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Middle East and North Africa Programme: Workshop Summary

Egypt in Transition: The Media's Role in Politics

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INTRODUCTION

This report is a summary of discussions that took place at a workshop held in Cairo in June 2011, bringing together a group of Egyptian journalists, and activists from across the political spectrum. Part of Chatham House's 'Egypt in Transition' project, the workshop focused on the topic of the media's relationship with politics.

Some of the main findings of the workshop include:

- While there is more media pluralism in Egypt since the revolution there remain 'red lines' – perhaps self-imposed – in particular concerning criticism of the ruling military council.
- Professionalism in media institutions has suffered as a result of the Mubarak era. Journalists and editors are used to referring decisions upwards, while reports are often not credibly sourced.
- There is currently a vacuum in terms of regulation, and an urgent need to develop mechanisms to hold media accountable.
- In the light of the grassroots 'bottom-up' approach to politics which many Egyptians are trying to encourage, the media need to reorient themselves to ensure that they are more relevant and closer to the people they are supposed to be serving.
- There is a generation gap in attitudes towards new media: established media professionals are suspicious of online platforms such as Twitter and blogs, but young Egyptians see the potential of new media to 'fill in the gaps' where traditional media have failed.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule:

“When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed”.

SESSION 1: THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN EGYPTIAN POLITICS

A number of changes have taken place in the Egyptian media over the last few decades. For a long time they were monopolized in order to promote the ruling party. In the 1970s some variety was granted through permission for the existence of a party press, allowing publications belonging to political parties other than the ruling party, then in the 1990s the private press and satellite TV channels were established. The latest wave has been the 'new media', accessed through both the web and mobile services. However, a large part of the media has remained state-owned, its main role until 25 January being to promote the old regime, rather than serve the Egyptian people.

The 25 January revolution caused something of a shock in the state-owned media: suddenly they had a great deal more freedom. Reporters were used to working under strict rules and many topics were taboo; they were used to taking orders, and referring editorial decisions to the very top. This legacy is proving to be problematic as they attempt to navigate the post-Mubarak era.

Red lines

One problem in particular has been how to deal with criticism of the ruling military council, the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces). While some participants in the workshop defended the media's approach to airing criticism of the SCAF, noting that the state media would be happy to broadcast interviews with people putting forward critical opinions, others were sceptical. Several important stories – such as the arrest and torture of 176 activists on 9 April when the military police decided to clear Tahrir Square – have received little or no coverage in the state media.

Even the private press seems to have drawn its own 'red lines'. Several participants highlighted the problem of an authoritarian and hierarchical culture – one of shame and respect for superiors, which is not only present in the media – and the need to develop democratic values to replace it. In this sense, just as journalists have been used to obeying – and fearing – the Mubarak regime, many are taking the same attitude to the SCAF. In the past the legal constraints were strong and there were many ways a journalist could be silenced, even put in jail. Now there is uncertainty – so perhaps journalists cannot be blamed for their caution when it is not clear what actions might cost them their job or their freedom.

Back to basics

Several participants argued that there is little attempt to convey the truth in the media, and reporting is often poorly sourced or consists of little more than rumour. University students studying media learn that attempting to convey the truth is a fundamental principle of journalism, yet sometimes it seems that professional journalists have little respect for this. There are also many important issues that receive little coverage in the mainstream and state media, such as poverty or labour issues, and when they are reported there is often no attempt to probe in depth. For example, when a demonstration is covered, no demonstrators will be interviewed.

All participants acknowledged the need for training to improve professional standards. Some projects are already under way, with the state broadcaster running both internal and external training sessions. The Egyptian Radio and TV Union is being supported by the British Embassy in Cairo to use external consultants to draw up election guidelines. Several participants also argued that the current situation is chaotic, and that there is a need for regulation and the development of a professional code of conduct.

It was agreed that there needs to be an emphasis in the state media on encouraging editorial independence and prioritizing newsworthy stories over those intended to please the government. Editors need to learn how to make decisions. This process is already under way, although as journalists and editors are used to referring decisions upwards it will be a gradual process. Some participants expressed scepticism that any progress had been made on this front.

Agenda for the future: a strong, independent media presence

Reform of the media will be a key issue for Egypt in this transitional period. While Egyptians are hoping they will now have a multiparty parliamentary system, the possible outcomes of the transitional period are as yet unclear. Strong media would contribute to ensuring greater accountability for the next government, and strengthening media institutions now would give any future government less control in this area.

Participants argued that the state-owned media should be treated as a public service broadcaster, like the BBC, and the difference between ownership and leadership should be clearly defined. State media may be government-owned but must not be government-led. A new higher council for journalism should be formed, and the trade union should be independent. The Ministry of Information is a symbol of political hegemony and arguably should be scrapped.

The media could also play a positive role in other aspects of institutional reform, such as in relation to the army's role in Egypt: the media should be allowed to report on the process of training recruits, on the army's budget, and on arms-trading incidents such as that involving Hussein Salem (a case which has mostly been reported in depth by American newspapers).

Not all Egyptians are willing to wait for the media to reform themselves; with the opportunities offered by the internet for citizen journalism, many young people are now attempting to bypass the mainstream media by reporting events on blogs, Facebook and Twitter.

SESSION 2: ANONYMOUS SOURCES AND THE CHATHAM HOUSE RULE

Discussion in the second session focused on the potential for the Chatham House Rule – used widely in the UK and also internationally for conferences and workshops – to be a useful tool for journalists in Egypt to encourage the divulging of information. The Chatham House Rule, spelled out in the introduction to this paper, developed under particular historical circumstances. It allowed high officials to discuss matters freely, and existed as a kind of gentlemen's agreement, whereby all agreed that they had a shared interest in not having their names attached to the proceedings of a discussion. However, the rule does have disadvantages which are not frequently discussed in the UK, where its use is widespread.

The Egyptian context: non-credible sources and rumours

Several participants were concerned that the nature of the Egyptian context meant that the rule would be more of a hindrance than a help. They cited the problems of rumour-mongering and the frequent use of anonymous sources in newspaper and TV reports which make it difficult to sift through information. There is a sense that a lot of information in Egyptian media is not credible, and several people mentioned being suspicious of information from anonymous sources. It was pointed out that the UK has also had problems with misleading information being leaked deliberately via anonymous 'security' sources, most notably in the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003.

More generally in the UK there is a greater degree of trust in media institutions, supported by accountability mechanisms. These include programmes such as Feedback on the BBC and the role of the Reader's Editor at the *Guardian* newspaper. However, in Egypt there are no such accountability mechanisms, nor does any written code of conduct for journalists exist, and some felt that there is little integrity in the profession.

While the use of the Chatham House Rule is a different question from the use of anonymous sources in reporting, in the 'taboo-breaking' atmosphere of the revolution disclosure is seen as a very positive value and Egyptians are keen to put things in the open. In this sense, some participants did not feel that using the Chatham House Rule was in keeping with the spirit of disclosure they were trying to foster.

Discussion space

Nevertheless some participants did feel that the Chatham House Rule could be useful in certain contexts. The lack of public space for discussion was highlighted, as well as the need for more discussions between Egyptians to foster political education. There are many chat shows on Egyptian TV (especially on private satellite channels) which feature sensationalist speakers, but not many opportunities for participatory events.

The value of televised participatory debates such as the Qatar Foundation's Doha Debates or the BBC's Question Time was also queried. BBC Arabic runs the Alexandria Debates, which are largely successful, but there is a general problem with holding such debates in contexts where people fear negative repercussions for expressing certain opinions. When there is a possibility that someone from the interior ministry may be in the audience and the event is also being filmed, participants may not feel able to speak freely.

The free exchange of opinions in anonymous discussion spaces has the potential to translate into greater confidence in crossing the 'red lines' in media reporting. The ability to confront led to the revolution, but there are still taboos that need to be challenged. There is currently a game of pull and push going on with the SCAF: when journalists are assertive gains can be made. This was the case in a recent discussion on guidelines for covering elections: the SCAF was reluctant for people to get together to discuss these guidelines but pressure from within the state media organization enabled it to happen.

SESSION 3: REPORTING EGYPT'S ELECTIONS

The election period will throw into sharp relief issues around ethics in journalism. Before the revolution, the state media were used as a vehicle to stifle opposition parties and smear candidates, while dissenting private media would be silenced in various ways, including having a regime crony buy out the newspapers in question.

In the new political context, there are concerns around the lack of guidelines and regulation for covering elections, and fears that as the political scene becomes more polarized the media may also follow. The Muslim Brotherhood intends to launch two new (satellite) channels, as does the Liberal party. As the media scene becomes increasingly plural and media sources with varying political outlooks are launched, the question of ethical conduct in covering elections becomes increasingly pressing.

From self-censorship to self-regulation

Prior to the revolution there were no uniform written guidelines for journalists, although certain newspapers have drawn up their own ethical guidelines. With the additional proliferation of media outlets after the revolution, several participants emphasized the need for more mechanisms to regulate the media and ensure uniform standards throughout the industry. However, some were concerned by the possibility of a 'top-down' approach to media reform which would jeopardize the media's attempt to reconnect with the public.

One participant described the experience of the Tunisian media as a comparison. They share some of Egypt's problems: state media are still very dominant and 97% of Tunisians access information mostly through their televisions. Few new TV stations have been created since the revolution and while many licences have been issued for new newspapers, these media are generally financially unstable and dependent on donations. A temporary regulatory body has been put in place until there is a new constitution. However, the challenge in Tunisia is the development of pluralism while in Egypt, which has historically had a freer and more plural media presence, it is perhaps more one of regulation.

A new media monitoring project is being launched to observe how the Egyptian media are covering the SCAF and the elections; this is one way of attempting to make the media accountable. Voluntary codes of conduct also have a track record internationally of successfully raising the credibility of the media. While it was argued that educating citizens in what to expect from the

media will be a key way of holding the media accountable, there is also a balance to be struck between informing people of their rights and engaging the public. This is an important issue in the Egyptian context of the nation-building role of the media: a long-running debate is taking place on how to inform people without creating media that are didactic and patronizing.

New media and old media

Participants were divided over the role being played by new media in Egypt. Some were highly sceptical, seeing them as susceptible to misinformation and polarization, as well as completely unaccountable and therefore extremely difficult to regulate. One participant described new media as 'forms of self-expression and not professional arenas – [their] ability to play a role in the democratic process is not very credible'.

Many noted that internet penetration is still limited and, as in Tunisia, Egyptians are most likely to access information through television programmes. However, others saw digital media as 'filling in the gaps' where traditional media have fallen down, and expected citizen journalism to play a key role in covering the election. Several examples of online platforms for crowdsourcing electoral violations were mentioned, such as Ushahidi (<http://www.ushahidi.com/>). Others played down the rift between new and old media, noting that they share the same problem of often printing rumour as fact.

One of the central problems shared by new and old media is that there is no clear information or procedures for journalists to access the information they need to report the election, including sources monitoring the process, or access to polling stations. One participant highlighted how little was known even about the parties and candidates, just two months away from the planned date for parliamentary elections. In the past, access to vital information during elections had been restricted to those friendly towards the regime, which limited independent coverage of elections.

Conclusion

At present there are no media which can be regarded as able to play the 'public service broadcaster' role during the election, and many outlets are still perceived as participating in smear campaigns and rumour-mongering. A clear sense remains that to a great extent the mainstream media are not serving the public, and in the light of the grassroots 'bottom-up' approach to politics being embraced by many sections of Egyptian society, all the media

need to reorient themselves to become more relevant in the post-revolutionary period.

ABOUT

The Egypt in Transition project

Egypt is at a critical stage of its post-revolutionary evolution, when it is important that the expectations raised through the promise of change are met through continuing to provide for debate on a range of issues of concern to a variety of Egyptian constituencies.

A series of workshops convened by the MENA programme in Cairo will address elections, moving from military to civilian rule, political alliances, UK and Western policy, the economy and the role of the media. A core aim of this project is to increase political inclusion: to draw previously peripheral or suppressed voices into national and international policy dialogues.

<http://www.chathamhouse.org/egypt>

Chatham House MENA Programme

The Middle East and North Africa Programme, headed by Dr Claire Spencer, undertakes high profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa.

To complement our research, the MENA programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events which seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy.

We also produce a range of publicly available reports, books and papers and recent publications include titles on the Iranian elections, Britain and the Middle East, Kurds in international affairs, the conflict in Jerusalem and Yemen's regional relations.

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