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After the Arab Revolts

Social Media and the Journalist in Egypt

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Introduction

This chapter recognises the role social media played in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts in 2011, but concentrates more on the interface between journalistic activity and the political structures of the Egyptian state post January 2011, within which this type of activity represents one important development. Much has been written on the subject of social media use (see Khamis and Vaughn, 2011; Comunello and Anzera, 2012; Rinnawi, 2012; Khamis and Vaughn 2013; Wolfsfeld et al, 2013; El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013; Brym et al, 2014; Herrera 2014; Wolver, 2016). For my part, I have argued in an article published in 2011 that social media had been taken up as a mobilising tool to bring people to the streets of Tunis and Cairo (Harb, 2011).

In that same article I argued that "what happened in Tunisia and Egypt was effectively the seizure of power by the people as part of a collective will to overthrow dictators and autocratic regimes and to effect democratic change from within" (ibid: np). Social media networks did not of themselves generate revolutions but they were able to facilitate them, helping to generate a sense of connectedness. They created a space where people shared grievances against those in positions of authority: groups of young people, in particular, used that newly shared virtual space to demand that a corrupt political elite be held responsible for their misuse and abuse of power.

Della Porta and Diani, referring to the work of Pizzorno (1996), noted that "collective identity is strongly associated with recognition and the creation of connectedness" (1999, 21). Sharing Facebook posts and twitter hashtags provided exactly that essential bond between protestors. Della Porta and Diani also argued that "Identity is not an immutable characteristic, pre-existing action … it is through action that certain feelings of belonging come to be either reinforced or weakened … collective action produces and encourages continuous redefinitions of identity" (1999: 93). In this particular case, protest was the form of action that brought people together to form a collective identity, while social media was that platform that enabled the youth of the region to form the underlying bond.

The problem is that in many Arab countries, with the exception of Tunisia (where the democratic process is still developing despite many obstacles (Ghannoushi, 2014)) the strength of popular power has been reduced. Egypt, for example, has been hit by the return of military rule, despite the fact that on June 30th 2013 Egyptians again took to the streets in their millions, demanding the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamad Morsi. (Since jailed, prosecuted and now facing a death sentence (Kingsley, 2015)). No sooner had he been removed, than his successor, President Abed El Fatah El Sisi (former head of the Egyptian army) used what he described as 'the people mandate' to oversee a crackdown on most forms of opposition (ibid). Political freedom and freedom of speech in Egypt have undergone a major setback. This chapter will concentrate, therefore, on the state of journalism in Egypt post January 2011, and the space social media occupies in the lives of a group of journalists struggling to stand up to power and hold it to account. **It will also draw**

on the state of investigative journalism in Egypt amid the clampdown on freedom of expression.

Parallel states: media and politics in Egypt

After January 2011, Egypt witnessed an influx of newly established TV channels, among those channels supported and financed by the Muslim Brotherhood. At one point, there had been a shift away from the homogenised messages issued (in both print and broadcast media), in support of the government and the country's leaders (Diab, the *Guardian*, 2011). This healthy development, however, did not last long. Following the June 30th revolt the media were used as a mobilising tool in the hands of the military, led by Abed Al Fatah al Sisi. Journalistic notions of fairness and balance in covering events vanished. The country's media was then divided into two extreme media clusters - one in support of the Brotherhood, including Aljazeera *Mubasher Misr* (Egypt Live), and the other in support of the military. Hate speech against 'the other' on both sides came to dominate public discourse, until the military-led authorities closed down the channels affiliated to the Brotherhood and other Salafi affiliated religious channels.

The prevailing message and its associated terminology became seamless. Slogans such as 'the people want to execute the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood', were turned into a celebratory message. There had been several attempts to provide some discursive balance in Egypt, including the creation of a satirical programme produced and presented by Bassem Yousef (who became known as the Jon Stewart of the Arab World), the appearance of a current affairs programme produced and presented by Reem Majed, and another produced and presented by Yousri Fouda. Within two years, the increase of private satellite TV stations in Egypt, which had seemed at first to represent an explosion of media diversity, foundered on a new reality; print and broadcast media ended up singing from the same hymn sheet, that produced by the ruling military elite. The three programmes mentioned above were taken off air for presenting what was assumed to be an attack on the country's political and military leadership.

This situation, where the media realm runs parallel to political organisation (rather than acting as an instrument of critique), can generate poor levels of professionalism in journalists (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). These authors maintain that, conversely, a high degree of professionalism in journalistic enquiry occurs when journalism is clearly differentiated as an institution from other bodies and forms of practice – including, of course, politics (38). This lack of autonomy has created a dominant mindset among a majority of Egyptian journalists; they have become tied to the political actor to which they lend their support. To borrow Hallin and Mancini's term, the media in Egypt became 'instrumentalized' (37). Journalists in Egypt (mainly broadcasters) identify themselves with particular points of view, which meant that they were not serving the public (even though they claimed to be doing so), contradicting their own standards of practice as specified in the Code of the Profession, ratified in 1986.

The Egyptian airwaves are these days dominated with hours and hours of one man or one woman shows, talking heads claiming that they represent wisdom and the truth, as though audiences should be grateful to them for sharing their insights. Some of these talk shows have generated hours and hours of hate speech against the 'other', which in the Egyptian case is seen as those critical of military rule – such people are described as traitors. As prominent broadcast journalist Reem Majed put it, in a paper presented at a conference in Berlin, "the

media is playing the lapdog role rather than the watchdog role, keeping an un-informed populace - that can be easily confused - deceived and directed" (Majed, 2015). The newcomer to the TV market in Egypt is a channel called DMC. Journalists I spoke to in Cairo refer to it as the Defence Ministry Channel, in reference to the direct funding it receives from the Ministry of Defence. Egyptian journalists, therefore, are divided into two groups. There are those that fully ally themselves with the regime and act as its mouthpiece, defending its political and economic activities, and those who are trying hard to defend their journalistic integrity and values. Many of the latter have lost their jobs and have been told to stay at home, while others decided to resign when accurate reporting became harder and harder to achieve.

Young people in Egypt were among the first of the Arab youth to have used the Internet as a political platform, and as a tool to mobilise people for change. Egypt has the largest and most active blogosphere in the Arab world. The Egyptian bloggers were the first to reveal corruption and initiated calls for change as early as 2007 (Saleh, 2007 see also El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2014). A few victories were achieved, such as the firing and sentencing of two police officers condemned for torturing Imad Al Kabeer in 2007 (BBC Arabic, 2007). However, these early Egyptian bloggers faced significant jail sentences and prosecution (BBC News, 2007). In their book *Egyptian Revolution 2.0*, El Nawawy and Khamis (2013) highlighted the role played by Egyptian political blogs in encouraging civic engagement and public participation through the use of these methods:

> *1)* acting as effective tools for supporting the capabilities of the democratic activists by allowing forums for free speech and political networking opportunities and *2)* providing a virtual space for assembly, which allows for the exchange of civic discourse, deliberation, and articulation that goes beyond simply supporting the capability of the protestors to plan, organize, and execute peaceful protests on the ground (3).

El Nawawy and Khamis studied Egyptian activists' blogs (describing them as citizen journalists). Although the use of blogs and other forms of online agitation and commentary, are usually associated with the growth of citizen journalism, I know several professional journalists who took to the blogosphere during the Mubarak era, in order to publish information and raise questions about political and economic misconduct in the country. They adopted this approach was because they were denied space in their own media institutions. Some of those journalists used pseudonyms to escape prosecution or the loss of their jobs. The blogosphere in Egypt has come to be dominated by social media outlets, and mainly by Facebook, where note publishing has given both journalists and activists the space they need to publish their stories.

Some ten years after these events, the prosecution of journalists and social media activists is still a regular occurrence. In January 2016 the Egyptian authorities arrested three Facebook admins and "accused them of using the 'networking website to incite against state institutions' '' (Shearlaw, 2016). There are up to 35 journalists in detention right now for 'publishing offences', as one Egyptian journalist told me (S, interview with author, 2016) in a discussion that was part of a wider study of Journalism and Culture in Egypt[1]. In November

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[1] Journalists interviewed are anonymised and are referred to by random letters to protect their identity.

2016, an Egyptian court "sentenced the head of the country's journalists union and two board members to two years in prison while additionally handing each of them fines of around $650 for harbouring two wanted journalists" (*The New Arab*, 2016). Another Egyptian journalist summarises the situation as "journalists live in a state of fear … Big Brother is watching …' (M, interview with author, 2016).

The Egyptian government is now planning to introduce a new law that criminalises what they call 'illegal trading of ideas' which comes as an addition to the law on 'Electronic Crime' and can lead to the prosecution of journalists and activists who might do no more than exchange ideas that the regime might deem harmful to 'national interests' (B, interview with author 2016).

Despite the depth of political gloom in Egypt, some journalists have taken their arguments to the virtual space, establishing journalistic online news ventures that are acting as an alternative forum to that provided by mainstream media. Among those ventures are *Mada Masr*, *Aswat Masriyah, Minasah* and a newcomer to the market called *Madina. Mada Masr*, for example, became known for its investigative reporting that shed light on corruption and misconduct among politicians and the military. According to journalist B (interview with author, 2016), the online news website gained credibility among whistle-blowers in the Egyptian civil service. However, that didn't come without a price, because Hosam Bahgat, one of their leading investigative journalists, was arrested and detained for publishing a story in *Mada Masr* on October 13 2015 with the headline 'A coup busted?'. The article spoke of "the conviction in August of a group of military officers for plotting a coup with the banned Muslim Brotherhood" (*BBC News* 2015).

After his release, Hosam posted a statement on Facebook detailing what had happened, informing his readers that he faced "charges of deliberately broadcasting false news that harms national interests and involuntarily disseminating information that harms the public interest, as per Articles 102 and 188 of the [Egyptian] Penal Code." (*Mada Masr*, 2015). In Egypt, 31% of the population use Facebook, meaning there are some 28 million users of the service. 'The most notable year-on-year increase, however, was between July 2013 and July 2014, with the user figures jumping by 6.4 million to reach 22.4 million users. (*Daily News Egypt*, 2016). Bahgat knew, as did other journalists and activists in Egypt, that the penetration of social media (mainly Facebook) has become far bigger than the readership of online or print news outlets in Egypt[2].

According to Enrico De Angelis (2015), many journalists were forced to abandon mainstream platforms such as *Al-Shouroq* and *Al-Masri Al-Youm* newspapers, and began writing for alternative media outlets such as *Mada Masr*. However, "the public recognition of the relevance of the internet is rapidly bringing to the online world the same constraints from which print media suffer." (119). De Angelis situated Egypt's media system within Chadwick's (2013) hybrid model, "in which old and new media logics coexist" (Chadwick, 2013: 112). Yet this hybrid model seems to be fading from view, with the reproduction in the online news world of "the existing networks of hierarchies, loyalties, and patronage" (De Angelis, 2015: 109). Naila Hamdy argues in her study on networked journalism in Egypt that 'traditional journalism workers continue their intentional attempt to maintain hegemony over

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[2] Television is by far the most common source of news for Egyptians with 84.2 % using it daily or several times a week to get news (Broadcast Board of Governors, 2014)

information in a networked journalism environment through their use of gatekeeping practices' (Hamdy, 2015:16). New Media outlets in Egypt do enjoy a level of independence that is almost non-existent in traditional outlets, but as Journalist W put it "In the Egyptian experience, professional journalism has little to do with the platform (interview with author, 2016).

As the case of Hosam Bahgat indicates, investigative journalism in Egypt has taken the form of advocacy journalism. Very few journalists are engaging or willing to work on investigative stories, mostly because of fear for their safety, but also for lack of media platforms that are willing to publish those stories. Most investigative journalism activities in Egypt are now based on individual initiatives. Some of those journalists are trained by Arab Investigative Journalists Network (ARIJ) based in Amman, Jordan and some have not undertaken any professional training. However, ARIJ for one Egyptian journalist, who has worked with the organisation and prefer to stay anonymous, should not be deemed as independent and impartial organisation as it claims (personal communication, 2017). According to this journalist ARIJ refuses to publish or commission any investigation that involves the Jordanian army or the security apparatus in Jordan. ARIJ, on the other hand, had commissioned Egyptian Journalists to investigate corruption in the Egyptian army that led to arms being smuggled to ISIS operatives in Sinai. One prominent Egyptian investigative journalist and TV presenter Yosri Fouda, had left the country and moved to Germany to produce and present a show on Deutsche Welle, the German TV broadcasting in Arabic. Fouda, has been advised not to return to Egypt fearing for his safety (journalist M, personal communication, 2016).

Pan Arab TV news and the Egyptian journalism scene

We cannot explore Egypt's media and journalism scene without dedicating some space to the two most prominent Pan Arab news channels - Al Jazeera Arabic, and Al Arabiya. These channels have both become directly involved in the political struggle that is taking place in Egypt (as they are elsewhere in the Arab World see Harb, 2011). Despite the fact that they follow the same editorial line on Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, they actually differ in their treatment of Egypt. Al Jazeera Arabic in Egypt has become the voice of the Muslim Brotherhood, promoting the organisation through a separate dedicated channel called *Mubasher Misr* (Arabic for Egypt Live). In Egypt, unfortunately, Al-Jazeera Arabic failed its own professional standards. The station broadcast old videos claiming them that they were new, and exaggerated the number of protests held and protesters against the military. They dedicated considerable air-time to voices from the Muslim Brotherhood, ignoring those that did not share its perspective. Despite the fact that they followed the same broadcast style as they did during the 2011 revolt (dedicating screen space for user generated content), coverage was one-sided and their credibility in Egypt has been harmed as a result. The Egyptian regime, meanwhile, shut down all Al-Jazeera offices and operations, including Al Jazeera English, which was accompanied by the arrest and prosecution in 2014, of three of its journalists for "operating in Egypt without a licence" (Al-Jazeera, 2015).

However, in 2015, when the relationship and political rivalry between Qatar (which owns Al-Jazeera network) and Egypt softened, Al Jazeera decided to shut down *Mubasher Misr* and to

take it off air (Shams El-Din, 2015). Nevertheless, that failed to stop the reproduction of anti-Qatar sentiments in Egypt, and Al Jazeera remains a major target of those sentiments. In November 2016, a number of Egyptian TV hosts and journalists launched a campaign against Qatar, over a critical documentary film produced by Al-Jazeera on Egypt's compulsory military service (Abdallah, 2016). The documentary featured several testimonies given by army conscripts, claiming ill-treatment and abuse by army officers.

The anti-Qatar and anti-Al Jazeera campaign was fuelled by large numbers of social media users, who lashed out at Qatar and started "a storm of mockery on Twitter of the Emir of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Another hashtag was also used to praise the Egyptian army; both of which were among the top trending hashtags in Egypt". Many of the Egyptian journalists working for Al-Jazeera have left the network after Al Jazeera adopted a fully pro-Muslim Brotherhood stand, or were otherwise forced into exile in Doha or Turkey. Al Arabiya and its sister channel AL-Hadath, on the other hand, adopted anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiments, and hence received support from the Egyptian regime, its military and a large number of Egyptian journalists, who as mentioned above have accepted the role of apologists for the regime.

Social Media and the journalist

In-depth interviews were conducted with seven Egyptian journalists as part of a study I am conducting on Journalism Culture in the Arab world. All seven Journalists work or used to work for newsrooms supported by professional organisational structures. They range between mid-career to senior journalists (those that have been in the profession between 10 and 20 years), to the top echelon who work in the role of editors and deputy editors. Respondents were based in both state-run and privately owned news organisations. None of my interviewees works for Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabiya. Questions posed to these journalists included how has social media affected their way of conducting journalism, how do they use it, and what content they tend to generate.

As stated earlier, the journalists interviewed have been anonymised and random letters have been used to refer to each individual. Interviews were conducted via email, Skype and face to face. It is worth mentioning that all of these journalists, except one, have taken part in the protests in Tahrir Square in 2011. At that time they thought it extremely important to fulfil their role as citizens first, and then to as journalists. Like all other activists at the time, they took to social media to express their views. One of them was later identified as a rising star of Egypt's "online opinion journalism" (a term coined by De Angelis, 2015). Despite this accolade, the journalist himself told me that the phenomena reached its zenith between 2012 and 2015, and has now ended. Some of this decline, according to journalist E, has been due to "the *negative* impact of social media" (my emphasis). For him, social media played the role of the censor, where journalists are judged by users according to their own perception of what how journalists should be practicing their profession. "Some users tend to classify and attack you according to their political beliefs and perceptions of political reality" (interview with author, 2016). Still, social media was seen by all as a significant source of news and information in a country where accessing information is restricted and sometimes impossible (M, interview with author, 2016), which coincide with Naila Hamdy's study (2015) on Networked Journalism in Egypt. Journalist W argued that social media had alerted her to

stories as they were happening, even before they became news. She, however, points out that because of 'the government propaganda' in mainstream outlets she has now turned to social media.

> Like many reporters, I've been able to contact sources through their social media accounts or identify a story simply by following actors on the ground tweeting about what they're seeing or what is happening around them. And because I can no longer read the papers regularly (the government propaganda could be a put off) I keep track of read-worthy content when it's shared on social media (W, interview with author, 2016).

Journalist M (interview with author, 2016) gave credit to social media users, because it was these people who were altering her production team to stories and issues that needed to be brought to the public domain, and that would not otherwise have gained attention.

> We also used it to find guests for our show away from the official voice and the elite. It enabled us to disclose many human rights violations. We investigated those and verified the accusations and in most cases they were reliable stories. We cannot consider social media users as representative of public opinion, but they do represent one fraction of the society (ibid).

Journalists S and B, being senior editors, speak of the role of social media in bypassing censorship. Facebook is used to post full articles by journalists who have had to remove information from their articles that was deemed not in the 'national interest' before they are published in mainstream newspapers. Readers and users are able to see the two versions of the same article and realise what has been censored in the printed edition.

> Social Media helps in raising the bar of freedom of expression and in confronting censorship in Egypt. Social Media is also helping in opening up the space on mainstream media to discuss issues that are usually not permissible to be discussed in the public domain. We use social media trending stories to talk about political or economic issues and publish stories that are perceived by the censor as crossing the line. That is why we are now witnessing an orchestrated campaign against social media (B, Interview with author, 2016).

Journalist S confirms that some pages on Facebook, such as Al-Mouqef Al Masri, have followers that are approaching one million, "which exceeds all national Egyptian newspapers' daily distribution" (Interview with author, 2016).

Social Media is being used, therefore, as a tool to help many Egyptian journalists resist the official discourse that is being recycled through mainstream media, especially TV. At the same time, social media is being used as a platform to distribute lies or what is now being called 'fake news', items that attempt to justify government failures or policies. Journalist A, despite depending on social media interaction for certain stories, said he is mostly sceptical of stories posted on social media.

> Social media is also used as marketing tool for some journalists, and as a measuring device to guage discover how interested and engaged the public are, in one topic or the other (D, interview with author, 2016).

Social Media users in Egypt are as divided as the journalistic scene, between those acting as a mouthpiece for the regime, and those whose voices are critical of the economic hardship, political corruption and social injustice in the country.

The role of Social Media in bringing about democratic change

Wolsfeld et al. (2013) state that "one cannot understand the role of social media in collective action without first taking into account the political environment in which they operate" (119). This proved true in the case of Egypt. During the January 2011 revolution, the political and economic situation was at its worst, and the public had become tired of a handful of people in the political elite, who hung on to power and benefitted from the country's wealth, while depriving the public of their basic needs. This nationwide anger and disdain were growing and social media (mainly Facebook) were used as the tool to pass on and share that anger, and to facilitate calls for action (Harb 2011; see also El-Nawawy and Kahmis 2013). These days, much of the social media scene in Egypt is centred on nationalistic and patriotic sentiments, and the fear of the insecurity that just one year of Muslim Brotherhood rule brought to the country. The regime has succeeded in manipulating that fear and in using it every time voices of dissent (mainly through social media) rise to prominence.

Social Media, as one of the journalists interviewed here noted, could be a destructive tool directed at journalists, used to undermine their professional integrity and keep the political status quo intact. A clear example of that is the story of the Lebanese British Journalist Liliane Daoud. After the 2011 revolts, Daoud (whose daughter is Egyptian), decided to leave the BBC Arabic service in London and move to host a TV show on one of the rising channels in Egypt (OnTV, owned by Egyptian Business man Najeeb Saweris). Her talk show, The Full Picture, aired critical views of Sisi's government and hosted protesters and youth leaders as well as government officials (the *Guardian*, 2016). In February 2015 Daoud issued a tweet, calling on those Egyptian youth who had been sentenced to 5 years in jail for protesting, "not to despair as the slayer will keep trying to deprive you of your will to live and your will for a better life…". Following this tweet a hashtag on Twitter appeared, which called for the deportation of Daoud. "#Lilian_must_leave" went viral, and became the highest trending hashtag on twitter in Egypt for two days (*Almawke3 News*, 2015). The hostile tweets that attacked Dauod included death threats. Users believed she was mocking El Sisi (the Egyptian President) and referring to him as the 'slayer' (see above). Many Egyptian journalists jumped on this bandwagon, attacking Daoud, while articles published in publications like El Youm El Saba'a fabricated information about her.

Nevertheless, some Egyptian journalists took also to Twitter and social media to support Daoud against the hate campaign to which she was subjected. They tweeted and posted on Facebook defending her professionalism and journalistic integrity, reminding the Egyptians that during the rule of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood she also hosted critics of the Islamist group and, just like the majority of the Egyptian people, she celebrated the ousting of Morsi. That however, didn't deter the authorities form deporting Liliane Daoud in June 2016, claiming that "she was deported because her residency has expired" (*The Guardian*, 2016). Daoud was deported hours after her contract with OnTV was terminated. One of OnTV officials told *Al Monitor*:

> The decision to stop broadcasting Daoud's show and the termination of her contact, which was supposed to continue until the end of the year, came as the result of

'editorial policy' and conditions that the new ownership tried to impose on her. She was said to have rejected this, with the contract ending in an amicable manner (Saied, 2016).

The termination of the contract came a month after the channel was sold to another businessman who had close ties to the Sisi regime. In this instant, social media was used as a 'coordinating tool', to borrow Clay Shirky's term (2011), to spread hate and mobilise dissent against journalists who did not agree to the 'Hail Cesar' approach to public life. Despite the negative impact social media might have in silencing voices that are critical of the regime, the journalists interviewed for this chapter still believed that social media provided them with a space to launch campaigns based on the dissemination of information that the authorities and their protégés do not want to reach the public domain. Egyptian journalist Hisham Allam, a member of the International consortium of investigative journalists, and the only Egyptian journalist who took part in the Panama papers and Swiss leaks investigations, told me that it is too hard for investigative journalists in Egypt and the Arab world to get access to information through traditional routes, "so we take to social media, looking for sources and people willing to provide us with information" (interview with author, 2017). Allam said that sometimes social media is used to publish material mainstream media in Egypt won't accept to publish. He reveals that:

> While working on the Panama Papers investigation, I had information that related to members of the royal families in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, to the 'tax haven' investigation. Mainstream media in Egypt refused to give me space to publish these materials, because of the good economic and political relationship Egypt holds with these countries, while they would agree on me publishing anything that will condemn Qatar. I refused and to keep my journalistic integrity I used my Facebook and twitter accounts to publish the material I have investigated. There were no space restrictions (Allam, interview with author, 2017).

Investigative reporting, the cornerstone in journalists' role to hold those in power to account, cannot operate adequately in an atmosphere of fear for safety and security. Journalism needs to operate as an independent body from political institutions, if democracy is to function (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004 and McQuail, 2013). Despite the fact that these are western ideals of journalism, they resonate within the Egyptian context. Egyptian media are directly connected to the political institutions in the country. As Journalist W (interview with author, 2016) put it, "in Egypt we don't have independent media, we have independent journalists". Independent journalists are paving the way using online ventures and social media in order to keep holding those in power to account. Social media users and January 2011 revolution activists are not singing from the same hymn sheet anymore, but the situation is not going to go back to the way it was before January 2011. Independent journalists in Egypt (despite their limited numbers) will continue to fight to safeguard democratic change. If denied space on mainstream media, social media is there for them as an alternative space and an accessible tool of public communication.

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