

Is Libyan Media More Free After The Revolution? (New Research Report)

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Polis visiting research fellow [Fatima el Issawi \(@ellssawi\)](#) has just published the latest of her series of reports on Arab media in transition after the recent Political upheavals. Her latest is on Libya. Here she gives you a taste of the challenges and opportunities facing mainstream Libyan journalists.



After the fall of the Qaddafi regime, Ahmed Saghir thought that he would finally be able to work as a reporter without fear of reprimand. Saghir, who used to work for one of the state-owned TV channels under Qaddafi, was arrested during the revolution and tortured in the regime’s jails after he voiced his opposition on Al Jazeera.

Since the liberation of the country, however, he has twice been arrested and interrogated by former rebels because of his reporting on controversial topics such as the bombing of shrines. Saghir says:

“Before we had one Qaddafi, today we have hundreds of Qaddafis,”

In the post-Qaddafi *Jamahiriyye* (“republic”), media—like all sectors—is starting an uncertain new chapter. More than a year after the overthrow of the regime the media, which has transitioned from extremely closed and manipulated to become more open, is still lacking in vision and solid professional support for journalists.

In the chaotic new Libya, reporting on militias and armed groups can be as dangerous as approaching topics related to the security apparatus of the former dictatorship. In the post-revolution media, questionable standards and media practices remain—as does a volatile working environment in which journalists lack professional support or legal protection and are often threatened for tackling controversial topics.

Boom And Closure

After the fall of the regime, some national mainstream media experienced a real boom, while other media outlets could not sustain themselves and had to shut down. According to the Legatum Institute’s [Libya Media Wiki](#), there are currently at least 200 registered newspapers, 20 TV channels, and 200 radio stations.

The lack of any law or emerging policy to organize this field means it is ripe for libel, slanderous statements, and unfounded accusations. However, the first months of the transition witnessed a high level of bravery from journalists who were apt to at least experiment with investigative journalism.

These journalists could question the growing authority of armed militias who reign over the country with “revolutionary legitimacy,” violent actions such as the [bombing of religious Sufi shrines](#), extremist factions’ control of some areas, and the growing role of religious clerics.

Unimaginable Dynamism

But under growing intimidation and threats, political reporting has become mainly focused on parliamentary and governmental activities. Post-Qaddafi political life is gaining a dynamism that was unimaginable under the former regime.

For Mohamed Baio, who used to be the head of General Press Corporation (the former regime’s arm in managing the state-owned press publications), freedom of expression is under siege. The new oppressors of the press could be more dangerous than the former state censorship apparatus:

“Yes, journalists can today criticize the government or the parliament because those are not the real rulers of the country. I challenge any of these media to criticize the head of a militia. Today, we receive threats but we don’t know who is behind it. These are not institutions with addresses and officials. These are ghosts.”

Practicing political journalism under Qaddafi was impossible due to strict censorship. Now it is the most attractive feature for journalists. Under Qaddafi, the four main state publications (*Al Jamahiriya*, *Al Shams*, *Al Zahf Al Akhdar*, and *Al Fajr Al Jadid*) had only minute differences because headlines, editorials, and political news were simply provided by the state Jamahiriya News Agency.

New Censorship

The fall of this censorship regime does not mean the end of journalists’ oppression or the restrictions on what media can tackle in the post-Qaddafi era. Libyan media are learning how to cope with a new set of censorship practices.

Mahmood al-Sharkasy, the main anchor of the private Al Assema TV channel, was not afraid to tackle topics such as the power of extremist militias and the lack of rule of law among others. However, the continuous threats al-Sharkasy is receiving have pushed him to finally lower his voice:

“They sent me indirect threats reminding me that I have a family and children. I am not afraid of them but I became wiser and less enthusiastic. No one can accuse me of being ‘anti-revolution’ as I myself joined the rebels. I am now calculating risks and limiting their scope.”

After the revolution, the transitional bodies tasked with reorganizing the media sector took radical measures with regard to the state media legacy without much success. Media was later put under the umbrella of a ministry of culture and civil society, and parliament finally opted for reinstating a ministry of information.

The Committee for Encouraging and Supporting the Press, which was formed in the aftermath of the regime’s fall, made the decision to dismantle the former state newspapers and to publish new ones to provide jobs to the 1,200 staff of these old publications (most of which are technical and administrative).

The former state TV and radio stations were also rebranded, as the Libyan Radio and Television Corporation. Until now, this body has not been successful in managing the legacy of the former regime.

Back In Business

Most of the state radio and TV channels are not back in business due to internal power struggles. With the opening of media to the private sector, the industry is booming with new projects—most of which are linked to political agendas.

The question remains: Is media today in Libya more free and transparent?

The simple answer is yes, but authoritarian practices still manage to peek through, and the setting does not yet facilitate a professional work environment. The media reconstruction process seems to be heading to the unknown, while the insecurity and the inability of the government to disarm militias are leading to a situation where journalists have to again exercise self-censorship in order to protect themselves.

The disappointment of Asma Ben Said, a former state media journalist who could not practice journalism under the new system, echoes that of many of her colleagues:

“I am afraid that this new freedom is only an illusion. There is no party we can talk to, there is no party who can protect us. What shall I do?”

You can [access the report in full here and download a pdf](#)

A [shorter version of this research was also published by the Carnegie Foundation](#)

Access the [previous report on Tunisian media here](#)

And read the previous [blog on Egyptian media here](#)

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