understood as a practice of the representational or lived space, a media imprint on the physical environment. The process of accommodation, on the other hand, refers to the non-media-based activity being streamlined in such a way that it is more readily compatible with or even subordinated under the logic of communication in relevant media. This is a process we observe in the Al-Asmarat project with its distinct emphasis on public relations.

Clearly, media has an instrumental effect on the way representations of space are produced and communicated. This is in line with Hjarvard's hypothesis on the structural impact of the logic of media on the performance of politics. According to Hjarvard, "Mediatization refers to… process, whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media's influence" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 114). Due to the constant interaction of individuals and institutions with mediated content and the role of media as a coding-decoding, or interpretative device, politics and politicians are forced to shape the content of politics in accordance with what is communicable. A discursive dependency is established, shaping the public representation of institutions and their actions (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 107). Here Hjarvard picks up an argument by Mazzoleni and Schulz: As social actors and organizations accommodate themselves to the logic of media (or rather mediated communication), they become dependent on the media. He goes as far as saying that "mediatized politics is politics that has lost its autonomy" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 107; cf. Mazzoleni, 2014; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999, pp. 249–250).

Consequently, interactive social media and professional media are integrated into the policy process and how politics is performed. Hjarvard argues that media, especially modern social media with its integration of a large number of contributors and its own internal regulations, can be described as an institution of its own which has become a "structural aspect of modernity" and, as such, should be treated in research as a social—and thus by extension political—object with inherent formal and informal structures and logics of production (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 107). The concepts of representational space and spaces of representation, as produced, conceived,

and perceived social spaces allow us to apply this "structural" logic of mediatization to the production of social and hence mediatized spaces in our case studies areas of Al-Max and Al-Asmarat to document the central role of media in shaping communication in and about urban development projects.

### *1.4. Informal Settlements and Mediatization Since the 2011 Uprising*

Even before 2011, filmmakers had turned their cameras on Egyptian slums, introducing a biased representation of the culture of these neighborhoods to public discourse. In the last two decades, informal settlements, especially in Cairo, have been framed through film production as characteristically dirty, inhabited by criminals and other immoral elements of society. Repetition has led to a stigmatized stereotype. This has been brought up in public debates questioning whether this exported stereotype of slum dwellers is morally acceptable and even reflects the actual situation in these poor areas (Elmouelhi, 2014; Mofeed & Elgendy, 2016).

However, during the 2011 uprisings and in their aftermath, urban informality in Egypt was exacerbated, in part due to the absence of law enforcement under the status of political unrest. This resulted in a tremendous increase in informal construction. Informal settlements reached 38.6% of the total construction mass as per official statistics but are likely much higher (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, 2016). Learning its lessons from the unrests, the Egyptian regime under the leadership of President El-Sisi has started to pay attention to the poorer citizens as a mobilizing force (Ismail, 2013). Reframing the figure of the *ashwa'eyat* residents as a reflection of the poverty and shortcomings of the previous regime, the government prioritized the improvement of livelihoods and the transformation of residents into proper citizens (Wahba, 2020). According to Soliman (2021), this introduced further socially and culturally stigmatizing representations of urban informality and informal residents by decision-makers and media. Unsafe areas became a problem to be overcome, and the solution offered was relocation to new housing projects (Eissa et al., 2016).

Under the slogan of "Egypt Without Slums," projects were established in several governorates. Although urban planning after the 2011 uprising has become more market-oriented, housing projects for the low-income classes are mostly carried out by the state as private sector investments in affordable housing for lower-income groups are considered risky for developers seeking high-profit margins (Elmouelhi, 2019; Hendawy & Stollmann, 2020; Shawkat, 2020; Sims & Abu-Lughod, 2010). According to the ISDF's statistics, in 2014, 364 areas across Egypt were identified as unsafe (Maabady, 2015). By June 2021, celebrating seven years of President El-Sisi, short national TV advertisements documented the regime's slum relocation projects: "The Egyptians have succeeded in developing 298 *ashwa'eyat* unsafe areas in different governorates….177,5 thousand families have received new flats in safe and healthy areas" (Channel One, 2021). Represented as a major pillar and achievement among many other urbanization and construction projects, the reports carried an explicit message of progress and political potency.

## 2. Mediatization of Urban Development Policies: Two Case Studies

Mediatization and its interaction with politics have been widely discussed in the past decade, including influences on the content of policies, negotiation of policy, creation of public and institutional consensus, and naturally the communication about politics (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Lilleker, 2006; Mazzoleni, 2014, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). Some, like Hjarvard (2008), go as far as ascribing institutional qualities to the media, which as such perform collective functions and manage central aspects of social life via rule setting, sanctioning, and the allocation of resources. Missing in these discussions of applied mediatization is the effect of "mediatized" policies on material practices and vice versa. From the perspective of urban research—which as a discipline is concerned with the interaction of societies and the built environment—this represents an unsatisfactory flatting of the analysis of the relation between space and its social representations, as it has been debated under the term "spatial turn" (Harvey, 2016; Schroer, 2008; Soja, 1989). Implemented policies take shape in built environments of considerable durability. The interaction of residents and the wider society with these material consequences—as our case studies will show—introduces its own dynamics on mediatized imageries. While both cases are not comparable in terms of scale, they do allow for an exploratory discussion of the scope of mediatization in the discourse of *ashwa'eyat* and urban redevelopment projects in Egypt. In this struggle over attention and interpretation in the mediatized urban development in Egypt, three elements can be reconstructed: (a) An official representation of successful development projects through different media and tight control of this narrative, (b) a struggle by residents to participate in the public narrative on relocated settlements and voice their perception of their new environments, and (c) attempts at re-narrating qualities of place regarding the places of origin of the relocated residents.

## 3. Al-Asmarat Relocation Project

Al-Asmarat (or "Long-live Egypt City," Tahia Masr) is located in Muqattam district southeast of Cairo city. The national housing project with a total area of 78,4 ha is executed by the Egyptian government. Initiated under Cairo Governor Galal El Saeed, the relocation gathered momentum in the wake of Egypt's Vision 2030, which aimed for complete slum eradication by the end of

2030 under the pillar of national urban development goals (I. El-Hanafi, interview, July 29, 2019; Leila, 2019). Planned in three phases with a total budget of more than three billion EGP, the project is considered a quantum leap in dealing with slums considering the scale and allocated funds (I. El-Hanafi, interview, July 29, 2019). It is to accommodate a population of over 80,000 people comprised of former residents of life-threatening areas and unsuitable shelters, mostly in Manshiyet Nasser, Istabl Antar, and Maspero (Cairo Governorate—Al-Asmarat Neighborhood Management Unit, 2019; State Information Service, 2016). The project's first and second phases were officially inaugurated by the Egyptian president on the 30th of May 2016; the third phase in 2020. The attendance of the Egyptian president and the top statesmen has created a strong impetus for Egyptian media to pay this project special attention. For the first time in Egypt, the inauguration ceremony of a social housing project was live-streamed and broadcast on both public and private TV channels (Figure 1). In 2020, the Egyptian Prime Minister Madbouly announced the intention to replicate the model of Al-Asmarat in each governorate after the project's success to fulfill its objectives ("Egypt's Sisi directs," 2020).

*3.1. Al-Asmarat Coverage in Mainstream Media*

There were two main streams in the media coverage of the project. Firstly, in order to propagate the project as the pinnacle of the Egyptian state's achievements, the whole spectrum of public and pro-regime TV channels, official journals, filmmakers, and online content creators was mobilized to capture the positive side of the project with great praise. Several documentaries were produced by the Department of Morale Affairs of the Egyptian Armed Forces and other TV channels to portray the transformation of slum dwellers' lives after their relocation to Al-Asmarat. *New Dream* is one of the early documentaries prepared in 2016 to portray the success of Al-Asmarat project (among other projects) in improving the lives of tens of thousands of Egyptians who were deprived of basic decent living conditions.

The project has remained in the focus of media coverage. *Man Ahyaha* (Who brings it to life) is the most recent documentary to portray the fruitful results of Al-Asmarat project four years after its construction, broadcast on various TV channels and online platforms. Delivered with emphatic language, it compares the residents' life before and after the relocation. Statements such as "The cries that were met by deaf ears had finally found listeners and supporters" (narrator, 00:00:16–00:00:23 hr) exemplify the governmental efforts to respond to the needs of slum dwellers. Powerful imagery is used to contrast the project with their previous undesirable habitats:

> I was afraid to marry and have a kid, how would this child's future look like? He might stand at the door of the house and sell drugs, and if I reprimanded him, he might hit me or slap me in the face. (male resident, 00:02:44–00:02:50 hr)

Values such as decency and cleanliness found in the new environment are promoted through sentences such as, "The new generations will grow up in decent places and not see what we have seen or what our parents have

**Figure 1.** Media coverage for the inauguration of Al-Asmarat. Source: Sayed (2020).

seen growing up" (young girl, 00:03:45−00:03:50 hr) and "when we came here, we found playgrounds, schools, beautiful things and good clean people" (young boy, 00:03:52–00:03:56 hr).

Some of the above-mentioned messages in *Man Ahyaya* and similar films have drawn the ire of relocated residents as derogatory and disrespectful of their origins and efforts to make a living. This includes designating them as former "neighbors of the dead," referring to the practice of living in large graveyards or "cities of the dead" in Cairo, and phrases such as "the nightmarish life is there no more." (narrator, 00:00:09 hr). The transformation from slum-dweller to respectable citizen and the accompanying behavioral and cultural changes are important aspects of relocation. This is affirmed by the head of the neighborhood management unit saying, "After four years, I can tell you that we have transformed the residents' behavior by 70%" (H. Ghandour, interview, August 4, 2019).

The image of *ashwa'eyat* as inhumane settlements, and Al-Asmarat as an ideal solution as effective representations of space are reinforced through these media reports. The interviewed residents suggested that the media stop humiliating the slum/*ashwa'eyat* dwellers and stop the stigmatization, which would encourage them to accept the relocation and improve their overall satisfaction accordingly.

To a smaller extend, opponents to the project and such interventionist policies dealing with slums are able to voice concerns through social media and online news websites. They address some of the criticisms directed at the technical, social, and economic implications. Denouncing negative reporting as "rumors," the media center of the Egyptian Cabinet has issued several statements to provide the public with supposedly correct information, as can be seen in Figure 3. They aim to counter reports of forced relocation by listing the alternatives given to residents (ExtraNews, 2020).

### *3.2. Contested Representation of Al-Asmarat on Facebook*

Al-Asmarat has a strong presence on Facebook, with more than ten groups and pages dedicated to it (see Table 1). There are around 45 groups that reflect subcommunities within Al-Asmarat, such as groups for residents of certain blocks, groups based on the gender or profession of its members. These groups and pages aim to share daily news about the neighborhood and discuss problems that residents face. Only *Al-safha Al-rasmya le Hay Al-Asmarat* (Al-Asmarat Neighborhood official page) is created and managed by the head of Al-Asmarat neighborhood, with more than 6,000 followers. It is considered the official Facebook page for the project via which all the activities taking place in Al-Asmarat are announced.

The others are unofficial pages run by residents to discuss their daily news and internal problems. These groups usually report both positive and negative feedback allowing discussions and debates among the group members with higher tolerance to bitter criticism, unlike the official page. The Al-Asmarat Elyoum (Al-Asmarat Today) group has the highest number of members (around 25,000 members). It was accessed to collect feedback by the residents on the provided services, general impressions, and complaints.

An exploratory review of the Facebook pages reveals contradictory opinions about life in Al-Asmarat. Comments reflect the same pattern as that detected in official media. One party praises the advantages of the new life granted to the ex-slum dwellers, advocating the efforts to improve the living conditions of thousands of people. The other party uses social media as a channel to vent anger, discussing their bitter dissension and disclosing their indignation towards the project, as can be seen in Figure 4.

**Figure 2.** Still image from *Man Ahyaha*.

**Figure 3.** Official announcements to respond to rumors regarding Al-Asmarat through online channels. Note: translation—"The rumor: Forced eviction for *ashwa'eyat* residents without compensation. Facts: Ministry of Housing: Not true, as we confirm that before developing any *ashwa'eyat* area, three alternatives are offered—financial compensation, alternative housing, returning to the area after development—and the appropriate alternative is chosen for each family." Source: ExtraNews (2020).

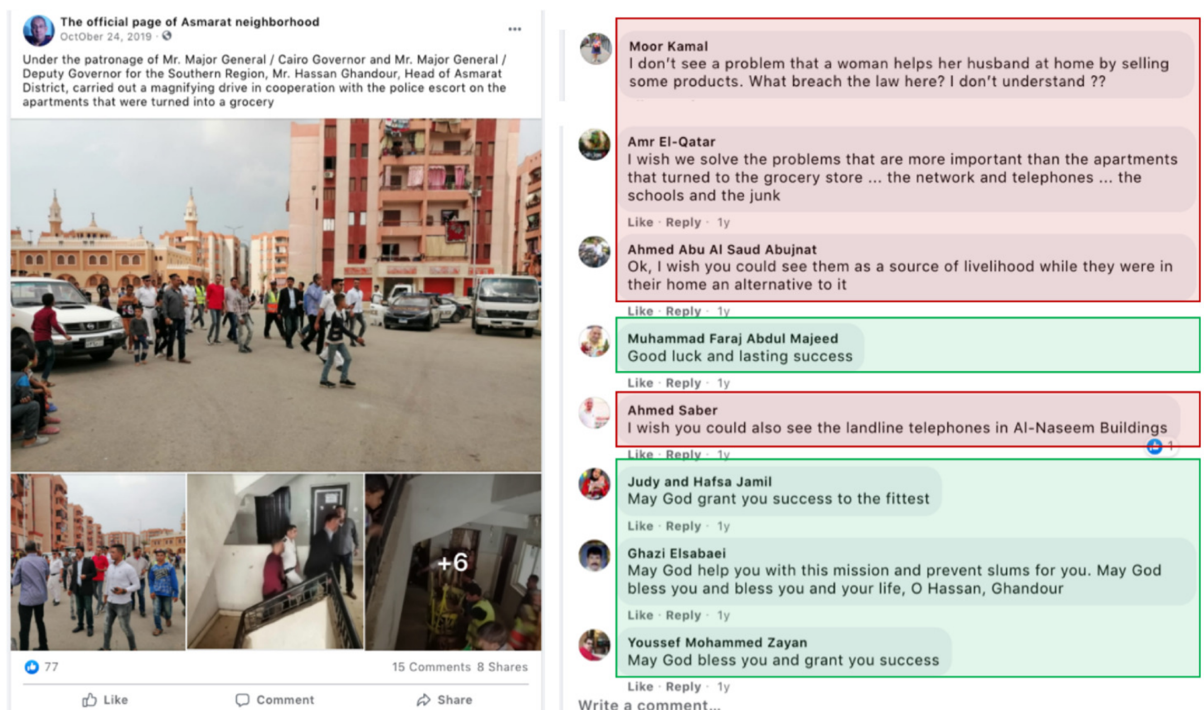


**Figure 4.** An example of the discussions on Facebook about the policies in Al-Asmarat. Note: Original in Arabic, translated automatically via google chrome.

### *3.3. Perception of Al-Asmarat Residents*

During the fieldwork, the 25 interviewed residents expressed their annoyance regarding the representation delivered by media about slum dwellers and residents of Al-Asmarat and countered it with images of their lived, representational space. Blaming official media campaigns for sending out the wrong messages about their living conditions and ethical standards, they claim that misleading representation has resulted in the vilification of Al-Asmarat residents, with them being depicted as perpetrators of violence and crime. This representation negatively impacted the reputation of the neighborhood. Of the interviewed residents, 72% were clearly unsatisfied with media coverage and stated that they did not like to reveal their current residence to avoid being stigmatized by others if they knew they lived in Al-Asmarat. An interviewed resident said:

"Media filmed us as uncivilized people living in shacks who were mobilized into an isolated camp [Al-Asmarat; A/N] as an attempt to be rehabilitated so we can be re-integrated with society afterward" (Hassan, August 6, 2019). Another resident angrily said:

> Do you want me to sum it up? Here we are dealt with as criminals. They put us in a place like a jail. The only difference is that they allow us to go out daily to get our food then return again. (Ahmed, August 6, 2019)

In accordance with this information and responding to the questions during the same study, 72% of the surveyed residents showed severe to moderate dissatisfaction with the reputation of the Al-Asmarat residents. In comparison, 20% were satisfied, claiming that they currently were in a better position than their previous life in slums (residents' interviews, 2019). It is noteworthy that Eng. Ihab El Hanafi from the ISDF mentioned that there was a plan to have a fourth phase of Al-Asmarat, but the idea was declined due to the fear of tension or anger among the residents of Al-Asmarat heights compound (a high-class compound next to Long Live Egypt City). Placing what they called "a low-class compound or compound for the poor" next to them could negatively affect the image and reputation of the whole district lowering the real estate value of the apartments (I. El-Hanafi, interview, July 29, 2019). This partially contradicts the idealized representation of space prevalent in the official image of Al-Asmarat. It may also be seen as an indicator for a hyperbolic appearance of Schulz' concept of amalgamation: Egyptian resettlement policies are streamlined for media representation to such an extent that their material reality not only falls short of the image but is increasingly not a constitutive part of policymaking. The lived reality of Al-Asmarat as an inhabited space shaped by the residents has not been successfully mediatized to a wider audience and consequently has not impacted public policy until now.

**4. Al-Max Relocation Project**

The fishing village Qaryat Al-Sayadin was an approximately 500 m long strip of houses on the banks of the Mahmoudiya Canal between Lake Mariout and the Mediterranean Sea in Alexandria, Egypt. It is the oldest part of the Al-Max neighborhood (Hatem et al., 2019). Maps from 1917 show the early formations of the fishing village at the western border of Alexandria (Hatem et al., 2019). Most of the village inhabitants worked in fishing-related professions, inheriting their occupation generation after generation, along with lands and houses (Adel et al., 2016). The village had two to three rows of houses on each bank of the canal (Adel et al., 2016). Administratively, Al-Max Bay followed the General Authority for Fish Resources Development (GAFRD), which is under the administration of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation. Consequently, the houses of the fishing village were owned by the GAFRD (Adel et al., 2016). The houses around the canal used to follow the property tax law, which is an indicator for partial formalization. In 2017 however, when the eviction notice was issued and the inhabitants demonstrated against it, the district's general secretary declared that the land was owned by the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation and that the residents were negatively impacting the canal (Mounir, 2017). In 1998, the first decree to demolish the area of the fishing village was issued (Daif, interview, July 12, 2020). This decree was annulled in 2006 when the inhabitants demonstrated against being relocated 14 km away from the Al-Max district (Adel et al., 2016). Daif (interview, July 12, 2020) explains that it was not a demonstration but rather an art installation as a part of the community development activities held by Gudran and joined by many community members. The fishing village in Al-Max was categorized as "grade two" in the 2009 national map of unsafe areas by the ISDF, a representation of space designating the area as "life-threatening" (Maabady, 2015; see also Khalifa, 2011, 2015). According to the strategic plans of Alexandria for the year 2032, which started to be enacted from 2010 onwards, the fishing village strip falls under the category "land owned by the Egyptian Armed Forces authority" (Nassar & El-Sayed, 2016). After the January 2011 uprising, a cooperation agreement was signed between the ISDF and the Alexandria governorate to develop the area by building housing projects in the El-Max district and relocating sub-areas, including the fishing village. The project got the first installment of funds based on decree 73/2015 that adopted the draft of the project (Adel et al., 2016). By the end of December 2018, the east bank got a one-week evacuation notice and was evacuated in March 2019. The west bank followed by October 2019 (Baiomy, interview, June 26, 2020; Mohamed & Amer, 2018).

*4.1. The Fishermen's Contested Narratives and Their Media Representation*

The area has drawn much attention because of its unique environment and ambiance. In 2007, the *Alsharq Alawsat* newspaper published an article about the fishing village and described it as the "Venice of the East." The term has been widely used ever since in many official and non-official newspapers and publications and thus forms a representational space of considerable impact (Adel et al., 2016). In 2008, the movie *Bolteya El-Ayma* (Swimming Bolteya) was released in cinemas in Egypt. It portrayed the then hypothetical scenario of forcibly evicting the inhabitants of the fishing village to establish a touristic project and how it would affect those families with an emotional and physical connection to the village.

Official media, mainly newspapers, reported on the project in 2017 and 2018, highlighting the importance of slum clearance and praising the efforts of the Alexandria governorate to provide housing units and eliminate

life-threatening areas (e.g., Al Ahram, 2017). The plans were complimented for having the safety of the inhabitants as a priority and upgrading the status of the inhabitants, similar to the arguments brought forth in the official representations of the Al-Asmarat project. The visits of the governor and the ministers to the housing project were also reported (Mohammed, 2019). A few private newspapers also documented the progress of the project in terms of buildings constructed and the relocation process (e.g., Al Adawy, 2019; Al Watan, 2019). Some mentioned that the "prophecy" of the *Bolteya El-Ayma* is coming true (Samir & ElZoghby, 2017).

Non-mainstream communication channels more actively represented Al-Max through workshops, reports, factsheets, websites, social media, and art projects. In January 2017, Tadamun (an online research initiative managed by the private urban development company Takween) arranged a set of workshops entitled Know Your City | Alexandria, which investigated the history and tried to assess the needs of areas studied, one of which was Al-Max. The workshop resulted in an online publication that analyzed the proposed housing solution and suggested initiating a discussion on the relocation of the fishermen to minimize harm to their jobs. The publication resulted in pressure to upgrade the services since the whole area of Al-Max lacks basic transportation, health, and education services (Hatem et al., 2019).

*4.2. Al-Max: A Romanticized Counter-Narrative?*

In 2018, the photography project Revive Memories started in the fishing village. It aimed to portray a connection between time, place, and people which the artist saw as the memories, the physical traces that the people can leave behind, and how they can be translated into memories (Baiomy, interview, June 26, 2020). Baiomy was able to document many of the changes to the eastern bank of the canal since the beginning of the demolition. A sequel to the project, a video installation, connected the families to their past homes and gathered their memories and stories about them. Baiomy declared that she was able to make out clear signs of grief when residents saw their demolished houses in the pictures. Some residents saw the houses, which were later destroyed, pictured for the first time since they had left and asked for copies (Baiomy, interview, June 26, 2020). A different perception of the area was spotted on Facebook: One resident of an area neighboring the fishing village commented on a post showing a picture of the old fishing village saying, "It was an unplanned and a dangerous area full of drug dealers, it's a good thing it was removed and that the people got relocated to better housing units." Someone replied that "it was false information and that the area hosted urban poor who lived and earned their living in that area before being evicted." Another comment mentioned that "they work as fishermen and depend on God, and even the best areas in the world have good and the bad" (Figure 5).

The residents' perception of media and their new home is still influenced by the recent relocation, and the interviews revealed their grief and a longing for the life they had before. Many of the relocated residents interviewed in October 2020 brought up scenes from the *Bolteya El-Ayma* movie repeatedly to explain how

**Figure 5.** A screenshot for a picture of Al-Max and the comments section on a Facebook post that showed the fishing village before the relocation.

painful it was to see their houses being demolished (see Figure 6). The representational space of the residents is clearly supplemented by the image of Al-Max as a "Venice of the East," exemplifying the process of media slipping into the everyday, which Schulz calls amalgamation (see Section 1.3).

During site visits, residents revealed that they felt neglected. They perceive that it was more important for the government to take their land because of its prime location than to care about their needs. In one interview, a fisherman screamed out that he would rather die (stating that he felt that was what the government wanted) than to feel as lost and unimportant as he did at that time. Echoing the reformatory approach to slum dwellers in Al-Asmarat, a fellow fisherman said that the government wanted to erase not only the slums but also its people because they do not fit the image the government wishes to present in the media and to the rest of the world (Fishermen, interview, October 22, 2020)

## 5. Comparison and Discussion

The two case studies are a clear depiction of the effects that mediatization has on urban development projects in Egypt. The "compound" of the Al-Asmarat housing project is presented through official media channels as a model approach for dealing with *ashwa'eyat*. As such, it also carries stigmatizing imageries of the plight of all informal settlements as well as the ideal type of a model home for reformed citizens, expressed as official representations of space. The media portrayal of the fully serviced relocation settlement reaffirms the official position regarding the dysfunctionality of *ashwa'eyat* as a place to live, work, and socialize. Past and present are presented as polar opposites to emphasize their political achievement. However, the findings show that the stigma related to living in *ashwa'eyat* is sustained even after relocation, hinting at the persistence of stereotypes as well as at the failure of the mediatized narrative of the citizens' transformation to be converted on the ground. On the other hand, Al-Max is a story of effective counter-narratives through the successful placement of representational or lived spaces as opposed to official representations of space. While the destruction of the original village could not be prevented, the image of the fishermen as a community with close and necessary ties to the land (and sea) has been established through alternative media. It has become a core component of identity that is employed against the governmental narrative of progress through upgrading.

In both Al-Asmarat and Al-Max, media provides the relocated urban poor with an unfulfilled promise that improving the quality of their living environment would consequently elevate them to the level of proper citizens. The rather static idealized imagery of Al-Asmarat and Al-Max is supplemented and in part subverted by public discussions on Facebook and other social media. This study's limited scope and duration do not allow us to assess whether the discussions are fully representative of either the conditions in the new settlements or the diversity of opinions that different groups or individual residents may hold, and it does not thematize existing restrictions and risks of public expression. Nonetheless, Facebook clearly functions as a platform for debate where opinions are expressed, and perceptions shared. There appears to be room for the confrontation of official narratives through arguments and counterarguments. The efficacy of this debate in terms of influencing the mediatized discourse as well as eliciting improvements to lived reality on the ground calls for further study.

Despite the quantitative and qualitative difference between the coordinated professional media avalanche by the government and affiliated news agencies and the haphazard resistance from below through Facebook, small independent news outlets, or art projects, we observed both sides utilizing aspects of mediatization. The integration of media through the processes of accommodation and amalgamation means that the fulfillment of urban development goals is not only announced but also realized as a political achievement

**Figure 6.** Still shots from *Bolteya El-Ayma*. Notes: On the left, the main character is standing on the ruins of her demolished house; on the right, it's a depiction of daily life using the canals.

through its mediatization. The crime-infested informal neighborhoods, the picturesque fishermen community of Al-Max, the reformed neighborhoods of Al-Asmarat, and the new Al-Max settlement all have more bearing in their publicized and mediatized version than the lived reality on the ground, creating a mediatized replica of urban development. It remains open to discussion whether politics in Egypt has arrived at the stage of "virtualization" of interaction that Hjarvard (2008, p. 129) proposes or whether it makes empirical sense to talk about the "emancipation" of media from politics (Mazzoleni, 2014, p. 43; Strömbäck, 2008) in a state where the government effectively exerts control over large parts of mass media. Maybe the cautious warning against the risk of overemphasizing the role of media as agents of change as marked by Hepp et al. (2015) should be heeded. However, as the study of Al-Asmarat and Al-Max has shown, various forms of media play a crucial role, not only as a platform for the top-down display of urban development projects by the government and as a bottom-up forum for responses from the public, but as a strategic element for the creation of urban realities through tactical narratives by all actors involved.

This article highlights the crucial role of mediatization in configuring the socio-political and urban transformations in the societies of the post-Arab spring and opens a broader debate on modernization and state-building in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa where the interplay of media, mediatization, and urban development is tangled up with the politics of legitimacy. Beyond the described ill-effects of destroying homes and perpetuating stigmatization, powerful mediatized realities shift part of the burden of creating, maintaining, and modifying the object of political discussion to the media itself. In such contexts, the structural aspects of institutionalized media co-opted or even co-created by authoritarian regimes can obscure accountability and the possibility of action. Bringing urban development into discussions of mediatization allows us to ask questions on the lived reality and material aspects as consequences of mediatized discourse. Further research on the mechanisms and dynamics of their interaction and possibilities of interruption is needed to understand and modulate responsible pathways for action.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Disclaimer

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) is supporting the thematic issue "Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings: Beyond Media and Liberation,'' edited by AGYA alumna Hanan Badr (Gulf University of Science and Technology, Kuwait) and AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller (Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Germany). AGYA is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The authors remain solely responsible for the content and recommendations provided in this publication, which do not reflect the positions of AGYA or any of its funding partners.

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**Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183-2439)**

*Media and Communication* is an international open access journal dedicated to a wide variety of basic and applied research in communication and its related fields. It aims at providing a research forum on the social and cultural relevance of media and communication processes.

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