

The Tunisian media

Between polarization
and compromise

The Monographs of Arab Media Report

Edited by

Pietro Longo

Azzurra Meringolo

The Jasmine Revolution tore down the Ben Ali Regime, in what is increasingly seen as the only Arab Spring to have ended well. With the downfall of the old regime, freedom of expression and the right to information increased exponentially.

Numerous new newspapers were founded, and radio-television stations emerged to compete with pre-existing ones. Censorship collapsed and media rapidly entered the world of the possible.

What appears to be comforting is that political polarisation that threatened to balkanise the constitutional transition – the secular-Islamist opposition – was not directly reflected in the media sphere.

Essays written by Maryam Ben Salem, Kerim Bouzouita, Fatima el-Issawi, Pietro Longo, Atidel Majbri, Azzurra Meringolo

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The Monographs of Arab Media Report

Arab Media Report is a project promoted by Reset-Dialogues on Civilizations, the international organisation for dialogue between cultures. It was created to develop a greater knowledge in Italy, of media in Arab countries and countries with a Muslim majority (Iran and Turkey).

Breaking linguistic barriers and making them directly accessible to the public, Arab Media Report analyses media that are shaping the new cultural, political and social horizon of the Mediterranean area and the Middle East. Constantly monitoring contemporary media developments, Arab Media Report focuses on the press, television and social networks. It analyses programming of large pan-Arab networks, as well as those of local channels through newscasts, political debates, soaps and reality shows.

Directed by Giancarlo Bosetti, Arab Media Report employs Az-zurra Meringolo's coordination alongside a network of regional collaborators, consenting an exhaustive view of the media landscape.

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Introduction

Azzurra Meringolo

What it truly means to be a journalist is one of the most pressing questions that countries affected by the Arab Spring have had to face. When the squares lit up, thousands of youths took to the streets in the double guise of protesters and citizen-journalists. They voluntarily and freely reported a chapter of history, which they actively contributed to create, while state televisions continued to ignore it. As Anglo-Egyptian actor, Khaled Abdallah,¹ noted these are the first revolutions in history to have been reported and narrated by their participants as opposed to existing press organs. When censorship and self-censorship barriers were torn down, both professional and amateur journalists found themselves immersed in a completely new media-communication sphere. Debuting within this new and unregulated context, these new journalists tasted the emotion of exercising rights, which they had regained during the protests. These were rights, which they had never been able to exer-

¹ *Al-Abram*, 20 January 2012.

² In the transliteration from Arabic, a simplified standard has been privileged to facilitate the reading of the text by a non-Arabophone au-

cise as long as whichever *rais*², who had subjected them, had denied them. Thus, for the first time, new citizen-journalists experimented the power that media holds outside authoritarian regimes. They were now able to grasp the influence they could have on the public – from whom they had to partially veil the truth, and their own interpretation of events, for years. Indeed, a rapid evolution³ of the role of the journalist and one which became increasingly militant was observed.⁴ In this way, camera, microphone and pen became essential instruments for carrying out a political battle within turbulent transition periods.

Identifying the most fertile terrain for sowing democratic seeds cast by the Arab Spring in Tunisia, *Arab Media Report* has chosen to devote this monograph to an analysis of contemporary dynamics in the local Tunisian media context. Despite experiencing dramatic and bloody moments – such as the assassination of Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi – and especially after learning the Egyptian lesson of July 2013, the Tunisian transition phase has nevertheless embarked on a path of political compromise through inclusion. This seeks an answer to the dangerous political polarisation, which threatened to injure the country again by making it descend into a chaotic struggle for power. The effort for compromise has been obvious in

dience. Names and terms currently found in the Italian language have been transliterated according to their common usage, as opposed to following the scientific method of transliteration from Arabic.

³ Followed by a devolution – at least in the case of Egypt.

⁴ Although the role of the partisan journalist staunchly expressed itself in Egypt and Libya, it also dominated an equally bitter Tunisian transition.

the work of the Constituent Assembly, constantly monitored by *Al-Bawsala*, the non-government organization directed by thirty-year old Amira Yahyaoui⁵. The organisation monitors the Constituent Assembly, and acts as a compass for both its members and citizens, who can follow its progress live on-air. No discussion, vote or friction escaped *Al-Bawsala*, who presents itself as a non-traditional information tool, enabling the citizen to be at the centre of public and political action like never before.⁶

Arab Media Report therefore questioned itself about the role played by more or less traditional means of communication that acquired greater authority during the revolution. How did they act and what mechanisms did they set into motion during the transition, especially in its highly polarised first phase? Did they accentuate or reduce it? In order to answer these questions we have attentively followed the evolution of the media system, which also underwent a complex and highly discussed reform process.

Entering the headquarters hosting⁷ the *Haute Autorité Indépendante de la Communication Audiovisuelle* (HAICA), we found ourselves immersed in an absolutely new phenomenon of the Tunisian institutional panorama. The offices of this ancient residence in

⁵ She is the daughter of Judge Mokhtar Yahyaoui, fired in July 2001 after writing an open letter to the ex-President Ben Ali denouncing the magistrature's lack of independence. Amira is also the cousin of Zouhair Yahyaoui – the pioneer of cyber-dissidence in Tunisia – who died aged 37 from a heart attack in March 2005 due to ill-treatment in prison.

⁶ Kerim Bouzouita, "Al-Bawsala: la bussola che monitora la costituzione tunisina", in *Arab Media Report*, 5 February 2014.

⁷ In the past it hosted the old Constituent Assembly.

the nearby suburbs of Tunis, host an organ, which despite being created by Decree 115 of November 2012, has only been truly functional from 3 May 2013. As he welcomed us, Ria Farjani – mass media specialist by profession, recruited into the team of this establishment – told us that, “For a year and a half the law of the jungle ruled”. Before the fall of President Ben Ali, management of the media system was tightly in the hands of the regime. The latter dominated television and radio transmission by direct controlling journalists and the advertising market. The media surveillance and repression system was implemented by the Ministry of Communication – who exercised total control over information; the *Conseil Supérieur de la Communication* – which carried out research and sector studies, also measuring audience quotas; the *Agence Tunisienne des Communications Extérieures*, which acted as the regime’s propaganda tool; and the *Agence Tunisienne de l’Internet*, that filtered information available to foreign journalists and controlled – unscrupulously censoring – internet sites. The revolution dismantled the structure of this repressive apparatus. Indeed, after the fall of the dictator, an assembly of elders, l’*Istance National pour la Réforme de l’information et de la Communication*, was created to direct Tunisian media legislation towards a new era.

Leaving the HAICA and entering the journalists’ trade union was enough to understand that the process has been anything but smooth. Among the angriest unionists we found those who described ‘new’ media nepotism, as a family very similar to that governing in the old regime. They drew our attention to

the quasi anarchic proliferation of audio-visual outlets, which the HAICA was battling against.⁸ In fact, pirate radio stations⁹ were the first to populate the new Tunisian media jungle. They made their voices heard in primarily community settings. Not only did the exorbitant cost of the licence – roughly 50 thousand euro a year – push them underground but also the complex process of dismantling state monopoly over this sector.

In order to understand the post-revolutionary evolution of Tunisian media, Kerim Bouzouita, retraces the most important moments in the history of Tunisian television in Chapter 1. Created in 1966, it was put at the service of the newly independent state. It was not only influenced by French channels but also by Italian ones. In the 80s, *Rai 1*, captured by the country's northern and central satellites became the second most watched channel in Tunisia. At the time, this channel was also, young researcher and journalist Bouzouita's personal favourite, and he in fact learnt Italian by tuning into this channel every day. Bouzouita identified the birth of private television, *Hannibal tv*, as a historical event. He describes the evolutionary parabola, which also thanks to the birth of *Nessma tv* guided television after the revolution and into the subsequent transition phase – when religious and Islamist channels reappeared on the scene despite not finding a very receptive public. By courageously employing

⁸ Azzurra Meringolo, "L'autorità radiotelevisiva nella Tunisia del post Ben Ali", in *Arab Media Report*, 13 March 2014.

⁹ Ernesto Pagano, "Stazioni pirata continuano ad affollare la giungla radio-televisiva tunisina", in *Arab Media Report*, 23 April 2014.

revelations offered by shares,¹⁰ Bouzouita reveals a post-revolutionary paradox. He demonstrates that, in fact, channels existing before the revolution still dominate the Tunisian television scene. Nevertheless, the 2011 revolution impacted on media liberalization. Indeed, it increased freedom of expression, but also contributed to the diffusion of a new trend. In post-Arab Spring Tunisian media, neutrality and credibility struggle to affirm themselves. In fact, programming is gradually being replaced by a staunchly politicised agenda.

These characteristics show how professional ethics still have to take root in the Tunisian journalistic sector. Chapters 2 and 3 question how far the post-revolutionary political polarisation between secular and religious elements has weighed on local media agendas, and vice versa. Departing from an analysis of reform within the sector, and demonstrating its effectiveness in enrooting a large part of oppressive features of the previous media system, in Chapter 2, Fatima el Issawi underlines the need for a long process of professional training. This is also revealed as necessary in other countries affected by the Arab Spring, Egypt in particular. Describing the role played by the media on the stage of post-revolutionary political battles, El Issawi embraces a less reductive interpretation of Tunisian

¹⁰ Understanding how many people watch a programme or a specific channel means determining the cost of advertising spaces. But if in countries like France and Italy, Auditel or Médiamétrie have been measuring ratings for thirty years through instruments connected to television appliances, in the Arab world channel ratings only a few isolated experiments to scientifically measure ratings are being currently launched. Cfr. Ernesto Pagano, “Auditel arabo: alla ricerca della pietra filosofale” in *Arab Media Report*, 5 February 2014.

polarisation. She introduces essential socio-economic elements to fully understand the transition and quest for a minimum national consensus in Tunisia. The latter has been described by Dakhly as “an alternation of brief moments of democratic reconciliation and phases of divergence in which everything seems to be out of control”.

In Chapter 3, Maryam Ben Salem and Atidel Majbr further contribute to the analysis of polarisation. They show how religion, politics, capital and entertainment all cohabit within the new Tunisian media sphere. Quoting Pierre Bourdieu, they explain that even if agents involved in the political and journalistic spheres are in a relationship of permanent competition and tension, and the former is in a certain sense encapsulated by the latter, these two fields have one thing in common: they both strictly and directly fall under the influence of market approval and public consensus.¹¹ Chapter 3 subsequently examines transformations of the media scene in the context of political expansion by considering the influence of political and economic fields. The essay then introduces a different perspective to the analysis of the evolution of the Tunisian media sphere, by exploring the image and role of women in this new context. Thanks to monitoring undertaken within the *Center of Arab Woman for Training and Research* (CAWTAR) a qualitative analysis of the image of women is carried out. Here, woman's position in the media, both as a subject as well as a producer of information is examined. If on the one

¹¹ Bourdieu Pierre, “L’emprise du journalisme”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, Vol. 101-102, March 1994, p. 7.

hand, this image appears to be evolving, it is also obvious that – following a paradox already witnessed in other countries affected by the Arab Spring¹² – public life remains a sector from which woman is excluded.

The regulations, which the HAICA is struggling to implement, is a necessary step to restore the Tunisian media landscape. The revolution has opened up margins of freedom never seen before in the country but it has simultaneously created a certain level of anarchy. The press, for instance, has been reduced to the role of a spokesperson for party requests. This has negatively impacted on professionalism and objective information. Paradoxically, freedom of expression enshrined by the new Constitution plays on this process. Today, after decades of censorship there are infinite ways to access information. However, without any form of control, the media would not be able to carry out its role as the fourth estate. It will therefore be up to HAICA, through its regulations; the magistracy – in cases where freedom of opinion is violated; and to journalists themselves, through a degree of self-censorship – to make themselves the guarantors of a new objective and pluralistic Tunisian media landscape.

The current media context is a battlefield in which a thicket of different factors and interests compete. Indeed, it is not merely characterised by the polarisation between an Islamic and a secular pole. Despite presenting itself to the public as the most promising country affected by the ‘Arab Spring’, Tunisia has not

¹²Azzurra Meringolo, “Tra vignette e graffiti. L’auto rappresentazione femminile svela il paradosso di genere egiziano” in Renata Pepicelli (edited by) *Le donne nei media arabi. Tra aspettative tradite e nuove opportunità*, Rome, Carocci, 2013.

been spared the development of partisan journalism. This was a natural consequence of the change in role of journalists in the aftermath of the revolutions. Their role shifted from those of government spokespersons to figures with a voice on media messages, which they channel. This confirms that the approach advanced by partisan journalism has become one of the fundamental features of post-revolutionary media systems. The latter has failed to lobby for rights and freedoms in order to sweeten the image of political and ideological allies.

Will the new political pathway and reforms carried out in the Tunisian media sector be capable of correcting the diffusion of partisan journalism? Not only will the future of news rooms – battlefields where the ferocious ideological and political clash between the country's opposing forces are aired – depend on this, but also the identity of information agents who vacillate between being journalists, and backing specific political factions.

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Translation Maria Elena Bottigliero

The media landscape in Tunisia: power and television during the dictatorship and democratic transition

Kerim Bouzouita

Tunisians spend between one and four hours in front of the television on average.¹³ They also have access to over 300 channels in Arabic and over a thousand western channels via satellite. According to sociologists of mass media, the most watched television programmes and their nature can reflect the social identities and worries of spectators. Yet, the case of Tunisia is unique. Indeed, the media scene in this small Mediterranean country has experienced various episodes of rapid successive transformation: independence, dictatorship, satellite globalisation, partial liberalisation and lastly, a revolution. All of these episodes, which are closely tied to the country's internal and foreign politics have contributed to write the most fascinating pages of Tunisia's contemporary history.

Television at the service of the new independent state

Television first made its appearance in Tunisia for the first time with the unexpected capture of *Rete 1* (known as *Rai Uno* from 1975) in the country's north-

¹³ TvScan Report, 2014.

eastern coastal region at the end of the 1950s. In 1966 the first national television channel, *Tunisian Radio Television* (RTT) was launched. The channel was renamed *RTT 1* in 1983 after the creation of a second channel, *RTT 2*. It would take another twenty years for a third Tunisian channel – and first private channel – *Hannibal tv* to be launched in 2004. This was followed by a fourth channel, *Nessma tv*, three years later. However, the real historical television boom began in 2011, in the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution with the creation of 15 new channels in less than three years.

However, from Tunisian independence in March 1956, right up to the revolution of 2011, the main obstacle erected against liberalising Tunisian television scene, which was tightly monopolised and controlled by the state, was the reluctance of Bourguiba and Ben Ali's successive governments to respect freedom of expression, the right to just information, and rights of journalists to inform public opinion. According to Larbi Chouikha, Tunisian researcher and media expert, "all instruments that operate in this public space reproduce the schema of the patrimonial state both in their structure and their mode of production".¹⁴ These obstacles prevented the existence of free and independent television up to the Tunisian revolution in 2011.

Already in 1957, the transmission system adopted by the newly independent state was increasingly centralised in order to ensure control over this public space. This was the result of government choices and strategies to monopolise the future audio-visual public space. In fact,

¹⁴ Larbi Chouikha, "Autoritarisme étatique et débrouillardise individuel", *La Tunisie de Ben Ali la société contre le régime*, L'Harmattan, 2002.

on 31 May 1966, the first Tunisian television network known as *Tunisian Radio Television* (TRT) was officially inaugurated by the president Habib Bourguiba in person. On that occasion Bourguiba stated on air: “With this invention you will never have to wait under the scorching sun or the rain to hear me again. I will come to your homes”.¹⁵ A year after its birth, the channel broadcast three hours of programming a day: two hours in Arabic and one in French. The channel’s programming gradually evolved into four daily editions of the news, three in Arabic and one in French. These diversified a programming based on entertainment: music, theatre, soccer and showbiz alongside the *Taalima Sayyad Al Rayis* (The President’s directives). The latter consisted in a brief broadcast, in which President Habib Bourguiba spoke directly to the people. It lasted roughly ten minutes and was always aired before the news.

A cultural battle: France versus Italy

At this post-colonial historical juncture – primarily dominated by a francophone elite – the government developed a form of cooperation with francophone television. This included the Roman Swiss Television, which provided programmes to RTT and invited the first Tunisian tv journalists to its studios in Geneva for training sessions. Yet, French language and culture was faced with an unexpected enemy, which took the form of Italian language and culture. In fact, the *National Network* (that was known as *Rai Uno* from 1982) was cap-

¹⁵ National Tunisian Archive, Habib Bourguiba’s speech on RTT dated 31 May 1966.

tured by masts in the north and centre of the country. It subsequently became the second most popular channel in Tunisia in the 80s. French cultural diplomacy hoped to regain its poll position as the first foreign language in Tunisian media space through the *Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision française* (ORTF). The latter pressed the Tunisian government and financed the development of a second Tunisian channel, which imposed the French language. The agreement froze but the project was eventually signed in 1982 by decree of 25 December 1982 that foresaw the creation of an executive sub-commission of national television to “ensure the planning, programming and distribution of programmes in French”. The channel, baptised as *RTT 2* was officially launched on 12 June 1983. However, with the exception of its newsroom, the channel did not have technical means or human resources to produce its own programming. Directors of the second Tunisian channel selected programmes from French public channels and rebroadcast them. These included the French series *Maggie*, or the American series *Falcon Crest* and *Colt Silvers*. Yet, the channel disappeared in 1989 when its frequency was transferred to the second French channel *Antenne 2* (*France 2* from 1992) until the end of October 1999 when the second general Arabic channel, *Channel 21*, was created and obtained exclusive use of the frequency.

The satellite globalisation of the television landscape

In the 90s the invasion of satellite dishes dramatically altered television habits in the Arab world. It enabled

access to hundreds of western channels followed by pro-Arab channels in the late 90s. These became a veritable media phenomenon, which contributed to transform the television scene. An example of this is *Al-Jazeera*, the Arabic news channel owned by the Emir of Qatar, and broadcast since 1996. The channel threatened the State's monopoly on information. In fact, the official Tunisian *Channel 7* fell in popularity: it only registered weekly viewings of 52,2% compared to 80% in 1999.¹⁶

The fact that *Al-Jazeera* has shaken Arab countries is undeniable. While analysing the channel's discourse, one question instantly springs to mind: is *Al-Jazeera* a television network encouraging democracy in Arabic countries, or, a propaganda channel of political Islamism? Indeed, according to experts, *Al-Jazeera* is both a symbol of freedom of expression in the Middle and Far East and a dangerous Islamist propaganda tool.¹⁷ With the creation of *Al-Jazeera* it appears that Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani attempted to represent all the political tendencies of the Arab world: Islamists, Arab nationalists and liberals. As a result, these three currents are frequently present in the network's programming. However, religious programmes and programmes about political Islam are absent with the exception of *Sharia and Life*. This programme is run by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the key figures of political Islam and of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is one of the reasons why the channel is frequently viewed as the Muslim Brotherhood's media tool.

¹⁶ Sigma Report, 1999.

¹⁷ Claire Gabrielle Talon, *Al Jazeera. Liberté d'expression et pétromonarchie*, PUF, 2011.

The second reason is that *Al-Jazeera* made its antenna transmission available to both governments and its opposition. Given that the opposition in the last twenty years also includes Islamists, it is inevitable to be faced with the Muslim Brotherhood and their associates. The third reason is most probably generational. The Director General, Wadah Khanfar, is a forty year old Jordanian-Palestinian who completed his studies in Jordan in the 80s. His generation was not instructed in socialism, nor in Arab nationalism but rather, in Islamism. Upon taking up his new role he brought both his friends and networks of influence with him. The latter are primarily Palestinian and frequently close to Hamas. If *Al-Jazeera* can currently work in all areas, including Pakistan, it is because there are people within the channel who have close ties to more radical Islamists.

This new television phenomenon, which also presented itself as staunch competition in discourses pushed the Ben Ali government to make a reform of *Tunisian Radio and Television* (RTT). This reform presented itself as an important turning point in the evolution of the Tunisian audio-visual scene to the extent that it reduced the level of centralisation and control in local productions. This first reform created a new institution: the *Tunisian Radio and Television Establishment* (ERTT). Despite not being totally autonomous from the State, *ERTT* gained relative autonomy in terms of its administrative and financial management. In reality, this transformation phase in relation to media was carried out in two ways. Firstly, through an effort to review the judicial regime of radio and television with a second big reform in 1997, which opened the door to the sep-

aration of radio and television production. This reform attempted to reduce centralisation of institutional structures by creating a radio and television branch, which separated production and distribution activities. It was primarily aimed at making the media sphere more dynamic by handing over a part of production to private operators. Yet, despite this attempt to reduce monopolisation, the *ERTT* establishment continued to depend on the executive. In fact, the institution's directors were nominated by a judicial mechanism of ministerial decrees, in other words by President Ben Ali.

The faint wind of liberalisation

In 2004, the event was quite historical: *Hannibal tv*, the first Tunisian television channel was launched. This moment was almost historical because liberalisation was in no way a healthy indicator of Tunisian television. The entrepreneur, Larbi Nasra, who had obtained the first private license was a relative of Leila Trabelsi, the wife of dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, and the 'god mother' of the "quasi-family mafia", as she was described by the American ambassador Jacob Wells in Tunis in a diplomatic telex revealed by WikiLeaks in 2010.

Although, in its early stages *Hannibal tv* had to face some difficulties, in 2007, and for the first time, *Tunisie 7* lost its poll position to *Hannibal tv*. Viewer ratings (Mediascan, 2007) indicated that *Tunisie 7* was now in second place after *Hannibal tv*. The latter held 29,1% viewer ratings in the region of Tunis and 32,4% in the Sahel region. The most popular programme in that pe-

riod was *Belmakchouf* (All transparent), a hard-talk on sport criticism. On 16 March 2007, a second private television channel was broadcast in Tunisia. Indeed, *Nessma tv*, created by the advertising agency *Karoui and Karoui*, and with a budget five times lower than *Hannibal tv* attempted to become the first Tunisian entertainment channel. In reality, the channel was not allowed to produce news bulletins because it had not obtained a government license. It therefore transmitted from Paris via the *Arabsat* and *Niselat* satellites. The channel attempted to impose itself on the Tunisian scene with its flagship programme *Star Academy Maghreb*. However, its impact on the public was limited. The programme was in fact challenged by the diffusion of *Middle East Star Academy* on the Lebanese channel *LBC*. After its first season, *Nessma tv* had serious financial difficulties caused by the suspension of its capacity to broadcast musical videos. This financial crisis ended with the arrival of new partners: Tarak Ben Ammar's French group *Fifth Communications* and especially the giant media network *Mediaset*, owned by Berlusconi.¹⁸

The project was re-launched in 2009 with a new programme primarily based on American films and series. The only exception was *Nessma tv*, the first Tunisian talk-show that was based on the French series *Nulle part ailleurs* aired on *Canal+*. This was significantly successful and allowed the channel to attract advertising budgets and produce new programmes. For example, *Nsibti Laaziza* (Dear mother-in-law), which reached daily viewings of 40% during the holy month of Ramadan.¹⁹

¹⁸ *La Stampa*, "Tv, Mediaset sbarca in Maghreb", 21 May 2008.

¹⁹ Sigma Report, 2011.

Despite tough Arab competition, which enjoyed access to significant financial resources, local channels, *Hannibal tv* and *Tunisie 7*, had the best daily viewer ratings in 2009 and 2010. They benefitted from the fragmentation of pro-Arab channels and the significant decline in the Tunisian public's interest in Francophone channels. This was also a result of the Arabisation of secondary school education during the 90s, carried out to compensate for the population's acculturation towards the ex-colonial French language. These two private Tunisian channels focus on local news through social programmes, which were difficult to find on other entirely Tunisian channels. Contrastingly, rival programmes *Andi ma inkollel* and *Al-Mousamah Karim* aired on *Hannibal tv* on the model of *C'é posta per te* (You've got mail) had the best ratings with 27% and 43% (Sigma Conseil, 2009). The other great champion in terms of total daily ratings was the private radio-television Group *MBC* at the end of the 2000s. The latter was able to push three of its own network channels onto the list of the top five most watched channels in Tunisia: *MBC 2* with subtitled Western films, *MBC 4* dedicated to fiction, and the mainstream *MBC* channel.

The first Tunisian religious channel made its appearance as *Zitouna FM*, when Ben Ali began seeking out media-religious legitimacy.

From 2007, the Ben Ali regime's attempt to revert back to a political Islam became more and more noticeable. This strategy was based on the will to invest the media sphere with 'Islamising' media. This was attempted through the figure of Sakhr el Materi, the dictator's son-in-law, whom many international observers

considered as Ben Ali's successor on the throne of Carthage.²⁰ Between 2007 and 2009, the young deputy businessman, acquired an 'Islamic' financial group after obtaining the exceptional approval of the Tunisian monetary authorities for the creation of a commercial bank. In this way, he created the *Al Zitouna* bank, specialised in financial products "respecting the Sharia".²¹ In its wake, he created the first religious media network authorised in Tunisia: radio *Zitouna FM*. This was managed by Dr. Kamel Omrane, ex-Minister for Religious Affairs, Imam and professor of Islamic Civilization. In that period the Tunisian opposition stirred public opinion by denouncing "an attempt by Ben Ali's regime to re-evoke a political Islam".²² Yet, the young claimant attempted to expand his media activities. Indeed, he bought the first private press group *Dar Assabah* and he worked on a project for establishing an Islamic television channel also called *Zitouna*.

For the *Journal du Dimanche*, the political-religious mix with which the regime meddled was "high risk [...] after ridding the country of all Islamist activity, the Tunisian Government wants to believe that it has finally found the answer to perpetuate a legitimacy, which is increasingly in danger due to an increasingly disenchanted population".²³ Larbi Chouka argues that "the logic of

²⁰ Catherine Graciet, "L'après Ben Ali se prépare", *Sud Ouest*, 24 October 2009.

²¹ www.banquezitouna.com/Fr

²² Florence Beaugé, "Entretien avec Khemaïs Chamhari: En Tunisie, le pouvoir mène une politique démagogique dangereuse", *Le Monde*, October 2009.

²³ Karen Lajon, "Les islamistes sous l'étouffoir: après avoir pourchassé sans pitié les barbus, le pouvoir tente d'encadrer une pratique religieuse modérée", *Le Journal du dimanche*, 24 October 2009.

power was logical, and realising that it could no longer play the card of Bourguibian modernism, it invested the religious field [...] There is a staunch regional tendency for ruling authorities to recover the message of Islam”.²⁴

This political repositioning did not eschew the Ennahda Party: the local version of the Muslim Brotherhood and historical component of Islamism in Tunisia. In September 2007, the office of the Ennahda Party welcomed Sakhr el Materi’s idea of launching the religious radio *Zitouna*. Their enthusiasm was reflected in an online statement signed by the Party’s president, Rached Ghannouchi. At the time, Reuter’s news agency noted “an unexpected initiative on behalf of a banned party”.²⁵

With the Muslim Brotherhood in power, a difficult struggle for controlling the media scenario rapidly ensued.

PART ONE

After the Tunisian revolution and the first democratic elections in the Arab world, the Tunisian parliament was dominated by Islamists who governed through a tripartite government known as ‘Troika’. The latter was constituted by the Ennahda, Ettakkol (left) and CPR (centre left) parties. Rached Ghannouchi’s son-in-law, Rafik Abdessalem Bouchalka – ex-chief of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ S. BH, “Tunisie: Quand Ennahdha félicitait Sakher El Materi, Zitoun le trouvait intelligent”, *Tekiano*, September 2011.

diplomacy – soon expressed his party's desire to “cleanse the media and prevent them from becoming opposition platforms to prevent government action”.²⁶ In Tunisia, 70% of press indirectly or directly depends on the State. Indeed, relations between journalists and the government quickly hardened, and resistance against state control rapidly became fierce. The newsrooms of various televisions, radios and newspapers denounced the nomination of new directors who had been chosen from ruling party ranks without consulting journalists. Convinced that their independence was threatened, journalists and civil society rapidly mobilised. Initially, teams of journalists reacted with hunger strikes, as occurred in the *Dar Assabah* newsroom. However, they were unable to prevent the government from implementing this invasive policy.²⁷ In reality, two thirds of the country's 2000 journalists were members of the *National Union of Tunisian Journalists* (SNJT), which played an important role in reorganising media and defending newly obtained rights after the fall of Ben Ali in January 2011. The movement played a critical role and along with seven syndicates and humanitarian organizations launched a call for help: “new threats to radio-television instruments stuck between the government and black money could fall into the hands of specialists of manipulation and misinformation”.²⁸ Following this, the government changed its policy.

²⁶ T.A.P., “Tunisie: les islamistes au pouvoir veulent assainir les médias”, August 2012.

²⁷ Kapitalis, “Tunisie. Dar Assabah se portera bien sans Lotfi Touati, l'homme d'Ennahdha”, 21 September 2012.

²⁸ Ibid.

PART TWO

In the face of public sector journalist, who were determined to prevent a return of Ben Ali type policies, and refused be used as a small cog in the machine of the official discourse, Islamists changed their approach. Indeed, they attempted to conquer the audio-visual sphere by launching their own private media tools.

The first step was to block regulation. This is what caused the governments delay in implementing two law decrees (115 and 116). These were designed to create a very liberal press code, as well as a *High Independent Authority for Audio-Visual Communication* (HAICA). In reality, the HAICA spent over 17 months without members, as the parliamentary majority delayed nominations. It took, a national journalist strike (17 October 2012) and the political crisis following the assassination of the leftist leader Chokri Belaid, for the procedures to finally go ahead. In May 2013, the National Constitutional Assembly eventually nominated members of the regulation authority. Six months later “the HAICA still did not have the human and material capacity to start working”.

During this time, the Tunisian audio-visual landscape changed dramatically. In fact, not less than 12 radio stations and numerous television channels began to broadcast without HAICA authorisation between 2012 and 2013. Indeed, widespread liberalization animated the local television scene. Eight new privately owned television channels were created. Moreover, several private television stations which functioned through the *Nile Sat* satellite can be identified. These commercial chan-

nels include *Tunisia World tv*, *Djanoubya tv*, *Tunisia New tv*, *Al-Himar*, *Ettounissia tv*, *Sport tv*, and more recently *Telvza tv*, as well as four partisan channels of the Tunisian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood: *Zitouna*, *Al-Insan*, *Al-Moutawassit* and *Al-Qalam*. *Zitouna*, for example, is directed by Oucema ben Salem, son of Moncef ben Salem, leader of the Ennahdha Party and ex-Minister of Secondary Instruction (between 2011 and 2014).

However, Islamist and religious channels were not faced with a receptive audience. Viewer ratings in 2014 indicate that *Al-Wataniya 1* is in pole position with 30,3% followed by *Ettounissia tv* with 24,1%. This network specialises in prime time talk shows such as *Klem Ennes* (What people say) based on the French Talk Show *On n'est pas couché* broadcast on *France 2*. In third place, we find *Hannibal tv* with 19,6%. The first foreign channel is *Al-Jazeera*, which lags behind with only 3%, followed by *Al-Wataniya 2* with 2,9% and *MBC* with 2,7%.²⁹ Paradoxically, the most popular programme within the Tunisian television sphere is the social talk show *Andi ma inkollek* (I have something to tell you) that has been broadcast on *Ettounissia tv* since *Hannibal tv* was bought by a Saudi investment fund.

A second paradox is that the Tunisian television landscape is still dominated by channels that existed before the revolution. New networks will have to fight hard to win the viewer ratings race. This is especially the case given that the yearly advertising market is estimated at around 40 million dinars (less than 20 million euros). This amount is too low to guarantee the survival of all

²⁹ Sigma Report Ramadan, 2013.

channels. According to the Director of *Sigma Conseil*, Hassan Zargouni: “the minimum necessary sum to make a television function is roughly estimated at about 10 million dinar a year”.³⁰ Yet, nowadays, major historical channels within the Tunisian media scene are increasingly obtaining the largest part of the ‘media cake’. Aside from *Ettounissia tv*, no new channel has been able to obtain a place in the top five. As stated by Hassan Zargouni, “The fight will be particularly tough for channels, such as *Zitouna tv* or *Al-Qalam*, which are characterised by a very pronounced ideological hue”. Statistics indicate that the average viewer rating for these channels never rises over 1,6% with a maximum of 2,6% reached by *Zitouna tv* on the first day of Ramadan, the sacred month in which people watch more television and are also more sensitive of religious discourse.³¹

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³⁰ Amira Soltane, “Combien coûte une télévision sur Nile Sat?”, *L’Expression*, July 2014.

³¹ TvScan Report Ramadan 2014.

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Translation Maria Elena Bottigliero

Tunisian media and political polarization: glorifying the self, rejecting the other

Fatima el Issawi

Tunisian journalists benefited broadly from the political openness which followed the stepping down of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, securing unprecedented rights that empowered them to question the political sphere. After having been hostages of the most repressive media system for decades, Tunisian journalists gained essential rights as a result of a largely successful media reform that liberated them from the government dictate. However, the empowerment of the media community did not automatically lead to a new newsroom culture based on professional media practices. The complex and crucial issues at stake in the political transition and the tough political polarization left the media community in limbo. The media polarization is a result of the political divide but it is also in turn fuelling it. In this heightened environment, facts are blurred with rumour. The manipulation of news by journalists for the sake of their ideological agendas and allies friends is leading to confusion and the return of the old style media propaganda. If regulatory change is a difficult process, journalists' identity change remains the thorniest challenge.¹³

¹³ The article draws on the findings of the empirical research project "Arab Revolutions: Media Revolutions" hosted by the department of

Political polarization

Since the departure of Ben Ali in early 2011, the Tunisian transition has undergone a shaky process. Nonetheless, it succeeded in overcoming major obstacles, namely the ratification of the new constitution of the country (January 2014) and the resolution of an acute political impasse without duplicating the Egyptian scenario of a military takeover.³³

The deep political crisis that plunged the country into a severe impasse in the summer of 2013 was dealt with wisely by different parties. It led to a national road map and finally the adoption of the constitution and the appointment of a caretaker government. The Tunisian transition process proved again a successful model in ruling by compromise for the sake of safeguarding the political process. The lessons from Egypt proved positive although not to the extent of creating a genuine culture of consensus between the main two belligerent camps and their supporters: the Islamic led government and its secular opponents.

The experience of building a ruling Islamist-secular coalition in parliament was presented as the reflection of a national consensus on the critical importance of compromise. However, the coalition did not secure real support from its popular basis, often criticized as inefficient and failing to respond to people's expectations. Nevertheless, the interim National Constituent Assembly elected in 2011 remained the main and legitimate

arena for political participation.³⁴ This divide mainly portrayed as a secular-Islamic arm wrestle is deeply rooted in key aspects of the transition: the nature of the political system, the place of Islamic *sharia* and traditions in the constitution and in everyday life, gender equality and the role of women among other crucial matters.³⁵

If the consensual approach continues to prevail over the political stalemate, it has not yet succeeded in creating a new culture, both at political and social levels. A discourse of eliminating ‘the other’, ‘the opponent’, ‘the different’, is still triumphing over calls for unity and compromise. This discourse threatens to undo the achievements of this transition. The two biggest parties, the Islamic Ennahda (Renaissance) and Nidaa Tunes (Call of Tunis), the leading opposition party, are fuelling this culture of discord. The opposition’s politicians and supporters are calling the Islamist “rats” and those on the opposing side, the Islamic camp, retort by calling their opponents “snakes”. The message strongly disseminated by the two opponent camps is the following: “us or no one else”.³⁶

Both the two camps and their political representation have their internal dilemmas that also threaten to quash the transitional process.³⁷ Nidaa Tunes, which includes some of the figures of the old regime, is suspected of trying to revive the features of the autocratic regime. In the opposite camp, the possible alignment of the Ennahda party with radical Islamic trends would lead to

³⁴ Brookings, April 2012.

³⁵ Fakir, May 2014.

³⁶ Zelin, March 2013.

³⁷ El Issawi a, 2012.

the failure of its legitimacy and leadership. The governmental reaction to the growing Islamic extremist threat is largely viewed by its opponents as the main factor behind the deterioration of the security situation with political assassinations.³⁸

The government is viewed by the opposition as unable and even unwilling to quell the terrorist threat. For the secular opposition, the shallow response by the government to the extremist threat and the growing radicalization among the youth is the main reason for the degradation of the security situation and growing intimidations of civil liberties. Topics such as “hotels halal” and Islamic kindergartens are becoming favourite topics for the local and international press.³⁹

The failure to reform the security services is another major handicap with the Ministry of Interior divided between factions loyal to Ben Ali and to Ennahada government.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of the military take-over in Egypt, voices calling for a military solution in Tunisia were high, alongside with fears of a take-over by factions inside the Ministry of Interior loyal to the former regime who benefited from the growing despair and frustration among the population.

However, this political polarization that is often presented as a major struggle between secularists and islamists, is criticized as a naïve perception of the complex democratic transition which ignores the social fractures at the root of many of the current challenges. The excessive focus on issues such as the status of

³⁸ El Issawi a, 2012.

³⁹ Zbiss, December 2013.

⁴⁰ Zelin, March 2013.

Tunisian women and the problem of growing radicalization among Islamist youngsters and the security threats, overshadow the socio-economic tension at the heart of the 2010 demonstrations that led to the regime's overthrow. These demonstrations had their historical roots in the social movements that erupted in the rural regions and were severely repressed by the regime years before the Jasmine revolution.⁴¹ The consistent portrayal of the Tunisian transition as a struggle over the identity of the country is considered by some analysts as a distraction from more urgent matters, namely addressing economic development, unemployment and poverty.⁴²

The “minimal national consensus” described by Dekhli as “the alternations between ephemeral moments of revolutionary reconciliation and moments of divergence where everything seems out of control” is an accurate depiction of the state of the Tunisian transition as one continuously swinging between hope and despair. The transition is in its deepest sense “a process of complete rewriting, more so in the streets than in parliament” of the Tunisian story.⁴³

Media Regulatory Reform

The question of media power and the relation between media, especially the media elite, and the power sphere is not unique to Tunisia and the emerging media systems in the Arab Spring countries. The phone hack-

⁴¹ Dakhli, *Jadaliyya*.

⁴² Brookings, 2012.

⁴³ Dakhli, *Jadaliyya*.

ing scandal in the British press reveals the intricate link between media and politics in one of the most advanced media systems.⁴⁴ However, the excessive bias of Arab journalists in support of their political and ideological allies threatens to resurrect the old tools of propaganda which prevailed under the former autocratic regimes. For instance, the degradation of the Egyptian media into a tool of blunt praise of the new regime is impacting the media environment in neighbouring countries that face similar challenges. This extreme polarized media environment is threatening to re-impose the unilateral media narratives, thereby ending media pluralism, one of the major gains of Arab national media industries that resulted from the political change.

Tunisian journalists were one of the main communities to benefit from the gains of the Jasmin revolution. They shifted from an extremely closed media system where their role was restricted to reports on the ruling clan, to that of active providers of information empowered by essential rights such as the right to access to information.⁴⁵

The media reform was largely successful in dismantling most of the oppressive features of the former media system. A consultative body (the *National Authority for Reform of Information and Communications*, INRIC) conducted a revision of the regulatory system governing national media. Major achievements included a new press code (Decree 115-2011) replacing the old restrictive 1975 Press Code that ensures basic media rights, such as journalists' access to information, the confiden-

⁴⁴ Cammaerts, June 2014.

⁴⁵ El Issawi b, 2012.

tiality of sources, as well as freedom of publication without prior license for print outlets and transparency with respect to outlets' funding, ownership, editorial management, and anti-monopoly stipulations.⁴⁶ The decree 41–2011 provided journalists with an unprecedented access to governmental documents, which was previously taboo under the Ben Ali regime. The decree 116–2011 established an independent regulatory audiovisual body – the *High Independent Authority for Audiovisual Communication* or HAICA – tasked with regulating the industry with no interference from the government especially for state owned media broadcasters. However, the reluctance of the government to ratify these decrees and especially to approve the establishment of the HAICA limited the efficiency of this regulatory reform as well as the ambiguity of some of new legal texts.⁴⁷ The new regulatory body is yet to prove its ability to exercise its functions against interferences that aim to undermine its independence.⁴⁸

Another major handicap is the legal uncertainty resulting from the judiciary system which uses double standards in dealing with legal cases against journalists by applying both the new press code and the old repressive penal code. In addition, the frequent application of prison sentences for journalists and various intimidations for allegedly offending Islamic morals or acts of indecency is transforming the judiciary into the main tool to quell press freedom.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ El Issawi b, 2012.

⁴⁷ Freedom House, 2012.

⁴⁸ Article 19, 2014.

⁴⁹ Freedom House, 2013.

The adoption of the new constitution for the country (January 2014) represents a major step in protecting media independence and rights although this was only possible after concerted campaigns by Tunisian activities to guarantee its protection. These campaigns managed to quell attempts to include provisions that would have effectively reduced the powers of HAICA by giving it an advisory role rather than a regulatory one and by requiring its membership to be elected by the parliament, potentially leading to the politicization or marginalization of its mandate.⁵⁰

Tunisia media as a stage for political battles

If opening up the regulatory media system is crucial for opening the door to independent media practices, it is not on its own sufficient to achieve any progress. Building new patterns of professional and responsible journalism inside newsrooms is equally if not more important. A new culture of media production is the main safeguard against the return of old tools of censorship, self-censorship and media manipulation. If Tunisian journalists felt empowered as a result of the opening of the political and media spheres, this empowerment was mostly translated into a chaotic expression of views, unfounded accusations and libel. It was not surprising to see a call for killing a minister aired on a talk show on one of national tvs post uprising. This chaotic media environment was a result of the lack of newsrooms traditions of professional journalism but also the

⁵⁰ Freedom House, 2014.

sudden dismantling of main bodies that used to oversee national media, mainly the Ministry of Information, without the provision of professional alternatives for dealing with needs and challenges of the media sector in such a crucial phase of the history of the country.

With the opening of the private broadcast sector for political reporting, national tv stations quickly became the main spearhead of the political polarization with businessmen investing heavily in the war between “leftist tv channels” and “Islamist tv channels”. As an example, *Nessma tv*, owned by the influential businessman Nabil Karoui, and which was a broadcaster before the uprising, is considered to be one the main media platforms for the secular opposition. The channel was convicted for “disrupting public order and violating morals” for airing the Iranian film *Persepolis* considered by conservative Tunisians to be blasphemous. *Al-Himar* channel, close to Nidaa Tunes opposition political party, is strongly critical to the government accused by Ennahda supporters of calling for a coup. In the opposite camp, pro-government tv channels such as *Al-Mutawaset* and *Zitouna*, are heavily engaged in defending the government policies and discrediting its opponents.⁵¹

It is evident that Tunisian media, previously extremely monotone, developed into a pluralistic sectoring the post uprising phase, thus ending the era of the unilateral official storytelling. However, the excessive polarization is seriously threatening this recent pluralism, a common challenge facing all post uprising Arab media systems.⁵² Furthermore, this extreme focus on

⁵¹ Ayoub, 2013.

⁵² El Issawi, 2013.

politics is fuelling audience scepticism towards Tunisian media which is accused of neglecting the essence of the uprising, that is the calls for social justice, by limiting its coverage of the daily concerns of citizens for the benefit of the political and ideological divide.⁵³

I will focus now on some of the main aspects of this media polarization and its impact on the success of the media reform in the long term:

- the process of freeing the Tunisian public media sector from the control of the government was to a large extent successful. The attempt of the government to appoint editors-in-chief and managing directors of public broadcasters was decried as a return to the governmental dictate over public media.⁵⁴ The operation of choosing the heads of public media by competition before independent panels was highly praised as recognition of the importance of a professional public service independent from the government. However, the independence demonstrated until now in the public media coverage of governmental policies as opposed to the submissive style prevailing under Ben Ali regime is perceived by the supporters of the government as an expression of the loyalty of the public media to the former regime and not of independent media practices.⁵⁵ It is very crucial to support the newfound independence of the public sector and to ensure that it is the expression of a cultural change inside these newsrooms and not

⁵³ Abrougui, 2013.

⁵⁴ Article 19, 2012.

⁵⁵ Tunisialive, 2013.

that of a political alignment. Changing the old habits of public media requires much more than changing the leadership. It also requires a long term process of professional training to empower and educate journalists. Furthermore, the new regulatory body tasked with overseeing public broadcasters has yet to prove its professionalism and transparency and its ability to act independently from pressures or any other form of political alignment.

- The poor professional skills of Tunisian journalists who have had to work for decades under the dictate of the regime is another major handicap that has increased media polarization. The weak editorial independence inside newsrooms, the link between the media ownership and the political sphere, the chaotic situation that followed the dismantling on the old media regime with the outbreak of dozens of new projects and pirate tv channels, most of them presenting an unprofessional media environment, all contributed to the exacerbation of media polarization and made it a serious threat to pluralistic storytelling. Furthermore, there is no consensus on the definition of professional journalism for Tunisian journalists, a large part of them advocate against neutral media narratives under the guise of having to take a political stance during the transition process.⁵⁶
- Media polarization is fuelled by the repressive role played by the judiciary which has become the main tool of intimidation for journalists through its use

⁵⁶ Abrougui, 2014.

of the old penal code to punish them. This situation is leading to further divides inside the media community and is threatening to resuscitate the old habits of self-censorship among journalists due to the fear of being prosecuted. The threat of being prosecuted and ultimately jailed for defaming public officials, or under other alibis such as insulting morals or Islam makes investigative journalism a difficult task. These restrictions are not only leading to a blackout on information but are also fuelling the political and media divide as the judiciary decisions are largely perceived as politically motivated acts.⁵⁷

- Tunisian journalists have not been able to unite around professional concerns and shared interests that make them a distinct community from that of their political and ideological allies. The plans by the National Union for Journalists to create a new self-regulatory body for the press would be an important step towards ensuring freedom of expression is protected by journalists themselves and dilemmas related to the exercise of the profession are dealt with at the professional level and within the professions specialized bodies free from the influence of politics.⁵⁸

Conclusions

Tunisian journalists are major winners from the political openness that resulted from the fall of the former

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch, 2013.

⁵⁸ Article 19, 2013.

autocratic regime. As one of Tunisian journalists I interviewed in my field research rightly commented, the post uprising is witnessing the spring of journalism and the winter of politics. That was in the first months that followed the fall of the regime. The reality today is different. It could be accurate to say that the media polarization and bias for the service of political camps could transform this spring into a severe winter.

The empowerment of journalists as a result of the revolution's gains should be used to construct a new culture within newsrooms that breaks with the traditions of the past, a process which should be considered a major priority for a sector that was undermined for decades. However, this doesn't seem a major preoccupation for journalists who advocate for the duty to take sides in the heightened post-uprising political environment. This could be understood by the limitation of journalists' role to that of the reporters of the clan for decades. An enthusiasm brilliantly expressed by a young journalist I met in the aftermath of the uprising and who described his new role of a political reporter as a "dream", that of being finally able to work "like (the French) *Le Monde*' journalists". For this young journalist who experienced for the first time political reporting, this was a development of unimaginable significance.

The development of advocacy journalism in the aftermath of the uprisings in the Arab Spring countries is a natural consequence of the shift in the role of journalists from a mouthpiece of the regime to having active say on the content of media messages. It is also explained by the impact of social media narratives in influencing traditional journalists, in their attempt to

copy the style of bloggers who were celebrated for their leading role in telling the story of the uprisings while traditional institutional national media denied their outbreak.

However, this advocate journalistic role which became one of the main features of the post-uprising media systems has shifted from lobbying for the defence of rights and freedoms to embellishing the face of political and ideological allies, even if serving political allies requires the dissemination of rumours and media manipulation. The recent fall of Egyptian media into the old habits of propaganda for the regime and the exclusion of dissenting voices best expresses the dangers of this blurred identity of a journalist advocate. For Tunisian journalists and their colleagues in the Arab Spring countries, as well as that of the unions and professional bodies representing them it is time to make the debate about journalistic professionalism a priority.

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Post-revolution Tunisian media: polarisation of the media and women's image

Maryam Ben Salem and Atidel Majbri

“L’histoire du journalisme pourrait bien être, pour une grande part, l’histoire d’une impossible autonomie, ou si l’on veut s’exprimer de façon moins pessimiste, l’histoire sans fin d’une autonomie toujours à reconquérir parce que toujours menacée.”

Patrick Champagne. *La double dépendance*

Introduction

Since the January 14th, 2011 revolution in Tunisia, the political scene has undergone a number of major transformations, including the legalisation of clandestine political parties, the formation of new ones and the organisation of the first free elections in October 2011. For these elections, political dispersal was at its peak, with 1781 lists of candidates for the Constituent National Assembly (A.N.C.) divided into 33 electoral constituencies.⁵⁹ The Tunisian Islamic party, Ennahda, legalised in March 2011, and the winner of these elec-

⁵⁹ Instance Supérieure Indépendante Pour Les Elections, Report for the elections develop, Tunis, February 2012, p. 108-109. <http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/africa/TN/tunisie-rapport-relatif-au-developpement-des>

tions with 41,47 % of the votes, formed a parliamentary coalition with two other secularist parties, the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (Ettakatol) and the Congress for the Republic, thereby achieving a majority of seats in the A.N.C. The day after the elections, an Islamist/secularist polarisation very quickly resulted in the creation of the two largest formations, the Islamic party Ennahda, and the secular party Nidaa Tounes, founded by Béji Caid Essebsi on July 7th, 2012.

Within this context, it is totally legitimate to wonder whether this Islamist/secularist polarisation emerged through the Tunisian media, another sector that experienced a striking mutation after January 14th and one that has not ceased to evolve ever since. Following the lock-down period experienced under the rule of deposed President Ben Ali, the media experienced an unprecedented explosion, when the publication of dozens of newspapers was authorised and a certain number of radio and television channels received permission to broadcast from the *National Authority for Reform of Information and Communications* INRIC.⁶⁰

In an article about the media, Pierre Bourdieu observed that “although those who became involved in the journalistic and political sectors are in permanent competition and struggle, englobed in the political sector within which the media exercises very powerful influence, these two sectors have in common the fact that they are very directly and strictly held accountable by the approval of the market and the voters”.⁶¹ Based on

⁶⁰ Instance nationale pour la réforme de l’information et de la communication.

⁶¹ Bourdieu Pierre, “L’emprise du journalisme”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, Vol. 101-102, March 1994, p. 7.

this triptych, we propose to analyse in this paper the Tunisian media's transformations within the context of a totally political event (starting on January 14th, 2011), while also questioning the influence exerted on the media by political and economic sectors. This paper will also ultimately address the issue of the media's autonomy and hence its effects on women and their position in the media, as well as professionals in this field and players in the public debate. There are many studies that have addressed the issue of the status and image of women in the media, but very few have linked the observed gender gap, about which most researchers agree, to other characteristics and evolutions in the field of journalism.⁶²

Rather than reasons of polarisation, it is better to focus attention here on the competitive struggle that emerges in the media, between political, economic, journalistic and religious sectors in this particular context of democratic transition. We will later attempt to understand in what manner and to what extent these struggles, aimed at imposing a particular point of view on the world through the media, have an impact on the status of women in that sector, on the one hand, as well as the image of women the media provides, on the other. As far as this last point is concerned, we are relying on two monitoring programmes of the Tunisian media carried out by the *Centre de la Femme Arabe pour la Formation et la Recherche's* (Cawtar) media centre during the years 2012 and 2013, concerning the image of

⁶² Béatrice Damian-Gaillard, Cégolène Frisque and Eugénie Saitta, "Le journalisme au prisme du genre: une problématique féconde", *Questions de communication*, 15 | 2009. <http://questionsdecommunication.revues.org/544>

women in the media, among them those portrayed by a media-linked religious element in religious programmes and/or channels having a religious agenda.

*Presentation of the Tunisian media:
is an Islamist versus secularist polarisation pertinent?*

THE TUNISIAN MEDIA BEFORE JANUARY 14TH, 2011

In terms of media privatisation, Tunisia before the January 14th, 2011 pre-revolution is of particular interest. Tunisia is a country that has always been fully committed to international initiatives on this subject, and the new *National Authority for Reform of Information and Communication* was adopted at the end of the 1996 Tunis conference.

It is also the country that hosted the second phase of the *World Summit on the Information Society* (WSIS). When asked by the French newspaper *Liberation's* special correspondent in Geneva "What is the point of the WSIS", the executive director replied, "It is to Tunisia that we owe the idea of holding a world summit devoted to issues that will involve us in the 21st century with the development of new technologies".⁶³

One must also remember that Tunisia was the first Arab country to be connected to the internet in 1990. Once again, one discovers that Tunisia was among the

⁶³ Abdelkrim Hizaoui, "Insertion des TIC dans le monde Arabe, adaptation et résistances", in *Technologies de l'information et de la communication, discours, représentations et pratiques*, ouvrage collectif, IPSI (Tunis) - COMU (Louvain Catholic University), Tunis, 2006, pp. 71-83.

first Arab countries to open its skies to broadcasting for other channels, authorising *Rai* to broadcast in the capital and its surrounding areas in 1960, and French television's 2nd Channel in the 1990s. In 1992, the pay channel *Canal Horizon* also appeared on the Tunisian media stage. A scope statement registers the channel as a pay television channel. *ART* and *Orbit* were to follow with scope statements stating for the first time the exploitation of a television cable distribution network and the commercialisation of pay satellite television services in the second case.

In a speech made on November 7th, 2003, deposed President Ben Ali announced the opening of the audio-visual sector to private entrepreneurs. This marked the birth of *Mosaïque FM* (2003), *Jawhara FM* (2005), and tv channels *Hannibal tv* (2005) and *Nessma tv* (2007). There was talk of special (or rather confidential) conventions between the Ministry for Telecommunications and network owners. No scope statement has ever been made public.

The debate on the budget held in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Chamber of Advisors in December 2006 only mentioned the audience ratings concerning the privately-owned channel, *Hannibal*. The Minister for Communications and Relations with the Lower House and the Upper House at the time, Rafaa Dkhil, was part of a strategic programme aimed at promoting a media sector that included no regulations on privatisation or any legislation regulating private channels. This juridical void had to be filled by legislation. This juridical straightjacket was used to implement constraints placed on freedom of expression at the time. The apparent

opening complied with rules contained in United Nations international conventions and statements, and pressure applied by bilateral agreements.

The post-revolution upsurge of the media

One of the most striking elements of transformation that followed the January 14th 2011 uprising, was the recovery of the Tunisian media, which for a long time had been doomed to being discredited, due to control exercised over this sector by the regime of the previous head of state. Self-control as well as direct censorship resulted in rather flat and not very credible media productions. At a quantitative level, the media was also characterised by degrees of scarcity. Before the revolution there were only four television networks, of which two were owned by the state, *Tunisie 7* and *Tunis 21*, and two were private, *Hannibal tv* (2005) and *Nessma tv* (2007). As far as radio stations were concerned, there were four national radio stations, five regional ones and five privately owned. To these official radio stations one must add clandestine ones such as *Kalima*. Print journalism included 265 specialised and non-specialised newspapers and magazines published in Arabic and in French.⁶⁴

Political liberalisation led to openness also in the media sector, characterised by greater freedom of expression, at times even described as a “media deviation” especially in the early stages of the transition period,⁶⁵ and by an

⁶⁴ Zeineb Touati, “La révolution tunisienne: interactions entre militantisme de terrain et mobilisation des réseaux sociaux”, *L'Année du Maghreb*, VIII | 2012. <http://anneemaghreb.revues.org/1426>; DOI: 10.4000/anneemaghreb.1426

explosion of media supply. This took place later, within a context that was not at all blameless, as proved by the last decision made by Tunisian Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa. Immediately after the July 19th terrorist attack in which 15 Tunisian soldiers died, he gave the order to immediately lock down all clandestine and unauthorised media outlets and television stations from which jihad was preached and that hosted those making accusations of apostasy. These measures and others were decided within the framework of a crisis unit created within the premiership to ensure security and order, all without the media, always the main players in bringing about change, being implicated, including the HAICA.

During this phase, the main characteristics in the media sector were the following:

the appearance of new national television channels and the disappearance of “red lines” established by the old regime, resulting in moving the debate on the state from abroad to inside the country, thereby returning significant status to the Tunisian media, for so long abhorred. The laws of proximity rest on the postulate that, “the consumers of media products will be all the more interested in information that is close to them in time (live news), in space (one is more sensitive to events taking place nearby), in their ideas, social-professional status, daily lives, or that affect their personal or emotional lives”.⁶⁵ Hence, Arabic and/or Arab language satellite channels such as *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiyya*,

⁶⁵ Instance Nationale pour la Réforme de l'Information & de la Communication (INRIC), *Rapport Général*, Résumé, April 2012, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Cf.: <http://clemidijon.info/la-loi-de-proximite-preside-aux-choix-de-l-info/>

France 24, *Russia Today*, which were the most watched by Tunisian viewers, since there was no other way of being informed on what was going on in the country, were abandoned and replaced by Tunisian channels now presenting televised debates and providing news addressing in detail current Tunisian affairs, even very local ones. Public debates invite sensationalism and demands.

It is, therefore, well worth mentioning that there is still foreign intervention in this sector. Certain elements lead one to believe that networks such as *Al-Arabiyya* and *Al-Jazeera* infiltrate national channels, more specifically by appointing a non-Tunisian CEO to head the national private channel *Hannibal tv*.

The emergence of local media: local media mainly consists of local radio stations, divided into two categories. The first concerns media linked to national radio, and known as regional radio stations of which there are six. The second category consists of private radio stations and private community-based radio stations that appeared after January 14th, 2011. These last radio stations mentioned are far more significantly involved in community development and in defending the right to local news as well as being profit-making. *Radio Sawt el Manajem* is an example of this.⁶⁷

In spite of the broadcasting problems experienced by *Sabra FM*, its team's commitment made their mission

⁶⁷ Gafsa, South Tunisia: launched in March 2012, a community radio with a cultural vocation, this project was supported by UNESCO and World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters AMARC. The origins of this project date back to 2008 and events in the Gafsa mining basin. This station addressed unemployment, local development and poverty.

possible over the period it took them to familiarise local listeners about local development projects and/or engage local authorities in a real debate.

Other purely profit-making channels were also created, aimed at providing generalist reporting and/or entertainment (CAP FM, IFM). Local media increased, occupying an important part of the Tunisian media sector.

The creation of regulations and the addition of freedom of expression and information to the Tunisian constitution: Article 31 of the new constitution drafted by the National Constituent Assembly – ANC - stipulates that “The right to freedom of opinion, thinking, expression, and media shall be guaranteed. Such freedoms shall not be subject to prior censorship.”

Article 32: “The right of access to information shall be guaranteed. The state works to guarantee the right to access to communications networks”.

The addition of HAICA, *The Supreme Independent Authority for audio-visual Communication* to the constitution, as well as the right to information and freedom of expression, boosted the consecration of freedom of expression and its regulation that was the main real benefit in this transition.

The struggle undertaken by media operators: one of the most important characteristics in the post-revolution Tunisian media sector remains the struggle undertaken by media operators themselves. The most edifying example was that of a woman at the head of the National Union of Tunisian Journalists, Néjiba

Hamrouni. Her mandate involved a battle fought on all fronts: juridical, deontological, political, regulatory, as well as involving norms and the social and economic fragility of many journalists. The general strike, not to mention forms of protest, or the hunger strike by journalists working for the newspaper *Essabeh*, achieved a number of results in support of this sector. The mobilisation undertaken by journalists and their ability in mobilising local and international communities led various governments to realise how combative journalists can be during transitions periods, especially when fighting for higher levels of freedom of expression.

*Is the post-revolution media sector
moving towards polarisation?*

The issue of a polarisation of the Tunisian media on the basis of the Islamist/secularist dichotomy is quite tempting, bearing in mind that it is one of the most evident fissures on the Tunisian political stage.⁶⁸ All the same, one cannot, as things stand and in the current situation of ongoing transformation, say the same as far as the media sector is concerned. Considering the political, economic and religious interference and competition between them to exercise dominance of the media sector, at best one can speak of tendencies that form while remaining variable.

On this subject, a careful analysis of the directors and owners of Tunisian media allows one to establish

⁶⁸ Cf.: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/moyen-orient-afrique-du-nord/afrique-du-nord/Tunisia/b037-l-exception-tunisienne-succes-et-limites-du-consensus.aspx>

the following classification of the five areas of influence exercising pressure on or having an effect on the media.

The economic sector: the issue here concerns media owned by businessmen, as is the case for most published, audio-visual and electronic media outlets created after January 14th 2011. Some were simply diversifying their investments, or using their privately-owned media to strengthen their financial position in a constantly changing market, experiencing an economic crisis, resulting in fears of a monopoly.

The political sector: since the revolution, interference between politics and the media has become increasingly important, since relations of symbolic domination have changed form and intensity. Effectively, we moved from direct domination resulting in censorship and the total submission, to political power of a media that had become a propaganda tool, to a far more subtle and insidious form of domination. There have been many politicians, or people close to the world of politics, who, after the revolution, invested in the media, such as for example Tahar Belhassine, promoter of the *Al-Hiwar* network, or Slim Riahi, a businessman and founder of a political party who bought *Ettounsia tv*.

Some opted to do the opposite, as in the case of Arbi Nassra, CEO of the privately-owned channel *Hannibal tv*, nicknamed “the creator of the network”. Arbi Nassra sold the channel to a group of businessmen, one of whom was not Tunisian. He thereby abandoned the world of media after having, for a number of years, built up the audience ratings of a channel described as that “of the people” to incorporate the political scenario.

The political-religious sector: at this level there is a

distinction between purely religious media⁶⁹ and media in which religion plays a political role, which have rapidly proliferated throughout the media world. Although statistics are revealing, the management of such media remains obscure especially in terms of financial aspects.

On August 13th, 2012, the online newspaper *Business News* reported that, “Since Monday August 13th, the Tunisian media world has seen the appearance of a new television channel, *Al-Insen tv*. This is an Islamic channel, broadcasting on *Nilesat* using the 10815 H – 27500 frequency. The identity of its sponsors remains unknown for the moment as does that of its financiers, while it is instead known that advertising is guaranteed by the Islamic radio station *Zitouna FM*”.⁷⁰

The professional sector: one cannot neglect the attempts made by a number of professional players to invest in the media. Those who tried saw their attempts destined to fail, as happened to TWT, owned by Issam Elkhrijj, as well as Latifa Hosni’s *Radio Samra*, Sihem Ben Sedrine’s *Radio Kalima*, and Nabil Jridet’s newspaper *Al-Oula*. Reasons for such failure differ from one case

⁶⁹ There is a difference here between the event-driven role played by all media, including media with religious characteristics able to address religion as a current event and not a religious issue, and a role that is strictly one of religious education/orchestration. Also called “spiritual media” these are media promoting a certain ensemble of beliefs and dogmas defining the relationship between human beings and the divine. This media orientation appeared during the seventies in a context in which there was a great overlapping between religious and political matters, more specifically, two symbolic events that marked history: the rise of neo-Evangelism in American politics (the election of an Evangelist president, Jimmy Carter. The emergence of political Islam - the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution).

⁷⁰ Cf.: [http://www.businessnews.com.tn/Al-Insen-TV,-une-nouvelle-cha%C3%A9ne-islamique-tunisienne-\(vid%C3%A9o\),534,32845,3](http://www.businessnews.com.tn/Al-Insen-TV,-une-nouvelle-cha%C3%A9ne-islamique-tunisienne-(vid%C3%A9o),534,32845,3)

to another. On March 20th, 2012, a journalist by training, Issam Kheriji officially launched the television channel *Tunisia World Television* (TWT) of which he is the president and director general. On February 3rd, 2013 broadcasting was suspended due to financial problems. Banks refused to grant credit and advertisers refused to invest in the project due to the economic crisis.

Another example of the problems faced by media professionals was that of the weekly magazine *Al-Oula Attounisia*, launched by Nabil Jridet in May 2011. There were two major obstacles. The first was political and concerned the upholding of the old regime's repressive customs, such as the notification delivered by a notary's clerk to the paper's editor-in-chief on January 10th 2012 from Tunisian Television's new CEO Adnène Khedher, demanding he withdraw a report to be broadcast on Wednesday, January 11th, 2012 about "possible financial advantages lost by tv's current boss."

The second obstacle was economic, that is to say the advertising market that endangered the survival of newspapers that were not financed by businessmen. In spite of the dissolution in January 2011 of the *Agence Tunisienne de Communication Extérieure* ATCE⁷¹, a state agency in charge of managing state and political media advertising's budget under Ben Ali and a real means of propaganda, the problem of an impartial management of advertising while respecting the media's autonomy, has not yet been regulated. The absence of any form of regulation or management, has, on the contrary, exacerbated competition between different media outlets.

⁷¹ Formal dissolution only occurred on December 18th 2012, in the meantime ATCE has been placed under court administration.

Other media launched by professionals in this sector encountered managerial problems.⁷² Some, having obtained approval from INRIC, have not yet launched their radio or television projects. Of all the television channels “authorised” by the INRIC⁷³ (5 television stations), only one has emigrated from the Web to satellite, while another closed after only broadcasting for a few months (TWT). One is still waiting for the others to make their debut. The problems surrounding launching and permanence seem less important as far as radio stations are concerned, since of the 12 radio stations authorised by INRIC, only one, *Kalima*, stopped broadcasting after a great fight to obtain the right to FM airwaves.

The financial problems encountered by media professionals in launching and maintaining their media outlets resulted in them falling back on the electronic media, such as web tv and newspapers (*Choklata tv* di Chokri Belhassine⁷⁴, or the *Tunisian Telegraph* published by Jamel Arfaoui⁷⁵).

Showcase owners or dummy corporations: this is indeed a subject requiring greater investigation. There

⁷² As in the case of *Tehsa tv*.

⁷³ The *Instance Nationale pour la Réforme de l'Information et de la Communication* (INRIC), General Report, September 2012, p. 283. http://www.inric.tn/fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=170:inric-presentation-du-rapport-&catid=43:inric-conferences&Itemid=163

⁷⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/ChoclataTv?ref=ts&fref=ts#> which describes itself as a tele *Choclata tv* for peace, freedom, tourism and art.

⁷⁵ *Tunisie Telegraph* is a free newspaper founded by a team of journalists specialised in the Maghreb. Even if the site is based in Europe, and its objective is to build another bridge between the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean, its geographical area of interest is the Grand Maghreb in general and in particular Tunisia. <http://tunisie-telegraph.com>

is talk nowadays of certain Tunisian and Arab religious or political personalities hiding behind investments granted to certain media personalities by people from the world of business. Not to mention television channels, the “about us” sections on the websites presenting a network’s editorial line, or its fields of interest, or even certain posts concerning a media network’s organisational chart, all without ever revealing the names of investors.

Media owned by politicians represent a small percentage of Tunisian media, while those launched by journalists are an even smaller minority and seem to find it extremely hard to survive due to a lack of resources.

It therefore seems clear that economics dominates the organisation of the Tunisian media sector. Resorting to audience ratings and opinion polls is another element confirming the ascendancy of economics over journalism. The market of readers/consumers of media products seems to increasingly demand journalistic orientations.⁷⁶

One now sees an overwhelming cohabitation of religion, politics, capital and entertainment and this is increasingly confirmed by the change, be it announced or not, in certain media’s editorial policies, especially television channels and radio stations.

The question one therefore poses, is to what extent and in what way is journalistic/media production subjected to the risks of this polarisation and, above all, what is the position of women in the sector?

⁷⁶ The proliferation of opinion poll audience rating companies moved as fast as those of the media.

Women in the Tunisian media

In this paper we plan to understand also the effects brought about by the recent changes in the field of journalism analysed above, focusing on women, on the one hand as media professionals and, on the other, as the subjects of the media. The status and image of women in the media is an issue that has often been studied, but without, however, taking into consideration the manner in which the reorganisation of the sector has affected the choice of subjects addressed by the media and the perspective adopted.

Here we essentially address three points. The first is an analysis of the status of female journalists in the media, through an inventory of the number of women in decision-making positions.

The second consists of monitoring of the media carried out by CAWTAR's media centre in 2012, addressing the manner in which women's rights are treated by the Tunisian media. The third is monitoring based on the analysis of the image of women in the religious sphere as published by the Tunisian media, and carried out in 2013. One must bear in mind that since then the Tunisian media has become a true reflection of society without the equality, status and rights of women being at the heart of the public debate. Women are under-represented, in fact absent in the media as the main implementers of change achieved and to be achieved during the transition period. Women are also not represented in decision-making positions and in hosting this debate. On this subject, one should perhaps remember that almost all editorial boards for news and debates, on the

radio and on television, were composed of women during the most critical period of power transition. They spontaneously found themselves providing a historical mission and accomplished it successfully and in a professional manner. This decision was not publicly paraded since the times had not allowed the real players in media production at the time to be revealed.

Just like the spontaneous aspect of equality that characterised protests held between December 2010 and January 2011, specific aspects characterised the media; women effectively held all decision-making positions in television and presided over editorial meetings. Would they also have preferred to be soldiers rather than take centre stage? That is a question requiring in-depth analysis.

As the media world “became organised” around the various sectors mentioned earlier and other elements, women journalists left the decision-making positions for a variety of reasons. One could say that the Tunisian “media system”⁷⁷ itself contains the mechanisms for the removal of women from the decision-making sphere. The only ones to remain visible were field reporters.

In order to preserve positions as field reporters, a job that for a very long time was, on one hand, reserved to men and, on the other, without real professional status,⁷⁸ female journalists, most of them young, had fought a real battle.

Of the many questions for which there are many possible aspects that can be attacked, only one will be

⁷⁷ The media system is an analysis of different aspects of the media sector while also analysing its impact on these viewers, as well as the reasons behind the production of all media.

⁷⁸ Most of the time field reporting was associated to covering events.

privileged, because female journalists tenaciously work as field reporters, thereby rejecting easy options and preferring not only to cover events in “hot” spots, but also to report as real investigating journalists, confounding all media outlets.

In reality, the media tend on this issue to present a two-faced mirror, with, on the one hand female journalists do the most “dangerous” field reporting, and, on the other, a media sector predominately having men at the centre stage as the hosts of debates, experts, guests and sources of information.

Since the beginning of July 2011, five months after Tunisia’s January 14th revolution, we interviewed 16 producers and television debate hosts (11 men, who hosted debates, and five female editors-in-chief). These interviews with players working for three Tunisian state-owned and private television channels⁷⁹ addressed the issue of the absence of female personalities speaking at post-revolution televised debates.

An analysis of the contents of remarks made by those interviewed, revealed that they were all profoundly convinced that that male participants were more numerous, more willing and more motivated to discuss state affairs. On the other hand, those interviewed observed that when females personalities were invited to participate, the main reasons for not accepting were their unavailability (due to family commitments), the need to refer to a husband or other relatives in order to take part in these debates in addition to their fear of not being certain of providing an adequate contribution to the debate.

One must also observe that in addition to production

⁷⁹ The only ones that existed during this period.

requirements demanding instant answers to urgent questions, other reasons were provided by these women, among them concerns about being presentable, “looking good”, the fact that they are not sensitive to the role played by the media, that they are demanding and selective (compared to other participants) and that they lack self-confidence.

Paradoxically, this analysis also revealed that the producers and hosts of televised debates believed that women invited to media debates, although marginalised, went straight to the point, initiated constructive, pointed and rational discussions, prepared their contributions well, answered questions immediately and were outspoken. On the other hand, they also, most of the time, obliged others in the debate to respect certain rules (respect for one another, the amount of time allocated, not changing the subject on the agenda). According to those interviewed, their contributions stood out from those of male debaters for their rigorously and precise pragmatic arguments, avoiding all theoretical abstract extrapolations. They, more often and more than men, were inclined to introduce new themes and to set politics in the framework of a society-based project.

It was William Shakespeare who said “The world is a stage”. “On stage as in the theatre of life, there exists a game of roles in which social players linked by complex relationships of alliances, conflict, negotiations and competition are involved.”⁸⁰ The media sector plays by the same rules, hence the introduction in journalistic productions of the “stars” of the theatre of life. Nowadays, one sees, for example, televised debates addressing

⁸⁰ Sihem Najar and Mohamed Kerrou, *La décision sur scène*, Tunis, CAW-TAR, majd, 1st edition 2007.

political, financial and even security issues, animated by participants from other walks of life, such as a female participant from a game show or even universities “making names for themselves” in the total absence of any direction. This, once again, returns us to a sector experiencing “anarchic” change, in which economic factors dominate and in which journalists of both genders, and especially women, are increasingly alienated.

This post-revolutionary setting has merged everything. One now sees television hosts wearing the veil, a situation inconceivable before January 14th even in background of an interview on the streets of Tunis. Leaving aside a human rights approach, in the aforementioned media system, these veiled women are supposed to represent a certain category, bearing in mind the recrudescence of religiosity.

*The image of women in the post-revolution Tunisian media
How the media treat women's rights*

During the crucial period of the transformation of the political and media landscape, expectations of the media were very high, also as far as professionalism, objectivity and impartiality were concerned. There were also expectations regarding the manner in which the new political situation would be addressed and the role played in applying equality laws⁸¹ contributing to the

⁸¹ Equality in electoral lists was promulgated by the *Haute Instance pour la Réalisation des Objectifs de la Révolution*. This law regulating the electoral process makes equality and the alternation of men and women compulsory in all electoral lists. It stipulates that lists not respecting these principles will be annulled.

spreading and consolidation of a balanced image of women, reflecting their role and capabilities. It was necessary to avoid denigration campaigns and abuse aimed at managers active in civil society, while denouncing all practices degrading for women that affected their image. While this period was characterised by women accessing decision-making positions, especially in television, this increase in numbers was not accompanied by a change of quality as far as media contents were concerned, as emerged in a report monitoring the written press, radio and television published in 2012 within the framework of the project entitled “The rights of Arab women and the press.” The process included the monitoring of private media outlets *Hannibal tv* and *Nessma tv*, and one state-owned channel, the *Chaîne Nationale 1*, which has the highest audience ratings.

The sample monitored also included three daily newspapers (*Essabah*, the *Maghreb*, *Al-Fajr*) and a weekly (*Réalités*) as well as two radio stations, *Mosaïque FM* and *Chems FM*. The monitoring lasted ten months, for five days a month, for a total observation period of 50 days.

The analysis of the manner in which women are portrayed was qualitative and based on a format developed by the CAWTAR media centre, addressed at analysing the place held by women in the media both as the subjects of news and the producers of news. This format allowed us to address four main issues: 1. Who provides the news? 2. Who does the news report on? 3. Which women are the subjects of news? 4. In what manner are women referred to?

The main elements observed in this analysis indicate the persistence of the marginal and minor role played

by women in the Tunisian media within the context of the transition, while this same context would instead have been favourable to the inclusion of a gender approach as far as the media's treatment of issues linked to this subject were concerned. The transition phase effectively led the media to focus attention on issues judged to be priorities and from which women were almost systematically excluded, thereby contributing to strengthening women's invisibility and continuing inequality between men and women in media productions.

Initially, freedom of expression and the independence of the press emerged as a crucial issue, considering the repeated attacks on media institutions and professionals. The channels *Nationale 1* and *Nessma tv* and the newspaper *Le Maghreb*, the object of our monitoring, were directly targeted by denigration campaigns organised by mainly Islamist political forces. Lotfi Zitoun, a member of the political party Ennahda and a political advisor to the head of the Hamadi Jebali government, did not stop threatening to place the names of journalists who collaborated with the old regime on a black list, or to embark on crusades against the "mauve" press.

The sit-in that lasted 50 days, outside the entrance to the television station, aimed at a clean-up operation of state-owned "iilam al ar" (The media of shame), led by the Islamist fringe, is another example of pressure exercised by the political sector on the media, to the extent to which it imposed a struggle to achieve autonomy as being the number-one priority in the field of journalism.

On the other hand, the media outlets analysed focused on political and economic issues, giving priority to events linked to current affairs when reporting, without attempting to address issues linked to human rights. As far as the phase during which the drafting of the new constitution took place, it was not exploited to pose as the subject of debates, the juridical and legislative rights of citizens in general or more specifically those of women.

As far as the manner in which news was reported, the media outlets monitored were characterised by a lack of gender approach in analysing information, and by weakness in their basic addressing of human rights within the context of events linked to public life. The wave of protests concerning social and economic issues, the *nigab* affair (the full veil) at Manouba University, the work done by the committee drafting the National Constituent Assembly's new constitution, were also events that took place during 2012 and could have provided fertile material for raising the question of women's rights, had those responsible for the media and had journalists themselves had media competence based on such rights.

Thus the position allocated to women as the subject and source of news remained a very marginal one. Effectively, the issue of women's rights did not emerge as a priority subject during the period studied (2012). This became clear in the media observed, which, furthermore, did not invite women to debate these issues, and more specifically the inclusion of women's rights in the constitution that was being drafted. In truth, the absence of women as interlocutors or experts prepared

to discuss issues concerning public life is flagrant, and reflects the ongoing idea that the public sphere is exclusively reserved to men. Moreover, one could also observe the weakness of databases for women, avoidance of contentious issues raised by society, in particular those linked to women's rights, as well as the absence of editorial guidelines for addressing women's issues.

The only positive element was the absence of stereotype questions asked of women, which were, however, dominant in interviews with female personalities.

Women and the religious issue

A number of studies have emphasised the increasingly large space occupied by religious channels in the Arab media. Their number effectively doubled between 2010 and 2011, which raises a number of questions concerning their links with realities in Arab societies and their concerns, and whether they have been capable of contributing to opposing the extremist schools of thought speaking in the name of religion. None equally questioned the presence of women and their image as portrayed by these media outlets. In what manner does the religious media present the religious issue? What are the effects used to disseminate such visions and representations, especially those concerning women?

In Tunisia, no one doubts that the Islamist movement Ennahda's rise to power has had a significant impact on the media, characterised by the emergence of a number of newspapers and audio-visual outlets with religious orientations, attempting to provide different and varied visions and perceptions of questions con-

cerning religion and social life. Furthermore, in 2012, the Ministry for Religious Affairs in Tunisia organised a round table entitled “Towards a vision of reforming the religious media in Tunisia”, during which three main subjects were debated: “A critical approach of the religious media under the old regime,” “The reality of religious programmes in the audio-visual sector,” and, “Religious pages in Tunisian newspapers after the revolution.”

In what way do religious programmes and publications portray women and define their role in society? Are there significant differences between religious media affiliated to Islamist movements and private independent media? To answer these questions we rely on the outcome of media monitoring undertaken by the CAWTAR media centre throughout 2013 (January – May/September – November 2013), specifically concerning an analysis of the religious issue. This monitoring involved the following media:

1. Three Islamist newspapers (*Al-Fajr*, *Edhamir*, *Es-sahwa*)
2. The programme entitled *Ezzawaj Mawadda* broadcast by the Islamist radio station *Ezzitouna*.
3. The programme entitled *Tawassol al Qoulub* broadcast by the privately-owned television channel *Hannibal tv*.

Generally speaking, the outcome of this observation of the media study reveals the absence in religious columns of subjects concerning women, reflecting the lack of a clear and rational religious debate on women. This leads to an exaggeration in addressing issues con-

cerning women as well as a stereotyped image of women, their role and their position in society. In truth, women were not present at all in the media studied, except for subjects portraying a stereotyped woman and the traditional outlook, relegating all women to the private sphere. Women were absent in other subjects addressed as if they were not concerned with anything linked to public life.

What attracts attention is the absence of significant differences between religious or political-religious media and the independent and privately-owned media. For example, the programme *Ezzawaj Mawadda* broadcast by the radio station *Ezzitouna* affiliated with the Islamist party Ennahda and the weekly show *Tawassol al Qouloub* broadcast by the privately-owned television channel *Hannibal*, had the same attitude in the manner in which they addressed matters concerning women. Women were considered here as incapable of reflecting on themselves, relegated to the traditional role of bearing children without going beyond the borders of the private sphere. These programmes also emphasised women's duty to obey their husbands, the head of the family, and their inability to participate in making decisions and to demand equal status with men.

The question that arises is to understand whether these similarities concerning the image of women in the religious outlook presented by these two aforementioned media, are the result of stereotypes deeply rooted in the Tunisian mentality, or whether they were to be blamed on the rapprochement between Larbi Nassra, the owner of *Hannibal* television, and the party in power, Ennahda.

The only detectable difference concerns the written Islamist press, and more specifically the newspaper *Al-Fajr*, affiliated to the Islamist party Ennahda. The manner in which matters concerning women are addressed in the daily newspaper's religious columns, mainly concern the use of the veil and the full veil, as well as the law forbidding the veil in the army and the right of women wearing the *nigab* to attend schools. The choice of subjects addressed by this newspaper depend greatly on the country's political and economic situation and the priorities outlined by political and ideological competition, setting Ennahda in opposition to secular political movements.

One also sees that religion is no longer the only reference mobilised to address questions linked to the garments worn by Muslim women, since post-revolution political change has imposed the inclusion of a "human rights" approach in debating the subject. This corresponds more to the logic of partisan and ideological struggles than to purely religious and spiritual considerations, thereby reflecting the awareness of those responsible for this newspaper of the need to confront their opponents, mainly political ones, on the basis of the same "universalist" reference points.

Conclusions

The polarisation of the Tunisian media between an Islamist and a secular front has not yet been clearly defined. What effectively emerges from this analysis is the entanglement of interferences between the political, economic, religious and journalistic sectors. The media

are therefore a battlefield and Tunisian women, and the manner in which their image is portrayed, are the gateway to all change, whether within the Islamist versus secular or the political versus economic dichotomy.

Women are at times concealed by the media, depending on priorities outlined on the basis of the evolution of the country's political, economic or security situation, or exploited by the religious-political media for propaganda purposes. The only thing that seems to have not changed, compared to the pre-revolution period, is that the public sphere remains a domain from which women are definitely excluded.

This invisibility/exploitation is not only the result of a currently hypothetical and fluidly outlined polarisation. The lack of competence among journalists as far as gender equality in the media is concerned and a clear desire to rectify matters, are the elements that one should take into account when rethinking the way in which media professionals should treat all issues concerning women.

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Translation Francesca Simmons Pomeroy

Conclusion

Pietro Longo

In the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution, the media landscape in Tunisia has undergone important changes. The fall of the Ben Ali regime has indeed opened wide margins of freedom for exercising citizenship rights. This is particularly valid for rights and freedom of expression.⁸² In a brief timeframe, the disappearance of censorship – previously enforced by state apparatuses, such as the Ministry for Tele-Communications – has enabled a significant number of new newspapers, radio stations and television channels to flourish. Within this process, it is important to consider the significant increase of online newspapers and blogs. These are managed by professionals and by mere ‘improvised’ journalists. In a similar way to political parties and associations, media has also experienced a kind of ‘excess of democracy’. This sudden and unregulated explosion is entirely comprehensible in the aftermath of decades of authoritarianism which the country rapidly tried to escape from between the end of 2010 and 2011.

⁸² A. Driss, “Arab citizenship review no. 3”, *Democracy and Citizenship in north Africa after the Arab Awakening: Challenges for EU and US foreign policy (EuSpring)*, August 2013; Id, “The New Tunisian Constitution and Citizenship Rights”, op. cit., May 2014.

For sixty years, the rigid control imposed by the Bourghiba and Ben Ali regime on means of mass communication distorted the function of the ‘fourth estate’. This is what the media should function as in a pluralistic setting, in which information is the cornerstone of democracy. Throughout this process – geared to limit civil society’s field of action – the example of the control exercised by the regime on the press is very significant. For a long time, and since its foundation, *La Presse* newspaper retained poll position in sales and diffusion, even before Tunisia gained independence (1934). Despite representing a specific view of Tunisia shared by the Francophone elite of the Destourian party, this newspaper became a reference point for citizens who wanted to be informed.⁸³ In addition, the fact that this newspaper was, since its birth, published in French reflects specific editorial and choices of the public which it was directed at.⁸⁴ In short, the press played an important historical role in the delicate process of constructing national identity, and in defining the ‘tunisianité’, which is still defended today as being specifically Arab, Islamic and Maghrebian. Yet, the employment of the press as a means for promoting national identity could only occur at a very high cost: quashing the right to information and freedom of expression in a context hungry for information. In fact, according to statistics, Tunisia is the third largest producer of newspapers in North Africa, following Algeria and Egypt.⁸⁵

⁸³ E. Webb, *Media in Egypt and Tunisia: From Control to Transition?*, Palgrave, New York, 2014, p. 63.

⁸⁴ The Arab version of *La Presse*, *Assabafa*, wasn’t a translation of the French one.

⁸⁵ M. Camau, V. Geisser, (edited by), *Habib Bourghiba. La trace et l’héritage*, Karthala, Aix-en-Provence, 2004, pp. 202-203.

Another element which was formerly part of this process of identity construction but was actually employed by 'old regimes' to maintain power, was Tunisia's exclusion from international media circuits. But from the Eighties, with the eruption of the Ben Ali's regime, the advent of pan-Arabic satellite channels, and the subsequent diffusion of internet, isolating Tunisia and its 'request for information' became an increasingly arduous task. Restricting freedom of expression, political and opposition rights, Ben Ali based the legitimacy of his 'White Revolution' on strengthening the social state. He promoted the education of youth and encouraged foreign investment (even if this fell within the framework of *crony capitalism* or client capitalism).⁸⁶ To facilitate these openings his regime indiscriminately used censorship, obstructing the development of new digital media. It soon became obvious that the Benalists regime was based on a strong contradiction: by obstinately isolating the country from the flow of information, it failed to reconcile itself with the promise for economic reform and a greater opening to tourism and foreign capital.

In order to resolve this dilemma, the regime experimented a curious, and diabolical strategy of separating political and economic information. This consisted in rigidly controlling the former, while continuing to manipulate the latter but leaving it relatively free.⁸⁷ For example, Tunisia was the first amongst Arab countries to introduce the data diffusion system in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) requirements. This was

⁸⁶ E. Murphy, *Economic and Political. Change in Tunisia. From Bourguiba to Ben Ali*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 1994.

⁸⁷ M. Camau, V. Geisser, op. cit., p. 205.

designed to enable European investors to access the country's macroeconomic data, necessary for stimulating enterprises and increasing capital investments. On the other hand, political information was side-lined, and despite the existence of alternative mass communication means alongside those centrally managed by the state, dissent was not permitted. According to a practice already tested by Bourghiba, the opposition press did not receive any support from public funding. This substantially contributed to weaken it.⁸⁸ The fact that this policy was devised to avoid the president becoming an object of attack and contestation by other political elements was not a mystery. Following a decision by Bourghiba in April 1981, the country opened itself up to a tame and controlled multi-party system in occasion of the congress of the Socialist Destourian Party that year.

While, the Jasmine revolution swept this system away, it also revealed the structural shortcomings of the information sector in Tunisia. Despite the HAICA's enormous efforts for regulation, the legal domain defining the media's field of action is still largely dominated by uncertainty. The *Independent Agency for Audio-Visual Communication*, which emerged in the transition period and incorporated by the new Constitution in 2014 (Article 127) attests to this. In the post-revolutionary context, media was also the object of a great need for transition, and it is precisely at this juncture that many new and promising realities of information emerged. The *Tunisia Live* portal is a good example of how a newsroom 'from below' was created with few means in

⁸⁸ Ibidem, p. 347.

Tunisia and solely spurred on by an original idea put into practice by young journalists. The editors who are also the project's founders, underline the importance of their work. Indeed, this is completely independent from parties and solely financed to inform users. None of the journalists who work here are professionals. Indeed, for the most part they are university students who studied in Tunisia or France, and in some cases spent a semester in the United States as trainees for some of the most well-known international newspapers.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, *Tunisia Live* is not legally recognised as a newspaper but is registered as a simple cultural organisation. This demonstrates the extremely uncertain phase Tunisia media is undergoing.

The fact that the state failed to carry out important policy reforms relating to the journalistic profession in the phase of constitutional transition is evident. These include the modification of their code of ethics, and sanctions incorporated in the penal code for defamation (another way in which the Benalists regime kept the opposition press in check). As a consequence, this affected the quality of information products. This is particularly valid for newspapers, which have been primarily reduced to party spokespeople, unsympathetic to the need of making information in an objective way.

Exercising the right to information and freedom of expression undoubtedly requires the dismantling of censorship. However, this alone is not enough. Nowadays, Tunisian journalists are capable of carrying out interviews they deem necessary, they have regained the

⁸⁹ Interview with Ramla Djaber Djerbi, co-founder of *Tunisia Live*, November 2013.

right to contestation and can express objective opinions on the conduct of public affairs.⁹⁰ What is still lacking is a sensible use of this freedom. In other words, the capacity for Tunisian journalists and editors to inscribe information into the framework of democracy, the multiple-party system, and in general of polyarchy.⁹¹ An authentic liberalisation of Tunisian media that goes beyond the simple proliferation of newspapers or new radio-television stations will only occur by investing in training of journalists, and in acquiring certain professional standards. This is also true with regards to salary levels. As El-Issawi underlined in his essay, without these elements, information content is destined to stay in second place.⁹² Furthermore, a greater professionalization could prevent the manifestation of an awful spectre: the polarisation of media between a religious and secular field – a reflection of the political landscape.

It is true that after the revolution media allied itself with political forces: *Al-Fajir*, the main paper linked to Ennahda circulates freely in the country's newsagents, alongside other newspapers of an opposite tendency, such as *Al-Maghreb*. Periodicals have flourished for the past three years. These include *Realité* or *Leaders*, which sympathise for the Nida Tounes party or the democratic pole. On the television plane, Tunisian spectators are exposed to *Al-Mutawassit* programmes on a daily basis. The latter is a pro-Islamic channel, which also proposes youth entertainment programmes vaguely following the

⁹⁰ Fatima el-Issawi, *Tunisian Media in Transition*, Carnegie Endowment for the International Peace, July 2010, pp. 1-2.

⁹¹ R. Dahl, *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1971.

⁹² Fatima el-Issawi, op. cit., p. 3.

MTV format. *Hannibal* channel, founded by Larbi Nasra (close to President Ben Ali) in 2004 and *Nessma tv*, founded in 2007 and presided by Nabil Karoui (recently fined for “offence to public morality” after projecting the animation film *Persepolis*) continue to persist. Despite being explicitly tilted towards Nida Tounes, both channels also propose religious programmes during the month of Ramadan or for Muslim festivities. This varied and fluid landscape appears to confirm that a real polarisation of mass media does not still exist in Tunisia. The turbulent but ‘sensible’ management of the constitutional transition by the Troika (Ennahda, CPR and Ettakol) may have avoided this danger. Nevertheless, it could indeed occur depending on the evolution of the political scenario. In other words, Tunisian media do not yet appear to possess their own autonomous maturity vis-a-vis political opposition with which they simply drift.

A real test of this is the presence of women in media, especially on tv channels and the facility with which female journalists are able to carve out their own space within newsrooms. Women are frequently hidden by local television according to priorities defined by the country’s political and economic evolution, and security. At times the image of woman is instrumentalised. This is particularly true in the case for media that propose religious content for mere propaganda ends. Instrumentalisation can be avoided through decisive state intervention aimed at containing the euphoria brought by the new freedom of expression, on the one hand, and on the other, for the supervision of media content. In this transition phase, control on standards is necessary

as long as it does not re-transform itself into a form of censorship, or even worse, a silencing of voices on political information. Journalism in Tunisia is a profession, which is still being defined: the margin of autonomy enjoyed by post-Ben Ali journalists is still not clear. What is certain is that this space is much larger than in the past. The hope for the future is that this freedom will grow, so that a sensible use of information can become an expression of civil society's voice, and a counterweight to the political world.

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Translation Maria Elena Bottigliero

Authors

Maryam Ben Salem has a doctorate in Political Science. She works as a researcher on female political participation at the Center of Arab Woman for Training and Research (CAWTAR) in Tunis. Her research revolves around political activism, religious effort, cyber-activism and media visibility of female politicians. She is also a member of various scientific associations: the Observatoire de la transition démocratique, the Mediterranean College for Scientific Research and the Tunisian association for political studies.

Kerim Bouzouita is a political anthropologist. His research papers on power and subversion have been published in the U.S, the U.K, Japan and France. After fighting for human rights, in particular the rights of refugees, he became an Advocacy Advisor for the United Nations in 2011. He is also the author of the Advocacy reference book for the United Nations Development Project (UNDP). He is an actively engaged journalist, collaborating with RAI, French television and Tunisian television and radio, as a political reporter.

Fatima el-Issawi is a Research fellow at the LSE Mid-

dle East Centre. He collaborated to the “Arab National Media and Politics: Democracy Revisited” project with the University of Dubai. Its objective: to monitor media changes in Morocco and Algeria.

He has over 15 years of experience in Middle Eastern media reporting for international agencies such as Agence France Presse (AFP) and BBC Arabic Service. He is also a media consultant for various organisations and institutions including the European Commission, the European Council and the Doha Centre for media freedom.

Pietro Longo is a doctoral researcher in Near Eastern and Maghreb Studies at the University of Naples “L’ Orientale”. His research areas focus on Islamic law and so-called “Islamic Constitutionalism”. The author is also Fellow at the Center for Comparative Constitutional Law & Religion at the University of Luzern and researcher for the international project, EuSpring, active at the University of Naples “L’ Orientale”, and financed by the Compagnia di San Paolo.

Atidel Majbri is a Ph.D. student and university lecturer. From 1999, she has been responsible for the Department of Information and Communication at the Center of Arab Woman for Training and Research (CAWTAR) in Tunis and chief editor of its periodical. She has produced online debates on social issues for the Tunisian Satellite Channel. She won the creative prize for the best conference moderator at the Cairo Radio and Television Festival (2002), and the Tunisian Journalist Association award for the best female production (on gender violence). In addition, she coordinated the three year pro-

gramme on “Sex and Arab media” for CAWTAR and UNIFEM.

Azzurra Meringolo is the coordinator of Arab Media Report. A professional journalist who has worked in the Middle East for years, she is currently a researcher on the Mediterranean and the Middle East for the Institute of International Affairs (IAI). Here, she focuses on the Arab World with particular emphasis on Egypt. She holds a Ph.D. in International Relations, is the chief editor of *Affarinternazionali* and author of *The Guys of Tahrir Square*. She has won the following journalism awards: Ivan Bonfanti (2012) and Montanelli (2013). Her doctoral thesis on Egyptian anti-Americanism was awarded the Maria Grazia Cutuli prize.

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