

# 10

## Media in North Africa: the Case of Egypt

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In May 2011, Freedom House issued a press release announcing the findings of a survey recording the state of media freedom worldwide. It reported that the number of people worldwide with access to free and independent media had declined to its lowest level in over a decade.<sup>1</sup> The survey recorded a substantial deterioration in the Middle East and North Africa region. In this region, Egypt suffered the greatest set-back, slipping into the Not Free category in 2010 as a result of a severe crackdown preceding the November 2010 parliamentary elections. In Tunisia, traditional media were also censored and tightly controlled by government while internet restriction increased extensively in 2009 and 2010 as Tunisians sought to use it as an alternative field for public debate.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore Libya was included in the report as one of the world's worst ten countries where independent media are considered either non-existent or barely able to operate and where dissent is crushed through imprisonment, torture and other forms of repression.<sup>3</sup>

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Arab Knowledge Report published in 2009 corroborates these findings and view the prospects of a dynamic, free space for freedom of thought and expression in Arab states as particularly dismal.

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House, (2011): *World Freedom Report*, Press Release dated May 2, 2011. The report assessed 196 countries and territories during 2010 and found that only one in six people live in countries with a press that is designated *Free*. The Freedom of the Press index assesses the degree of print, broadcast and internet freedom in every country, analyzing the events and developments of each calendar year.

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House (2011): *World Freedom Report 2011*. Available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2011>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Apart from the proliferation of Arab satellite channels and Internet blogs, which have provided a safety valve for a noticeable upsurge in activity by the region's youth, the outlook for freedom of thought and expression remains gloomy. Some Arab governments have imposed restrictions on Arab satellite broadcasting. Additional broadcasting and media legislation and laws have been enacted which have strengthened governments' grip on the media, press, journalists, internet blogs and bloggers, as well as intellectuals. Most media and knowledge-diffusion mechanisms remain state-owned and operate alongside a limited number of large media and entertainment companies transmitting to the Arab countries from the Gulf or from outside the region.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will argue that the events that unfolded in these countries since 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010 when an unemployed fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest against corruption were directly impacted by the muzzling of the media and were to a large extent enabled by the online space available to the protagonists of the uprisings. It hopes to demonstrate however that the rumblings for change can be discerned much earlier, in the diffusion of satellite station networks which have, in the past years, convulsed the media scene and brought to the Arab street new content that allowed it to consume and evaluate some of the democratic norms available to others.

The final push towards the dynamic events may be attributed to a coalescing of a number of factors which social media in particular exposed and which other media latched on to and released to a wider audience. The deep concerns with governance however, from aging leaders to corrupt and ineffectual regimes coupled with a more educated, unemployed and disaffected youth suggest that the tally for pushing for regime change was high in all

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<sup>4</sup> Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation; United Nations Development Programme, 2010: *Arab Knowledge Report 2009, Towards Productive Intercommunication for Knowledge*. Available at: <http://www.mbrfoundation.ae/English/Documents/AKR-2009-En/AKR-English.pdf>: 22.

of these countries. In the final analysis, this story is the compelling narrative of the pushing of boundaries, the attempts at its reversals and the determination not to let that happen. It is also an account of how, in coming to the tipping point, online space crossed over to real space, maintaining its online toolkit to be deployed effectively for mobilization and information sharing.

For a number of reasons including a more dynamic media environment notwithstanding punishing restrictions, this paper will focus exclusively on Egypt. Egypt has also the largest population of the Arab states facing uprisings with a population of over 80 million, one third of which is between 15 and 29 of age.

The paper will attempt to address some of the most pertinent questions involving traditional and social media in Egypt. What has the media thrown into the mix of these popular revolutions? Have journalists and bloggers featured in setting the stage for the uprisings and if so, how has this come about? What role did they play throughout the days that Tahrir Square swelled with Egyptians from all walks of life culminating in the ouster of President Mubarak? How, if at all, has media space changed in the months following that pivotal event?

## **I. Media Landscape in Egypt**

The country had a tradition of open media dating back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and extending to the Nasser revolution when newspapers provided platforms for writers and thinkers as Egypt grappled with foreign occupation.<sup>5</sup> The partisan press also knows its beginnings to this period with the introduction of leading daily newspapers, cinema and radio leading to a highly dynamic, pluralistic and vibrant media environment. With the 1952 revolution and independence this paradigm was replaced by

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<sup>5</sup> Khamis, Sahar, 2011: “The Transformative Egyptian Media Landscape: Changes, Challenges and Comparative Perspectives”, in: *International Journal of Communications*, 5:1159-1177.

a restrictive environment as newspapers were closed down or were crushed under the heavy financial fines imposed on them and the imprisonment of journalists started in earnest. With Sadat's coming to power in 1970, an era of ambivalence towards the press and freedom of speech was ushered which still persists today.<sup>6</sup>

## A. Print Media

Egypt has a flourishing print media with some of the oldest and most widely read newspapers in the world. More than five hundred newspapers are published in the country and Egyptian print media is diversified in terms of content and ownership and includes governmental, partisan and independent newspapers.<sup>7</sup> Newspaper circulation is however hampered by an illiteracy rate of anywhere between 22 to 28 percent.

The High Press Council which is headed by the President issues licenses for newspaper ownership which is restricted to public or private legal entities, corporate bodies and political parties. An individual may not own more than ten percent of a newspaper.

Of the state owned newspapers, the most important dailies are *Al-Ahram (The Pyramids)*, *Al-Akhbar (The News)* and *Al Goumhurya (The Republic)*. The editors of these newspapers are appointed by the President through a recommendation of the High Council of the Press and loyalty of employees is essentially to government. Newspapers like *Al-Ahrar (The Free)*, *AlWafd (The Delegation)* and *Al-Ghad (Tomorrow)* which are published by political parties tend to enjoy little freedom from censorship and are viewed with some skepticism by Egyptians. Indeed, according

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<sup>6</sup> Rugh, William A., 2004: *Arab mass media: Newspapers, radio, and television in Arab politics* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger): 4.

<sup>7</sup> Allam, Rasha (2010, November 8). *Media Landscape: Egypt*. European Journalism Centre. Available at: [http://www.ejc.net/media\\_landscape/article/egypt/](http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/egypt/).

to Mirette Mabrouk these papers do not have a particularly great reputation with readers because of their partisanship and their tendency to be fairly strident.<sup>8</sup>

There are also independent newspapers which struggle against heavy censorship and constant harassment but which nonetheless have been tolerated in the past decade by the state. These newspapers have been highly successful due to excellent newsgathering and professional reporting and by virtue of the critical opinions expressed on government performance on many fronts. Of these the dailies *Al Masry-Al Joum (The Egyptian Today)* which was formed in 2004 and *Nahdet Misr (Egypt Awakening)* have thrived and eaten into the circulation of other newspapers. *Al-Destour (The Constitution)*, a weekly independent newspaper set up by journalist Ibrahim Eissa became a distinctive landmark on the Egyptian media scene, even as Ibrahim Eissa was dismissed from the editorship in late 2010 through a takeover masterminded by the regime after having been imprisoned for a year in 2006.<sup>9</sup> It has been to these independent newspapers that the people have turned to for information.

Many newspapers today are also online and provide readers with the opportunity to interact by way of sending feedback about any story.

## **B. Audiovisual Media**

Television is by far the most popular medium, with 98% penetration and is found in 12.8 million of households.<sup>10</sup> Here

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<sup>8</sup> Mirette Mabrouk is Ford Foundation Visiting Fellow and Editor-at-Large at the American University in Cairo Press. She was speaking at an event of The Brookings Institution on *Now What? How Egypt's Changing Media Landscape is Influencing Domestic Politics*, July 28, 2009. Available at: [http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/0728\\_egypt\\_media.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/0728_egypt_media.aspx).

<sup>9</sup> al Aswany, Alaa, 2011: *On the State of Egypt* (New York: Vintage Books): 189-192.

<sup>10</sup> Allam, Rasha, art.cit.

again it is the state-owned Egypt Radio and Television Union which dominates broadcasting in Egypt. It owns two national channels, six regional channels, and a number of satellite channels. The Union also operates the Nile TV Network.<sup>11</sup>

State owned television has always been regarded as the voice of the Egyptian government and the ruling political party. News is highly filtered and employees' and journalists' loyalty is strictly to the regime. One such example is that linked with the events on the 2006 Eid holiday in central Cairo, where women were attacked and molested by a mob of more than a thousand men. State television first denied, then resorted to contradictory accounts of the events as pictures and videos proliferated on the web.<sup>12</sup> During the Presidential elections in 2005, a human rights body reported that much wider coverage was afforded to the Mubarak campaign than to any of the other candidates. More indicative maybe is how in the first days of the uprisings in Tahrir Square, the Government sent the President's presidential guard unit to guard the Maspero, the distinctive state television building.

The introduction of satellite channels shook the Egyptian terrestrial television industry but also introduced to Egypt new distinctive programming and more liberal content leading some authors to discuss the extent of the democratizing effect of satellite television channels even as the state monopolized a number of these channels.<sup>13</sup> Satellite broadcasting started in Egypt following the launch of satellite services provider Arabsat. Egyptians were able to witness the Gulf War in 1990 when Arabsat launched its first Egyptian satellite channel purposely to cover the war. The second service provider, NileSat was introduced in 1998. Satellite broadcasting allowed for the first time access to unfiltered news, and though government continued to restrict the viewing of satellite TV in public spaces through harassment tactics by the state security apparatus, Egyptians were free to access these

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<sup>11</sup> Menassat on <http://www.menassat.com>.

<sup>12</sup> al Aswany, Alaa, 2011, art.cit.:73-77.

<sup>13</sup> Khamis, 2011, art.cit.: 1161.

channels at home. Satellite dishes, relatively cheap to purchase, graced the most dismal abodes including tents in the desert and were even given as gifts to impoverished Bedouin newly-weds instead of the more traditional gift of jewellery.<sup>14</sup> The state's remaining option for an offending channel was to block its signal. So futile was this arrangement that in 2001, the state's monopoly on the broadcasting sector was lifted allowing for independent satellite channels.

The first private Egyptian satellite network was Dream TV which provided a diverse kind of programming including religious shows, sport, news analysis and talk shows. Being accountable to their consumers, Dream TV and others which followed sought to satisfy consumers' desires and none were as strong as the yearning for unbiased information. It was within its political programming that Dream aired in 2001 a televised speech by Mohamed Hassanein Heikal discussing the succession of power in Egypt.<sup>15</sup> Heikal is considered the Arab world's most celebrated journalist but for years later he was not allowed to appear on Egyptian television. He has since moved to Al-Jazeera, his lecture series aired on a Thursday evening earning him a strong following, especially among the young. Political programming however continued and while discussion of certain subjects like the health of the President, the succession and the army remained prohibited, other subjects like religion, the role of women and government performance became staple food for an audience hungry for controversy.

*Al-Jazeera's* role in opening up the public space for discussion in the Arab world is unquestioned. Miles, writing in 2005, contended that *Al-Jazeera* has been "so inextricably linked to tumultuous recent events in the Middle East....that the story of the news network, is in fact, the story of the upheavals that have taken

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<sup>14</sup> Miles Hugh, 2005: *Al Jazeera, How Arab TV News challenged the world* (London: Abacus): 36.

<sup>15</sup> Mabrouk, 2009, art.cit.: 6.

place in that troubled region in recent years".<sup>16</sup> In March 1998, *Al-Jazeera* set out to gain the attention and respect of Arab publics. On its books, it attracted more than a hundred BBC-trained Arab journalists, broadcasters and administrators, fresh from a failed attempt at a BBC Arabic service. Its twenty-four hour schedule and its liberal programming meant that it would not stay unnoticed for long. Guests were deliberately selected to be as controversial as possible but what made *Al-Jazeera's* name in the Arab world, was its talk shows.<sup>17</sup> Political, social, economic and religious topics are regularly tackled and schemas often imitate successfully Western programming. *Al-Jazeera's* two most famous programmes, *Al-Ittijah al-Muakis* (*The Opposite Direction*) and *Al-Sharia wal-Hayat* (*Religion and Life*) have run for years. In the former, reproducing CNN's *Crossfire*, two guests with opposing opinions argue a controversial theme. Its anchor, Dr. Faisal al-Qassem is known for his provocative on-screen style, typically pitting an Arab dissident living in exile against a representative of the native country's government. The programme has been responsible for at least five Arab countries severing diplomatic ties with Qatar. *Al-Sharia wal-Hayat*, a religious talk show in which a highly respected Islamic cleric, the Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi is presented with modern life dilemmas has an estimated audience of 60 million worldwide. Another very influential talk show is *Bi-la hudud* (*Unlimited*) hosted by Ahmed Mansour. While *al-Jazeera* gained its reputation in the West after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, it was already considered as the most widely viewed network in the Arab world by 2000 with a viewership in excess of 35 million. The network continued to grow in leaps and bounds. It broadcast extensively during the Second Intifada and was the only station broadcasting from Iraq during the 2003 invasion, its footage together with its newly launched English language website much sought after by news agencies.

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<sup>16</sup> Miles, 2005, art.cit.: 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: 37.



The Egyptian's government relationship with the news channel has been frosty. In 2000, President Mubarak while visiting Doha paid a visit to the station and is reported to have been taken aback by the small scale of the operation, exclaiming "All this trouble from a matchbox like this?"<sup>18</sup> On state television and state newspapers, criticism of *al-Jazeera* has been continuous and widespread. Criticism is leveled at allegedly biased coverage of news that is related to Egypt suggesting that the continuous attacks aim to destroy Egypt's image in the region.

Radio is arguably less important than television yet radio broadcasting is also controlled and operated by government and two private stations launched in 2003 are not allowed to broadcast newscasts. In 2009, *Radio Misr* having a partial government, partial private ownership hit the airwaves and was allowed to broadcast news bulletins.

### C. Online Media

Internet services started in Egypt in late 1993. The general public gained access in 1995, but the technology took off in 2002 when the government introduced a "Free Internet" initiative, whereby anyone with a telephone line and a computer could access the internet for the price of a local call.<sup>19</sup> It is estimated the number of users had swelled to 20.1 million by the end of 2009 or 24 percent of the population.<sup>20</sup> Although subscribers to broadband stood at 1.1 million, the number of users is said to be hard to estimate since it is not uncommon for users to share a connection. Moreover internet cafes are widespread even in urban slums and small villages.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: 11.

<sup>19</sup> Freedom House, 2011: *Freedom on the Net 2011. A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media*. Available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org>.

<sup>20</sup> ITU: *ICT Statistics 2009 – Internet*. Available at: <http://www.itu.int/net>.

<sup>21</sup> Freedom House, 2011, art.cit.

There is no doubt that access to the internet and blogging as well as other forms of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter meant that a new arena became available in which the public could express its views, ideas and criticism; comment on everyday issues; and discuss social, religious and political topics. Egypt is the leading country in terms of Facebook use, with over 4.5 million users by the end of 2010.<sup>22</sup> In recent years, Facebook pages have been set up to mobilize strikes and other activities including the airport welcome of Mohamed ElBaradei on his return to Egypt. The “We are all Said Khaled” facebook page, launched after the death of the young blogger at the hands of the state police is considered to have been a pivotal platform for the January 2011 revolution and remains effective today. The Egyptian blogosphere is extremely active, promoting a large range of opinions freely expressed online and a wide breadth of content available to users. Mirette Mabrouk contends that by 2009 there was an estimated 163,200 blogs in Egypt up from a sheer 40 six years earlier.<sup>23</sup> Of these some 18 percent had political content. The profile of the blogger had also expanded to include many women and blogging in other languages besides Arabic has also increased. Names like Noha Atef, Karim Amer, Alaa Abdel Fattah, Wael Khalil, Hani Morsi, Wael Ghoneim became household names in the blogosphere. All this activity online happens notwithstanding that in 2009 the Committee to Protect Journalists named Egypt as one of the ten worst countries in which to be a blogger.

To this array of new tools, one may also include mobile phones whose functions allow instant communication and exposure like never before. Users had exceeded 55 million in 2009, a 67 percent penetration rate.<sup>24</sup>

Mabrouk argues however that the real significance of this new media is that it has pulled in a section of society that opposition

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<sup>22</sup> Freedom House, 2011, art.cit.

<sup>23</sup> Mabrouk, 2009, art.cit.: 9.

<sup>24</sup> ITU: *ICT Statistics 2009 – Mobile Cellular Subscriptions*. Available at: <http://www.itu.int/net>.

political parties have been trying to reintroduce to the political arena for the past thirty years with next to no success.<sup>25</sup> A young tech savvy audience has found the space it feels most comfortable with to expose its grievances and attack relentlessly the shortcomings of the regime. Although no precise classification for internet usage according to demographics is available, it is estimated that more than half the users are between 21 and 29 years old. Mona Eltahawy, an American-Egyptian blogger who was very active during the days of the revolution, argues that social media has enabled the masses to establish their own agendas.

## **II. The Legal Framework**

The Egyptian Constitution upholds freedom of the Press in Articles 47 and 48 allowing for the right of every citizen to express his opinion verbally, in writing or in photography while censorship is forbidden. This is however circumvented by a number of legal restrictions and the State of Emergency that Egypt languishes in since 1981.<sup>26</sup> Legal restrictions include those on ownership of newspapers and other media outlets as already discussed, right to censorship and restrictions on the right of information flow. For example, Law 313/1956 amended by Law 14/1967 bans the publication of any news regarding the Armed Forces. And Egypt's press laws are amongst the most rigid to the extent that Egypt is one of 13 countries which allow for imprisonment in case of libel and defamation.<sup>27</sup> Detention is imposed in the penal code on a wide range of alleged crimes including harming the social decorum (art. 178), humiliating a judge, an authority or affecting a case (art. 186) and publishing cases that should not be disclosed (art. 189). Mirette Mabrouk contends however that the problem lies with the vagueness in the

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<sup>25</sup> Mabrouk, 2009, art.cit.: 9.

<sup>26</sup> One of the most vocal of the protesters' demands during the 18 days in Tahrir Square was the lifting of the state of emergency.

<sup>27</sup> Mabrouk, art.cit.: 12.

definition of libel and defamation. What is even more striking is that changes in the Press Law introduced in 2006 following a promise by Mubarak can be viewed as a regression. Not only did they mandate prison sentences for insulting public officials in the media but it can be argued that the imposition of high fines may be even more effective. Penalties were fixed and can be as high as 30,000 Egyptian pounds compared to journalists' salaries which tend to be as low as 1,500 Egyptian pounds monthly. Fines were doubled in these amendments as were criminal penalties for criticizing the president or foreign leaders which was fixed at between six months and five years in prison. Human Rights Watch condemned the amendments noting that "the vague and broadly worded provisions in Egypt's Press Law invite abuse and contravene international standards of freedom of expression".<sup>28</sup> Courts have since ruled that these restrictions apply to online writings.<sup>29</sup>

The regime was also heading to address the dynamic media environment playing out on satellite television and on the net. In 2008, a draft Satellite Broadcasting Regulation Law based on a non-binding Charter which Egypt proposed at the Arab League some months earlier, was leaked to the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Joum*. The draft bill required journalists and broadcasters to avoid damaging "the social peace", "national unity" and "public values" and imposed imprisonment, fines, confiscation of equipment and suspension or cancellation of broadcasting licenses for those who contravened. They were widely seen as a serious threat to freedom of expression and a move "to silence opposition voices on televisions and computer screens."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch (2006, July 10). *Egypt Journalists still risk jail under press law*. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2006/07/10/egypt-journalist-still-risk-jail-under-press-law>.

<sup>29</sup> Freedom House, 2011, art.cit.

<sup>30</sup> Stanford, David (2008, August 7). *Egypt faces new media censorship. Al-Jazeera.Net*. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2008/08/20088791952617974.html>.

In addition, the Emergency Law, extended in 2008 allowed authorities to ban publications for reasons of national security and try offenders in military tribunals. The end result of these heavy legal constraints is that journalists in Egypt enjoy modest protection and have no right to access of information.

At the same time and notwithstanding these legal restrictions, according to Khamis, the Egyptian regime's attitude towards the media remained ambivalent ranging from contrasting poles of freedom of expression to repression. Many incidents, which could have been brought to justice were not while others were meted heavy punishment. The ambivalence of the regime was reflected in the 'independent' media which pushed the boundaries of acceptable coverage on a range of topics including the state security police, corruption, and torture but stirred away from others including the President and his family and the army.

Why would the regime tolerate a hostile press when offences were punishable by law? The argument put forward by both Khamis and Seib is that the media acted as a safety valve that "allowed the public to vent anger and frustration at many political, economic and social ills and injustices given that people were not granted the chance to exercise real political rights or actual decision-making." The media, be it the independent newspaper *Al-Masry al-Youm*, the satellite TV station *Al-Hewar* or the vigorous activity in the blogosphere which had exploded in 2005 were seen as substitutes to democracy rather than promoters of democratic trends.

### **III. Towards the Parliamentary Elections of 2010**

The newfound vehemence of the media must also be examined against a background of attempts at heightened political activism mainly through the *Kefaya* Movement (Enough) which was launched in 2004 and the presidential elections of 2005 which allowed for independent candidates for the first time. Although not linked directly to this movement or the opposition, the media

assault gained momentum and a number of high profile incidents initiated collaboration between different media that would spell trouble for the regime.

One such foretaste occurred following a peaceful demonstration by opposition activists on the day of the May 2005 referendum calling for constitutional changes. The protesters, including journalists were brutally attacked in front of the Press Syndicate Office by police and plainclothes thugs but in contrast with previous events, pictures and videos of the viciousness of the attacks were posted on the net which in turn were picked up by private television stations. The *Eid ul-Fitr* incident in October 2006 continued this trend where shocking pictures and videos posted on the internet by bloggers such as Wael Abbas moved first to private television channels and then constrained the backtrack of the government's initial denial on state television. Similarly, a video of the torture and rape of a young microbus driver arrested on minor charges two months later, again posted by Wael Abbas was picked up by Kamal Mural from *Al-Fagr* newspaper. The latter so enraged the public that it forced the trial of the perpetrators.<sup>31</sup>

Gaining confidence, bloggers, journalists and editors increasingly pushed the boundaries of what was legitimate to publish and air. Concurrently, talk shows, a staple diet of most Egyptians' television viewing also pushed in the same direction allowing not only access to different opinions but also pitching viewers directly against government officials, including government ministers who were constrained to tolerate berating through phone-ins from viewers who called in using their real names.<sup>32</sup>

The heightened activity exposing government's official repression led to increased surveillance and harassment. It has

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<sup>31</sup> Filiou, Jean-Pierre, 2011: *The Arab Revolution, Ten lessons from the Democratic Uprisings* (London: Hurst and Company): 47.

<sup>32</sup> Mabrouk, 2009, art.cit.: 11.

been suggested that the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense and the Interior all set up at around this time units to monitor the blogosphere and more than one hundred bloggers and internet activists paid with arrest the price for their disclosures in 2006 alone.<sup>33</sup> Amongst these were award-winning blogger Ahmad Said al-Islam and well-known blogger Alaa Abd el-Fatah but also bloggers who blogged exclusively in Arabic and who were strictly local, blogging on their own towns and villages.<sup>34</sup>

The compelling narrative of this is that defiance persisted. Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman received a four-year prison sentence in 2007 for criticizing the President and religion. The sensitive subject of the President's health was first brought up in *al Dustour* in early March 2008 and taken up by other newspapers. Editors of these newspapers including *al Dustour's* Ibrahim Eissa were found guilty of "publishing false information likely to disturb public order" and handed fines and prison sentences, the latter only revoked by a President's pardon.<sup>35</sup> A Facebook page created in early 2008 by twenty-six year old Esraa Abdel Fattah calling for a general strike on 6 April to support textile workers' appeal for better wages quickly reached seventy thousand members and resulted in Cairo coming to a stand-still on the day for fear of violence and looting. Abdel Fattah disappeared for twelve days and it took an Appeals Court to free the supplier of television broadcast services accused of supplying the equipment used by *Al-Jazeera* to broadcast the demonstration. He had faced a five year prison sentence and a fine of 150,000 Egyptian pounds. The regime also cracked down on satellite television stations. A spate of closures of satellite television offices in Cairo was reported in 2008 targeting London-based *Al-Hewar* channel, the Iraq-based *Al-Zawraa* and the Saudi-based *Al-Baraka*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cook, Steven A., 2011: *The Struggle for Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 195-196.

<sup>34</sup> Mabrouk, 2009, art.cit.:29.

<sup>35</sup> Cook, 2011, art.cit.: 197; al Aswany, 2011, art.cit.: 59.

<sup>36</sup> Stanford, 2008.

The crackdown however escalated in earnest as Parliamentary elections approached in 2010. By 2009, complaints brought about by government, companies, and the military against journalists and bloggers increased to a rate of one a day.<sup>37</sup> Lawsuits became common and *Hisba* lawsuits, in which parties without any legal interest in the case can file for blasphemy were routinely exploited. A ban on media coverage of the murder trial of a high profile Egyptian businessman accused of ordering the murder of his ex-pop singer mistress Suzanne Tamim was violated but the five journalists covering it were prosecuted and heavily fined. Prosecutions and financial punishment were often accompanied by physical harassment, illegal detention and confiscation of equipment. The mobile phone of Maher Abd al-Wahed of *Al-Youm al-Sabah* was confiscated after he was beaten for covering a sit-in at a government department. The incident followed another assault on two journalists days earlier. At the airport, journalists and bloggers were regularly harassed, their laptops and other digital equipment confiscated. Journalists and bloggers who covered Palestinian issues were also singled out for harsher treatment. Another tactic used was that of revoking licenses, with five news publications reportedly losing theirs in 2009, while another newspaper succumbed under the weight of heavy fines.

The broadcasting sector suffered a similar fate. The regime embarked on an aggressive campaign banning and blocking shows on many stations. One particular comedy show was stopped following a sketch criticizing the prime minister. The *Al-Alam* satellite channel whose office in Cairo had been closed down the previous year went off the air in more than a 100 countries as Egypt blocked its satellite signal. Egypt is also thought to have been behind the interruptions on *Al Jazeera* Sport as it broadcast the exclusive coverage of the World Cup opening ceremony and first match between hosts South Africa and Mexico.

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<sup>37</sup> Freedom House (2010). *Freedom of the Press – Egypt*. Available at: [http://www.freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/pfs/inc\\_country\\_detail.cfm?country=7816](http://www.freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/pfs/inc_country_detail.cfm?country=7816).



The blogosphere and the online world, ever the most vibrant, bore the brunt of the onslaught with a number of bloggers incarcerated. Tamer Mabrouk who wrote a blog exposing pollution by a private company was convicted under the defamation laws and ordered to pay 42,500 Egyptian pounds in fines. Three Moslem Brotherhood bloggers who criticized military trials of Brotherhood members were held for a number of days and a Swedish blogger who wrote extensively on the Palestinian issue was held and deported. Facebook, Freedom House wrote in its report for 2009 “had become a target of government repression.”

Nonetheless even as the state apparatus came down heavily on all ‘independent’ media, the media fought back for its space and refused to be silenced. It can be argued that it was assisted on one level by the heightened activity of the Opposition and on another level by its sheer size. While the extent of state monitoring was by all accounts huge, the challenge of keeping tabs on all that was written, broadcast and posted must have been overwhelming. This is not to say, however, that the regime did not try. The stakes were too high for it to let down its guard.

The beginning of 2010 saw the return to Egypt of Mohamed ElBaradei, the respected head of the International Atomic Energy Agency who was billed as a possible contender to Hosni Mubarak in the Presidential election to take place in 2012. More than a thousand supporters converged on Cairo International Airport amid high security in an event which was coordinated by Abdul Rahman Yusuf through a 60,000 strong Facebook group that continued to grow in the months after. The campaign, in the words of the editor-in-chief of *al-Ahram* was “tantamount to a constitutional coup”.<sup>38</sup> But perhaps the most important Facebook group would arise some months later when in June Egyptian-born Google marketing chief Wael Ghonim created the “We are all

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<sup>38</sup> Shenker, Jack (2010, February 19). Supporters give Mohamed ElBaradei hero's welcome at Cairo airport. *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/feb/19/mohamed-elbaradei-egypt-heavy-security>.

Khaled Said” page. The page, named after a young man who was beaten to death by police officers in Alexandria after having posted incriminating evidence online, became a rallying point against police brutality, exposing torture and corruption. It quickly acquired a following of more than 200,000 and was responsible for the organization of a number of protests involving mainly young people. Both websites were removed temporarily in November, many suspect at the request of the Egyptian Government although Facebook denies this.<sup>39</sup> In 2010, for the first time, a court found an internet cafe owner liable for defamatory information posted online by a customer to his shop.

The National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA) was also at the forefront of this concentrated effort to hamper information flow. In October, all broadcast companies which provided live television news feeds had their permits revoked.<sup>40</sup> They were requested to apply for new permits but were constrained to use state-run facilities in the intervening period. Text-messaging was also targeted with the NTRA decreeing that all media outlets apply for a new license to enable them to use SMS for newsfeeds. Groups that did not have official status, and that included the Muslim Brotherhood, the National Association for Change and all protest groups were barred from using mass messaging.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the independent media played its role in the run up and during the elections. The internet particularly was used to organize protests, public discussions and monitoring of the November 2010 elections. Freedom House for example reports on the interactive mapping website based on the Ushahidi model which collected eyewitness reports of violence sent in by email and text-message and placed them on a Google map.

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<sup>39</sup> Freedom House, 2011, art.cit.

<sup>40</sup> Cook, 2011: 278.

The Parliamentary elections were anything but free and fair, returning Mubarak's National Democratic Party with an even greater majority. The Muslim Brotherhood was barred from participating although some of its members stood as independent candidates. The National Association for Change, a loose grouping of various political affiliations including representatives of civil society and young people and spearheaded by ElBaradei in addition to other political parties including *Kefaya* and *al Ghad* chose to boycott the elections. The extent of the irregularities in voting led to some sporadic protests, arrests and beatings but the opposition was energized and although absent in the Chamber at its opening session on the thirteenth December was in attendance on the streets as it staged two demonstrations on successive days calling for the result to be nullified.

#### **IV. The Days of the Revolution**

From a media perspective, the eighteen days which brought down a thirty year long dictatorship can be described as the culmination of a movement which over a decade had seen to the daring opening up of denied media space and which had finally come together with opposition and activists for the final onslaught. It extended the trend, visible for the past five years by which online media pointed the way to be taken up by other media more easily accessible to the rest of the population. The new media was also instrumental in publicizing the protests and ensuring that Egyptians rallied to the cry but it also empowered them to become an intimate part of the narrative by encouraging and exploiting citizen journalism. Finally, the revolution extended the regime's high- handling of the 'independent' media and debunked once and for all state media.

There is however an important interlude between the unveiling of the new Assembly Chamber in December and the uprising in Egypt. Within that short time window, an enduring dictator had fallen in Tunisia and Egyptians had watched, with the rest of the world the spectacle unfold on their television channels. Tunisia

gave the call for change in Egypt a precedent with which it could measure up to but from which Egyptians also learnt valuable lessons.

The call for protest on the 25 January, which coincided with a public holiday known as Police Day was issued on Facebook and quickly garnered a strong following (88,000 “yes I am planning to attend”) although the outcome was far from clear. As the Day of Rage as 25 January was dubbed, drew near, the tension in Cairo was palpable. Tweets of the days prior to the uprising demonstrate the determination of the protesters but also the latent fear that resided in the Egyptian people.<sup>41</sup> Most young people who were the first to descend on Tahrir Square attended against the advice of their families. The number of protesters was still small by many standards but it would take only two days for the thousands in Tahrir Square to morph into an estimated million people demonstrating across seven governorates in Egypt.<sup>42</sup> This happened notwithstanding the heavy police presence in all key areas around Tahrir and the firing of tear gas on protesters.

The regime’s attempt to prevent the story from getting out was systematic although futile. From the very first day, journalists were singled out for brutal treatment, police often seizing phones, cameras and voice recording devices. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported extensively on violence against journalists covering the demonstrations. On the first day alone, at least 10 journalists were beaten and *Al-Hayat* Television reported that its station journalist Ahmed Hassan Kamel had not been heard of since the first night. Within a week of the demonstrations, CPJ had documented at least 101 attacks on journalists and news facilities and was investigating numerous other reports. By the 14<sup>th</sup> day the military had become the predominant force detaining journalists and confiscating their equipment rather than plainclothes police or

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<sup>41</sup> Campbell, Denis G., 2011: *Egypt Unsh@ckled, Using social media to @#:) the System* (United Kingdom: Cambria Books).

<sup>42</sup> Cook, 2011: 284.

government supporters and journalists were also faced with new accreditation rules.<sup>43</sup>

Interfering with the Internet was perhaps the regime's gravest miscalculation; on the first day the websites of two popular independent newspapers *Al-Dustour* and *El-Badil* were shut down. Within two days, authorities had suspended Internet connectivity and mobile phone service. The shutdown of five major Egyptian service providers happened within the space of a few minutes. According to Khamis the shutdown was "not only costly; it also backfired".<sup>44</sup> People were enraged by what they felt was an affront to their entitlement and feared a massive crackdown by state security to which they responded by flooding the streets. The shutdown was also counteracted by alternative services set up by search engine engineers such as the Speak to Tweet service and a free dial-up access to Egyptians with landline international telephone access. Internet access was only restored after five days.

The detention of Google marketing head Wael Ghonim in the early hours of the 26 January however can be argued to have had a singular effect on the protests. It alienated protesters who vouched they would not rest until he was released. Ghonim, whose involvement in the Khaled Said page had been instrumental in launching the protests went missing for twelve days and reappeared to give an emotional interview on one of Egypt's most watched talk shows on the Dream 2 television station. His interview, in which he declared that it was time to build the country, galvanized the protests which swelled with people who had stood on the sidelines for the whole duration of the protest; doctors and lawyers joined in and workers went on strike in different cities. "This is the revolution of the youth of the internet, which became the revolution of the youth of Egypt then the revolution of Egypt itself" Wael Ghonim had said. In the person of

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<sup>43</sup> "Egypt: New accreditation rules, military obstructs media", *Committee to Protect Journalists* (7 February 2011). Available at: <http://www.cpj.org/2011/02/egypt-new-obstacles-for-journalists-military-obstr.php>.

<sup>44</sup> Khamis, 2011, art.cit. : 1166.

Ghonim, an online activist, Egyptians seemed to have found the face of the revolution.

*Al-Jazeera* was on the ground from the beginning with continuous, detailed and comprehensive coverage of the protests so much so that it has been argued that the Arab Spring constituted *Al-Jazeera*'s 'CNN moment'. Five days into the uprising *Al-Jazeera*'s operations were shut down, the government cancelling its licenses, blocking its transmission via Nilesat and withdrawing accreditation to all its staff. The final straw may have been an interview it broadcast with the popular cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, protagonist of the talk shows which had put *Al-Jazeera* on the map years earlier and who had called on the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, to leave the country immediately. Nevertheless *Al-Jazeera* continued to report Egypt, its journalists going underground and increasingly using citizen journalism for news gathering and video footage. Egyptians tuned in via Hotbird and Arabsat. The station supplemented its all encompassing coverage by a Live Blog of Egypt showing updated videos, interviews, statements and eye-witness reports. It also provided a free live stream of its coverage through YouTube. In solidarity, at least seven Arabic-language television stations throughout the region carried *Al-Jazeera* content on the air.

The state-controlled media in contrast played down the uprisings, showing distorted images and reporting conflicting narratives of what was playing out in Egypt's public spaces. Cameras of the Egyptian state TV were not on Tahrir Square but on a bridge showing cars passing by and various channels aired "an excess of musical, variety and cooking shows".<sup>45</sup> Presenters and guests on various radio and television channels claimed that foreigners, including international journalists, had a "hidden agenda" against the government while *Al-Jazeera* was accused of

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<sup>45</sup> Mohamed Abdel Dayen Blog. Available at: <http://cpj.org/blog/2011/02/government-lies-are-exposed-in-egypts-tahrir-squar.php>

“inciting the people.”<sup>46</sup> Shahira Amin, a broadcaster on state-owned Nile TV resigned claiming she was prevented from presenting images of protesting masses and was constrained to airing only pro-Mubarak rallies. This behaviour created what Khamis terms “a credibility crisis” which may have led to the final rupture of Egyptians from the clutches of the regime.

The significance of social media in the organizational aspects of the protests is undeniable. On the 25 January and in the days following, Twitter provided the best platform by which people could organize and alert each other of danger. Denis G. Campbell’s fascinating book gives a unique insight on how tweets from Tahrir Square and from those supporting the uprisings from outside provided “leadership and ongoing, on-the spot coverage throughout the event”. Subscribers to Twitter were only about 20,000 in Egypt but it enabled them, Campbell contends, to connect to outside users and take Egypt’s revolution ‘viral’.<sup>47</sup> Tweets were also used as GPS and information was constantly requested and given on what was happening elsewhere in Egypt.

Video footage taken by mobile phone cameras, on the other hand, provided the evidence of violence happening in places where no television cameras were allowed to tread. The pictures were quickly relayed on YouTube and from there to satellite television channels and stood as irrefutable proof of the killing of defenseless people. In some areas, notably in Suez, these pictures were at times the only proof and fuelled the outrage of the Egyptians who refused to balk but kept on the pressure for Mubarak to step down.

The seventeenth day of protests was marked by Mubarak’s address to the nation on state TV, the speech in which he was

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<sup>46</sup> “Egyptian media say foreign journalists have ‘hidden agenda’”, *Committee to Protect Journalists* (5 February 2011). Available at: <http://www.cpj.org/2011/02/egyptian-media-say-foreign-journalists-have-hidden.php>.

<sup>47</sup> Campbell, 2011, art.cit.: 18.

expected to step down and in which he instead delegated his duties to the vice-president. The incredulous protesters would have none of it and early on the eighteenth day around 5000 of them surrounded the heavily barricaded Maspero state TV building and the Presidential Palace. The last breath was also a media war. State TV ran heavily edited message of Wael Ghonim calling for the people to go home, while protesters tweeted disbelief. But as labour strikes spread to health workers, facilities along the Suez Canal and steel workers it was estimated that 10 million people were protesting in cities across Egypt. Mubarak's resignation on 11 February was conveyed in a short statement on state TV of less than one minute by Vice-President Omar Suleiman in which he confirmed that power had been handed over to the military.

## **V. Press Freedom after Mubarak**

The struggle for press freedom in Egypt is far from over. Even a cursory look at the Committee to Protect Journalists' website is sufficient to indicate that the challenges to press freedom remain substantial even as the reform of the media will be a key issue for Egypt in this transitional period. What has transpired in the months following Mubarak's ouster throws a dark shadow on the ability of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to deliver on its promise of a peaceful transition of power in the framework of a free and democratic society. On further examination it can be argued that a trend towards regression can be observed as the SCAF's clamps down to limit the parameters within which the media can perform its obligation to inform, scrutinize and ensure accountability.

For decades, as already indicated, the army was a taboo subject in Egyptian media. Laws dating back to the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser prevent journalists from reporting anything about the military without permission. Since the revolution, the Supreme Council has sought to reinforce restrictions. In late March the Morale Affairs Directorate of the Egyptian Military advised editors of all Egyptian publications to obtain approval for all



mentions of the armed forces before publication demanding that they do not publish “any topics, news, statements, complaints, advertisements, pictures pertaining to the Armed Forces or to commanders of the Armed Forces” on grounds of national security.<sup>48</sup> CPJ attested to the effectiveness of the rule considering the absence of any related news in traditional news media. The military’s letter followed on the heels of the sentencing to three years imprisonment of blogger Maikel Nabil Sanad in a military court for “insulting the military”. His blog had called for more transparency by the army in decision-making.

Since then, CPJ reports the continuation of “censorship, intimidation, and politicized legal proceedings to cow critical journalists into silence”.<sup>49</sup> It exposes the interrogation of several journalists and bloggers for reporting on the army. Amongst these is Hossam el-Hamalawy, who was summoned to the military prosecutor after criticizing abusive military police practices on a private ONTV channel; 19-year old, Rasha Azab, a journalist for the newspaper *Al Fajr* following an article reporting a meeting between the army and activists calling for the elimination of military trials for civilians and 26-year old activist and blogger Asmaa Mahfouz for defaming the SCAF on social media networks.

The reinstatement of the Information Ministry which was abolished a few days after the ouster of Mubarak is also of particular concern. The reversal in July was followed by the more alarming news in September of the extension of the Emergency Law until June 2012 despite earlier promises that it would be revoked. The repeal of the law had been one of the leading demands of protesters and its extension is considered a huge setback allowing for individuals to be detained without charge or

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<sup>48</sup> Kouddous, Sharif Abdel (2011, June 20). After Mubarak, Fighting for Press Freedom in Egypt. *The Nation*. Available at: <http://www.thenation.com/print/article/161555/>.

<sup>49</sup> “In Egypt, military harasses critical journalists”, *Committee to Protect Journalists* (2 June 2011). Available at: <http://www.cpj.org/2011/06/>.

trial for up to 45 days and for trials of civilians in state security courts without the right for appeal. The Information Ministry has also put a temporary freeze on new satellite TV licenses and twice in September SCAF security forces raided the offices of *Al-Jazeera Mubashar Misr* (*Al-Jazeera Live Egypt*) on grounds of it had not been properly licensed. The station had broadcast extensively the protests in front of Israel's embassy in Cairo.

This gradual hardening of the military rulers has culminated in October with the fatal demonstration by Coptic Christians which left 25 dead including a journalist. The Maspero incidents constitute, according to the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, state incitement of sectarian violence and policy of extrajudicial killings.<sup>50</sup> The demonstrators who were protesting the demolition of a church with the alleged complicity of security forces moved in a peaceful march to stage a silent protest outside the state television building. Video footage and eyewitness testimonies from Maspero show military police and security forces disperse protesters by opening fire and using military vehicles to run them down. Protesters responded by throwing stones and setting an army vehicle on fire. People in civilian clothes, thought to be Muslims later joined the assault with army and police personnel persisting in firing tear gas and bullets and a continuation of hit and run tactics.

The effect of this incident on the overall perception on media freedom can be observed on a number of levels. Wael Mikhael, a cameraman for the Coptic television broadcaster *Al-Tareeq* was shot in the head as he filmed the clashes between the military and protesters<sup>51</sup> but more disquieting was the coverage of the clashes by state television which were taking place on its doorstep. CPJ stated that during the live broadcast "anchors made claims that

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<sup>50</sup> Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2011, October 16). *Maspero: state incitement of sectarian violence and policy of extrajudicial killings*. Available at: <http://www.cihrs.org/English/NewsSystem/Printable/Articles/3010.aspx>.

<sup>51</sup> "Attacks on press swell in Egypt: journalist dead", *Committee to Protect Journalists*. Available at: <http://www.cpj.org/2011/10/attacks-on-press-swell-in-egypt-one-journalist-dead>.

turned out to be false – including that soldiers had been killed by protesters – while failing to take note of civilian fatalities.” A presenter is said to have, at one point, called for viewers to go to the scene to “defend” the military from the “angry Christian protesters”. The Minister of Information, while calling for an independent investigation, defended state television coverage. The incident also led to the raid by security forces of two television stations which aired incriminating footage and the severance of electricity, telephone and internet service to the leading newspaper *Al-Sharouk* after it released video footage on its website of the dead and injured.

Together with these severe setbacks, one must also highlight progress in the area of more media pluralism. Writing in September, the newspaper the National suggested that since the revolution some 20 television channels and a handful of newspapers have been launched with some weekly newspaper switching to daily publication.<sup>52</sup> Editorial content has edged closer to objectivity in some of these media but the lack of transparency over ownership has dampened their success. Revolutionary youth have come together and published and distributed a monthly underground bulletin, *El Gornal* that aims to “educate and activate” its readers from all socio-economic backgrounds. A group of film makers, citizen journalists and activists have founded *Mosireen*, a non-profit media centre in Cairo dedicated to supporting citizen media of all kinds and providing services like media training, camera rentals, filming workshops and open discussions and events. Online platforms such as Twitter, blogs and facebook pages such as the “We are all Khaled Said” continue to thrive and act as promoters of activism and discussion.

A workshop organized by Chatham House in June on Egypt and the Media’s Role in Politics which brought together Egyptian journalists and activists from across the political spectrum has

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<sup>52</sup> Halime, Farah (2011, September 4). Ownership of new media under the spotlight. *The National*. Available at: [www.thenational.ae/business/media/ownership](http://www.thenational.ae/business/media/ownership).

listed some of the key challenges that Egyptian media are facing at this time of transition.<sup>53</sup> They include a hierarchical culture which militates against crossing “red lines”, some of which are self-imposed; lack of professionalism in media institutions with a high incidence of rumour-mongering and frequent use of anonymous sources; a need to be more relevant to grass-root grievances and a rift over the role being played by new media.

## **VI. Concluding Remarks**

The change in media landscape over the past fifteen years in Egypt has been enormous. Within the last decade, satellite television, ‘independent’ newspapers and access and use of online tools including social media have transformed the media content the average Egyptian is likely to consume. This in itself is highly significant and impacted directly on reinforcing perceptions of what Egyptians had for long believed about their regime. The establishment’s ambivalent attitude of allowing the media to act as an arena in which the expression of dissent was tolerated in lieu of real political rights backfired as media outlets, online media particularly, slowly encroached on dangerous turf which the regime could no longer allow without shedding its legitimacy even as it projected its alternative narrative in the more abundant state-controlled web of media channels. The resort to censorship, harassment, legal restrictions and imprisonment nonetheless did not disable the independent media which emboldened embarked on an unsystematic exposure of the many political, economic and social injustices of the Mubarak regime. At this juncture it is important to underline the mostly unintended collaboration between media outlets, with online media blazing the path which independent satellite channels and newspapers closely followed. It was in blogs, on Facebook and on YouTube that the most vibrant discourses and disclosures were first revealed but which would have most likely had less impact had other mainstream media not

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<sup>53</sup> Chatham House, Middle East and North Africa Programme: *Workshop Summary, June 2011*. Available at: [www.chathamhouse.org.uk](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk).

engaged. In the eighteen days which led to the ouster of Mubarak, social media took the level to a higher notch, acting both as a mobilizing and organizational tool as well as an effective instrument through which the story was relayed to the world. In the months which have followed, the ruling military establishment has again bore down heavily on the independent media and is attempting to re-establish an official sphere. The likelihood of a return to practices which have been simmering for more than a decade is however remote, even though the media in Egypt faces key challenges in taking forward its democratic credentials.