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ALGERIAN NATIONAL MEDIA: FREEDOM AT A COST

FATIMA EL-ISSAWI

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Algerian National Media: Freedom at a Cost

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Dr Fatima el-Issawi is Assistant Professorial Research Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre and Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Essex. Her book, *Arab National Media and Political Change*, published by Palgrave in 2016, dissects dynamics of change and conformity in traditional newsrooms post-Arab uprisings. Fatima has over 15 years of experience in covering the Middle East for international media such as *Agence France Presse (AFP)* and *BBC Arabic Service*. She is also media commentator and media consultant for several media development and international agencies.

Abstract

This report on Algerian national media and political change is part of the ‘Arab National Media and Politics: Democracy Revisited’ project, examining the relationship between Arab traditional mass media and the political sphere within the broad subject area of political change in the Arab world. Based on a series of around 30 in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with journalists and media stakeholders in Algeria, as well as analysis of media regulation and individual case studies, this report looks at the role played by national media – radio, television and print – in widening, or restricting, public debate under a competitive authoritarian system.

*Si tu parles, tu meurs,
Si tu te tais, tu meurs,
Alors parle et meurs.¹*

Introduction

The Algerian media landscape, while exhibiting some of the structural features of the industry in neighbouring North African countries, is unique in tending to employ a bolder tone and showing comparatively greater resistance to pressure. It is empowered by a long history of braving taboos, including enduring retaliations by extremist Islamist groups during the dark decade of the Civil War.

However, Algerian national media has missed an opportunity for development. During the Civil War, it was reduced to a ‘patriotic’ platform for the regime’s messages and consistent attacks by rebels. Today, independent reporting is curtailed by a combination of formal and informal pressures. Media content is restricted by vague legal stipulations, including normative obligations to play a ‘national role’ in support of the state. The precarious situation of the private broadcast sector, which is tolerated without being licensed, increases its instrumentalisation, and it now heavily invests in sensational reporting, operating at the margins of international standards.

The Algerian media landscape represents multi-layered struggles and divides: linguistic, cultural, generational and ideological. It is a case study of excessive state intervention in the shaping of media content, operations and economic viability, especially by use of commercial pressure.² The recent move towards the institutionalisation of media rights and freedoms is largely state-controlled and is seen as suspicious by a large part of the media community. Algeria’s new media law falls short of meeting international standards for freedom of expression.

This report on Algerian national media and political change is part of the ‘Arab National Media and Politics: Democracy Revisited’ project, examining the relationship between Arab traditional mass media and the political sphere within the broad subject area of political change in the Arab world.³ Based on a series of around 30 in-depth qualitative

¹ [If you speak, you die. If you are silent, you die. So speak out, and die.] Saying by Tahar Djaout, leading Algerian journalist assassinated in 1993.

² For media ownership see: Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock and Helena Sousa (eds), *Media Ownership, Concentration, and Control The Evolution of Debate* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Steven Barnett and Judith Townend (eds), *Media Power and Plurality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015); Gillian Doyle, *Media Ownership: Concentration, Convergence and Public Policy: The Economics and Politics of Convergence and Concentration in the UK and European Media* (London: Sage, 2002).

³ For a discussion on media systems, media and democratisation, see: Diamond Larry, ‘Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation’, *Journal of Democracy* 5/3 (1994), pp. 4–17; T. Carothers, ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm’, *Journal of Democracy* 13/1 (2002), pp. 1–21; D. C. Hallin & P. Mancini, *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

interviews conducted with journalists and media stakeholders in September 2016, as well as analysis of media regulation and individual case studies, this report looks at the role played by national media – radio, television and print – in widening, or restricting, public debate under a competitive authoritarian system.⁴ The report especially examines the impact of state intervention in the media sector and its implications on independent reporting, taking into consideration the unique journey of a media industry trapped between extremism, authoritarianism, and political and ideological polarisation.

Key Findings

- Sustained state interference in shaping the national media sector and its economic prospects is preventing the institutionalisation of genuine media pluralism. Opening the broadcast sector to private ownership is only providing a façade of pluralism, while consolidating the homogeneity of media content and structures.
- The regime’s use of the private broadcast sector as a platform for political messaging with no independent regulatory framework is reinforcing the uniformity of content and strengthening control by enforcing normative ‘national’ obligations of positive reporting.
- State monopoly over public advertising is a powerful tool for undermining the economic viability of the critical press. Pressure on private advertisers to withdraw their financial support of critical media is alarming.
- The progress of media reform towards the institutionalisation of media rights and freedoms is positive. However, there are many exceptions imposed on these rights in vaguely worded legal articles.
- The sustained use of judicial pursuits against journalists and media organisations is draining financial resources and delegitimising the critical press, thus acting as a powerful deterrent against any expression of dissent. Frequent imprisonment cases related to expression of dissent on social media is in contradiction with the new constitution that abolished prison sentences for journalists and acknowledged freedom of expression.
- Lack of access to official information is a powerful barrier against independent reporting. The entrenched habits of self-censorship by journalists – under the guise of protecting the stability of the country – are further empowered by the lack of practical means to access information.
- National Algerian media is yet to respond to challenges posed by recent developments in the media industry and to invest in adequate professional training for journalists, especially the youth. The entrenched traditions of opinion journalism are surviving alongside the thriving populist trends championed by the new media, which is largely loyal to the regime and consolidates lapdog journalism. A debate about the definition of professional standards is as important as the reform of journalistic bodies responsible

⁴ For analysis on the public sphere and its limitations, see: Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989); Craig J. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks (eds.), *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere in the New Media Age* (London: Sage, 1992).

for protecting journalists' rights. Algerian journalists need to regain the trust and respect of audiences, because their legitimacy is currently at stake.

- Independent national media is besieged by a combination of regulatory, judicial and financial restrictions that make its future uncertain. The increase of pressure on critical media after President Bouteflika's election for his fourth term questions the genuine will of the government to implement efficient and inclusive media reform.

The Algerian Spring and the Effects of Civil War

When you ask Algerians about the wave of political uprisings that swamped the Arab world from 2010, a common answer is: 'We already had our Spring'. The popular riots of 5 October 1988 paved the way to the introduction of a multi-party political system and the fall of state monopoly over the national press.⁵ Constitutional reforms were introduced and approved in a referendum organised in February 1989. The advent of the so-called independent press between 1990 and 1992 is viewed as the 'Golden Age' of the Algerian press. Newly launched print publications introduced a new diversity of content away from the uniform state media narratives.

A military coup aimed at preventing the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) from winning the second round of elections in January 1992 plunged the country into turmoil, leading to a brutal civil war between Algerian security forces and extremist Islamist factions.⁶ The so-called 'dirty war' lasted a decade, leaving 200,000 Algerians dead and approximately 15,000 forcibly disappeared, including journalists, effectively halting the process of media reform. The Civil War ended with the adoption of an amnesty law (Concorde Civile) in 1999, followed by the so-called Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation (Chartre pour la Paix et la Reconciliation Nationale) in 2005. The process was contested as failing to bring justice to the victims of terrorism.

At the time of the 2011 Algerian protests, tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets, protesting against high food prices and unemployment. However, their numbers were too small to have an impact on mainstream politics. The country's ability as a major oil and gas producer to increase public spending on subsidies, social housing and public sector wages, was one factor that helped limit the protests.⁷ But the lack of large-scale popular engagement was indicative of a general rejection of radical political change among Algerians, whose cost could be renewed infighting. The collective memory of the Civil War had formed a psychological barrier. Bouteflika's election for a fourth term in April 2014 despite his frail health, following a constitutional amendment in 2008 removing

⁵ The violent events led to around 500 deaths and thousands of arrests. See: Benjamin Stora, 'Algerie, le Seisme d'Octobre 1988', *Liberation*, 10 October 2008. Available at: http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2008/10/10/algerie-le-seisme-d-octobre-1988_114109.

⁶ Luis Martinez, 'The Algerian Civil War: 1990–1998', *Comparative Politics and International Studies* (London: Hurst, 2002); Jonathan C. Hill, *Democratisation in the Maghreb* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

⁷ Mohsin Khan and Karim Mezran, 'No Arab Spring for Algeria', *The Atlantic Council*, 29 May 2014. Available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/no-arab-spring-for-algeria>.

restrictions on presidential term limits, can be considered a vote for the status-quo.⁸ Meanwhile, human rights and freedom of expression continued to worsen. According to Freedom House ratings for 2015, Algeria declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to restrictions placed on the media during and immediately after the 2014 presidential election.⁹

Limits to Progress

Following the country's independence in 1962, the ruling National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN), imposed a monopoly on the national press, limiting it to one daily French language (*El Mujahid*) and another published in Arabic (*El Shaeb*),¹⁰ alongside a few periodicals. The constitution of 1976 stated that freedom of expression should be exercised 'within the framework of socialist principles',¹¹ which in practice banned all expression perceived to be against these ideals.

State monopoly over the national press was abolished alongside the introduction of political pluralism in 1988. The new constitution of 1989 acknowledged fundamental freedoms and rights, such as freedom of expression and association.¹² In line with this newly introduced political diversity, and in an attempt to reduce the scope and financial cost of the state-owned press,¹³ the new Information Code of 1990 (Article 11) granted professional journalists of the state press the right to own publications – up to a third of the publication's shares – on the condition that they organise themselves into collective editorial boards.¹⁴ These new projects benefited from strong state support, such as payment of salaries for three years, low rent and low-cost printing in the state-owned printing houses.¹⁵

The creation of the Information Code of 2012 (Article 12-05)¹⁶ was another major development, since it ended state monopoly over broadcast media, which had been exercised since the country's independence. However, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 32 of the law's 133 articles can be used to restrict independent reporting, imposing undue restrictions on access to information, as well as heavy fines for violations of the law.¹⁷

⁸ Richard Javad Heydarian, 'Algerian Elections: The End of the Arab Spring?', *The Huffington Post*, 18 April 2014. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-javad-heydarian/algerian-elections-the-en_b_5174754.html; Mélanie Matarese, '5 questions sur l'élection présidentielle algérienne', *Le Figaro*, 23 March 2014. Available at: <http://blog.lefigaro.fr/algerie/2014/03/5-questions-sur-l-election-presidentielle-algerienne.html>.

⁹ See: *Freedom House* report. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/algeria>

¹⁰ The two dailies are still published to date, although with very low distribution.

¹¹ See: the 1976 Constitution. Available at: <http://www.icla.up.ac.za/images/un/use-of-force/africa/Algeria/Constitution%20Algeria%201976.pdf>.

¹² Article 39 of the 1989 Constitution. Available at: http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.dz/Constitution89_2.htm#s3.

¹³ See an article by the pan-Arab newspaper *Al Hayat* on the complex relationship between the national press and the Algerian regime. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2k2jd6U>

¹⁴ *Journal Officiel de la République Algérienne* 14, 4 Avril 1990. Available at: <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/9961/77638/F1547031388/DZA-9961.pdf>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *La loi organique n° 12-05 du 18 Safar 1433 correspondant au 12 Janvier 2012*. The law covers the publication of ideas 'by any written, sound, television or electronic support'.

¹⁷ 'In Algeria, new media law stifles free expression', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 25 January 2014.

The Audiovisual Code of 2014 opened the sector to private authorised Algerian institutions.¹⁸ However, private broadcast media was limited to thematic programmes and obliged to disseminate ‘messages of general interest for the public authorities and official statements aiming to maintain the public order’. In addition, conditions imposed on media ownership were strict¹⁹ and the government declared the non-availability of free frequencies on FM waves.²⁰

The Audiovisual Regulatory Authority (Autorité de Régulation de L’Audiovisual, ARAV) was instituted in 2016 to oversee the broadcast sector – both private and state-owned – by ensuring the ‘free exercise of the audiovisual activity according to the conditions defined by law’. Its power extends to all broadcasting platforms – terrestrial, cable and satellite²¹ – and includes regulation (giving permission to use TV frequencies), control (ensuring adherence to all regulations) and advice (on all related laws). It also acts as an arbiter in resolving litigations.²² This new entity is formed of nine members nominated by presidential decree. With the system of nomination of members largely controlled by the President, and the lack of clear criteria in defining requirements for these posts, doubt can be cast on its ability to act independently away from governmental oversight.²³

While Article 50 in the new constitution of 2016 consecrated freedom of the press, it also states that media freedom should be exercised ‘under the law and with respect of the religious, moral and cultural constants and values of the nation’. Article 51, on the other hand, declared the right to access information and to disseminate it. However, this right remains limited, excluding ‘the private life, persons’ rights, legitimate interests of enterprises and the requirements of the national security’.²⁴

While recent efforts towards media institutionalisation present a positive move, there are many exceptions especially when it comes to practical implementation.²⁵ Prison sentences for journalists for offences related to their profession were abolished in the new constitution, but the frequency of legal cases brought against journalists, institutions or social media users based on defamation pursuant to the Penal Code is a powerful deterrent

Available at: <https://cpj.org/2012/01/in-algeria-new-media-law-stifles-free-expression.php>.

¹⁸ *Loi n° 14-04 du 24 février 2014 relative à l’activité audiovisuelle* [Law 14-04], March 2014. Available at: <http://www.ministerecommunication.gov.dz/fr/node/356>.

¹⁹ Jose Alberto Azeredo, ‘Assessment of media legislation in Algeria’, *MEDMEDIA*, 2015. Available at: <http://www.med-media.eu/library/assessment-of-media-legislation-in-algeria>.

²⁰ ‘Lancement de chaînes de radio privées: Messahel affirme la non disponibilité d’espace libre dans la modulation de fréquence’, *Djazairiess*, 7 January 2014. Available at: <http://www.djazairiess.com/fr/apsfr/339546>.

²¹ See the website of the new regulatory body: <http://www.arav.dz/fr/>.

²² See the webpage detailing the mission of the new body: <http://www.arav.dz/fr/2-non-categorise/26-missions-de-l%E2%80%99arav>.

²³ The first nomination by presidential decree of the new authority’s members took place on 19 June 2016.

²⁴ République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire, *Constitution de la République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire* [The Algerian Constitution], p.7. Available at: <http://www.joradp.dz/TRV/Fcons.pdf>.

²⁵ See: *Freedom House Report on Algeria*, 2015. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/algeria>.

against dissent, especially because it can lead to prison sentences in practice.²⁶

National Media and the Special Conditions

Publications that emerged during the ‘Golden Age’ of 1990–92 helped the press gain a reputation of being ‘serious’ and ‘quality’. The most prominent among these publications are the French language *El Watan*, *Liberté* and *Le Quotidien d’Oran*, with leftist secularist tendencies, and the Arabic language *El Khabar*, which presents itself as a news-focused, independent publication with no political affiliation.

These publications have faced competition in recent years from newly launched newspapers. The most notable of those, *Echourouk* and *Ennahar*, which score the highest in terms of distribution, are owned and managed by former journalists who are allegedly close to the regime and benefit from its financial support. In contrast to the sober tone and content of the so-called ‘quality’ press, these new publications compete over the sensational.²⁷

The state audiovisual apparatus is limited to one institution, the Entreprise Nationale de Télévision Algérienne (ENTV), established in 1986, which manages five channels and four regional TV stations. The state also monopolises radio frequencies. The Etablissement Public de Radio Diffusion Sonore (EPRS) manages seven national radio stations and 48 regional radio stations.

The outbreak of the private audiovisual sector led to the flourishing of a multitude of tolerated – yet unlicensed – television channels post-2012.²⁸ These TV stations, broadcasting from inside the country with large operations and staff, operate in total regulatory limbo, registered as foreign media institutions. Only five have gained a temporary one-year authorisation from the Algerian authorities, which can be revoked at any time and requires continuous renewal. They allegedly adopt a news agenda favourable to the regime, or some currents within it. Indeed, the advent of private channels was first encouraged by the regime during a diplomatic crisis with Egypt over a soccer match, in which the Algerian winning team was subjected to violent attacks by Egyptian fans and media, leading to a political crisis between the two countries.²⁹

²⁶ Prison sentences can be imposed according to articles of the Penal Code: Article 144 imposes prison sentences – 2 months to 2 years – against ‘anyone who intends to infringe the honour, delicacy and respect due to their authority, [...] of a magistrate, a civil servant, a public officer, a commanding officer or a law enforcement officer’; Article 144 imposes prison sentences – from 3 to 5 years – for ‘offences against the Prophet’ and Article 146 imposes prison sentences or fines for offences against public institutions.

²⁷ Ministère de la Communication, ‘Pluralisme, Professionalisme, Crédibilité’ [Pluralism, Professionalism and Credibility], *Les Cahiers de la Communication*, May 2015, pp. 71–79. Available at: <http://www.ministerecommunication.gov.dz/fr/node/1202>.

²⁸ These were launched in the context of a speech by Bouteflika in April 2011 in which he promised reforms in response to the wave of Arab uprisings and street protests in the country. See: ‘Algeria Leader Bouteflika Pledges Constitutional Reform’, *BBC*, 16 April 2011. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13102157>.

²⁹ Hamid Skif, ‘Game of Hate’, *Qantara*, 11 December 2009. Available at: <https://en.qantara.de/>

The Ministry of Communication's advisor Majid Bakoush explains the 'special conditions' that led to the birth of the private broadcast sector:

The process could have been more rigorous, but we were going through special conditions. Algerians saw their flag being burned; they were insulted by aggressive Egyptian satellite channels, they went crazy. We needed Algerian channels to defend us. This was a *raison d'Etat*.³⁰

The private broadcast sector, born out of the regime's 'special' vision to serve its needs at the international level, largely operates outside international norms and standards. While the new TV channels are accused of fueling sensational populist trends, they enjoy large viewership among Algerians, competing with pan-Arab TV channels over national audiences, especially in rural areas with higher illiteracy rates. The uncertainty that shapes the conditions of this sector helps deter dissent among its hundreds of – mostly young – journalists.

This private audiovisual landscape is dominated by few TV channels: *Ennahar TV*, owned by former journalist Anis Rahmani, known for his staunch support of Bouteflika in the last presidential elections of 2014, *Echourouk TV*, owned by former journalist Ali Fadil, critical of the government but hesitant to question the President's person or policies, and *KBC TV*, owned by the collective of journalists who launched *El Khabar* newspaper, considered relatively critical of the regime. *El Djazairia* is owned by businessmen close to the regime, and *Dzair TV* by the prominent businessman of the building sector, Ali Haddad, known as economic baron and close to the President.³¹

Tasked with reorganising this chaotic scene, the new regulatory body, ARAV, oversees the process of granting licenses according to the *Cahiers de Charges*, recently adopted by the Ministry of Communication. Criticised by some journalists interviewed as draconian, these new specifications are perceived as an attempt by the regime to completely shut the already-narrow window of tolerance for dissent.³² These *Cahiers de Charges* 'proscribe any offence, any offensive speech, insulting or defamatory, against the President of the Republic or the institution he represents'. Other articles, more vaguely worded, restrict media content criticising 'national values and state symbols as defined by the Constitution' amongst others.³³

Lack of clarity and consultation threatens to transform the new regulatory body into a tool for the Ministry of Communication to implement its policies. The head of the regulatory body, Zouaoui Benhamadi, refutes these accusations while not denying the lack of clear process and vision: 'The authority is not a technical instance that will punish the media; I am neither a policeman nor an arbitrator. This is a body that has as a mission to

content/football-war-between-algeria-and-egypt-game-of-hate.

30 Author interview, Algiers (September 2016).

31 George Joffé, 'Ali Haddad and Algeria's 'Economic Barons'', *Al Araby al Jadeed*, 27 March 2015. Available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/3/27/ali-haddad-and-algerias-economic-barons>.

32 Author interview with scholar and journalist AbdelKarim Tafeguennit, Algiers (September 2016).

33 'Cahier de charges de l'audiovisuel / Des interdits en cascade', *Algerie Focus*, 2 July 2016. Available at: <http://www.algerie-focus.com/2016/07/audiovisuel-grands-axes-cahier-charges-regissant-lactivite-devoiles>.

reflect on profound societal matters.³⁴

National Media under Attack

Mistrust has always marked the relationship between President Bouteflika and Algerian national media, reflected by his reluctance to give interviews, his critical statements towards the press, and the 2001 amendment to the penal code which imposed prison sentences for defamation against the President. Bouteflika recently slammed online media for ‘allowing the dissemination of slanderous and insulting insinuations’ to the extent of ‘attacking openly and without any scruple, our people and our country’.³⁵ Algeria currently ranks 129 out of 180 in Reporters Without Borders’ 2016 World Press Freedom Index.³⁶

Journalists interviewed labelled the frequency of legal pursuits for defamation against them as ‘judicial harassment’, perceived as a tool to drain their financial resources and to delegitimise them. Even if prison sentences are no longer legally imposed for press offences, two articles in the Penal Code still prescribe prison sentences for offences against high ranking officials, especially the President. Furthermore, frequent legal cases against journalists and their institutions based on fiscal or personal affairs are largely viewed as politically motivated and aimed at intimidating critical voices. The lack of independent regulation for audiovisual media makes it extremely susceptible to punitive measures – a television station operating without a license can be abruptly shut down if it is considered offensive or not in line with the regime’s policies.

A recent prominent case is that of freelance journalist and blogger Mohamed Tamalt, who died after medical complications as a result of a hunger strike in protest against his arrest. He was convicted of ‘defaming a public authority’ and ‘offending’ President Bouteflika in a poem he posted on Facebook. He used to run a website in which he allegedly posted personal allegations against the President, Algerian officials and members of their families. He was sentenced to two years in jail.³⁷

³⁴ Author interview, Algiers (September 2016).

³⁵ ‘Bouteflika s’attaque à la presse électronique’, *Kabylie News*, 21 October 2016. Available at: <http://kabylie-news.com/algerie/bouteflika-sattaque-a-presse-electronique/>; ‘En trompe l’oeil’, *Algeria Watch*, October 2005. Available at: http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/analyse/benchenouf_presse.htm.

³⁶ See: Reporters Without Borders’ report on Algeria. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/algeria>.

³⁷ ‘Affaire de Mohamed Tamalt : la peine de prison confirmée en appel’, *Tout sur l’Algerie*, 9 August 2016. Available at: <http://www.tsa-algerie.com/20160809/affaire-de-mohamed-tamalt-peine-de-prison-confirmee-appel/>.

Other important cases include the imprisonment of two television executives of *KBC TV* in July 2016 for illegal production practices, after the channel aired a satirical show including allegations of corruption against Bouteflika and allusions to the frail health of the President, an issue considered extremely sensitive. The programme was immediately halted.³⁸ Pressure and intimidation increased during and after the presidential election of 2014. In March 2014, the private television channel *Al Atlas*, which adopted an editorial line against a fourth presidential mandate for Bouteflika, was ordered to stop broadcasting, accused of ‘incitement’ and ‘lack of professionalism’.³⁹ Another private TV channel, *Al Watan*, was closed in October 2015, after airing an interview with a former leader of the Islamic Salvation Army, accused of ‘offence against symbols of the state and the republic’ according to statements by the Minister of Communication Hamid Grine.⁴⁰

Expressing dissent on social media platforms can be punishable under libel laws. A 2009 cybercrime law gives authorities the right to block websites that are ‘contrary to the public order or decency’, and a centralised system monitors internet traffic.⁴¹ For instance, activist Zoulikha Belarbi was convicted of undermining Bouteflika for posting satirical online pictures of the head of state on her Facebook page.⁴²

Structures of Domination

Beyond the legal restrictions on media content, the economic pressures on national media were viewed by all interviewees as the most efficient tool for punishing, and thus deterring, expression of dissent. The weakness of a business model relying heavily on governmental subsidies and advertising revenues, alongside the selective legal cases that focus on irregularities in the management of media organisations expressing dissent, exacerbate both the vulnerability of the national media industry and its volatile conditions.

A major player in shaping national media is the Agence Nationale d’Edition et de Publicité (ANEP).⁴³ This state-owned agency is responsible for distributing and placing public advertisements in all Algerian media, print and audiovisual. For the Ministry of Communication

³⁸ ‘Algerian media faces ‘hostile environment’, *Al-Jazeera*, 15 July 2016. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/algerian-media-faces-hostile-environment-160713112312137.html>.

³⁹ ‘Algerian TV station shuts after police raid’, *Al Jazeera*, 12 March 2014. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/03/algerian-tv-station-shuts-after-police-raid-201431213348364242.html>

⁴⁰ ‘Algeria closes TV station over ‘subversive’ interview’, *The New Arab*, 13 October 2015. Available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/10/13/algeria-closes-tv-station-over-subversive-interview>

⁴¹ Freedom House Algeria country report 2016.

⁴² ‘Algerian activist fined for photo shopping Bouteflika’, *The New Arab*, 22 March 2016. Available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/blog/2016/3/22/algerian-activist-fined-for-photo-shopping-bouteflika>.

⁴³ Previously, the distribution of public advertisements was controlled by a special bureau within the security services, the so-called Directorate of Information and Documentation, which was dismantled in 2014 alongside Bouteflika’s new policies, which were introduced to weaken the influence of intelligence services. See: ‘Why Bouteflika dissolved Algeria’s powerful spy agency?’, *Al Jazeera*, 26 February 2016. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/02/algeria-dissolved-powerful-spy-agency-160225171417842.html>

advisor Majid Bakkoush, the state's intervention in public advertisements is 'a way to preserve pluralism in the media' arguing that these revenues are distributed according to 'certain requisites', but giving no further clarification. While there are no clear guidelines on how these revenues, crucial for the survival of media organisations, are dispatched, it is a common view among journalists that they are used as a stick and carrot policy to reward those loyal to the regime and to punish those critical.

‘*The minister talked about a circle of virtue – good money for good media.*’

These revenues also ensure the continuity of small presses with limited distribution and a pronounced allegiance to the regime. ‘The regime intervened in redesigning the media landscape by giving funds and incentives to the media, press and TV, that

serve its agenda; these are semi-governmental despite their private ownership, they are an extension of the power in place’, comments Ali Djerri, Chief Executive of *KBC TV*.⁴⁴

The financial pressure on national media expressing dissent has lately expanded from public to private advertisers, who have allegedly been pressured to withdraw their support for independent critical media, such as *El Khabar* and *El Watan*, through threats to their business interests.

Asked about these allegations, Bakkoush talks about a so-called ‘circle of virtue’:

We told advertisers not to link their image and reputation to unethical newspapers. This is not an order but a point of view. The minister talked about a circle of virtue – good money for good media.⁴⁵

State interference in shaping the national media industry takes various forms. When *El Khabar*'s owners attempted to sell the newspaper to the Algerian businessman Issad Rebrab, known to be critical to Bouteflika, court verdict supported the government's claim that the deal was in violation of the country's anti-monopoly law.⁴⁶ *El Watan* newspaper was recently prevented from moving offices in Algiers, based on claims it did not have the necessary permit for the new premises.⁴⁷

‘The fact that we give the opposition a platform is annoying the regime. They know they need us, all regimes need a breath of fresh air, but they need us within certain limits, without expanding and gaining more power and popularity’, comments *El Khabar* Director Kamel Djouzi.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Author interview, Algiers (September 2016)

⁴⁶ ‘Leading Algerian newspaper fighting for its life’, *The Arab Weekly*, 22 May 2016. Available at: <http://www.thearabweekly.com/News-&-Analysis/5184/Leading-Algerian-newspaper-fighting-for-its-life>

⁴⁷ ‘Algeria: Alarming attacks against independent media’, *Article 19*, 6 July 2016. Available at: <https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38435/en/algeria:-alarming-attacks-against-independent-media>

⁴⁸ Author interview, Algiers (September 2016).

However, to reduce their dependency on governmental resources, mainly in printing and distribution, few media outlets found alternatives. For example, *El Watan* pioneered an independent business model by owning private printing facilities – jointly with *El Khabar* – as well their own mechanisms for distribution and collection of advertising revenues. This independence is however threatened by the decrease in advertising revenues, recent competition with TV stations and online news, and the economic crisis in the country as a result of the fall in oil prices.

Omar Belhouchet, Founder of *El Watan*, comments:

What made the Algerian press different is our ability to resist, due to the legitimacy we gained during the war, our readers' loyalty and our economic model. We cannot talk about an autonomous press without an independent functioning economic model. This model is still resisting the pressures.⁴⁹

The Legacy of the Civil War: The Journalist Soldier

The outbreak of the Civil War stalled the process of media reform. It turned journalists into targets for attack by Islamic factions on the one hand, and into the conveyers of 'patriotic' journalism in defence of the state on the other. Although some were sheltered in hotels under high security, more than a hundred journalists and media staff were killed and hundreds had to flee during the so-called 'dark decade'.⁵⁰

Imposed in 1992 and only abolished in 2011, the state of emergency caused serious damage to the previously thriving national press.⁵¹ The pressure exercised by the intelligence services on media operations, led by the then powerful General Mohamed Mediène, nicknamed 'General Toufik', was crucial in shaping media content. The eventual repudiation of the powerful general and the instigation of judicial pursuits against other high ranking generals was characterised by the regime as a step towards a civil state, but was at the same time criticised as being simply reflective of the internal struggle between the different regime factions, which Bouteflika won.⁵²

During the war, the state imposed rigorous control over the coverage of violence through blanket censorship, the suspension of newspapers and the arrest and criminal prosecution of journalists who attempted independent reporting.⁵³ Diverse narratives on the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ 'Journalistes assassinés en Algérie durant les années 90', *Mediapart*, 23 November 2012. Available at: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/maryam-al-shamiya/blog/231112/journalistes-assassines-en-algerie-durant-les-annees-90>

⁵¹ 'Algeria lifts 19-year-old state of emergency', *Reuters*, 24 February 2011. Available at: <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/attentats-terroristes-a-paris/20151119.OBS9845/comment-vivre-avec-l-etat-d-urgence-les-algeriens-conseillent-les-francais.html>

⁵² Richard Nield, 'Why Bouteflika dissolved Algeria's powerful spy agency?', *Al Jazeera*, 26 February 2016. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/02/algeria-dissolved-powerful-spy-agency-160225171417842.html>

⁵³ See the special report by Committee to Protect Journalists, March 1999. Available at: <https://www.cpj.org/attacks98/1998/mideast/AlgeriaSR.html>

conflict were impossible; contradicting official narratives and disseminating unauthorised ‘pre-mature’ information were treated as offences. Draconian measures were set up, such as the notorious ‘reading committees’ established at printing houses to ensure newspapers conformed with the official line.⁵⁴ Kamel Mansari from *Le Jeune Independent* explains:

Terrorism destroyed professional traditions; we were in a situation of war. Some of our work was clearly unprofessional. We were into commentary, even propaganda. We had a different hat on, that of an activist, a soldier.⁵⁵

This did not however prevent the development of resistance amongst journalists. For example, *El Watan* published a report on an operation against the security forces, which led to the closure of the newspaper and the arrest of the journalists involved. Other forms of resistance included the publishing of blank pages when the military censor had obstructed information, or the publication of reports containing so-called ‘pre-mature’ security information in several presses on the same day, in a strategy aimed to avoid retaliation against one specific publication. The proven ability of the Algerian press to resist guardianship is counterbalanced by a lack of trust due to a perception of national media as an active actor in the struggle, serving as the voice of the regime – or factions within it – by political alignment rather than because of pressure. The press is yet to address these important questions.

Censorship of security information is no longer officially applied, but it is embedded in the practices of both journalists and government officials. Access to information on security, but also on other less sensitive matters, is presented by most journalists as a major challenge. ‘Security

‘We were into commentary, even propaganda. We had a different hat on, that of an activist, a soldier.’

information was not available during the Civil War and it is still the case today. It is the security officer who contacts the journalist and not the other way around. They give us the information whenever and however they choose. It is quite impossible to verify it by independent sources,’ comments Boualam Guamrassa, a journalist from *El Khabar* who was a field reporter covering the Civil War.⁵⁶ The head of *KBC TV*, Ali Djerri, also stresses difficulties faced when trying to access official information: ‘They accuse us of publishing false information when we do our job. I told them our information is accurate as long as we don’t have a clarification from a governmental source proving it is wrong. It is very difficult to have a comment or response from them on published press reports.’⁵⁷

⁵⁴ These were abolished in 1997.

⁵⁵ Author interview, Algiers (September 2016)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

French vs. Arabic: The Identity Divide

The divide between newspapers in Arabic and French is a reflection of societal divisions between a French-influenced elite and a rising new middle class attached to Arabic and Islamic identities. The French-speaking press is generally perceived as higher quality and more secular than the more conservative Arabic-speaking one. The latter claims an Arab identity and represents growing societal trends that shy away from French influence, investing in populist trends in contrast to the sober Francophone tone. During the Civil War, the national press – mostly Francophone – was perceived as supportive of the radical governmental positions against Islamists, to the extent of paving the way for the military coup of 1992 by spreading fear about the future of the country under Islamic rule. Sensitivities about language and identity are largely viewed as a legacy of French colonial times and post-independence policies.

The recent row surrounding the Ministry of Education's reform plan for public schools is an example of the linguistic-ideological divide. Education Minister Nouria Benghabrit's proposal to allow teachers to give dialect lessons in primary school has drawn accusations from nationalists and Islamists of betraying the Algerian identity.⁵⁸ The publication of elementary school level geography books mapping the Middle East and showing Israel instead of Palestine also triggered a row leading to the withdrawal of the books.⁵⁹ National media reported widely on these divisions.

Hadda Hazem, Editor of *Al Fajr* private publication comments:

They are attacking the minister because she is secular; public schools are under the control of obscurantists. We won the battle against terrorism on the ground but they won the social battle. The regime plays all cards, including religion, flirting with Islamists.⁶⁰

Conservative trends in Algerian society are solidifying. In September 2016, an Algerian Christian convert was sentenced to three years in prison for Facebook posts 'insulting Islam'.⁶¹ It is common for Algerians to be jailed or arrested for breaking the fast and 'violating the sanctity of Ramadan'.⁶² Outspoken journalist and writer Kamel Daoud from *Le Quotidien d'Oran* was issued a fatwa against him calling for his death from a leader of a

⁵⁸ 'Algeria school language reform hits nationalist raw nerve', *The New Arab*, 5 August 2015. Available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/features/2015/8/5/algeria-school-language-reform-hits-nationalist-raw-nerve>.

⁵⁹ 'The Algerian Ministry of Education is facing widespread criticism because of Israel's ethnic division', *CNN Arabic*, 19 September 2016. Available at: <http://arabic.cnn.com/world/2016/09/19/education-algeria-courses>

⁶⁰ Author interview, Algiers (September 2016).

⁶¹ 'Algeria: 3-Year Sentence for Insulting Islam', *Human Rights Watch*, 7 September 2016. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/07/algeria-3-year-sentence-insulting-islam>.

⁶² 'Algerians jailed for breaking Ramadan fast', *Al Arabiya*, 7 October 2008. Available at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/10/07/57856.htm>; 'Ramadan in Algeria: The Hefty Sin Tax', *Al Akhbar*, 6 March 2015. Available at: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/11246>.

Salafist party. Daoud had expressed controversial ideas in the French media on colonisation, the Palestinian cause, the Arab Spring and the relationship between Muslims and their religion, stating that religion was a problem in the Arab world.⁶³

New Landscape, Old Practices

While the old generation of ‘militant journalists’ is still leading the printed press, acting as gatekeepers on content, a new generation of young journalists is the main backbone of the rising private audiovisual sector. The new generation is largely perceived as less resilient to directives and red lines compared to their older colleagues, attracted by opportunities for fame and financial rewards in the private broadcast sector. The old generation is perceived as attached to the identity of the journalist-activist, not able – or not willing – to embrace modern trends of opting for more newsy content away from the political editorial. For Mourad Hashid of *El Watan*, ‘we are, as independent press, still in our teenage years, we are not able to grow into the adult age, to mature.’⁶⁴

‘*We believe that our main mission should not be to highlight problems, but to provide a platform for those who have solutions...*’

The newly developed private media presents a unique landscape. *Ennahar* media group is a good example. Strictly employing young journalists, even in leading editorial positions, the media group enjoys high viewing numbers through investing in everyday news with a pronounced populist tone and content. Editor-in-chief, Mohamed Bousari, young and with limited

professional experience, explains his eagerness to make sure content is respectful of the ‘editorial line’. He says: ‘the editorial line is patriotic, in defence of the country, our foreign policy, issues at stakes, especially security; we avoid all that can be in breach of these issues, such as statements or positions that can be considered as threatening the stability of the country.’⁶⁵

The sector’s support for the fourth term election of Bouteflika puts into question its stated identity as ‘the voice of people’.⁶⁶ Testimonies by young journalists demonstrate their ease in navigating between their personal beliefs about professional reporting – including their political choices and preferences – and abiding by directives of editors, the gatekeepers. A so-called positivism is embraced by these young journalists – a ‘patriotic’ duty to form a bright account of national controversies. The precarious conditions of the broadcast sector and its hierarchical structure further limit the possible margins for manoeuvre.

⁶³ ‘Kamel Daoud: A Chronicle of Controversy’, *Fanack Chronicle*, 11 February 2015. Available at: <https://chronicle.fanack.com/algeria/faces/kamel-daoud-chronicle-controversy/>.

⁶⁴ Author interview, Algiers (September 2016).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ On the dubious standards of the so-called independent press, see: Djamaldine Benchenouf, ‘La liberté de la presse en Algérie, en trompe l’œil’, *Algeria-Watch*, October 2005. Available at: http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/analyse/benchenouf_presse.htm.

Another important factor is the ability of the regime to co-opt journalists with rewards: ‘We believe that our main mission should not be to highlight problems, but to provide a platform for those who have solutions to these problems. Our role is to appease tensions’, comments Hakima Dahabi, a young journalist working for *El Mihwar* newspaper.⁶⁷

For *Echourouk TV* talk show host Kada Benamar, the ability to raise the ceiling of debates on TV platforms is linked to several reasons, cleverly controlled by the regime. He gave the example of the dismissal of Algeria’s head of intelligence in 2015, an unprecedented development in terms of the topics debated on televised platforms: ‘Security changes in recent years allowed us to cover topics we would never have dared to tackle before. We reported on trials of generals, talked about corruption, the role of money in politics, and the influence of generals in choosing presidents. However, this move was allowed and encouraged by the regime; the real margin of manoeuvre is usually the fruit of friction between the regime’s wings.’⁶⁸

If self-censorship habits are an everyday reality for journalists in the private sector, with a limited margin of flexibility, this margin does simply not exist for those working in state-owned broadcast media, a large sector providing more stability but limited freedom. For journalists interviewed from this sector, the golden word is how to be ‘clever’ in working around these restrictions by using ‘ruses’. ‘I asked to work on apolitical topics to avoid restrictions. Even when I produced reports on topics such as the eagerness of the young to immigrate or corruption in schools’ canteens, this was considered prohibited information’, said a broadcast journalist who asked to remain anonymous.⁶⁹

“ *We have an identity and we want to protect it. We are modernists, democrats, and we have immense differences with Islamic currents that are also represented in the press.* ”

The limited margin of diversity of views allowed on private televised media platforms, depending on the regime’s willingness to open this space or to close it, is creating a façade of media pluralism. ‘No one TV channel can tackle a topic related to the health of the president, or who is really in charge of the country now; those who dare will be closed. There are clear red lines, we know some personalities are above criticism, the president, his brother, the head of the army, these are real taboos’,⁷⁰ argues Boualam Guemrasa.

The lack of professional bodies working in defence of journalists’ rights and professional standards exacerbates the vulnerability of the national media industry. The formation of the movement of Algerian journalists (Mouvement des Journalistes Algériens, MJA) in 1987 played a major role in securing financial and professional gains for journalists. Other bodies such as a higher council for information and a council for ethics did not survive the

⁶⁷ Author interview, Algiers (September 2016).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

outbreak of the Civil War. The current syndicate of journalists is largely viewed as weak and lacking in representation, solely representative of secular French-influenced trends within the opposition and national media. This is not denied by the head of the syndicate, Kamal Amarni: ‘We have an identity and we want to protect it. We are modernists, democrats, and we have immense differences with Islamic currents that are also represented in the press. We are against them.’⁷¹

The perceived weakness of the union has encouraged the formation of other professional bodies for journalists, criticised for attempts to co-opt national media by the regime.⁷² The Press Commission, established by the Ministry of Communication to register professional journalists by issuing cards was boycotted by a part of the community, which thought it was aiming to assert control over the industry.⁷³

Conclusion

Pressure on Algerian national media has increased in recent years, with heightened social, economic and political tensions, and a great level of intolerance towards critical reporting. The latest presidential campaign of 2014 put severe pressure on the media, while simultaneously instrumentalising journalists to further political agendas.

‘You – journalists – can write what you want and we – the power – can do what we want.’ This is how Algerian journalists understand the freedom of expression. They understand that they have to face retaliation, thus navigate between resistance and co-optation in their relation to power. Practices of resilience and resistance, championed by few independent presses pre-Civil War, are challenged by the growing private broadcast sector embedding lapdog journalism as an expression of ‘ethical’ practice, and adopting a ‘national’ role, protecting the status quo. Resistance is also set back by a lack of professional development and training for journalists and the impact of years of isolation during the Civil War.⁷⁴

Red lines – usually the person of the President and the security institution – are well understood by journalists and reflected in their practices; the relatively high ceiling in the coverage of certain topics is seen as the reflection of internal struggles between the regime’s wings or the regime willingness to open up media platforms to serve its own strategies. Independent media is today trapped between several barriers that make its survival quite difficult: shrinking

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² ‘Journalists’ dissensions obstruct their syndicate progress’, *Al Jazeera*, 22 December 2008. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.net/home/Getpage/f6451603-4dff-4ca1-9c10-122741d17432/55ec1c53-8aa0-42f7-8a76-302ece124e0b>; ‘The birth of the national union for the honour of the Algerian journalist’, *Akhbarjalifa.com*, 13 February 2016. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2lpKYn7>.

⁷³ ‘Les enjeux d’une démarche’, *Liberte – Algeria*. Available at: <http://www.liberte-algerie.com/actualite/les-enjeux-dune-demarche-208479/print/1>.

⁷⁴ On press models and roles, see: Dennis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory* (London: Sage, 2000); James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press, Broadcasting, and New Media in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2003); Nico Carpentier, ‘Coping with the agoraphobia media professional: A typology of journalistic practices reinforcing democracy and participation,’ in Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier (eds.), *Reclaiming the Media* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2007).

advertising revenues, continuous lawsuits, libel cases, fiscal inspections and investigation into their management's irregularities. Excessive state intervention in shaping the media sector and its economic prospects pushes independent media towards self-censorship in its quest for survival. The recent mushrooming of media projects with sensational trends and a pro-regime editorial line is exacerbating the vulnerability of independent media by further isolating it.

Media freedom in Algeria is both real and illusionary at once. It exists so long as journalists have the courage to practice it, to pay the heavy price that comes with it, and to renounce the many advantages that can be earned by courting power. It is confined in the narrow space between the pressure exercised by the regime (and how 'creative' this can be), and the cleverness of the survival tactics used by those who want to resist it.

Earlier Report on Moroccan National Media

As part of the ‘Arab National Media and Politics: Democracy Revisited’ project, Fatima el-Issawi also wrote a report on Moroccan National Media. This examined the relationship between Arab traditional mass media and the political sphere within the remit of political change in the Arab world, enabled by the popular Arab uprisings that erupted from 2010 on. Based on in-depth field investigation, the report aims to analyse the intricate relation between the national media and democratisation, mapping trends in the national media by reflecting on the lived experiences of journalists and their perception of their roles and practices. The report looks especially at journalists’ approach to entrenched taboos and the dynamics of censorship and self-censorship in newsrooms. It is based on the outcome of a series of qualitative interviews conducted in Morocco in July 2015 with more than 30 journalists and stakeholders in mainstream media, both print and audio-visual.

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