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## Journalism's Rewriting of History in Reporting the Arab Spring

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**Abstract:** Investigation of journalism's role as writer and rewriter of the record of political episodes of world importance is central to this article, which takes an empirical approach in choosing the Danish press coverage of *The Arab Spring* as its starting point. The article analyses how a number of historical references to, in particular, European revolutionary history from Eastern Europe in 1989, are woven into the journalistic descriptions of events in Tunisia and Egypt. But the analysis also reflects on journalism's own historical precedents in that field. Therefore, this paper takes the topics and circumstances that put Tunisia and Egypt on the Danish media's agenda in the year before the Arab revolutions as a starting point. The central point of this comparison is to convey how journalism, while describing contemporary events of *The Arab Spring*, at the same time rewrites its own prior commentary on the region. Rewriting history in this way gives journalism a neutral and unassailable position as observer of events of world-wide importance, but it brings in its train other problems with staying true to both the readers and to unfolding events.

**Keywords:** History, Journalism, Arab Spring, Historical Analogies, Eye-witness, Rewriting of History

### Introduction

*How* journalism reports great political upheavals depends not only on the way that circumstances develop but, equally, upon the point of view that journalism itself may adopt in doing so. The rewriting of history is one available strategy in defending a journalistic position as neutral observer.<sup>1</sup> However, such rewriting of history can have unfortunate consequences for journalism's relationship to the reader, and for the possibility of both understanding and describing these types of events. The means by which examples of the rewriting of history can be identified, and the role they play in journalistic practice, are the subjects of this article.

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<sup>1</sup> Here thought of as an unconsciously embedded part of journalistic practice in line with Tuchman's strategic rituals (Tuchman, 1972).

Absolutely central to that journalistic practice and to journalism's understanding of its role is the expectation that it will bring news of important events from around the world to the readership (Winfield, Friedman, & Trisnadi, 2001). Political events of world importance, such as power struggles are self-selecting subjects for news, and the popular uprisings and change of power among the countries of North Africa in 2001, collectively known as *The Arab Spring*, were precisely such occurrences.

At the same time, these are events of which very few outside North Africa have had the chance to gain firsthand knowledge: consequently the amount, tone and approach brought to the journalistic input have had decisive consequences for how *The Arab Spring* is understood and interpreted in the rest of the world. And it is just this, journalism's role as the first chronicler on the scene at the world's trouble spots that is the pivotal point in the following:

“It has become clichéd to assert that journalists write the first draft of history. Far less attention has been paid to who does the rewrites. Frequently, second drafts of history are also written by journalists“ (Edy, 1999, p. 71).

I intend, however, to stretch Edy's point further and propose that journalistic rewriting takes place in the first, contemporary, reporting of the story. Rewriting of journalism's own prior views and utterances on those very Arab countries can actually be found in the stream of news from the Arab revolutions: and it is journalism's reaction to such historical turning points that this article will attempt to portray. The question therefore is directed at how journalism reports on such turning points. In this I have been inspired by the use of historical data in the coverage of major media events. (See e.g. Edy, 1999; Olsson, 2010; Schudson, 1992; Winfield et al., 2001; Zelizer, 1992; Zelizer & Allan, 2011)

Specifically, I intend to investigate how those contemporary events, involving popular revolt and fleeing presidents, are linked to earlier historical events. Here the question arises which approach to journalistic practice can explain such linking of the contemporary to the historical in describing *The Arab Spring*.

It is this article's over-arching submission that journalism gives us a contemporary record of *The Arab Spring* that is based on some quite decidedly historical and cultural conceptions of revolution and democracy, and that the reportage is influenced by particular attitudes and routines pertaining to journalistic practice. Furthermore, the contemporary descriptions contain, to a marked degree, examples of the rewriting of history in which the pre-revolutionary society is re-interpreted using post- revolutionary logic.

## Method

The analysis is grounded on an empirical study that incorporates theoretic approaches in the context of the use of history in journalism.

To find out how journalism describes major upheavals I will set about the analysis in two ways. In the first instance I give an exemplary résumé of how, when and how often news from Tunisia and Egypt appeared on the agenda of the Danish press in the period immediately prior to the revolutions: one can also call this an empirical sketch of journalism's own history in this area. The aim of this is to set journalistic descriptions of *The Arab Spring* against the coverage that the selfsame media gave these countries before the revolutions. That part of the analysis comprises a summarised description of the principal topics and types of material and of the occasions on which respectively Tunisia and Egypt were named in Danish papers in 2010.

Next I look more closely at how the Tunisian and Egyptian insurgents themselves were covered in 2011. Here my interest will be especially directed at how the journalistic descriptions are linked to historical aspects. Nonetheless, the question of the journalist as eyewitness will also be stressed, since both aspects contribute to the construing of journalism as history's chronicler. That part of the analysis is at the same time mainly a review of how historical elements appear, and how they are employed in the journalistic coverage. There will therefore be several aspects of the journalistic coverage of *The Arab Spring* that are *not* covered here.

In the analysis I use the term interpretative framework or packages inspired by Gamson & Modigliani where an ongoing discourse provides interpretations and meaning against which events can be considered and described. In this analysis I firmly place journalism's frame or interpretative package for *The Arab Spring* within Entman's four functions of a frame: 1) definition of the problem 2) establishment of the cause 3) moral assessment 4) suggested solution. Except for the question of solutions or future prospects for *The Arab Spring*, journalism seems to be agreed on the same basic narrative or interpretative frame; centred on democracy and revolution (cf. Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989)<sup>2</sup>.

In both parts of the analysis the empirical data has been taken from the eight largest Danish dailies: *BT*, *Berlingske*, *Børsen*, *Ekstra Bladet*, *Information*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *Kristeligt Dagblad* and *Politiken*.<sup>3</sup> These newspapers can all be

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<sup>2</sup> The theoretical questions and the implications of the use of framing are not discussed further, as it is the historical analogies that are the focus of the analysis.

<sup>3</sup> These eight newspapers represent all the national dailies in Denmark. *BT* and *Ekstra Bladet* are both tabloid papers, which traditionally have a low interest in foreign news, *Børsen* is a paper with focus on business and finance, *Information* is a small intellectual paper with global focus and traditionally a political orientation to the left. *Kristeligt Dagblad* is the only Danish paper based on Christian values. The three largest dailies are: *Politiken* (center-left) *Berlingske* (conservative) and *Jyllands-Posten* (conservative). The differences between the papers are reflected in the amount of articles written about the Arab countries and The Arab Spring, but *not* in the uses of historical

accessed at article level via the Danish data base *Infomedia*.<sup>4</sup> Here, I have searched using the most basic criteria by using respectively *Tunisia* and *Egypt* as search words. The data base includes, broadly speaking, all articles in the Danish press, but the possibility cannot be excluded that individual articles with relevance for analysis have not been archived. Likewise the numbers of articles that are produced by each search are approximate, as there were minor discrepancies in the totals on repeating the search.

Even though the material is Danish and therefore in many ways reflects Danish journalism's relationship to the North African region, I would still expect to find that many of the tendencies revealed by the research can be tracked down in other western press coverage. Several of the historical analogies can in any case be found in a number of European media.<sup>5</sup>

### **Tunisia on the Danish Press Agenda in 2010 Before the Upheaval**

*The Arab Spring* began, according to journalistic accounts, with a string of incidents in Tunisia that in January 2011 became the centre of attention from the world's press. Such interest in that particular North African country is highly unusual.

It is well documented in foreign news studies (See Galtung & Ruge, 1965) that not all regions of the world enjoy an equal amount of press interest. In fact, news from Africa, Asia and South America only reach the Danish dailies when spectacular events erupt there (Holm, Kabel, Kitaj, Møller, & Ytzen, 2000). Journalistic attention follows to a great extent political attention; therefore countries where Danish interests are involved are given the highest priority (Jørndrup, 2005). For many decades the Middle East has been the subject of considerable journalistic awareness centered on Israel, and subsequently also on Iran and Iraq. Traditionally, resident correspondents have been stationed in the area in and around Israel (Holm et al., 2000).

Tunisia on the contrary, is seen from a Danish foreign news perspective as a rather uninteresting, non-élite country (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), that is neither in itself, nor continuously, a topic of interest to the media. If Tunisia has found its way into the Danish papers it is principally because Danish interests are involved in the country, or else because Tunisians immigrants have found their way to Denmark.

In a search of eight Danish dailies with country-wide circulation, the word Tunisia appears in at least 250 articles since 2010.<sup>6</sup> If one looks more closely at the

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analogies which are very similar in all papers.

<sup>4</sup> All the newspapers were available in html and PDF-version, except for *Information*, which was only accessible in html.

<sup>5</sup> The international paper *Le Monde Diplomatique* used the term "The Arab Wall" in February 2012.

<sup>6</sup> In this overview I have looked at *Berlingske Tidende*, *BT*, *Børsen*, *Ekstra-Bladet*, *Information*,

occasions that bring the country into focus, a meaningful picture emerges.<sup>7</sup>

Tunisia is named in three principal contexts; sports, tourism and Tunisian immigrants in Denmark. In 2010 Tunisia as well as Denmark took part in both the football and handball World Championships, on account of which Tunisia is named several times in sports reports on the Danish teams. Additionally, one can find a string of articles about Danes' favourite travel destinations and about the country itself, even though these are strongly influenced by western tourists' search for the appealing romance of the Orient (cf. Said, 1978).

“Authenticity is perhaps not the first word that occurs to the visitor to Chebika and Tamerza; furthermore, there are all too many tourists and importunate street vendors. On the other hand one can get closer to reality at home with the Snani family in a hole in the ground in the Berber town of Matmata, among the hills of the northern edge of the Sahara” (Politiken, 10/01/2010).<sup>8</sup>

That exotic representation of the authentic Arabia is still one of the few glimpses of Tunisian citizens' lives that Danish newspaper readers could find in the whole of 2010.

The third topic through which Tunisia finds its way into the Danish press concerns itself with immigrants living in Denmark, and especially with stories about the so-called *Tunisian case* in which two people with Tunisian background were suspected of planning to murder the Mohammed-cartoonist Kurt Westergaard (See e.g. Gravengaard, 2009). Tunisia, seen from a Danish point of view as a non-élite country is also reflected in the absence of references to the country in news on foreign- and security policy. Tunisia is named occasionally, but this occurs most often in summaries covering a group of countries, e.g. among a group of 18 countries that chose to boycott the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo (*Politiken*, 10/12/2010), or in an article on the lack of sex education in a whole range of Arab countries (*Jyllands-Posten*, 31/05/2010).

A single short paragraph touches on internal security policy in Tunisia. Under the heading: “Sick journalist imprisoned” (*Ekstra-Bladet*, 07/07/2010), news is announced of a journalist who is imprisoned for disseminating information threatening public order.

Generally speaking, Tunisia is a blank spot on the journalistic world map that only appears on the agenda if Denmark's sports or holiday interests are involved or if

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*Jyllands-Posten*, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, *Politiken* and gone into *Infomedia* with the search word *Tunisia* for the period 1/1-31/12-2010 without differentiating between areas of material, genre, debate subject or length of article.

<sup>7</sup> This sketch of the 2010 media coverage is not based on quantitative methods or statistical comparison, but on the overall impression based on a thorough reading and browsing through the material from the database search.

<sup>8</sup> References to articles in the press give the name of the media and the date. The name of the individual journalist is left out here, as it is actually the common journalistic view on events that are central, not the individual's.

Tunisian immigrants in Denmark succeed in getting themselves reported on in unfortunate ways. In the domestic and foreign policy fields the country goes totally unreported.

### **Egypt on the Danish Press Agenda in 2010 Before the Upeaval**

In contrast to Tunisia, Egypt is seen by journalists as a Middle Eastern élite nation and politically central to its region. Consequently, the country is also to a much greater extent to be found on the media's agenda, as shown by the figure of 1,400 articles that appear using the search-word *Egypt*.<sup>9</sup> The question then is what characterizes the content of those articles?

In Egypt's case Danish holiday-makers' interests also come to the fore in a series of articles, and Egypt appears on the sports pages, too. However, in comparison with Tunisia's restricted appearance on the agenda, Egypt in the Danish papers appears on a broader range of topics, such as in art and cultural matters. Some of the articles that refer to Egypt deal with literature, exhibitions, antiquities and bible studies – among other topics. The country is linked in this way with European cultural history, particularly through Egypt's place in studies of antiquity and the Bible.<sup>10</sup> Foreign- and security-policy stories about the Middle East are, however, the overriding reason for Egypt's having-a-place on the Danish agenda. Articles on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians connect both directly and indirectly to Egypt.<sup>11</sup> And further, when Iran and Syria are on the agenda, Egypt, with its strategic position, is drawn into the journalistic accounts.<sup>12</sup>

Egypt's position in the Arab/Muslim world<sup>13</sup> also means that articles about Islamising, or fears of terror, often refer to Egypt. Certain elements of the news are firmly anchored in the country, e.g. the marked attention paid to *The Muslim Brotherhood*, or attacks on Egyptian Copts. But several of these news items put the spotlight on the Arab/Muslim world in the general sense.<sup>14</sup> Egypt is also the place where Denmark meets the Muslim world and its reaction to the Mohammed crisis, since both *Politiken's* apology for the Mohammed cartoons and the government's *Arab Initiative* were responses to outrages throughout the entire Arab World, which was directly addressed at Egyptian organisations.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Same search as before only with *Egypt* as search-word.

<sup>10</sup> Around Easter articles that referred to Egypt while explaining the Easter traditions, e.g. occurs (*Berlingske*, 26/03/2001).

<sup>11</sup> E.g. recurring stories about the situation in Gaza, where Egypt played a crucial role (*Jyllands-Posten*, 03/01/2010; *Politiken*, 06/02/2010).

<sup>12</sup> E.g., an article on Syria's position in the Middle East that mentioned Egypt's role (*Jyllands-Posten*, 07/02/2010), while an article on the Iranian president also discusses the Egyptian position in the region (*Berlingske*, 7/10/2010).

<sup>13</sup> I use the somewhat diffuse description of *Arab/Muslim* since the concepts, in journalistic descriptions, are often mixed and turned into generalised stereotypes (See, inter alia, Karim, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> E.g. (*Kristeligt-Dagblad*, 15/02/2010)

<sup>15</sup> The Danish Mohammed cartoons were originally printed in the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005. 12 images of the Prophet Mohammed have been drawn by Danish cartoonists.

In contrast to the Danish press coverage of Tunisia, Egyptian domestic politics is a theme that does reach the Danish papers. Accordingly, scattered reports appear of unrests and dissatisfaction with Mubarak's rule in the year 2010, while the Parliamentary elections on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2010 put Egyptian domestic politics firmly on the agenda. And reportage of the Parliamentary election strikes a balance between both on-the-spot descriptions of the Egyptian election and more general descriptions of the common factors in society in the Arab/Muslim world. To regard the specifically 'Egyptian' as the prism for, or as synonymous with, the *Arabic* in general, is a recurrent frame of reference within the media that is explicitly articulated in leading articles, columns and commentaries. A leader in the *Kristeligt Dagblad* sets it out as follows:

“The problem in Egypt is in many ways the same as in other parts of the Middle East, where strongly authoritarian regimes suppress large opposition groups without leaving room for alternatives. The choice, therefore, in many of the countries of the region, lies between an authoritarian regime supported by the West and an Islamised opposition. There is next to nothing lying in the grey political area between these two influences” (*Kristeligt-Dagblad*, 15/02/2010).

According to Lars Erslev Andersen, who researches in the field of terror, both the political and social science appraisals of the Middle East are trapped in that binary logic where choice is thought to lie only between authoritarian, but stable regimes, and Islamic chaos (L. E. Andersen, 2011).

All told, Egypt occupies a much more important place than Tunisia in the Danish dailies' agenda; the pieces on Egypt stand out, in contrast to the extremely limited coverage of Tunisia, not simply in quantity but also in the variety of their themes and subjects. Comparison with Tunisia clearly reveals the reasons, including size, population, political strengths, alliances and influence. The country's historical and cultural position even gives Egypt a place in the European cultural history.

Most characteristic is nonetheless the journalistic double vision through which the circumstances in and around Egypt are simultaneously presented. Thus, Egypt both stands for itself and for the Arab world as a whole. The country's geographical position contributes to this. Related to it, is the fact that most papers have permanent correspondents in the country. In journalistic praxis Egypt is a reference point on which stories about the Arab world are based. Egypt expert Boserup describes Egypt's central significance for the Arab region with the

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Several of the cartoons were considered as an insult to Muslims by Muslim organisations in Denmark. In the following months the controversy became an international and diplomatic crisis when a number of Muslim countries condemned the cartoons, which were re-printed in several newspapers around the world. Demonstrations against Denmark and boycott of Danish products spread in Arabic countries to the point where the Danish embassy in Syria was burned down by protesters. In connection with the diplomatic crisis, the newspaper *Politiken* re-printed the cartoons. In January 2010 the then editor-in-chief of *Politiken* decided to apologise officially to a group of Egyptian-based Muslim organisations. In response to the Mohammed crisis the Danish government brought in and financed *The Arab Initiative*, a measure taken to improve mutual understanding between the Muslim and the Western worlds.

Egyptian proverb “What happens in Egypt doesn't remain in Egypt” (Boserup, 2011, p. 14).

## The Historic Breach

In the month of January 2011 Tunisia crashes onto the agenda with over 350 'hits' on *infomedia*.<sup>16</sup> On the 8<sup>th</sup> of January *Politiken* brought out the first story about unrest in Tunisia under the heading. “Young and poor revolt in North Africa” (*Politiken*, 08/01/2011). A couple of days later short notices appear on the situation in several papers. “At least 23 killed in street disturbances in Tunisia in the course of protests against unemployment and bad living conditions” (*Politiken*, 11/01/2011).

In the first accounts, the events are described within an interpretative framework of social unrest as the result of rising food prices. But shortly afterwards the journalistic accounts begin to include elements that point to dissatisfaction with political suppression and warn of a regime shift. “It began with protests about high youth unemployment and police brutality. Now it has become an 'intifada' that can threaten Ben Ali's hitherto rock-solid regime” (*Information*, 12/01/2011).

The Tunisian demonstrations appear sparsely in the newspapers' agenda however and are supplemented to a great extent by bureau material and French newspapers, as there are no Danish correspondents in the country. This changes drastically when, on 15<sup>th</sup> January, several papers are able to report that President Ben Ali has already stepped down on Friday, 14<sup>th</sup> January, and fled to Saudi Arabia. From this point on interest in Tunisia explodes.

One event seems significant when one reads the coverage retrospectively, namely that the papers completely failed to understand the extent of the revolt before the President had left the country. At all events, it was not given high priority on the papers' pages.

Viewed, and expressed, within an existing interpretative frame based on recurrent dissatisfaction with rising prices among the world's poor, none of the articles indicated that a revolution was under way. As late as 14<sup>th</sup> January *Jyllands-Posten* for example wrote about Ben Ali that “even though the President has been weakened he is still sitting firmly in power” (*Jyllands-Posten*, 14/01/2011). A great deal of the intense coverage from the 15<sup>th</sup> January and the following days, before the correspondents reached Tunisia, is either in fact late coverage or else a summarising of those events that did not get onto Danish newspapers' agenda.

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<sup>16</sup> Same newspapers as before search period 1- 31/1-2011, search-word *Tunisia*. For the analysis I have browsed through all of the articles in html format and selected those that offered interpretations and not just a news update.



When the subsequent uprising in Egypt got seriously under way at the end of January, the whole *Jasmine Revolution*, as the insurrection in Tunisia became known, takes on the mantle of prelude. The most notable difference is that this time the journalists have seen the writing on the wall and are there in position as eye-witnesses from the start. Journalism thereby recovers that “cultural authority” (Zelizer, 2007) in reporting and interpreting the course of world events, which the eye-witness role has traditionally given journalism.

In the period 15<sup>th</sup> January to 28<sup>th</sup> February there are over 1,500 articles referring to Egypt.<sup>17</sup> Among these is a remarkable degree of overlap with articles about Tunisia, since stories from the Jasmine Revolution are dragged into virtually all articles on Egypt; and this in turn is repeated with Yemen, Syria and other countries. Journalism is not anticipating one lone event, but a system shift: “The last weeks' protests in the Middle East are comparable with the situation existing before the fall of the Berlin Wall” (*Berlingske*, 27/01/2011). Demonstrators are cited as saying: “We will not be satisfied with bread: we demand respect” (*Politiken*, 29/01/2011), in which the shift from an interpretative frame based on social unrest to one based on democracy is incorporated.

In the following section I will look more closely at how these revolutions are explained through earlier historical events, both in North African countries and in world history itself. In the large sense, journalism's view of the revolutions can be seen in three different perspectives that all link the events with history. One perspective reaches back in history and discusses why the revolution took place; another focuses on the actual current events in Tunis and Egypt, and a third points ahead to discuss consequences, including the spreading of the revolutionary imperative to other Arab countries. Applicable to each – to the past, present and future perspectives – is that the revolutions are described within a common interpretative framework about a popular protest against years-long suppression by Arab dictators: an interpretation that unanimously regards the Tunisian and Egyptian people in a positive light, sees their protest as a just demand for democracy and the dictators' fall as an expression of historical justice.<sup>18</sup> Where there *can* be found disagreement about the journalistic interpretation is on the question of what the future will bring. In the following part I will look at how historical elements are woven into this story.

The objective of this close analysis of the historical analogy's enrolment in *The Arab Spring* is also to take into account how a fresh interpretation, or re-writing, of journalism's own previous coverage stands out.

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<sup>17</sup> Same papers, search period 15/01-28/02/2010, search word *Egypt*. In the analysis I focused mainly on the period around the end of January, when the demonstrations began in Cairo, and on the period around the departure of Mubarak.

<sup>18</sup> The positive framework is present e.g. in a reportage from Tunisia under the heading “While the People await Freedom” (*Jyllands-Posten*, 19/01/2011) where the fear and suppression under the regime of Ben-Ali is contrasted with the hope for democracy and the sense of freedom in the Tunisian people since Ben-Ali left the country. A heading in *Berlingske* even claims that “The Jasmine-revolution was inevitable” (*Berlingske*, 26/01/2011a).

## The Past

The historical perspective, in the case of the coverage about Tunisians, is especially significant in that long series of articles which attempt to re-discover that lost event. The articles also attempt to analyse on the causes and give explanations of why things went the way they did in Tunisia. Even though the revolution in Tunisia apparently caught the Danish press corps by surprise, the journalists quickly caught up on the story by using familiar templates from news on previous revolutions. As several studies indicate, the story of current events is told *through* earlier, similar news items (Edy, 1999; Olsson, 2010; Winfield et al., 2001; Zelizer, 1992). The moment of surprise arising from the unexpectedness of the events does not throw journalism off course, but to the contrary intensifies the use of well known templates for the production of news (Berkowitz, 1992). Within a few days, a common journalistic narrative is created covering the run up to the President's departure. In doing so, it selects particular elements in the story as being significant. These historical analogies can be found across the whole spectrum of the media, and thereby vindicates Zelizer's comment on journalism as a cooperative "interpretative community" (Zelizer, 1992).

In the journalistic narrative of the Tunisian revolt the starting point is taken as a young Tunisian who, in frustration at the absence of positive prospects in Tunisia's society, set fire to himself. The picture of the individual's helplessness and heroic protest is played up against a series of stories of the President's 23 years in power and of those elements of misuse of power, corruption and electoral fraud that marked his term in office. Tunisia which, throughout 2010 was only mentioned as an attractive tourist country, is suddenly described in such terms as *police state*, *Mafiosa-like dictatorship*, *regime*, and *totalitarian power*, while the President himself is called, inter alia, *dictator* and *despot*, and in one newspaper even as "Ceausescu of the desert" (*Information*, 27/01/2011).

President Mubarak was also drawn into the dictators' ranks along with Ben Ali. They are described as anachronistic personalities that had only been able to cling to power with the West's help : "These autocrats are known as the West's deputy sheriffs – of whom the 81 year old Mubarak is at present the most obvious example – and who tomorrow can very well be Gaddafi in Libya or Bouteflika in Algeria" (*Information*, 27/01/2011).

*Who* it is that depicts the presidents *Deputy sheriff* or *Ceausescu of the desert* is not made clear, but Danish papers had not promoted those views during the whole of 2010. Ben Ali himself had not been mentioned at all in Danish newspapers in 2010, while one could find occasional accounts of Mubarak in leading articles and columns that hinted at misuse of power or events that smacked of dictatorship. It is therefore worth mentioning that news journalism predominantly uses normative judgements when reporting about the upheavals in the year 2011. A special Egyptian variant calling Mubarak *Pharaoh* is also frequently used. This

characteristic re-writing of journalism's own previous descriptions of Mubarak – most commonly called *President* or just *Mubarak* – are most in evidence after his departure, when *Politiken* set its front page with the headline: “Dictator for 30 years. Overthrown in 18 days” (*Politiken*, 12/02/2011).

The problem in effect is that journalism, during the course of Mubarak's 30 years in power, did not to any significant degree describe him as a dictator. It is certainly only during the last 18 days up to Mubarak's demission that the description *dictator* has been used to any marked extent. In the same way it is significant that the adoption of that soubriquet is very much journalism's own choice and less so a cast-off from the world of politics. In the press coverage of the days around the falls of Ben Ali and Mubarak, respectively it is extremely difficult to find quotes from leading Danish ministries, or from other country's ministers and leaders, in which they use the description *dictator*. On the other hand there are several examples of the Egyptian demonstrators in the streets of Cairo calling Mubarak by a variety of epithets. But as in the above example, “Dictator for 30 years. Overthrown in 18 days” (*Politiken*, 12/02/2011), it is no shout from the streets that is made heard for the Danish newspaper readers, but the newspaper's authoritative interpretation of the course of history.

When journalism shifts its language use to the extent that the formal word *president* is replaced by *dictator* and *despot*, it is symptomatic for two interdependent events. First, there is a powerful distancing, because the phrase *the dictators* as a demonising description strip them of their hitherto legitimate position. Second, it is a sign that demonising has become the norm (D. Andersen & Jørndrup, 2010). The verbal portrait *dictator* first came to the fore in news journalism – traditionally bound by ideals of objectivity – when Mubarak has already lost power together with his western political props. Journalists do obviously not risk challenging either the Domestic or the Western political consensus (cf. Hallin, 1986) in calling overthrown presidents *dictators*. I see the sudden re-writing both of journalism's own views on – and previous descriptions of – the power relationships in North Africa, as journalistic re-writing of history, happening simultaneously with the contemporary recording of those historic events.

This observation is strengthened by the fact that journalism's rewriting of *The Arab Spring* is largely responsible for arousing considerable criticism of Western policy towards the Middle East. France especially, (in the case of Tunisia), but also the E.U. and U.S.A., are blamed in unequivocal terms for having stretched their hands out over the dictators and directly supported their regimes. However, no self-questioning of journalistic practise is to be found in the analysed articles about journalism's turning a blind eye towards the many years of suppression of Tunisian and Egyptian people. The analysed articles revealed no self-criticism about the journalistic silence on the subject of the western alliance with these regimes in the years before the revolutions. On the other hand, the picture of

revolution as an important historic and democratic milestone is strengthened by manifold references to earlier democratic revolutions in history.<sup>19</sup>

According to Edy (1999), the use of historical analogies is a widespread journalistic tool for understanding present day developments in the news, and at the same time points out that such historical analogies as a rule acquire the status of indisputable, objective facts when applied to present day accounts or analyses (Edy, 1999). The breakup of Eastern Europe in 1989 is prominent, in the same way, as an unchallenged and self-illuminating truth that the journalists can draw on without reservation.

Even an event that a broad swath of Danish journalists overlooked, or at any rate only categorised as low priority – the revolt in Tunisia – should actually be seen in the first instance as the result of the traditionally low degree of interest that the country is accorded in the Danish media. But that is not the explanation provided in the journalistic reporting, which, on the contrary, relegates it to the position of incontrovertible historical precedent.

“For one reason or another, the most all-embracing social upheavals are also the least foreseeable. When the Soviet Union broke up it caught most people by surprise in the same way in which it has surprised most people that thousands of citizens of countries in the Middle East have been revolting, and continue to revolt against their authoritarian regimes” (*Kristeligt-Dagblad*, 28/01/2011).

The entire common journalistic description of the protests as *The Arab Spring* (that properly speaking began in mid-winter), carries the connotation of a new start, but also borrows associations from *The Prague Spring* in 1968 and therewith the whole grand European story of democracy's victory over authoritarian regimes. Even that symbol of the divide between the captive regimes and our democratic world, the Berlin wall, is trotted out in, for example, *The Wall in the Middle East* (*Berlingske*, 27/01/2011), together with a number of references to countries, people or trends in the development of the earlier Eastern Bloc countries. And yet another western revolutionary movement is brought in as an explanatory frame for the event, “This is a young peoples' revolution – in Arabic” (*Politiken*, 16/01/2011).

## The Present

The core task of news journalism is to inform on what is happening right now, and in this connection the presence of journalists in situ is seen as an important tool in finding out what is happening. The first Danish correspondents reached Tunisia a couple of days after the President already had left the country. They sent home

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<sup>19</sup> A few days after the escape of President Ben-Ali an article in *Information* concluded that “The Jasmine Revolution marked a historical epoch and may carry over to the whole region” and based that conclusion on an analogy where this uprising was seen as “The Maghreb-version of the popular revolts that in 1989 lead to the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe” (*Information*, 17/01/2011).

reports of continued demonstrations connected with the power struggle in the wake of the President's escape. However, it is clear that the main event in Tunisia has already taken place, for which reason the eyewitness sources come in the form of the pickings from what has already happened. The journalists visit the presidential family's home, long since plundered, and interview Tunisians who happen to be there; or seek the family of the young, now dead Tunisian, who by his self-immolation is thought to have sparked off the protests.<sup>20</sup> At the same time the journalists make strenuous efforts to update the readers on political events in Tunisia.

Here also, historical references are drawn in and contribute to the placing and interpretation of current events. The power struggle in the now president-less country is compared to the situation 23 years earlier, when Ben Ali himself, on the pretext of being willing to bring in reforms, pulled off the coup d'état that brought him to power. However, comparisons with the power shifts connected with the *Carnation Revolution* in Portugal in 1974, in post-Hussein Iraq and, not least, in connection with Khomeini's climb to power in Iran, appear frequently.

The current perspective is central in quite a different way in the accounts from Cairo. Here, the newspapers sent out correspondents who manage to report on several weeks' protests and demonstrations before Mubarak finally steps down on 11<sup>th</sup> February. Because of this, voices of demonstrating Egyptians play a much more prominent role than those of Tunisian protesters, which are, at best, pretty much absent.

The demonstrators' aims and progress also creates openings for both drama and tension, for the correspondents who were sent out to take their place as eyewitnesses to, and chroniclers of, a historic event on the world's stage. 'Will the people win, or will the regime have the luck to snuff out this budding democracy?' is the very question that the journalists have been sent out to cover.<sup>21</sup> Even when journalists are not in Egypt, they still strive to give the sort of cover that simulates eyewitness sources. One article in *Information*: "Timeline: logbook from a day in the throes of revolution" (*Information*, 29/01/2011) sketches developments with precise timings throughout the day, using foreign journalists, TV stations and social media as sources.

For a short while the journalists' activities become part of the fight for democracy when Mubarak's agents tried to limit foreign press reporting from Tahrir Square

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<sup>20</sup> The metaphors associated with fire and self-immolation are commonly used. In the editorial *Jyllands-Posten* writes about the incident: "When the young Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi on December 17<sup>th</sup> set himself alight, he lit a fire, which is now spreading across the whole Arabic World" (*Jyllands-Posten*, 28/01/2011). A heading in *Kristeligt Dagblad* states: "The Tunisian fire is spreading" (*Kristeligt-Dagblad*, 19/01/2011).

<sup>21</sup> Under the heading "In Cairo, with darkness comes insecurity", a reportage from Cairo emphasises the uncertainty in the situation (*Berlingske*, 01/02/2011a) while another reportage gives the demonstrators the upper-hand: "Self-confident youngster: Now we own the Freedom Square" (*Politiken*, 01/02/2011).

demonstrations. But even that dramatic incident has a happy ending and *Ekstra Bladet* can report: “Reporters again welcome: from a cudgelling to a kiss on the cheek” (*Ekstra-Bladet*, 05/02/2011).

From the perspective of the eyewitnesses a clear separation of roles is made out, in which the heroic citizenry, in all its variety, stands together against the villains in the form of Mubarak and those backing him. In the sidelines lurks *The Muslim Brotherhood* who, it is feared, will take advantage of the situation.<sup>22</sup> This splitting of roles supports the interpretative frame based on an Arab fight for democracy, which, in the journalists' eyes, is bound to lead to a veritably historic upheaval in line with the Eastern Block's collapse in 1989. Consequently, the eyewitness sources and the statements of Egyptian witnesses are supplemented with historically framed tales of earlier struggles for democracy, in which Eastern Europe's fight for democracy is seen to be reflected in *The Arab Spring*. When Mubarak finally steps down, journalism can acclaim the popular demonstrators' victory as a historic event in world history. “The world's biggest street party was under way, just as moving and liberating as when the Berlin wall fell in 1989” (*Ekstra-Bladet*, 12/02/2011). Kennedy's famous words from Berlin are recognisable in the headline “Ecstasy of happiness: 'This evening the whole world is Egyptian' “ (*Information*, 12/02/2011a).

That Mubarak's demission is seen as a significant moment in history is shown by the almost identical catalogues of the world's historic high points in the newspapers. *Politiken* writes: “There are moments when the whole world pressed the pause button” and lists the Kennedy murder in 1963, the moon landing in 1969 and the terror attack on 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2001 before continuing: “For Egypt – indeed for the whole Middle East – Hosni Mubarak's resignation is of that importance. One can tell that from the celebration in the centre of Cairo” (*Politiken*, 13/02/2011). Here historical elements are linked with eyewitness sources to make an irrefutable case. *Jyllands-Posten* strikes just about the same note, though the fall of The Wall replaces the moon landing and support is drawn in from Middle East researchers to state “that the politically storm-ravaged Cairo has been touched in recent days by the rustle of history's wings” (*Jyllands-Posten*, 13/02/2011). Comparison with Eastern Europe's fall are so overwhelmingly present that the day after Mubarak's withdrawal *Information* can use the headline, “This is definitely not Berlin 1989” (*Information*, 12/02/2011b) over an article that sows doubt on how widely democracy can really gain acceptance in Egypt.

## The Future

In the journalistic descriptions of the revolutions, the fear of Islam is the fly in the ointment of democracy, just as it already was as part of the pre-revolutionary

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<sup>22</sup> E.g. “The struggle for power” (*BT*, 01/02/2011) where the position of *The Muslim Brotherhood* is compared with other political forces in Egypt.

interpretative frames covering the Arab world. For Tunisia, Egypt and the rest of the Arab world, it is feared that democracy will be derailed. This is picturesquely described in: “Tunisia's Islamists wait in the wings” (*Kristeligt-Dagblad*, 18/01/2011).

The papers are filled with articles on the news, news analyses and columns that in different ways try to forecast how firmly the democracy movement will become rooted in Tunisia, or alternatively whether it will be ousted by Islamic forces. Similarly, they raise the question of whether the waves of protest will spread and succeed in toppling dictators in other Arab countries, as under the headline: “Dictators sleep uneasily” (*Ekstra-Bladet*, 17/01/2011). *Berlingske*, meanwhile, when Mubarak has gone, asks: “Who falls next?” and foresees “a domino effect in the Middle East” (*Berlingske*, 13/02/2011).

Here there are both optimistic assessments of democracy's chances, and the expectation that other populations – in line with events in 1989 – will be fired by the Tunisian and Egyptian successes in toppling the dictators. In these extrapolations, heavy reliance is placed on historical references to European democratic movements, especially those in Eastern Europe.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast are the other journalistic conjectures about the future that foresee either the existing regimes as having a chance of survival, or that the Islamists will gain power. The pessimists, too, have a marked tendency to find historic instances in the histories both of Iran and Algeria. Common to all the journalistic prognoses of possible developments in the Middle East is that events are described as continually interwoven with each other, so that Egypt's showdown is constantly related with those in Tunisia, Yemen, etc.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, a series of historical events play an important role in various ways. “Journalism uses a past event as a tool to analyse and predict the outcome of the current situation” (Edy, 1999, p. 77). The claim of journalism to predict the future relies on specific concepts concerning *the past* and *history*. The *past* is perceived as a real, and neutral, account of events from around the world that calls for no expert interpretation. Journalists have direct access to this account, as have the readers. The past in this form can be used to predict future events within a concept of *history* that sees the unfolding of world events as being governed by a system of reasoning that remains unchanged over time; a notion of history as repeating itself (Edy, 1999; Jørndrup, 2012).

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<sup>23</sup> As in *Berlingske* which under the heading “Chaos or democracy” discusses the possibilities for democracy versus Islamic rule in various Arabic countries (*Berlingske*, 28/01/2011), and under the heading “Freedom is the best gold” the situation in Egypt is analyzed by comparing the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the revolutions in Eastern Europe 1989, which represent the Islamic and the democratic outcome of a revolution, respectively (*Berlingske*, 01/02/2011b).

<sup>24</sup> It is a very common feature in many articles to include a fact box which gives brief information about the current situation in several Arabic countries, while the main article focuses on one country. E.g. an article in *Berlingske*: “Anger explodes in Egypt” that includes a fact box called: “Hot Spots in North Africa” with brief updates on the uprising in four countries (*Berlingske*, 26/01/2011b).

## Journalism's own Historical Standpoint Disappears

Journalism's representation of Ben Ali and Mubarak and their years-long regimes are rewritten to an enormous extent and in very short order. Ben Ali, who was almost unknown to Danish newspaper readers, was for a short time the moment's most vilified ex-dictator, until media interest descended on Mubarak. Ben Ali's and Mubarak's falls are seen, in journalism's accounts, as positive events that all democratic and freedom-loving people the world over should be pleased about. Journalism helps the rejoicing on its way, partly by including the events in western narratives about democratic revolutions, partly by summarising the history of the dictators' many years of misuse of power. Both approaches can, on one assumption, be seen as journalistic tools-of-the-trade in creating identity with, and interest in, the development of countries normally seen as peripheral, but it can also be seen as a clear sign of journalistic rewriting of history with the aim of securing for journalism a continuing and unspotted platform as neutral observer from the world's trouble-spots.

The point is that both journalistic approaches lack relevance in the Arab countries themselves. As the trawl of the newspapers' coverage of Tunisia and Egypt showed, the democratic movements – as with the movements in Eastern Europe before the dissolution of the Eastern Block – were not included in the journalistic accounts of these countries, which to the contrary were caught in the binary logic between dictatorship and Islamism. And neither, indeed, is the anxiety for the suppressed peoples which they so sympathetically describe in the first post-revolutionary days, to be found in journalism's own reports from 2010. Most significant in the coverage of Tunisia, where neither the Ben Ali regime nor Tunisian domestic politics were mentioned at all in 2010.

That either the victor or time writes history is also a well-known cliché, but there is more to it, and something different, at stake here. While journalism is very sensitive to, and critical of, how western leaders re-define their alliances with Arab leaders so readily they ostensibly have no eye for nor do they reflect on journalism's own corresponding u-turns. In the rapid rewriting of Tunisia's and Egypt's histories in recent years, journalism actually hides its own position in both its implicit alliance with the earlier regimes and in its corresponding indifference to the previously suppressed peoples.

Breaking with earlier allies can perhaps, to a certain extent at least be accepted and legitimised under the banner of the foreign policy system, where security policy considerations, protection of the national interest, and similar factors, trump other concerns. Journalism on the other hand has no such differing aims that can be weighed against shifting alliances and strategic opportunities, but claims itself to be ideally free of these influences, and committed to tell the truth about the course of world events. For this reason, it appears that news journalism finds it hard either to accept, or to reflect on, its own shifts of alliance, but hides them by



rewriting history, and legitimises them in the routines of journalistic news production. And even though these rewritings of history should help journalism out of that acute difficulty by legitimising its position in a new situation, in fact the manoeuvre leads to two new problems.

First, this kind of journalistic practise is breaking with the fundamental expectations of and contract with the readers when it rewrites history that it has itself previously set down. The matter of course in which, for example, the hitherto omitted story of Ben Ali's 23 years in power is re-told in such great haste implies that the reader already knows about it. But just as readers could not earlier have read in Danish papers that Ben Ali was called *The Ceausescu of the desert*, neither could they have read in them anything about other details of Tunisian domestic politics, and would certainly have been unable to find reports that elicited sympathy for the suppressed Tunisian people.

When journalists implicitly refer to an earlier history that has not previously mentioned, it is – in some regard – cheating the audience. The individual reader who cannot recall having read of the Tunisian dictatorship may well believe that it is his or her own memory that has slipped the point, when really what it is about is that the foreign news sections have not, earlier on, regarded the country and its people's troubles as newsworthy.<sup>25</sup>

Second, that rewriting of history, which to begin with is more of a narrative about the western world's studies of its own revolutionary history and an acclamation of western democratic ideals, than any coverage of existing Arab societies, creates problems for journalism's future reporting from those same Arab countries. When the Arab turmoil was mainly reported within the frame of revolutionary argument, the dictators' demission has been the climax of the story, after which it can be difficult to maintain the public's interest in events. Similarly it can be difficult for journalism to understand the subsequent course of events if developments do not follow the same path as did those in Eastern Europe.

When Ben Ali and Mubarak had been deposed, the enormous media attention to Tunisia and Egypt faded in consequence. Fresh individual events in those countries continued to attract journalism's interest, but the question of the direction in which internal developments are moving are not the object of similar attention. Various media take stock of *The Arab Spring* from time to time and thus *Politiken*, on 15<sup>th</sup> May, disseminated an article that was illustrated with a map of the Middle East. Each country was presented with a *Rebellion Barometer* that could swing from Dictatorship to Democracy. A new binary logic was now put in place, but the absence of that very logic was illustrated by the fact that a large

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<sup>25</sup> The fact that Tunisia is very rarely on Danish news agenda is understandable, given the country's position in the world and the scarce resources in foreign news desks. It is not the low level of interest in Tunisian politics that is criticized here, but the fact that newspapers neglected to tell their readers, that they had not previously reported about Tunisian domestic politics.

number of the countries were clustered in mid-barometer, around the status shown as *undecided* (*Politiken*, 15/05/2011).

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