

Tunisia: Winter of Politics, Spring of Media?

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“It might be the winter of politics in Tunisia but it is definitely the spring of the media”: the statement by a Tunisian secular journalist disappointed by the victory of Islamists in the recent elections of the Constituent Assembly is very well reflective of the “awakening” of Tunisian media, long-time muzzled by the dictatorship of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. The opening of the media industry which used to be maliciously operated by a clientelist system run by Ben Ali’s family and friends, has inevitably turned into a complex reform process. Modernising the media industry towards accurate, balanced and plural journalism, is a tough challenge in Tunisia where, under a repressive legal umbrella and lack of media institutionalism and the minimal protection and job security for journalists, the industry was confined to praising the rulers and publishing their press releases. The legal and structural reform of the media industry proceed alongside the urgent task of introducing new media practices, improved editorial policies and a coherent set of ethics. Deeper challenges have emerged for a post-authoritarian media, the most important of which is the change in attitude and adaptation towards modernity necessary to better understand the complexity of modern media spheres. This challenge has yet to be met.

A complex and dynamic reform process

From the tight control of the Ministry of Information which used to monitor the whole process of media production to an interim period of unprecedented freedom, the Tunisian media industry has witnessed a spectacular change after the fall of the regime. This new freedom is still so fragile that there are real fears of the possibility of being just a “false dawn” as Tunisian journalists have witnessed at times before when there was a political will to open up the media sector under pressure from the international community or as a way of easing tensions in response to socio-economic pressures.

From a heavily restricted media scene in which journalists were reduced to be the reporters of the clan, the Tunisian media scene has evolved to a dynamic and diversified one where publishing has become not only a job, but a joy. This new political spirit led to chaos in the first months after the revolution, when accusations, defamation and libel were flourishing in [reaction to the fall of entrenched taboos and the absence of any regulations](#). The transformation of the media industry towards professionalism and modernity is a thorny process but a dynamic one.

The first year following the Ben Ali era witnessed the launch of a reconstruction operation tackling different aspects of the media production processes. The National Authority for Reform of the Information and the Communication (INRIC) — a non- statutory body — was empowered to implement reforms by decree-laws. These reforms mainly focused on abolishing the repressive character of laws governing the media sector such as prison sentences for journalists for opinion crimes as well as granting journalists with free access to official documents. Most importantly, the new amendments to the press code redefine the role of journalists’ work towards the institutionalism of the media sector by imposing the formation of editorial boards and teams independent from business management and by providing decent working conditions for journalists. Protection for confidentiality of sources has been introduced in order to prevent the legal pursuit of journalists and their sources for either opinions expressed or information published. [1]

Tunisia has [seen the creation of around 100 new media outlets](#) including press publications, radios and television. The INRIC approved applications for 5 new TV channels and 12 new Radio stations. Many of the

new radio licenses were for regional stations, in contrast to the old media landscape where media was centralised in the capital. Although *The Independent High Commission for Audio-visual Communication* was created as an independent commission by a presidential decree in November 2011 [2] to organize and guarantee the freedom of the audio-visual sector, this body has not started work yet. An attempt by the actual government to nominate top ranking officials in state-run TV and radio stations sparked an outrage among the media community and forced them finally to give concessions. What was largely viewed by the media community as a return to an era of clientelism was explained by the government as a lack of any organizing body for the audio visual sector.

Most importantly, justice is becoming the new tool to impose restrictions on media freedom, a practice which was also prevailing under the former regime. Although the new press law forbid the prosecution of journalists in connection with their work, the criminal code is providing the opportunity to do. [Article 121, paragraph three states](#), “The distribution, sale or public display – or the possession with the intent to distribute, sell or display for a propaganda purpose – of leaflets, newsletters or stickers, whether of foreign origin or not, likely to disturb public order and decency, is forbidden”[5].

Institutional change: Empowering journalists

The crucial battle for journalists has been not only that of fighting for the professionalism of their practices, but it was also mainly that of improving their poor working conditions and lacking job security. Equally it has been important to acquire some independence from the managerial hierarchy which used to implement directives of the former regime. In most of state-run media, the management board was changed and replaced by new managers appointed by new interim governments. For the media outlets that used to be owned by the family and close friends of Ben Ali, the ownership was transferred to the State and new managerial board members were nominated. Some of the media outlets that were owned by the governing party, the former ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally, RCD, have been shut down and their staff merged with other state media outlets.

Tunisian journalists are fighting to improve their working conditions and professional standards. Their movement focuses on two main grievances: improving their salary scales to enable them to enjoy job security and acquiring independence from the owners of media outlets, prominent bosses and editors, who used to be very close to the former regime and who, in large number, shifted support from the regime’s camp to that of the opposition now in power.

Poor living conditions for Tunisian journalists, especially younger journalists, means there is a natural tendency for them to focus on improving their professional status and financial situation, and for many of them, struggling to secure a job contract. Under these conditions, fighting for better standards might not be seen as luxury, but rather as a priority.

While the status of journalists is defined in agreements introduced by the former regime and accepted by the owners of media outlets, these agreements have yet to be implemented. According to the journalists we interviewed within this pilot report, the owners of media organizations have the upper hand in deciding on working conditions and can abuse this freedom thanks to the lack of jobs and general economic hardships throughout the country.

In the Tunisian media sector, a large community of journalists works as freelancers. Most of them are paid around 80 dinars (£50) per piece. If they are lucky to be paid a salary, the owner of the media decides on the wages. In this situation, it is difficult for journalists to also fight for better professional standards or to maintain independence from those in power. Challenging the authority of the management of the media outlet is also highly risky (because they are not protected by any regulation for job security).

The unbearable new freedom and the identity ‘rehabilitation’

Tunisian journalists have rediscovered their profession after the revolution as much as they rediscovered their country. The main change was the introduction of genuine political journalism, virtually unknown to journalists previously limited to covering cultural, socio-economic events or the activities of the President and his family. Another new dimension was reporting news from around the country after the centralization of the news media under Ben Ali's regime.

Yet, the main challenge for Tunisian mainstream journalists has been to remove what some of them describe as "the face of shame" that makes them, in the eyes of their audiences, the accomplices of the regime. This perception works at different levels, from those who were actively misleading in their work, to those who passively put out its propaganda and applied its directives. If they are to be rehabilitated they must regain the trust of their audiences, which for years did not take them seriously and considered them simply as mouthpieces of the regime.

To secure the gains of this new developing identity among mainstream journalists and the beginning of trust from the public, a change of attitude is much needed. Are journalists fully aware of the importance of their role and the necessity of political independence? This question is much more valid today with the fierce battle between secularists and Islamists in which mainstream media is becoming the main field. Indeed, the two opposing camps are much more aware of the importance of mainstream media in the current political struggle. For instance, national state run media is accused of being the voice of the leftist opposition by Ennahda supporters calling it 'the media of shame'.

There is no agreement within the media community on how to address the legacy of this period in order to be able to move on, nor even an open debate on this crucial issue. However, to move on beyond the legacy of the former regime requires self-criticism from journalists but most believe that they did not have a choice. They claim that their audiences understand this, as they were themselves oppressed by the same regime. This logic is not convincing for everyone. Some fear that denying the responsibility of the media community in supporting the former regime threatens to transform the media sector again into the voice of the new regime. For some, this is already a reality.

Conclusion

The regulatory reform process continues and is tackling some of the main structural requirements for opening the media sector up and for fostering and then protecting independent news media. Although major steps have been taken, there is still a power struggle involving management, journalists and the union around entrenched practices such as clientelism. Relieved from the repressive regime of Ben Ali, journalists could scarify their new freedom for the sake of serving a political agenda. Mainstream media which was testing its practices and impact during the elections of 23 October 2011, is attracting the appetite and attention of different political players.

The Tunisia "media revolution" is strongly and directly linked to the recent political structural shifts. Indeed, protecting the very fragile media reform is vital to the success of the process of political transition. Many journalists expressed the fear of a replication of the old authoritarian practices that prevailed under the former regime. Open debate needs to be fostered within and between the news media and wider political community. The journalistic culture of dependence on political power and clientelism has not been eradicated by media reform. Journalists need to be empowered to go beyond their entrenched attachments. They need to improve their self-awareness and their understanding of the importance of their role in preserving the very fragile existing freedoms through media vigilance and integrity.

[1] *The freedom of the printed press was safeguarded by the decree 115, November 2nd 2011 that set out to guarantee "the freedom of exchanging, publishing and receiving news and views of all kinds". However, as with decree 116 which applied to broadcast media, this freedom is limited by the respect of other's rights*

and dignity, protecting public order and national security. Another decree was adopted on May 26th 2011, to organize the disclosure of governmental documents for the use of journalists.

[2] Decree N116, 2011, dated 2 November 2011, the official revue for the Tunisian republic, 4 November 2011, p84.

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This article draws on the finding of a pilot study which Fatima El-Issawi conducted in Tunisia within the project “Arab Revolutions: Media Revolutions” looking at the change operated in Arab media scene within the current unfolding uprisings. The project is hosted by POLIS media and society of the LSE.

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