

"NEW MEDIA CONFIGURATIONS - CHANGING SOCIETIES? CURRENT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH ASIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA"

Panel 2: The Political Economy of Media: Politics, Ownership and Technologies

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"Persisting Powers, Fragmentation and Trust. Transforming the Egyptian Media System"

Abstract

In Egypt, the protests in early 2011 and the resulting ouster of president Hosni Mubarak triggered a surge of new print publications, TV channels, and grass-root media collectives. Still, freedom of expression is highly contested and this leaves observers doubting the existenc of a free Egyptian media system in the future.

In order to reinforce their prerogative of interpretation, the now ruling Muslim Brotherhood appointed their own sympathizers to chief executives in the state-controlled media. Thus, by using means to retain power invented by the former regime, they fatally damaged initiatives to reform these institutions from the inside. Similiarly worrying are the delay in reforming media laws and bodies as well as the increase of legal attacks on outspoken journalists and presenters. The private media market remained tightly in the hands of businessmen advanced in the time of the Mubarak regime. In the highly contested market some new publications already failed and had to close down due to the economic situation and lack of advertising revenues. This market drive in addition to fierce competition in the political field have led to an even more polarized media scarcely suitable to restore citizen's trust in the professionalism of media workers or to help create a vital public sphere.

Research suggests that although new communication channels like blogs or social media played a powerful role in the evolution of revolts from Tunisia to Turkey, the success of political activism relied heavily on more traditional ways of communication, namely personal interaction and TV talk shows. Media collectives like "Mosireen" as well as individual bloggers – some of them journalists who discovered the Internet as a space to escape the burdens of censorship and self-censorship long before 2011 – certainly enjoy the trust of their followers. Nevertheless media audiences in the Internet are fragmented and do not represent a public sphere in its entirety.

In the light of these considerations, Egypt and its media need to strive further in order to develop an environment eligible for free and fair discourse and finally the establishment of democratic institutions – the same seems to apply for countries like Tunisia and Libya. Media institutions need to regain the trust of the public to be able to lobby for thorough legal reforms and amendments to the constitution. One way to do so might be to establish suitable means of self-regulation, transparency and accountability.