

# All Talk? Egypt's complex media revolution (guest blog)

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8/9/2012

Polis Research Fellow, Fatima el Issawi reports on her latest field trip, to Egypt, as part of our [project looking at Arab media in transition](#).

In Cairo, the heart of the Arab world, the media scene is frenetically buzzing. Local audiences are bombarded with a huge amount of information – mostly unconfirmed – from a multitude of media platforms which have flourished during Egypt's complex political transition. The media scene in Egypt post-revolution seems as complex as the political process.

Egyptians' evenings are filled with dozens of talk shows in which all kinds of topics are debated openly but with heavy partisan slants. Depending on your political position you will choose your talk show with your chosen political flavour. The "stars" of these popular talk shows are becoming real



opinion leaders preaching to the public on what to do and how to understand the rapid developments which are taking the Egyptian people as well as the media through turmoil.

Some of the stars of private TV played a role during the revolution, providing demonstrators in Tahrir Square with tips on what they should do and boosting their morale. Personal views and opinions are expressed bluntly on these platforms, transforming some of these talk shows into simple monologues guided by the star presenter.

## Filling A Gap

Not only are these TV platforms making up for the lack of the political forums which would ordinarily enable democratic participation, but they are also filling a gap in the market for quality news programs with high production values and impartial standards.

Traditional news bulletins are still monopolized by state TV and Radio which did not much improve after the revolution. They simply moved from starting their news with the latest on the ousted president Hosni Mubarak to the news of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi.

In response to my question on how he can understand his role as an opinion leader as opposed to the western ideals of impartiality, a famous TV 'star' simply answered ' the Egyptian- and the Arab generally- public opinion needs to be told what to think while the western one prefers to make its own judgments'. He then added " I usually try to restrict myself from telling my audience what they should think about daily political events but I frequently receive phone calls from viewers urging me to tell them what they should think" about these events.

## Rife With Bias

Liberalizing the national public media (newspapers, TVs and radios) is still the most challenging task of the

media reform process. Greatly mismanaged, rife with bias, favouritism and a lack of basic professional standards (at least in parts of it), reforming this very old fashioned and inflated sector (public TV employs more than 40 thousand staff many of whom are superfluous) would require some 'surgical operations' as described by a journalist I interviewed.

Many of the the internal newsroom revolutions have resulted simply in changing names at the top of the state media leadership without any real "revolution" in the quality of their content. The decision of the Egypt's Shura Council, the upper, consultative house of parliament, to nominate three new editors-in-chief for state-owned newspapers, in the first reshuffle in these positions since the inauguration of President Morsi, sparked the fury of the media community. Not only because of the failure of attempt to find an independent professional process to nominate these positions but especially because of their declared controversial views against the revolution or anti- religious minorities, according to an article by the Ahram - Online[1]

### **Refuse To Publish**

Well-known columnists in private newspapers reacted by refusing to publish their articles, leaving instead blank spaces, in a gesture to express their objection to what they consider as an attempt by the Islamists new rulers of the country to muzzle the state owned media, according to an article by the blog Aswat Masriya (Egyptian voices) [2].

My short trip to Cairo to conduct field investigation into the transitional Egyptian media revealed to me how the word 'complexity' can be so intricate and subtle. The Egyptian phase of our project '[Arab Revolutions: Media Revolutions](#)' looking at the transformations in the Arab mainstream media under the political transitions is definitely a real challenge. Next stop, Libya.

By Fatima El Issawi

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[1] Egypt Shura Council announces new heads for 3 state papers, Zeinab el Gundi, Ahram online, 09/08/2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/49968/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-Shura-Council-announces-new-heads-for-state.aspx>

[2] Blank spaces in newspapers today in objection of the nomination of editors of chief of state owned newspapers, Aswat Masriya, 09/08/2012, <http://aswatmasriya.com/news/view.aspx?id=fab30790-b2dd-4fad-8ac8-0bde116d8802>

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