

Introduction: The hybrid system of Egypt and “cultural chaos”

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INTRODUCTION

THE HYBRID SYSTEM OF EGYPT AND «CULTURAL CHAOS»

In the last few years the media landscape in the Arab world has undergone profound changes. The revolts of 2011 accelerated some transformations, and on other occasions changed their course.

Some of the processes are of global importance, such as the spread of digital technologies and of social networks, the growing integration between old and new media, the emergence of a social and political sphere based on greater connectivity, and the synergy between street movements and the internet. Other times the phenomena are more confined to the Arab world: the decline, at least in terms of audience, of transnational television channels, the trend toward communication more focused on internal politics than on international issues, and the return of repressive measures and of censorship of information.

Several more years will probably be needed before we can assess with greater accuracy the nature of these changes, as well as their scope and their impact on the future of the region. The processes in question are particularly complex, and their development is taking place very rapidly, both at a political and at a media level. In this regard, it is sufficient to consider the enthusiasm towards the presumed role of new technologies in the 2011 revolts, which was just as quickly replaced by excessive indifference or diffidence with respect to them.

The difficulty in understanding the transformations in the media field, on the other hand, is not limited only to the Arab world. The advent of the Internet, the globalization of information, and media convergence are global phenomena, which today are a challenge everywhere that forces us to rethink theoretical and methodological approaches to media studies.

The advent of Web 2.0, preceded a few years earlier by that of satellite television, has led to the birth of a more and more interconnected system of global communication, characterized by an overabundance of content and a greater plurality of sources of information. Digitalization has generated new forms of intersection among different media and has blurred the distinction between those who produce information and those who consume it. The Internet has increasingly confused the boundary between public and private spheres, transforming the relationship between politics and representation, and rendering the concept of the media as the “fourth estate” almost obsolete.

Tracing the trends of an environment that is so interconnected and that is in continual evolution has become more and more difficult for those who analyze the impact on politics and on society of these changes. It is no accident that the sociologist Brian McNair uses the concept of “cultural chaos” as the emerging interpretative framework for the contemporary media landscape, affirming that for the political authorities it is more and more difficult to impose a hegemonic control over agendas of information which are increasingly volatile and difficult to predict.¹ Whereas McNair focuses particularly on the loss of control over information on the part of governments, recent events in the Arab world, however, put us on our guard with respect to considering these changes as a factor that always plays in favor of processes of democratization. Sami Ben Gharbeya, a founder of the Tunisian blog *Nawaat*, defines as “information cascade” the process by which, using different types of media, Tunisian activists were able to circulate revolutionary narratives both within the country and abroad.² However, this process on other occasions has appeared much more opaque and less effective, as the case of Syria, but not only that situation, shows. Similarly, the increasing pluralization of the circulation of content in countries like Egypt does not seem to have favored a political transition. Governments, democratic or not, seem to be more and more adapted to the logic of “cultural chaos”, at least up to the present time.

On the other hand, it is impossible to deny that the changes we are witnessing today are still very far from having revealed all of their long-term consequences.

1. Brian McNair, 2006, *Cultural Chaos, Journalism, News and Power in a Globalized World*, Routledge, London.

2. See, in this regard, Ethan Zuckerman, «Civic Disobedience and the Arab Spring», *My Heart is in Accra*, 6 May 2011: <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2011/05/06/civic-disobedience-and-the-arab-spring/>

In this context, *Egypte/Monde Arabe* intends to propose a series of analyses of the dynamics regarding the media in the region, focusing in particular, but not exclusively, on the Egyptian case. The objective is to try to shed light on some of the trends that have emerged in recent years, while recognizing that this is a field that continues to change rather rapidly. In this sense, these analyses attempt to avoid some of the simplifications that have characterized certain journalistic interpretations of these phenomena, as well as some academic ones. On the contrary, the objective is, on the one hand, to propose interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches that allow a deeper understanding of the changes taking place, and, on the other hand, to offer contributions that are based on solid empirical research and on long periods of observation.

The importance of proposing these analyzes, and the choice to dedicate a monographic issue of *Egypte / Monde Arabe* to this theme, reside in the awareness that the media are to be considered real political actors, and not only an arena for debate or for production of information. The possibility of a transition towards more participatory, open and egalitarian systems depends also, and not just a little, on the changes regarding the world of the media in the region. Furthermore, the increasing mediatization of politics, and the gradual but seemingly unstoppable interpenetration between public and private spheres as well as between social and political spheres, render the analysis of communication processes more and more important, even for those involved in other disciplines. In this sense, this issue also serves to bring closer together academic fields, namely political science and media studies, which often tend to ignore each other, resulting in the creation of obstacles to a greater understanding of the political and social developments in the region.

THE EGYPTIAN CASE: TRENDS AND CONTRADICTIONS

Egypt is a particularly interesting example for the analysis of the transformations of the media which have taken place in recent times. On the one hand, the Egyptian media system is generally considered one of the most advanced in the region. The private sector has many newspapers and television stations of a certain significance both in financial terms and in terms of audience. The Egyptian blogosphere was the first one that called attention to the importance of the Internet as a tool of dissent, and the practices that characterize it have served as an example for other countries in the region.

On the other hand, it is a media system that has also shown severe limitations during the last few years, revealing all the contradictions

within it. The media are also among the accused with regard to the failure of the Egyptian revolution.

The Egyptian case is thus to be considered a laboratory within which trends in the media field often emerge earlier and more clearly than in other contexts in the region.

Whereas more time will be needed to analyze some of these trends, others can already be identified with some clarity and can be used to delineate the general context, certain aspects of which will be examined more thoroughly by the articles presented in this issue.

Towards a more local political communication and the decentralization of information

During the period immediately following the revolts of 2011, it seemed that a new transnational public sphere would be able to emerge in the Arab world. Thanks to the social networks, young revolutionaries from various countries became able to get in touch with each other directly, exchanging news, supporting campaigns, and comparing their respective experiences. This is a public space that no longer relies solely on the pan-Arab media funded by capital from the Gulf region, and it also has different characteristics from the pan-Arabism imposed from above in the 1960s. The “arabités numériques” as they are defined by Gonzalez-Quijano, are also the expression of a common feeling uniting above all the new generations, which crosses the borders between single states, and which is rarely represented in the traditional media.³

However, in subsequent years the wind has seemed to change direction. The public has seemed to turn its interest toward domestic issues, devoting less attention to questions that traditionally occupied the Arab media agenda, such as the Palestinian issue and other international events, including the “revolutions”. The trend appears to cross boundaries, bringing together old and new media, young and older people. The virtual spheres are becoming increasingly provincialized, as can be easily seen by browsing through the social networks. Even the new digital journalism projects that have emerged in recent years prefer to focus on the local dimension, sometimes hyper-local, rather than on the international dimension. For as much as there has been talk for some time of creating international synergies among the initiatives of digital journalism “from the bottom up”, there still does not exist anything concrete in this direction. As for the traditional national

3. Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, 2012, *Arabités numérique. Le printemps du Web arabe*, Sindbad, Paris.

media, private and non-private, international coverage is often reduced to serving a very precise domestic political agenda. Today in Egypt, journalistic accounts of Syria, Libya, and Iraq are above all useful for remembering the cost that a revolution can entail.

But perhaps the most significant phenomenon is the decline of the transnational TV channels of the Gulf region. *Al-Jazeera*, especially, seems to have lost significant segments of its audience and has become a “second choice”, at least when it comes to following local events. The support provided to the Muslim Brotherhood after 2011, as well as inaccuracies in the coverage of other contexts, starting with Syria, have contributed to eroding the credibility of the channel. The loss of prestige of *al-Jazeera* and of its sisters, the satellite TV channels of the Gulf region, together with the growing demand for local news that a transnational channel struggles to offer, have pushed the Egyptian audience in the direction of the national television channels: *ONtv*, *Dream TV*, *al-Tahrir*, *al-Qahira wa al-Nas* and *CBC*.

This de-regionalization of communication inevitably transforms the impact of media on the socio-political processes. In fact, channels like *al-Jazeera* in 2011 had played a fundamental role in spreading news about the mobilizations, particularly in those sectors of society that were less connected to the new technologies. At the same time, the birth of dozens of platforms of digital journalism that are more focused on domestic issues, among which there are newspapers such as *MadaMasr*, *Mandara*, and *Wilad el-Balad*, just to name a few, can contribute to strengthening the domestic debate on questions that previously did not receive proper attention. In fact, one of the fundamental problems of journalistic information in Egypt was the excessive centralization towards Cairo. New technologies, in this sense, can facilitate the collection of information even within areas that until now have been kept on the margins of media coverage.

Synchronization and media convergence

The Egyptian media system, like others in the region, has become an essentially “hybrid” system, within which old and new media logics coexist, making the circulation of information more complex and varied.⁴ The distinction between new and old media becomes increasingly obsolete, and the ways in which information can be produced and distributed are multiplied.

4. Andrew Chadwick, 2013, *The Hybrid Media System. Politics and Power*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

In Egypt, the process of hybridization among different media is a phenomenon that was already visible in the middle of the 2000s. Television talk shows and newspapers were beginning to gather information and ideas from the web, developing true “hybrid newsrooms.”⁵ Activists and journalists who had gained visibility on the web were invited to TV broadcasts or to write directly for newspapers, which ended up creating a revolving door between different professions. In 2012 the newspaper *al-Masry al-Yaum*, in collaboration with the start-up *Meedan*, set up an online platform of live blogging. Hisham Kassem, one of the founders of *al-Masry al-Yaum*, had been working for years on a new newspaper, *al-Jumhuriya al-Jadida*, with the first “convergent newsroom” in Egypt.⁶ The case of Bassem Youssef, whose satirical program, which was circulated on Youtube, was later reproduced and distributed, first by *ONTv*, and then by *CBC*, is another important example.

The revolts of 2011 strengthened the integration among different platforms. The convergence was no longer just television, newspapers and the Internet, but extended also to other media. The Mosireen collective, founded in February 2011, was responsible not only for collecting digital videos on the revolution, but for projecting them in Tahrir square, inaugurating a new form of public cinema. In the wake of this experience, the campaign *al-‘Askar Kazibun* (the military are liars) organized screenings in various districts of Cairo to counter the narratives of the military about the clashes in Muhammad Mahmoud Street in November 2011.

Even a form of street painting, graffiti, was remediated on other platforms. Huguet and Carle, in the article in this issue, describe the modalities of production and circulation of the graffiti in Mahmoud Muhammad Street as a “palimpsest”. Graffiti is the object of a production process that is always unfinished, since it is constantly cancelled, reproduced, and modified. This process was amplified and completed by the circulation of the images of the murals on social networks, which introduced another level of dissemination and renegotiation of the meaning of the graffiti images, repositing them in different contexts from those of the physical place in which they were made. The interaction regarding the images, through comments, Facebook statuses, and re-tweets of the images, recalls what Lawrence Lessig defines as “remix culture”, a modality of approach to cultural content

5. Naomi Sakr, «Social Media, Television Talk Shows, and Political Change in Egypt», *Television and News Media*, 14:322, 2012.

6. AbdelRahman Mansour e Linda Herrera, “The Future of Media in Egypt: an Interview with Hisham Kassem”, *Jadaliyya*, 30 agosto 2012: http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7125/the-future-of-media-in-egypt_an-interview-with-hisham-kassem.

that is introduced by new digital technologies.⁷ It is this integration between, on the one hand, one of the oldest forms of expression, murals, and, on the other hand, social media, which according to Carle and Huguet multiplies the effectiveness of the recourse to graffiti within a “nouvelle culture contestataire”.

This example, like others, demonstrates the profound consequences of media convergence on the public sphere and its relationship with the political field.

As Chadwick says:

Power in the hybrid media system is exercised by those who are successfully able to create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable others' agency, across and between a range of older and newer media settings.⁸

Recent events in Egypt have often shown clearly that the “hybrid” dynamics of the media have introduced new possibilities both for challenging and for exercising political power.

In some cases, new media and old media can converge in a “synchronization” that can impose narratives with a strong impact on the political field. In the mobilizations of 2011, the revolutionary narratives were able to effectively exploit both new and old media, the convergence of which was the key to the formation of a cross-party consensus against Hosni Mubarak. However, as Alexander and Aouragh point out,⁹ synchronization among different types of media depends on the conditions of the political context. After the fall of Mubarak, the traditional media generally went back to supporting the authorities in power, whereas the revolutionary movements, which had gone back to a condition of marginality, had to resort again to web 2.0 and tools such as graffiti and street cinema to contrast the narratives produced by the authorities.

June 30 and the subsequent coup witnessed the creation of another synchronization among various media, this time, however, in favor of a counter-revolutionary movement supported by the army and by other components of the old regime.

7. Lawrence Lessig, 2008, *Remix. Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, Penguin Books, New York.

8. Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System. Politics and Power*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 207.

9. Anne Alexander e Miriyan Aouragh, “Egypt’s Unfinished Revolution: the Role of the Media Revisited”, *International Journal of Communication*, 8, 2014, p. 890-915.

This experience, in particular, demonstrates that the convergence and the synchronization among various media introduce not only new ways to construct anti-hegemonic narratives, but also new practices for the exercise of power.

The degeneration of the public sphere after the January revolution

In the period immediately following the fall of Mubarak, the Egyptian media system seemed to be able to experience a new phase of its history. There were new television channels and newspapers, the use of the Internet as a source of information was spreading, but above all the political atmosphere seemed to make the control of information more difficult. The public sphere had never appeared so rich and pluralistic, and it seemed to be able to ensure the revolutionary transition that the mobilizations of 2011 had begun.

Just a few years later, however, the scenario was very different. All the Islamist media were forced to close. Journalists from *al-Jazeera* were arrested and later condemned in the court of the first instance to 7-10 years in prison. The newspapers and private television stations in fact agreed to align with the narrative of the authorities in power, while the most critical voices, such as Bilal al-Fadl, Bassem Youssef and Yousri Fouda, were dismissed or silenced. Censorship and self-censorship returned, according to many journalists, stronger than before the revolution of January. At the end of October 2014, the chief editors of some of the most important media issued a statement of support for the government, committing themselves to not publishing news that might be harmful to the fight against "terrorism." Although forms of resistance still existed on the internet but also in other spaces,¹⁰ the media landscape seemed more similar to the one that characterized the government of Nasser than the government of Mubarak.

How can it have happened in the course of a few months, Kai Hafez asks himself in the article contained in this review, that the vitality of the public sphere during 2011 and 2012 changed into a situation in which the political control over information has been re-established in such an effective way?

Obviously, the political events that followed June 30 and the strong concentration of political power in the hands of the military and of the regime are the most important factors. As Gadi Wolsfeld has pointed out, the political field in general tends to dominate the media field.

10. For example, the appeal launched on the Internet by Khaled el-Balshi in which the position of the editors toward the government is criticized.

When the authorities in power are not divided and indecisive, in Egypt as in Western liberal democracies, the media have little chance of contrasting them.¹¹

However, Kai Hafez reminds us that the Egyptian media system already contained within itself some endemic limitations that contributed to its failure. Following the models of journalism proposed by Hallin and Mancini, the author analyzes these limits by taking into account three basic components: the relationship between State and Media, the degree of political parallelism, and the development of journalistic professionalism and of the journalistic market.¹²

Briefly reviewing these points can provide some basic elements of the general context of Egyptian media and of their relationship with the political field.

Egypt is still dominated by State media that have never been reorganized into a genuine public service, as happened, in different forms, in European countries. Although this element has long been the center of a debate among journalists,¹³ today there is still no clear idea about a possible reform of the public sector of the media. The Constitution of Morsi of 2012 did not concern itself with solving some of the structural problems of the sector, and in fact encouraged stagnation in the organization of the media landscape. The new Constitution of 2014 contains more explicit references to freedom of expression,¹⁴ and, at least on paper, is a step forward compared to the preceding one.¹⁵ Among the most important aspects there is even the creation of a National Media Council: elected by the Parliament, it should have a function of supervision of the media and of elaboration of an ethical code for journalists. These are potential improvements which, however,

11. Gadi Wolfsfeld, 1997, *Media and Political Conflict: News from the Middle East*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

12. Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 2004, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

13. See in this regard the chapter "Stimuli for a Public Service Ethos" in Naomi Sakr, 2013, *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism*, I.B. Tauris, London.

14. Article 71 declares that "It is prohibited to censor, confiscate, suspend or shut down Egyptian newspapers and media in any way. Exception may be made for limited censorship in time of war or general mobilization»: http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/final_constitution_-idea-_english-2_dec_2013-signed.pdf

15. For a comparison between the two constitutions in relation to the media, see: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/88644/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-constitution--vs--A-comparison.aspx>

are in fact annulled by the ambiguity that characterizes the Constitution as a whole. The list of cases in which journalists can be tried by military courts, for example, seems to be made to be able to include any type of situation.¹⁶

The second element analyzed by Hafez is the “political parallelism” of the Egyptian media, namely the tendency to produce partisan information, which adopts specific political positions, at the expense of professional rituals such as objectivity. The Egyptian media, therefore, offer an external, but not internal, pluralism: taken as a whole, they reflect different opinions, but rarely are the differences expressed in a single television channel or newspaper. This has encouraged a polarization of civil society and a radicalization of positions, as the clash between supporters and opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood can demonstrate. The problem, Hafez maintains, is that in young democracies, characterized by greater instability, political parallelism can hinder the formation of the consensus that is necessary for building shared democratic institutions.

The third element concerns the relationship between economy and media. In Egypt, the concentration of capital that characterizes the society as a whole is also reflected in the distribution of ownership of the communication industry. The private media are all in the hands of a limited number of businessmen close to the regime, and the difficulty of generating profits through advertising and sale of copies renders even more difficult the emergence of pure publishers, that is, publishers who have no interest in other economic sectors. The experience of Ibrahim Eissa, co-founder of the television channel *al-Tahrir*, is exemplary from this point of view. This journalist, as early as October 2011, decided to sell his shares in the channel, founded a few months earlier, to two businessmen. Those same shares were sold a short time later to Suleiman Amer, a businessman close to Hosni Mubarak. The difficulty of setting up independent media is also illustrated by the case of Hisham Kassem, who for years has been searching in vain for private entrepreneurs for his *al-Gumhuriya al-Jadida*. One of the reasons is that Kassem sets as a fundamental condition that none of the owners can exceed 10% of the shares, to avoid interference in the editorial policy of the newspaper.

Finally, the last element concerns the professional culture of the journalists. The absence of independent trade unions for the press and the inability of the existing ones to protect journalists from political

16. See, on this point, Basil El-Dabh, “Egypt’s Media Crackdown and the New Constitution”, *Timep*, 24 January 2014: <http://timep.org/analysis/media-crackdown>

power have impeded, even after the revolution, the development of an independent professionalism based on well-defined ethical rules.

In the final analysis, Hafez maintains, the Egyptian model can be compared to the Mediterranean journalistic models, as they are described by Hallin and Mancini, and it is shown to be particularly inappropriate in a non-democratic and unstable context like that of contemporary Egypt.

Whereas the article by Kai Hafez highlights the flaws endemic to the Egyptian media system, the contributions of Bachir Ben Aziz and Marianna Ghiglia concentrate on the role of the private media as sources of a renewal of journalistic production that expands the space of what can be said, and offers new perspectives for the recounting of reality.

Bachir Ben Aziz highlights the fact that the advent of the private media has introduced new ways of organizing journalistic work and the production of news. The private media occupy a space that is necessarily different from that of the public media: they have less access to political sources and official events, they must draw on a younger generation of journalists, and, in order to compete, they need to identify issues and problem areas to which the state media dedicate less attention.

These are also the elements, strictly bound to journalistic work, rather than to a choice of editorial policy, which make the private media the best vehicles for new reconstructions of reality, including protest movements. It is thus precisely the different organization of journalistic work that allows the tracing of the “itineraries of collective action” that inspired the workers’ protests in Egypt in the second half of the 2000s.

The article by Marianna Ghiglia instead examines the experience of the daily newspaper *al-Badil*. Founded in 2007, “neither partisan newspaper, nor private newspaper”, *al-Badil* is a unique case in the history of the Egyptian media. Differently from other private media, it is a newspaper conceived as a true political actor, to carry out a political militancy of opposition which cannot be expressed in a party organization.

Rethinking the role of new technologies

The role of new technologies in the context of the so-called “Arab Spring” has been one of the most discussed issues in recent years, both in the media and in university environments. As Yves Gonzalez-Quijano explains in his article, the opposition between cyber optimists and pessimists, as well as an excess of enthusiasm and of criticism,

have often constituted the elements of a debate which, even today, still offers few certainties regarding the effects of new technologies on socio-political processes in the region.

The article by Gonzalez-Quijano traces the principal elements of the discussion about the so-called “Facebook Revolution”, trying to outline an evaluation of the role of new media in the context of the revolts of 2011 and during subsequent years. At the same time, it invites us to consider the effects of new technologies in the long term, instead of concentrating, as has been done so far in most cases, on the relationship between web 2.0 and street protests.

As Hanan Badr describes in his article, the effects of social networks depend on structural and cultural factors pertaining to the context considered. The political culture in Egypt is thus reflected in social networks, interfering with the possibility to use them as democratic tools. In the same way, structural factors are another limit, ranging from the virtual architectures utilized to the government institutions that use the Internet in a more and more effective way. In this sense, to use the expression of Dutton, the Internet should not be seen as another medium of the “fourth estate”, but can be considered more similar to a “fifth estate”: a space of interrelationships contested by various actors and powers, the effects of which are still to be determined.¹⁷

A critical new reading of the dynamics within the networks of cyber-activism can consequently be a starting point from which to begin again to approach these issues in a more effective way. To this end, integrating the theories of new media with ethnographic, sociological and anthropological approaches, as some of the articles in this issue do, can be an antidote to be used, as Miriyam Aouragh states, “to push back the narrow presumptions about the universality of digital experiences.”¹⁸

Today we know that the networks of activism are not intrinsically democratic, as Enrico De Angelis explains in his article, and that forms of power and inequality emerge in the spaces online, just as they do in those offline; that the contents circulating on the web can be easily falsified also in the political field; and that the networks demonstrate a certain fragility when it comes to contrasts with other groups, as we

17. William H. Dutton, 2009, “The Fifth Estate Emerging through the Network of Networks”, *Prometheus: Critical Studies in Innovation*, vol. 27, n° 1, pp. 15.

18. Miriyam Aouragh, 2012, «Social Media, Mediation and the Arab Revolutions», *TripleC*, 10 (2), 518-536.

have seen in the elections in Egypt and Tunisia, against more structured organizations. Above all, it is necessary to recognize that society tends to transform the Internet at a faster speed than that of the transformations occurring in the opposite direction.

However, once the limits of activism online have been recognized, we cannot ignore all those cases in which it has generated innovative social and political experiences, the impact of which has produced concrete changes. An example is the Tunisian forum *SfaxOnline*, described in the article by Carboni, Crisponi, and Sistu which concludes this issue of *Egypte/Monde Arabe*.

The experience of *SfaxOnline* reveals practices of use of the Internet that are different from those based on digital social networks, on which most of the analysis has focused in recent years. It shows the use of the web as a means of aggregation and collective exchange within a local community. This no longer fits the description of networks of weak ties, those which the social networks tend to create through an interaction that is above all virtual. Instead, the web emerges as a technology that can generate new practices of coexistence and of cultural exchange within a community whose boundaries are well defined and limited. On the one hand, the activities of moderation of the site can remind us of those used within groups like “We are all Khaled Said”, and, as in that case, they result in people approaching politics who had previously been excluded from it. On the other hand, it is a platform that is based on the strong ties in a community that already exists, but which has no other spaces for public debate. It may seem to be a return to the past, to a time before social networks. However, rethinking the practices of the use of new media can also mean this: discarding or reinventing those forms of activities that have proven not to be functional in the long run.