

AGYA Conference of the Working Group Transformation: Dynamics of Change: Media and the Public Sphere in Egypt

8-10 December 2016

The conference aimed to discuss the current dynamics of change in the Egyptian media scene in a comparative perspective. In 2011, Egypt had witnessed a temporal opening that was followed by a relapse into autocratic settings. The media and the actors behind them (journalists, editors, activists, and owners) went through transformations, while at the same time were contributing to the transformation of the society. The pathways of these transformations were plastered with challenges such as exclusion and marginalization of different segments of society and a strong political polarization.

The conference offered the opportunity and space for actors from civil society, media and politics to discuss relevant issues

to the media in times of transformation and conflict. The in-depth exchange of opinions and experiences connected both practitioners' as well as academics' views on media and politics. Guiding questions for the exchange were: How do media as social systems and actors enhance their independence from the surrounding environment? How can media help societies to regulate the social orders in peaceful conflict resolution? While Egypt was the focal point of the conference comparative experiences from Morocco, Russia, Kenya and South Africa were also included in cooperation with MeCoDEM – an EU-funded research project on Media, Conflict and Democratisation.



The conference took place from December 8-10 at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany and was funded by the Arab-German Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA). The conference hosted 26 invited speakers including a keynote, 4 panels and 2 round-table discussions. In addition, the Arab participants also visited in an excursion two major German publishing houses (Springer and taz) in order to get informed about current developments in European media companies.

■ KEYNOTE SPEECH: VISIONS FOR JOURNALISM IN EGYPT

Hosted by the prestigious think tank German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), the keynote speaker Prof. Sahar Khamis from the University of Maryland, took the audience into a journey through the transformation of media during the years 2011 until 2016. The shifting journalism scene witnessed alternating open and closed phases, amid radical polarization. Dina Fakoussa, Head of Program, Middle East and North Africa Program at the DGAP, commented on the speech, acknowledging the uncertainty of the transformation outcomes in Egypt.



Media Systems in Transformation: Common Problems, Different Paths

Egypt's media landscape is not the first to be on a shaky transformation path. Speakers in the introductory comparative panel analyzed the challenges of transformation. What lessons from other countries are relevant for Egypt in terms of practical implications? How far should scholars re-adjust their attention to certain aspects? Fatima El Issawi from the London School of Economics focused on the cases of Morocco and Algeria. Judith Lohner from the University of Hamburg and member of MeCoDem-project spoke about Kenya, Serbia and South Africa and finally Anna Litvinenko from Freie Universität Berlin analyzed Russia's media system transformation.

All speakers highlighted the resilience of political traditions that are hard to be overcome in transitional processes. Loyalist newsroom cultures as well as corrupted privatization processes of media companies still constrain classical mass media despite the newly found freedoms. Counter-publics are still prevalent online, yet there are quite often attempts to curb them. Journalists have tasted the freedom of expression in early phases of transition but went back to survival mode due to non-changing structures. Changing ownership structures and changing journalists' attitudes are the main focus areas that need to be tackled in research and training.



Actors in Transformation: The Journalists' Syndicate as an Actor in Transformation

The latest elections of the Syndicate of Journalists in March 2017 revealed the divisions in the journalistic community. As a self-regulative body in the print media sector, the Egyptian Syndicate of Journalists does not have a long history in defending freedoms and rights, however it also shaped political events and protests. Nadine Abdalla from the American University in Cairo

and AGYA member analyzed the reasons of the Syndicate's failure in its conflict with the Ministry of Interior in May 2016. Internal divisions, ideological conflicts as well as the high politicization of the issues undermined the Syndicate's efforts to frame its demands as unanimously from a united professional community. The aftermath of the conflict is still evolving.





Pro & Contra:

Do Egyptians Need State Regulators in the Media Sector?

The panel “From State Media to Public Media” witnessed a dispute between two views on the role of the state in the media restructuring processes in Egypt. The first view is represented by Dr. Amr Elshobaki, a political scientist, columnist, and a member of the

Parliament as well as a member of the constitutional committee that wrote the current constitution. The second view is represented by Hisham Kassem, the renowned publicist and expert on media economy, who launched Cairo Times and Almasry ALYoum.



■ HOW RELEVANT IS MEDIA REGULATION BY A STATE ACTOR IN THE EGYPTIAN CONTEXT?

Amr Elshobaki:

An independent regulator is important in order to protect the people and support the media sector in performing its roles in society in an ethical and responsible manner. Here, impartiality and independence of the regulatory body is a crucial prerequisite to avoid its mutation into a tool for political control in the hands of the ruling elite.

Hisham Kassem:

I am absolutely against media regulation. First it is a guardianship over the population, second it can be abused for political purposes. Therefore, I am a strong proponent of complete market freedom in the media sector, with the condition of full transparency and strict auditing processes. The current constitution of 2014 over-regulated the media sector with 7 articles detailing the bodies and laws that frame the media sector. This is not productive.

■ CAN THE STATE MEDIA IN EGYPT BE TRANSFORMED INTO PUBLIC SERVICE ENTITIES?

Amr Elshobaki:

Journalists in Egypt lack the mindset and skills necessary for public service journalism. The historical evolution of the media made it dependent on politics for too long. Serious and ambitious training and rehabilitation programs are crucial. But currently, unfortunately, strengthening a public service media is not a priority.

Hisham Kassem:

Amid their financial crisis I highly doubt state media are able to survive. Overstaffed enterprises, lack of good governance and the costly monthly bill all undermine the potential for survival, let alone independence. Currently, their income derives directly from the state. Low ratings and revenues do not justify this money drain on the long run, especially in the current economic crisis.

Beyond the Political: Journalistic Genres & Practices from Three Fields in a Transitional Context

Instead of only focusing on political journalism in Egypt, the panel “Professional Margins and Constraints from the Journalistic System” looked at three diverse formats of journalism. These discuss relevant issues in the fields of culture, science and society. Journalists were invited to give an authentic insider account of their own experiences as well as potentials and challenges in the field.

■ SCIENCE JOURNALISM

What are the challenges and opportunities of being a science journalist in Egypt? This is what Ashraf Amin, the Head of the Science Desk at Al-Ahram Newspaper tackled. The field of science journalism needs improvement, but the absence of competition and lack of public interest are major constraints for a production of good-quality science journalism. “Who cares to bring science stories to the front page?” Amin asked. In addition, the Arabization of scientific terms is a persistent difficulty for science journalists. Despite the structural challenges within the journalistic systems, recent years witnessed lively initiatives from outside the media to strengthen scientific journalism and news dissemination. Young graduates are increasingly interested, and express it through the new media. Science journalism should reflect the diverse stakeholders in society, i.e. scientists, readers, universities and companies.



■ CULTURAL JOURNALISM

In her presentation, Ghada El-Sherbiny, moderator and producer of the cultural TV show El Fann Enwan (art is an address), explained the intertwined relations between media and culture. “In Egypt today, media productions are rare and do not reflect the current rich art formats in the Egyptian public sphere”, El-Sherbiny said. A dualism exists in the cultural field: on the one hand, the Ministry of Culture with its geographic outreach and assets has potential but is traditional and controlled, on the other hand, the independent art scene is free and diverse, and remains largely fragmented and unknown to the public. Current media programs focus on the commercial and mainstream content. They do not distinguish between cultural and social content.



■ INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Hisham Allam, member of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the networks that researched Swiss Leaks and the Pulitzer award-winning Panama Papers, focused on the Egypt leaks. Egypt ranked #20 among the countries with the largest dollar amounts in the leaked Swiss files. Allam highlighted the methods to investigate the hidden money flows that belonged to the business tycoons and corrupt elites from politics and finance. For a country with socio-economic problems reclaiming the vast amount of money smuggled out can be a step towards economic strength. Yet, difficult access to information, legal restrictions on the media as well as security and self-censorship in non-free contexts pose serious challenges to investigative journalism, Allam explained.



Roundtable:

New Spaces in the Public Sphere: Local and Community Journalism - Perspectives from Academia and the Profession

Local or community media is a trending topic discussed in the context of social and political transformation. People are mostly interested in what happens around the corner, in their particular neighborhood. Local media can offer a specific window to publics situated at the scale of community and thus constitute new communication assemblies. They can challenge established mass media by their proximity to the audience and discuss topics of everyday life that often go unnoticed in the mainstream media. Peter Trzka, a trainer affiliated with the Axel-Springer Publishing house, always reminds the journalists in his sessions: “You live locally, not nationally!”

In many Arab countries, community media did simply not exist before the digital era. Blogs and self-established Facebook fan pages changed the situation in Tunisia, as Amal Labidi a young journalist from Tunis highlighted. Now, even the journalists’ unions accept local, autonomous journalists as members. Moreover, local radio stations gain ground. Trzka argued that on a local level, a journalist can more easily be held accountable by the audiences and has to ensure that his information is correct. Producing local media content is thus the best training for good journalism.

Tarek Atia from Egypt presented a project that has received much attention during the more than three years of its existence. In times of print market crisis, he developed a local newspaper “Mantiqti” (My Neighborhood) in downtown Cairo to provide “engaged journalism” from the community for the community.

Stories such as covering problems in Metro stations or investigating the reasons behind demolished walkways do not sound like world-changing journalism, but are indeed most relevant for the local community and possibly are a starting point for citizen engagement. Naila Hamdy, professor at the American University in Cairo followed the project closely and calls for an accompanying social media space to provide interested citizens with a platform to discuss the issues in the newspaper, make aware of new topics to be covered and engage with each other. Thus, local media could indeed make a difference and help forming new publics.



صوت وسط البلد

**“You live locally,
not nationally!”**

Peter Trzka

**“Journalism from the
community for the com-
munity is a starting point
for citizen engagement”**

Tarek Atia

**“Local media can
form new publics”**

Naila Hamdy



AGYA Working Group *Transformation*

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) has been established in 2013 as the first bilateral young academy worldwide with the aim to promote Arab-German exchange based on the idea of scientific excellence and social commitment of early career scholars. The Working Group *Transformation* of AGYA has organized this event.

Many of the social and political developments that have taken place in the MENA region are not exceptional, but rather reflect and accelerate broader global trends. The importance of new media, new forms of social mobilization and new instruments of governance is evident outside the MENA region as well. Taking a transcultural perspective, the Working Group *Transformation* aims to improve understanding of transformation processes. The working group debates how ideas, norms and concepts are diffused in a context of mutual exchange, and how scientific relations between Europe and the MENA region can be improved.

Statements from the organizing AGYA members



Carola Richter is professor for international communication at Freie Universität Berlin. In her research she focuses on Arab media systems. She highlighted that “the conference provided a very nuanced picture of media developments in Egypt that was

far from the usual black/white images by which the region is usually portrayed. It provided fresh ideas for further research, e.g. with regard to community media or science journalism.”



Hanan Badr is postdoc researcher at Freie Universität Berlin and Cairo University, with a focus on political communication, journalism and media and transformation. “The conference brought together authentic high calibers from academia

and journalism to outline and contrast relevant issues for media in transformation. Bringing them together, AGYA definitely helped build sustainable networks of excellence and disseminated scientific knowledge.”



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