

Radically Polarized Publics and the Demise of Media Freedom in Egypt

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Democracy needs a public sphere. There are various theories in that field. One of the most famous is by Jürgen Habermas, who suggested that through rational deliberation among citizens, and between citizens and the state, modern societies interact and solve problems.¹ Legitimacy in democracies is not only guaranteed by elections, but citizens should participate in the public sphere and support elected politicians. Media freedom is a prerequisite of that process, as it enables public discourse. The core elements of any democracy therefore are: free elections, free gathering of people, human rights standards, and freedom of opinion and of the media.

However, there are many problems with this argument. Habermas himself called them the “structural changes” of the ideal public sphere. The mass media play a crucial role as mediators among citizens, but have no democratic mandate and very often act as agents of special political or capitalist interests. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky call this the “manufacturing of consent”.² Neo-Marxist theoreticians like Antonio Gramsci complained about hegemony in the public sphere.³ Feminists criticized Habermas for his naïve belief in a rational public which is, as they think, in fact very emotional. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau suggest the decentralization of the public sphere through the Internet as a necessary ingredient to post-democratic communication. They speak of multiple small, rather than one integrated, national public sphere.⁴

What has all this to do with Egypt? Egypt is certainly not a post-democratic state; it is not even a democratic state. The “Arab Spring” and a series of elections over the last two years have made it look like one, but electoral democracy has never been fully achieved and consolidated. First, there was a parliament without a president then a president without a parliament – and since the military coup in July 2013 there has been neither an elected president nor a parliament. President Mursi was toppled and the Muslim Brotherhood banned. With regards to media freedom the situation is much worse than under Mubarak, who at least granted some form of liberal autocracy

¹ Habermas, Jürgen (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge: Polity German Orig. 1962).

² Herman, Edward S./Chomsky, Noam (1988), *Manufacturing Consent*, New York: Pantheon Books.

³ Gramsci, Antonio (1971), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers.

⁴ Laclau, Ernesto/Mouffe, Chantal (2001), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy – Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* London, New York: Verso (2nd ed.).

with a certain amount of critique even of the government. The military coup seems more like a counter revolution and a Nasser-style roll-back to hard-handed media policies. The popular “Tamarud”-movement against Mursi was used by old elites, and the “deep state” that was left over from Mubarak to get back to power. The future will show whether democracy still has a chance in Egypt.

This is sad, because two years earlier a historic real social movement had toppled a dictatorship in Egypt. The social movement was the missing link which brought together secularists, Islamists and various social forces, each of which was too weak to overthrow the regime alone. We have to recall a situation that seems almost absurd today: in February and March 2011 people from all segments of society, secularists, Salafists and Muslim Brothers, demonstrated side by side on Tahrir Square and in the rest of the country. The Arab Spring in Egypt was not a “Facebook Revolution”, but it was partly enabled by new media like the web 2.0 transnational TV networks such as Al-Jazeera, which broadcasted live 24 hours a day about the revolution. The public sphere was certainly not limited to electronic media, because non-mediated oral communication on the streets played an important role.

How can we understand that a pluralistic public sphere such as that in 2011 and 2012 collapsed into what we are witnessing today? Formerly critical TV networks like CBS, Dream TV, Al-Nahar TV, Tahrir TV, Mehwar, Sada El Balad, QahiraWalNas or ONTV are all broadcasting the SCAF version of events, and the same is more or less true for the newspapers. After the Mursi coup, a “fighting terrorism” badge was aired on TV screens to show that the Muslim Brotherhood was a “terrorist organization”. Massacres perpetrated by the military on the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood were belittled, and attacks on churches dominated the news although Muslim Brotherhood protests against SCAF were predominantly peaceful. Since the coup, the political line of the state media’s coverage has turned around 180 degrees: once they were behind Mubarak, then supported Mursi, now they wholeheartedly support the military leadership. SCAF closed down the Islamist media and introduced much stricter censorship than during the Mursi period. International journalism associations and media are – perhaps for the first time in history – more critical than supportive of the coup against an Islamist government. At least, it seems that the almost unanimous support of military coups against Islamists, as in the case of the Algerian election 1190/91, has waned.⁵

To understand the Egyptian development we have to analyze the deep structural patterns of the Egyptian media system. International comparisons are helpful because what happens in Egypt – the disintegration of a previously vivid public sphere – is not new in democratic transformations. The vulnerability of young democracies is an almost universal feature in world history. Well-known media scholars Daniel Hallin und Paolo Mancini have identified four relevant dimensions for media comparison in

⁵ Hafez, Kai (1996), The Algerian Crisis as Portrayed in the German Press: Media Coverage of Political Islam, in: Communications. The European Journal of Communication Research 21 (2), p. 155-182.

democracies: the relations between state and media, civil society and media, economy and media and between the journalistic profession and media.⁶ These dimensions cover most aspects of systems theory and the interactions of media with other sub-systems, like the political and economic system, or more dispersed and less organized system environments (“civil society”). The question in democracies is not only how much freedom the state leaves to the media, but also if media contribute to social, economic and professional development.

Of course, Hallin and Mancini’s typology was made for European and North American media systems. The question is: To what extent such models can travel to, for example, the Arab world? Some have complained that the influence of religion has been neglected.⁷ This is somewhat true, since “Islam” plays a much more vital role in modern Arab politics than religion does in most Western countries. At the same time it would be wrong to presuppose an essential difference between Western and Middle Eastern countries due to the existence of Islam. Arab and Egyptian experiences are not completely sealed off from Western developments.⁸ For example, in the United States the First Amendment of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of opinion and of the media, has been frequently restricted on religious grounds.⁹ Hallin and Mancini also made clear that religion played a decisive role in European media history because it was the competition between Catholics and Protestants more than anything else that triggered the spread of the printed word, of papers and pamphlets. When utilizing Hallin and Mancini, therefore, I will try and walk a rational mid-path between essentialism and Eurocentrism, applying their basic media typology but, at the same time, considering religion and other factors that might be characteristic of the present Egyptian situation.

Egyptian Media and the State

Over the last sixty years and since the revolution of 1952, Egypt has experienced a clear long-term trend towards increased media freedom from the presidency of Gamal Abd al-Nasser to the military coup of July 2013. The late years of Husni Mubarak can by and large be labeled as a “liberal autocracy”, in which it was possible to criticize the government although many red lines were not to be crossed.

During the Egyptian Arab Spring of 2011 private media like ONTV, Dream TV or the newspaper Al-Masry Al-Youm supported the popular uprising, as did transnational media like the Qatari network Al-Jazeera. Media freedom in 2011 reached an all-time high in Egypt. But when the interim SCAF-government took over in 2011, the

⁶ Hallin, Daniel C./Mancini, Paolo (2004), *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Khamis, Sahar (2009), *Modern Egyptian Media: A Transitional Press Model in a Comparative Context*, Paper Presented at International Communication Association Conference, Chicago.

⁸ Hafez, Kai (2010), *Radicalism and Political Reform in the Islamic and Western Worlds*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Heins, Marjorie (1993), *Sex, Sin, and Blasphemy. A Guide to America’s Censorship Wars*, New York: The New Press.

problems started anew. The military acted against several journalists, and graffiti critical of the military were erased. However, the dualism between state controlled media and critical private media prevailed. More than twenty new TV channels were opened. Nile TV, ONTV, Al-Tahrir TV, Al-Nahar TV or Masr25 reported about police brutality or the massacre in the football stadium of Port Said.

The main characteristic of the era of President Mohammed Mursi was the stagnation of media freedom. His government did not so much introduce new hardships into the media system, the freedoms of the private media persisted. Although many Islamist media opened up there was no clear trend towards illiberal Islamization during his reign. Even so Mursi also did nothing to abolish restrictive media laws that were left over from the Mubarak regime, and while private media enjoyed great freedoms, there was no reform of the state media sector. Hallin and Mancini had made clear that despite the fact that Europe has large public media sectors most of them are not state controlled but autonomous and influenced by various civil society forces. As early as 2011 UNESCO demanded not only the abolition of restrictive media laws and licensing systems, but also a reform of the Egyptian state media into a public media sector.¹⁰ During the reign of Mursi, Egyptian media advisors worked out concrete plans for such a transformation and proposed them to the government, but such plans were never put into practice. Instead, Mursi kept the state media firmly under control and used them as a bulwark against the often critical private media.

The constitution Mursi introduced by referendum in November 2012 left many questions regarding the media sector unresolved. The constitution, which by then had been abolished, guaranteed freedom of the press as long as “national security”, cases of “public mobilization” or insults to religious prophets of Islam, Judaism and Christianity did not make censorship necessary (Art. 47 and 48).¹¹ Membership of the regulatory authority, called the National Media Council, remained unclear, quite like the status of media licenses, in particular, because they were only given to those who accepted the “values and traditions of society“ (Art. 215) – a passage that was open to interpretation and government censorship. Although the constitution was not an Islamist constitution in the sense of creating an Islamist dictatorship as in Iran, media regulations were unclear. However, rather than abolishing it, one could have amended the Mursi constitution, as was done several times in countries as diverse as the United States and Indonesia.

Despite the deficits of his constitution, Mursi’s rule was not so much a time of active Islamization of the media sector but of stagnation of media structures. But then came the military coup of July 2013. SCAF shut down all Islamist media thus ending the phase of pluralism in the Egyptian media system. Offices of Al-Jazeera and of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation were closed because they had had reported

¹⁰ Assessment of Media Development in Egypt. Based on UNESCO’s Media Development Indicators, UNESCO, Cairo 2011.

¹¹ Egypt’s Draft Constitution Translated, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/print/1278681>.

on Muslim Brotherhood protesters. Military censorship returned, many journalists were killed and more than one hundred of them imprisoned. Observers speak of a broad coordination between SCAF and private media in Egypt.¹² The military coup brought a roll-back from semi-liberal democracy to illiberal autocracy of a Nasserist type. Even the criticism of the political leadership that was there under the late Mubarak – not to speak of the widespread freedom that existed under Mursi – has been re-transformed into a state reminiscent of what William Rugh once called the “mobilizational” media of the Nasser era,¹³ only that the SCAF in 2013 rallied against what they considered the Islamist “terrorists” of the Muslim Brotherhood and elected President Mursi and not for Arab socialism.

Media and Civil Society

According to Hallin and Mancini, the basic problem in the relationship between the media and civil society is whether the media tend towards liberal “centrism” or “political parallelism”. In young democracies the media often show close affiliations with political parties and other forces of civil society. The question, however, remains whether they are able cover all relevant opinions in Egyptian society or merely represent a small elitist bias.

The first two and a half years after the Arab Spring revolution were characterized by sharp political antagonism within the public sphere or by what one could call “radical polarization”. Egyptian media were “pluralist” in the sense that they represented clear-cut political viewpoints, but also “radical” because they often denied any legitimacy to the “other” camp. The most decisive cleavage existed between pro- and anti-Mursi- or anti-Brotherhood media.

The pro-Mursi-media, for example the TV channels Masr 25, al-Rahma, al-Hafez, al-Nas, al-Khalijiya, were extremely one-sided in their coverage. More than once they spread, for instance, rumors against those protesters who demonstrated against the Mursi constitution, arguing that they were drunk and many other things. Islamist media at the time of Mursi were often sectarian and propagandist in style. Viewers sometimes became afraid of rapid Islamization, especially because the state media were also Mursi controlled. However, anti-Mursi media did not really perform better than that. Al-Tahrir newspaper, like many others, showed a firm anti-Muslim Brotherhood-orientation: a fact that was even criticized by journalists within the paper itself, but which never led to more internal pluralism.¹⁴ Only very few media such as Al-Masry Al-Youm could claim to be somehow “centrist”.

¹² Kirkpatrick, David D., Egypt Lashes out at Foreign News Media’s Coverage, The New York Times, August 18, 2013.

¹³ Rugh, William A. (2004), Arab Mass Media. Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics, Westport/London: Praeger.

¹⁴ I am indebted to my PhD-candidate Nadia Leihls for this information. She did numerous interviews in Egyptian newsrooms.

Moreover, there was and is a strong tendency towards boulevardization and “politainment” in the Egyptian media. The mass media sometimes used new freedoms for the extreme bashing of politicians, as demonstrated for example through the treatment and scandalizing of Mohammed el-Baradei and his daughter. Although solid content analysis is still missing, one is certainly not wrong when arguing that both content and the tone of many media outlets were not directed towards compromise or consensus, which are the core of the Habermasian rational public sphere, or what Hallin and Mancini call the liberal centrist media. Egyptian media were rather reminiscent of the Weimar Republic in Germany between the two World Wars, with its radical public debates between uncompromising political forces of ultra-nationalists, communists and Fascists leaving no room for a constructive support of the elected parliament and the democratization of institutions. The young German democracy was as overburdened as the Egyptian public; many people even enjoyed radical freedom of opinion after decades of authoritarian constraint.

From a theoretical point of view there were and are other problems with the Egyptian media, one being the extreme centralization of the media in the Cairo area. While theoreticians like Hallin and Mancini take it for granted that regional decentralization has been the backbone of democratic Western media systems for centuries, Egypt, like many other developing societies, suffers from a severe concentration in and around the capital city. As a result, regional problems, peasants, workers, the South and other peripheral interests are often ill-represented. Such problems can also be observed in other Muslim countries, just to mention the example of Indonesia with its enormous concentration of capital and media outlets in the Jakarta area.

To sum up, the public mood before and during the Mursi era was characterized by structural problems such as the radical polarization of the public sphere, a lack of internal pluralism of most media and insufficient integration of peripheral perspectives within civil society. Such patterns might not be too daring from the point of view of public sphere theories like that of Mouffe and Laclau, who argue *against* the idea of national integrated public spheres. For them, liberal centralism enabled through big mass media represents an extreme form of gatekeeping and mainstreaming of voices and interests. However, Mouffe and Laclau did not think of young democracies like that of Egypt, which are intrinsically instable and for which the national integration of discourse is direly needed in order to transform and rebuild national institutions. Habermas seems to fit much better here – or is the Internet a viable alternative to mass media?

During the Arab Spring, the Egyptian Internet became strongly politicized. Even before the revolution, Egypt was the center of Arab blogging. However, the Egyptian uprising against Mubarak was not a “Facebook revolution”.¹⁵ Only ten percent of the Egyptians used such tools, and after a few days of the upheaval in late January 2011,

¹⁵ Lynch, Marc (2011), After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State. *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (2), p. 301-310.

the Internet was shut down by the government. The argument that the closure of the Internet somewhat triggered increased protests might be correct, but the slogan the “Facebook revolution” surely reduces the credit other media – like Al-Jazeera – or non-mediated political communication on the streets deserve. After the initial revolution and up to today the Internet has certainly provided a back-up for news deficits in the mass media. And in times of re-enhanced censorship by the military the Internet has become all the more important for any kind of opposition.

Since the military coup of July 2013, political polarization, but also the type of pluralism that comes along with it, has come to an end. We have witnessed a roll-back towards Nasser-style authoritarian and mobilizational media. Islamist media have been closed and the existing media show a synchronicity of coverage that reaches deeply into the details. The authorities exert enormous pressure and most public voices have joined a hyper-nationalist chorus against the Muslim Brotherhood. SCAF critics are treated as traitors. Even media that supported the Tamarud-protests are expected to protest against such un-democratic forms of media repression, but they do not and/or cannot. The previous radical polarization had not yet developed inter-group tolerance, but it was at least critical of the government and acted as a “4th power”. Before the military coup, Egypt’s media system was comparable to Hallin and Mancini’s “Mediterranean Model” of democratic media with a strong government sector and a very polarized private media sector. Nowadays, it can no longer be considered a democratic system – it is authoritarian in nature.

The question arises to what extent the radical polarization of the Egyptian media in the Mursi era was at least partly responsible for the heated public climate that paved the way for the military intervention. The Egyptian case reveals that it is not enough to point to the emergence of the Arab public sphere¹⁶, the ‘Arab street’¹⁷, and somewhat idealize the struggles of Arab civil societies against the authoritarian state. It seems high time to reflect the deficits of Egypt’s political culture, the inability of many secular as well as Islamist media to understand that “Freedom is always the freedom of the one who thinks differently”, as the famous German communist Rosa Luxemburg once said. Radical polarization of public spheres in young democracies might be a historically widespread phenomenon – but it is also part of the puzzle of why the consolidation of democratic transformation is often such a painful long-term process. The most successful form of democratic transformation is not revolution but “negotiated system change”¹⁸ among previously radical political forces who actively create a new consensus.

¹⁶Eickelman, Dale F./Anderson, Jon W. (eds.) (1999), *The New Media in the Muslim World. The Emerging Public Sphere*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

¹⁷Lynch, Marc (2006), *Voices of the New Arab Public. Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*, New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁸Merkel, Wolfgang (1999), *Systemtransformation. Eine Einführung in die Theorie und Empirie der Transformationsforschung [System Transformation. An Introduction to the Theory and Empirical Practice of Research on Political Transformation]*, Opladen: Leske & Budrich.

Media and Economy

One of the biggest problems of democratic consolidation is the concentration of media capital. Unlike in many Latin American countries, the state media sector in most Arab countries is still huge. At the beginning of the Arab Spring events, UNESCO described Egyptian private media as rather diverse in terms ownership.¹⁹ However, there are increasing trends towards media concentration and no effective controls against that. Ownership concentration has spurred the downswing of pluralism in Egyptian media. For example, Ibrahim Eissa had to sell Al-Tahrir TV to Suleiman Amer, a businessman closely connected to the Mubarak network and to the old authoritarian elite.²⁰

One of the major structural patterns of the Egyptian media system is that the extreme inequality of capital distribution in Egyptian society was not at all affected and changed by the revolution. It is certainly true that even big and old democracies like the United States show the traits of extreme concentration. Most major US media are linked through ownership structures and boards of trustees to big business in the United States and this poses a serious challenge to media freedom. The ideal type “liberal media” that Hallin and Mancini talk of do not exist. However, when comparing Egypt to the United States, one must note that not all capital in the US is “loyalist” in the sense that it can be identified with a particular political player. US media capital is somewhat more competitive, and political parties, social institutions and civil society at large are less vulnerable than in Egypt.

After decades of authoritarian rule and a financial “deep state” still organized around networks that existed in the neo-patrimonial Egyptian state, capitalist deregulation of the Egyptian media system is a questionable strategy. It would certainly be wiser to opt for dual systems like those in Europe. A reformed public media sector, whose independence and linkage to civil society must be constitutionally guaranteed, should act side by side with private capitalist and independent alternative media.

Media and the Journalistic Profession

The professional development of journalism is important for democratic media and the public sphere. Without professional and ethical training, quality enhancement and adequate moderation of public debates cannot be expected. Moreover, internal journalistic freedom in newsrooms and professional ethical self-regulation through journalism syndicates or trade unions are important elements of independent journalism.

¹⁹Assessment (UNESCO), op. cit.

²⁰Sakr, Naomi (2013), *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism*, London: I.B. Tauris,

The Egyptian Press Syndicate was long dominated by the Mubarak regime. In recent years it has witnessed a power struggle between pro and anti-Muslim Brotherhood forces. As a result it has never been able to fully free itself from state interference. Although at several points in history the Syndicate protected journalists, but it is said to have also tolerated corruption. One of the major problems in the field of self-regulation is the lasting prohibition of free trade unions as these are not sheltered under the umbrella of the Syndicate. The forced membership of journalists is against the principles of the free association which, as was mentioned above, is among the core aspects of any democracy. In its current form, journalistic self-regulation is by and large a form of hidden censorship.

Internal media freedom in newsrooms is another pending issue in Egypt. After the revolution many journalists protested against newspaper editors. Some were even made to step down, others stayed in office. Some media installed real newsroom conferences and enhanced the internal media dialogue. But the strict editorial and political lines of many editors remained mostly intact.

The social situation is what makes most journalists vulnerable to editorial and political pressure and even prone to corruption. Except for hot shots in the media business, most journalists in the private media sector are ill-paid. Many journalists try to acquire jobs in the better paying state media. For most journalists there are no clear regulations governing salaries, holidays or other working conditions. Without better job security, no improvement in the quality of journalism can be expected.

Conclusion

Before the military coup in July 2013 one could have argued that Egypt was a rather immature and radically polarized but vivid public sphere. After the coup, however, it seems that the country has witnessed an authoritarian roll-back reminiscent of Nasserist times. The famous media scholar and political intellectual Noam Chomsky criticized the military coup in Egypt. One can and must be critical of the Muslim Brotherhood, he said, but their President Mursi was legitimately elected, and the military, in his eyes, is not aiming to stabilize democracy but seeks control over power and the economy.²¹ Once again it seems true that the mass media are hardly ever the avant-garde of democratization because they are simply too vulnerable to political or financial manipulation.²²

However, the media and journalists are also responsible for the current situation. The

21 Chomsky: No one Can Alienate the Muslim Brotherhood, <http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/americas/7834-chomsky-no-one-can-alienate-the-muslim-brotherhood>.

22 McConnell, Patrick J./Becker, Lee B. (2002), The Role of the Media in Democratization, Paper Presented to the Political Communication Section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research at the Barcelona Conference (http://www.grady.uga.edu/coxcenter/activities/Act_2001_to_2002/Materials01-02/DemocratizationIAMCRJuly2002.pdf).

heated and radically polarized public opinion during the Mursi era and the deep gulf between Islamist and oppositional media, with their strong group biases and affiliations, often projected the image of what a Lebanese political scientist once called a “democracy without democrats”.²³ Egyptian public opinion, once united in an anti-authoritarian movement against Mubarak, left the consensus behind and rallied behind antagonizing camps each with maximalist political options. It seems as if the ground rules of democracy were ignored. While Islamists disrespected the secular equality of religions before the law, their opponents showed contempt for elections and the peoples' vote whenever that turned out to favor Islamist parties, parliaments and presidents.

It seems high time for media studies of the Arab world to analyze both the benefits and the failures of Arab public spheres more thoroughly. The structural patterns of state, economy, civil society and professional journalism are all part of the puzzle. Meanwhile the Arab communication revolution has come to a stand-still and explains why reform is direly needed in all spheres.

23 Salamé, Ghassan (ed.) (1994), *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris.