

Global Media Journal

German Edition

Vol. 2, No.1, Spring/Summer 2012

URN: urn:nbn:de:gbv:547-201200080

Covering the Arab Spring: Middle East in the Media – the Media in the Middle East

The Editorial

Ehab Galal & Riem Spielhaus

As the events usually referred to as ‘the Arab Spring’ unfolded in Arab countries throughout the first half of the year 2011, conventional as well as social media were attributed a crucial role by observers as not only reporting what was going on but also by potentially taking part in mobilizing people for change. The involvement of media in the events raises vital questions about the role of TV, press, and social media in political unrests and how they are used as means to articulate or ignore frustrations of Arab populations. These questions concern the contributions of this special issue that brings together articles from various disciplines describing and analyzing specific cases of media coverage of the ‘Arab Spring’ especially during the first months of 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria.

By offering insights to a set of mediatized spaces in and outside the Middle East during the first months of the uprisings, the aim of this special issue of *Global Media Journal – German Edition* is to provide a basis for critical reflections with regard to media and opinion formation. Moreover, it aims to discuss research strategies and methodologies which are being applied to the analysis of interaction between media, politics and emerging cultural practices.

“Covering the Arab Spring” builds on studies on media in the Middle East and on the perception of the Middle East and Islam in Europe. Thus, the articles refer to a twofold role of the media by connecting research on the role of media in Arab speaking countries with research on media representation of events in these countries.

Media as actors for change

From the beginning, one of the most accentuated characteristics of the 'Arab Spring' was – not least in the media beyond North Africa and the Middle East – the essential influence of social media, such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and mobile phones. Functioning as tools for informing and mobilizing mainly the youth to participate in demonstrations and other protest activities, social media were quickly branded as a new democratic force changing the Arab regimes. The enthusiastic optimism ascribed to the power of social media was replaced after a while with more analytical approaches.

Media are not only indispensable sources to follow the events, but are themselves actors in the political mobilization by reporting and giving (different) meaning to the events. This becomes obvious when looking at *Facebook*-pages of activists who call for people to participate in demonstrations and other protests. By contrasting the representations of events in Cairo in two newspapers and two *Facebook*-pages during the first two months of the Egyptian uprisings, Amr Osman and Marwa Abdel Samei show in their detailed account that established 'national' media are contributing their version of the events as well. With regard to the Syrian uprisings, Lorenzo Trombetta portrays a media-war between cyber activists inside and outside Syria and official propaganda and therewith shows how both the regime and the activists attempt to represent the "real events on the ground".

National as well as international visibility of events has proven to be a relevant factor of media as actors of change. Visibility is not only significant to allow audiences to be informed about events in another city, nation or region, but it was a major catalyst and tool for those demonstrating in different Arab cities. Being present in national or international media, *Facebook* and *Twitter* appeared to be one of the major tools for protestors in their struggle for both national and international support.

Despite protestor's presence in social media, Egypt's state-owned media continues to be the arena of "confirmed" intellectuals, who according to Zvi Bar'el successfully re-constitute a hegemonic discourse that dictates the consensus, according to the ruling power's parameters. Senior writers, who have represented the top echelon of Egypt's public intellectuals, are still writing in the government-owned press, expressing their newly adjusted views that conform with the "spirit of change" while trying to maintain their position as public opinion shapers.

Regimes of censorship of varying degrees of severity exist across the region. "But how effective are they?" asks Edward Webb. In his article he investigates the relationship between censorship and popular uprisings with a survey of trends in repression of information across Arab states of Middle East & North Africa over several decades. Webb finds little support for the hypothesis that partial liberalization provokes revolutionary outbreaks. The trends rather indicate that

high or increasing repression might amplify the probability of regime-challenging popular mobilization. Most states experiencing popular uprisings have been among the more repressive in terms of freedom of expression. Egypt is an exception in the region that did allow more freedom but saw an uprising nevertheless. Webb assumes that repressive systems increase the pressure for people to meet face to face and act in public spaces by denying mediated opportunities to express frustrations.

New public spaces – new freedom of speech? Interaction and dependence of different types of media

The revolts were in some cases literally leading to the emergence of new public spaces and spheres, in which the new employment of technologies of communication was closely connected with the struggle for and appropriation of freedom of speech. These emerging spaces lead to an immediate diversification of media initiated by individuals. They started to print private newspapers, shared information in the form of wall newspapers in public places or local initiatives opened radio stations. Here, media activities appear again as an expression of a need to communicate, to express oneself, to share information, their interpretations and contextualization to a wider audience and last but not least to form communities of shared knowledge and action.

Simultaneously, media was on the one hand characterized by the absence or denial of what happened in the streets in national TV and national newspapers. On the other hand accounts were given every hour, every minute or every second on transnational satellite channels, on *Facebook* or *Twitter*. Consequently, the popular disillusionment with the 'national' media led parts of the public to turn to private newspapers and satellite channels for keeping pace with the events. This went hand in hand with a lack of influence by state-owned Egyptian media on public opinion during the anti-Mubarak uprisings in connection with the mistrust resulting from the admitted misinformation they previously publicized. However, on this point Zvi Bar'el raises the question why 'national' media are indeed still in place, a fact that he understands as an indicator for a continuity of the elite behind these media.

In his analysis of the interaction between traditional and new media during the first months of the Syrian uprisings Lorenzo Trombetta describes a constant media monitoring by both sides, activists and the Syrian regime, in which the two blocks observe, study and even learn from each other in an unceasing long-distance dialogue.

As the article by Mikkel Fugl Eskjær indicates the interaction between 'new' and 'old' media unfolds another dimension in the coverage of developments in the foreign press. In an unprecedented way, social media became a new source in

newspaper reporting and thereby added more local voices to the press coverage, even though it is mostly employed when traditional field reports from correspondents are unavailable.

International representations and perceptions

As the uprisings in several Arab countries emerged, international media introduced and presented the events under the single heading of the ‘Arab Spring’. Hence, disparate events that originated in vastly differing historical circumstances within separate Arab countries were assigned a common name, theme, and aesthetics: *the* ‘Arab Spring’. The term is on the one hand homogenizing the Arab world to a common region, hiding the different histories, languages and cultures. On the other hand it is associated with awakening – spring, the time of sowing what will be harvested in autumn. Moreover, the season stands for hope after a long and deep winter. And this seems to have been not only a selling point for media but has been appealing also to the demonstrators.

The section with contributions on the coverage of the ‘Arab Spring’ in Europe and South America highlights tensions between different perspectives on developments in the region that are informed by national, ideological or corporative interests. In his article “The Arab Spring is a Latin American Winter” Massimo Di Ricco from Bogota presents the development of a cooperation between the two transnational satellite television channels, the pan-Latin American channel *TeleSUR* and the Qatar-based *Al-Jazeera*, which after they had signed the agreement of cooperation in 2006 were accused by US conservative Republicans to build up a “network of terror”. Di Ricco argues that the coverage of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria until summer 2011 by *TeleSUR* seems to be rather a result of political interests of the channel's founders, than an attempt pursuing balanced information. While in the case of Egypt and Tunisia *TeleSUR* was expressing the voice of the people, in the case of Syria and Libya the voice heard was that of friendly governments. At this point the channel mostly focused on denouncing international media manipulation. In these attacks to international media, a direct and indirect target was *Al-Jazeera*, until then a partner and role model for *TeleSUR*. In the aftermath of the ‘Arab Spring’, the alliance between the two Arab and Latin American networks appears to lose its grip.

With a detailed comparative study of Danish press coverage of the uprisings in Tunisia and Syria from January-March 2011 Mikkel Fugl Eskjær demonstrates that the ‘Arab Spring’ has generated unprecedented attention to the Arab world in European news media. His mixed quantitative and qualitative content analysis monitors also patterns of and changes in news reporting on the Middle East, which show that the ‘Arab Spring’ challenged previous patterns of media attention to the Middle East including social conditions, new media, relations between religion and democracy apart from the more traditional themes of violence, terrorism and

international politics and leading to a more balanced attention to the geographic and social composition of the region. However, some patterns seem to persist like concerns about the relation between Islam and democracy, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the somewhat stereotyped perceptions of Arab politics.

Particularly interesting is not only how the events themselves were reported but also how they were contextualized and which comparisons were drawn within European contexts. In Europe and the US, perceptions and media coverage of the developments in Arab countries in early 2011 was initially shaped by national frameworks of the perception of Islam, especially during the first days and weeks of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. As the unrests gained momentum and affected more and more countries, the frames for presenting and analyzing them in media and politics were challenged and finally changed considerably.

Thus, the article by Hanne Jørndrup is concerned with the historical constructions of 'the Arab Spring' in Tunisia and Egypt in Danish newspapers which refer to revolutionary events in the past that are then presented as analogue. In particular the European revolutionary history of 1989 in Eastern Europe or the French revolution 1873-91, are woven into the journalistic descriptions of events in North Africa and the Middle East. Jørndrup draws our attention to journalism's role as the first chronicler – who publishes the first draft of history but also the second drafts in rewriting their prior commentary. Journalistic accounts of Tunisia and Egypt from 2010 were still caught in the binary logic between dictatorship and Islamism and did not include reports on existing democratic movements. In the reports on the 'Arab Spring', stories of Arab regimes have been rewritten as years of misuse of power while journalists celebrated the events by including them in "Western narratives" about democratic revolutions, thereby creating identity with, and interest in the development of countries previously seen as peripheral. In the rapid rewriting of Tunisia's and Egypt's histories, Jørndrup argues, journalism hides its own position in its implicit alliance with the earlier regimes concealing its own shifts of alliance and finally presenting an acclamation of "Western" democratic ideals.

Several of the articles in this issue address not only different media presentations but present examples for manipulation of facts, conscious misrepresentation and different perspectives on events. Herein lays a methodological challenge for any research on the upheavals. By and large researchers depend on the various media in order to follow or reconstruct what happened during the 'Arab Spring'. All the more important it seems to reflect the role of media in future academic work in this subject.

Obviously, the perspectives included in this special issue of GMJ do not cover all the possible and relevant perspectives of the media's role during the Arab uprisings. However, we hope they all contribute to the discussion by including a broader concept of media than the so far dominant focus on social media as a force

of mobilization. Also, the articles gathered here illustrate how challenging it is to describe – let alone analyze – recent developments that are not even completed yet.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank Jørgen Nielsen from the *Centre for European Islamic Thought* as well as Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen from the *Islam and the Public Sphere Program* at University of Copenhagen, Nina Grønlykke Møllerup and Michael Irving Jensen from the *International Media Support* for their contributions and support to develop the arguments presented in the contributions to this special issue.

Authors / Guest Editors

Ehab Galal is Assistant Professor in Modern Islam and Middle East Studies at the University of Copenhagen. He holds a PhD on Islamic satellite television. In his current project he examines “Audience responses to Islamic programming on Arab Television” including several long-term ethnographic fieldworks in Europe and the Middle East.

Email: ehab@hum.ku.dk

Riem Spielhaus is Research Fellow at the Centre for European Islamic Thought, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Within the field of Muslim minority studies she focuses on identity politics and religious practice of Muslims in Europe as well as on the (self)presentation of Muslims and Islam in European media and academia. In her current research project she compares national and multinational polls and surveys among Muslims in Western Europe since 2000.

Email: rsp@teol.ku.dk