The Transformative Egyptian Media Landscape:
Changes, Challenges and Comparative Perspectives

SAHAR KHAMIS

University of Maryland, College Park

This article analyzes the transformative Egyptian media landscape that shaped and reflected the equally transformative political landscape that led to Egypt's historical revolution. It provides an overview of Egyptian media and discusses how that eclectic scene exhibited many paradoxes. It analyzes the role of Egyptian media during the 2011 revolution, in which cyberactivism ignited public mobilization, enabled civic engagement, and encouraged citizen journalism. It discusses the post-revolutionary phase, in which Egyptian media are undergoing a restructuring process that mirrors political transformations. It contextualizes the transformations in the Egyptian media landscape within a comparative perspective that highlights the uniqueness of Egyptian media, as well as how and why they defy categorization or dichotomization. It concludes with observations on comparative media research; its applicability, or lack thereof, to the Egyptian media scene; and future expectations from this research in the Arab Awakening and the communication revolution accompanying it.

The Eclectic and Paradoxical Egyptian Media Landscape: An Historical Overview

To answer the question of why the media are the way they are, we have to first answer the question of why the government-media relationship is the way it is (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This makes it important to situate the complex government-media relationship in the transformative Egyptian media landscape within the appropriate historical context, through providing a brief historical overview of Egyptian media.

Before the 1952 revolution, Egypt was a monarchy under Ottoman rule, and it struggled against French and British occupation. This political context impacted the many newspapers and magazines published during this era of heavy focus on fighting against Ottoman rule and foreign occupation. The general atmosphere was characterized by hot political debates, highly nationalistic sentiments, and patriotic struggles against foreign invasion and colonialism (Hamroush, 1989). This era was also rich in its cultural wealth and intellectual diversity, because the newspapers provided platforms for various writers, poets, and thinkers to display their literary contributions. It also witnessed the birth of a strong and

Sahar Khamis: skhamis@umd.edu
Date submitted: 2010–04–18

dynamic partisan press and the introduction of leading daily newspapers, cinema, and radio (Sabat & Abdel Azim, 2001), as well as a highly politicized and vibrant media environment and significant partisanship among both media professionals and audiences.

When a group of army officers toppled the monarchy and seized power, turning Egypt into a republic, the so-called 1952 revolution led to mostly tragic developments in the Egyptian media scene. The pluralistic and vibrant media scene that had prevailed before the 1952 revolution, when Egypt was under British occupation, was replaced by a much more monolithic and restrictive media environment after Egypt achieved independence. In this new era, all media fell under strict governmental supervision, control, and ownership. Newspapers of the pre-1952 era started to disappear, as many were closed by the government, heavy financial fines were imposed on them, and many journalists were jailed (Abdel Rahman, 1985, 2002).

The era of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, in particular, was characterized by autocratic leadership, since he exercised an iron fist policy in dealing with his opponents. His policy led to a severe backlash in the margin of freedom enjoyed by various media, because he deliberately controlled mass media to mobilize people behind the government's policies and ideologies (Boyd, 1977, 1999). Most important, "Nasser's nationalization of the press marked the end of its freedom, professionalism, and excellence" (Nasser, 1990, p. 4) by curbing its diversity and plurality.

When Anwar Sadat came to power as president in 1970, after Nasser's death, he legitimized the birth of political parties and enabled them to publish their own newspapers. Although he started to ease off some of the harsh restrictions and limitations posed by Nasser on the media, the damage to the Egyptian media scene during the Nasser era was beyond repair for a long time. Under Sadat, "the press system changed several times, both toward and away from more diversity and freedom of expression. Sadat's attitude toward the press, and toward freedom of speech generally was . . . ambivalent" (Rugh, 2004, p. 152). That's because he was torn between his desire to increase democracy and his fear of its exploitation.

Therefore, his era, which started with the granting of a relatively wider margin of freedom and pluralization in both the political and media domains, ended with very strict and restrictive measures against his political opponents and their publications. Many of Sadat's political opponents were jailed, and the publications to which they contributed were shut down shortly before his assassination.

This ambivalent official attitude toward the media continued under President Hosni Mubarak, who assumed power after Sadat's assassination in 1981. Although he initially encouraged opposition parties to publish their own newspapers, the absence of true democratic practice and real political participation left these parties and their papers without a real base of popular support. Additionally, the high illiteracy rate in Egypt limited these newspapers' circulation, and the lack of trust in the political parties that published them limited their credibility in the eyes of the Egyptian people.

Moreover, Mubarak's ambivalent attitude toward the press was evident in that, although he allowed opposition parties and their publications to exist, "arrests and abuse of journalists—police assaults

and raids, detentions, even torture—continued" (ibid., p. 156). Therefore, the three presidents have much in common in terms of leadership and their relationship with the media.

However, the era of President Hosni Mubarak witnessed significant developments that affected the Egyptian media landscape. These include the emergence of media privatization, the introduction of private satellite television channels, the spread of privately owned opposition newspapers (both in print and online), and growing Internet accessibility.

According to Sakr (2001), the introduction of satellite television offered an uncensored alternative to otherwise government-owned and -regulated media, meaning that the audience became widely and increasingly exposed to many new cultural, political, and social influences. This led some authors to discuss the extent of the democratizing effect of satellite television channels (Lynch, 2005; Seib, 2007), mainly because their influx represented an important shift away from the monolithic, state-controlled, and government-owned media pattern to a much more pluralistic and diverse media scene (Atia, 2006; Khamis, 2007).

This pluralistic media scene also manifested itself in the birth of many small opposition newspapers in Egypt alongside the three semi-official dailies: *Al Ahram*, *Al Akhbar*, and *Al Gomhoria*. This was another example of the shift from total state ownership and complete governmental control to private ownership and individual or party control, thus increasing the degree of media pluralism and diversity. Some of these newly emerging opposition newspapers were very critical of the government and its top officials, and in some cases, they even broke some of the widely held taboos by criticizing very senior government officials, including the president (Atia, 2006).

Another major transformation was the introduction of the Internet in Egypt in October 1993. The widespread access to the Internet and the emerging concept of blogs (Abdulla, 2006; Atia, 2006; Iskander, 2006), as well as various forms of online social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, meant that a new arena became available in which the public could express views, ideas, and criticism; comment on everyday issues; and discuss cultural, social, religious, and, indeed, political topics.

Another good example of the newly emerging pluralistic media scene is that many newspapers, both governmental and oppositional, created their own websites. Many online newspapers represented diverse voices and conflicting political views, which were sometimes very critical of the government and its top officials (Atia, 2006). This signaled the coexistence of official, state-owned media on one hand, alongside oppositional private media on the other.

In brief, the introduction of these new media outlets signified a shift away from a highly monolithic media scene to a more pluralistic one. However, it was not until the 2011 revolution that the proliferation of these new media aided a genuine shift toward political reform in Egypt.

The overview of the Egyptian media landscape highlights a number of paradoxes that deserve special attention. The first is that the complex, often ambivalent relationship between the press and the state in Egypt has meant that the margin of freedom allowed for the media has oscillated between the

poles of press freedom and government repression. This repression was clearly demonstrated in various forms of direct and indirect state control, whether in the form of censorship, economic subsidies, media regulations, or governmental media ownership, especially over broadcast media and national daily newspapers (Al-Kallab, 2003). In brief, the Egyptian media exhibited a high degree of ambivalence in the government-media relationship (Rugh, 2004).

Moreover, the pace of change in the Egyptian media arena has been much faster than in the political arena, leading to uneven development between press freedom and political freedom, whereby the accelerating rate of press freedom, despite its many handicaps, restrictions, and imperfections, was not equally matched by actual political reform or real democratic practice.

This paradox could be referred to as a case of media schizophrenia (Iskander, 2006) because of the wide gap between the very loud, critical, or even angry voices heard through alternative media avenues in Egypt and the absence of true democratic practice and actual political participation.

Therefore, we can argue that the Egyptian media were largely acting as safety valves that allowed the public to vent anger and frustration at many political, economic, and social ills and injustices, especially given that people were not granted the chance to exercise real political rights or actual decision-making. This provided an interesting paradox, whereby new media substituted, rather than promoted, actual democratic practice and the exercise of real political rights (Seib, 2007). This trend was widely encouraged by many Arab governments for the purpose of either absorbing the public's anger and frustration at major political, economic, or social grievances, or diverting the public's attention away from them (Khamis, 2007; Seib, 2007). In every case, the underlying assumption was that, if the public were offered some avenues through which to vent anger and frustration, more drastic actions, such as protesting or revolting, could be avoided or at least delayed.

Additionally, the Egyptian media scene witnessed a number of parallel, though contradictory, phenomena. The first was authoritarianism versus resistance. While governmental hegemony and control were widely exercised in the political domain without genuine political participation, many alternative, resistant voices were creating their own media as platforms to express their political thoughts and oppositional views (Zayani, 2008). One good example was the *kefaya* opposition movement; the name means "enough" in Arabic, and it was conveying a clear message to the Egyptian president. This secular political group, like many others in Egypt, managed to have its views heard through Internet websites and blogging (Abdulla, 2006). Another example, representing the bipolar opposite of "re-Islamization,"[1] was

---

[1] The term "re-Islamization" refers to the increasing tide of Islamic resurgence that swept many parts of the Muslim world over the last few decades, starting in the 1970s. This wave of Islamic revival movements attracted wide attention from the international community, in general, and the West, in particular. In understanding this phenomenon, it is of prime importance to bear in mind that it encompasses a wide array of diverse, and sometimes even contradictory or conflicting, trends—ranging from the liberal modernists, who advocate reconciling Islamic core values and principles with contemporary ways of living and encourage dialogue, tolerance, and coexistence, to the most militant groups, who advocate a violent form of jihad. Unfortunately, the latter group, although they represent a very small fraction of the Islamic

the Muslim Brotherhood, a widely popular religious group that had been banned for many years by the Egyptian government. This group also recognized the potential the blogosphere holds for its active organization and politicization, and it launched a Web-based campaign to help its members who had been arrested, through online mobilization, instead of protesting or demonstrating (*The Economist*, 2007).

Therefore, it can be argued that the Egyptian media scene witnessed diverse communication content, which ranged from Islamism to secularization and from conservatism to liberalization, all expressed in varied outlets, including such digital media as websites, blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts, as well as mainstream media.

Another coexisting phenomenon was public versus private media ownership. State ownership was still the pattern in major Egyptian media outlets, though private ownership was expanding rapidly, as in the case of satellite television channels and opposition newspapers (Boyd, 1999; Rugh, 2004).

Finally, a closely related phenomenon was the coexistence of an official sphere versus a popular sphere, with official mainstream views, representing the governmental policies and positions, alongside the popular, diverse views, which usually came from private, independent, and more outspoken channels of communication, such as blogs (Seymour, 2008; Weyman, 2007) and other types of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. This paradox signified the large divide between such official spheres as governmental institutions and their controlled media and the popular spheres, in which most of the everyday communication activities take place in most of the Arab world. These include interpersonal communication; informal institutions, such as the market place or the mosque; communication with opinion leaders; and more recently, digital media. This gap was evident in that the political upheaval which toppled the Mubarak regime came about with the help of non-mainstream communication.

Egyptian Media During the 2011 Revolution: New Media and Public Will Mobilization

The 2011 popular revolution that ended President Mubarak's 30-year rule clearly revealed the potential of new media, especially online social media, in the creation of an active and vibrant civil society that would otherwise remain impossible because of the government's repression of religious and political groups, as well as its direct and indirect forms of control over mainstream media outlets. The role played by these media best resembles the process of "public will mobilization" which is defined by Salmon, Fernandez, and Post as "a social force that can mobilize organically, or with external support and influence, to become a political lever for social change [it] has the potential, if adequately resourced, organized, and mobilized, to serve as the impetus for social change" (2010, p. 159).

The role of new media during the Egyptian revolution was especially important in three intertwined ways: enabling cyberactivism, a major trigger for street activism; encouraging civic

---

resurgence movements, are the ones who attracted most international media attention.

engagement, by aiding the mobilization and organization of protests and other forms of political expression; and promoting a new form of citizen journalism, which provided a platform for ordinary citizens to express themselves.

Despite the political dissatisfaction that was generally shared among the Egyptian people and the availability of shared knowledge and information in the political arena, there was a need to find the missing link between public anger and resentment of the ruling regime and actual public mobilization to bring about real change. Political activism in the real world, aided by cyberactivism in the virtual world, found this link, transforming the role of new media in Egypt from just safety valves to effective mobilization tools.

According to Egyptian political activist Mohamed Mustafa, one of the organizers of the January 25 revolution, "the Egyptian revolution was already being planned for a long time ago." The protest in Cairo's Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, was not the first protest to be called for in Egypt. Because the Egyptian people were fed up with the corruption, dictatorship, economic distress, and humiliation that they had been experiencing, several protest movements were already active in the Egyptian political arena.

However, they failed to bring about real change because they could not achieve public will mobilization on a massive scale. Most of their marches and protests attracted only hundreds of people, which made it easy for the police to crack down on them.

This was not the case in Egypt's 2011 popular revolution, in which the use of new technologies helped to publicize the protest and ensure a popular base of support for it. The efforts to mobilize the public and bring about the desired political change were orchestrated by three groups that combined street activism with cyberactivism: the National Coalition for Change, the April 6 movement, and the "We are all Khalid Said" group, named for a young Egyptian man who was beaten to death by police after uploading a YouTube video exposing police corruption.

These movements, which have been active since 2005, used cellphones, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to document police excesses and brutality, organize meetings and protests, alert one another to police movements, and get legal help for those who had been arrested (Ishani, 2011; Nelson, 2008). The Facebook page "We are all Khalid Said" had more than 350,000 "friends" before January 14, 2011, and the creator of this page, Wael Ghonim, indicated that it was successful because it used surveys to determine the majority's opinion, which then prevailed (Joyce, 2011). In brief, we can clearly see the multiple roles performed by new media during the revolution in terms of raising public awareness, testing public opinion trends, rallying support for a political cause, triggering public mobilization, boosting civic engagement, and enabling citizen journalism.

Additionally, Egyptian political activists used digital technologies to broadcast general information, mobilize protesters, engage in collective planning, protect each other by evading censorship and surveillance, and transfer money (Joyce, 2011). With these functions combined in one effective

communication network during the January 2011 revolution, it is easy to understand how Egyptian political activists won their battle against the regime.

It is worth noting that, during the 2011 revolution, a credibility crisis emerged in terms of the public's perception of state-controlled media, which eventually led to mounting pressure to abolish the Egyptian Ministry of Information in the hope of creating a truly free and liberal media system. This credibility crisis was attributable to coverage from transnational satellite channels such as Al Jazeera, as well as to the reporting of citizen journalists, who provided minute-by-minute unedited accounts of actions on the ground. As Idle and Nunns point out:

> One of the features of the uprising was the gradual undermining of state TV and newspapers, to the extent that journalists began to resign as the public saw the ludicrous coverage for what it was. Also, instrumental in this process was the contrast provided by transnational satellite TV channels, like Al Jazeera, whose reporting was often influenced by information and footage coming from citizen journalists on the ground. (2011, p. 20)

Here, there are two important points to highlight. First, there is the dichotomy between the vibrant, independent, and politically vocal non-mainstream media domain and the much more constrained and restricted national, state-controlled media domain. The stark difference between the minute-by-minute citizen journalism and active mobilization that was provided by the former, and the propagandistic, officially orchestrated messages presented through the latter contributed to the loss of trust in national media, such as the Egyptian television network and national daily newspapers. This eventually led to the decision to dismantle the Egyptian Ministry of Information.

Second, the discrepancy between reality and the national Egyptian television's distorted coverage of the 2011 revolution, which played down the protests and did not reflect an accurate image of what was going on in the streets, was in stark contrast to the continuous, comprehensive, and detailed coverage of the Al Jazeera channel. This outraged the Egyptian government, which closed the office of the Al Jazeera television channel in Cairo, detained its bureau chief, and blocked its transmission via Nilesat. However, Egyptians watched Al Jazeera via Hotbird and Arabsat instead.

This draws our attention to the fact that the Egyptian revolution entailed not only a political struggle, but also a communication struggle between the government and the activists. Once the protests began to threaten the Mubarak regime, the state used an aggressive—and crude—method to impede Internet and mobile phone access. On January 28, 2011, the Egyptian government shut off the Internet and mobile phone services for the entire country, resulting in a blackout that lasted almost one week (Ishani, 2011). During this blackout, political activists and ordinary citizens did everything possible to find alternative means of communication that could help them stay informed and make their voices heard to the rest of the world. The Egyptian people should be given credit for being both resilient and creative in circumventing the government's blockages of various media outlets and means of communication during the revolution.

Most important, the Egyptian regime's shutdown of the Internet and cell phones was not only costly; it also backfired. It further enraged Egyptians accustomed to Internet and mobile phone access (*Daily Mail*, 2011). Young, educated Egyptians were affected by their years of access to the Internet, which shaped their outlook and connections to one another and led to a sense of entitlement to Internet access, "so much so that when this access was revoked [when the regime turned off the Internet during protests] they ended up flooding the streets" (Vila, 2011). Also, in the absence of the Internet, people were afraid there would be a massacre, so they took to the streets in large numbers to protect one another (Maaty, 2011). And, when young activists were not able to find their friends and counterparts on Facebook, they went to Tahrir Square. Therefore, it could be said that the lack of information in the virtual world fueled activism in the real world, instead of halting it.

According to Adel Iskander, an adjunct faculty member at Georgetown University, the Egyptian people were insulted by the government's blockage of the Internet and cell phones (2001). "[T]heir reaction to this was strong . . . they became more resilient and more determined, because they refused the government's attempt to 'infantilize' them." Iskander also said that "Facebook can easily become a weapon of mass distraction when people spend too much time on it, thus indulging themselves in virtual activism instead of real activism." Therefore, he contends, shutting down the Internet led to a surge in real activism on the streets, as evident in the huge numbers of protesters.

It can be concluded that although the Egyptian activists combined their strong public will and determination for change with the effective use of new media to achieve political reform and democratization, the Egyptian government combined its incompetent political strategy with an equally ineffective communication strategy that not only failed to halt political activism, but even fueled it.

The Post-Revolution Egyptian Media Scene: The Transition to Democratization

This discussion of the role of new media in triggering public will mobilization, encouraging civic engagement, and promoting citizen journalism clearly signals a victory for these media. However, it is important to remember that, as a general rule, "[w]inning the media contest is not enough for the transformation of political systems—new Arab media have to be followed by new political and social movements" (Hafez, 2008, p. 4). One can even argue that, perhaps, new Arab media should be preceded by active political and social movements if they are to have an impact on transforming and liberalizing the societies to which they belong. This could have provided the missing link between the vibrant media arena, the inactive civil societies, and the tame political parties in most of the Arab world, including Egypt, much sooner.

However, the dilemma is that the birth of such movements requires the development of a vibrant civil society, which has been largely missing in Egypt because of the need to achieve a larger degree of economic, political, and social reform; the fact that Egypt suffers from a significantly high illiteracy rate (Khamis, 2004); and the impact of successive authoritarian, repressive regimes, which practiced different forms of direct and indirect controls on the media and limited actual political activism. The active deployment of new media in the 2011 revolution helped to create the missing link between virtual and real activism.

Since the revolution, some drastic measures to reform the Egyptian media have been undertaken. The most significant was the decision to dismantle the Egyptian Ministry of Information. This was meant to mark the end of an era of government control and manipulation of national, state-owned media, and to signal the beginning of a new era of media liberalization, when private media ownership could be encouraged, multiple voices could be more loudly heard, and political opposition could be more widely practiced. Yet, the new structure of the Egyptian media landscape in the coming phase is still very much in the making, as are the country's political future and its transition to democratization.

However, despite the many uncertainties around the current status and future of both the political and communication landscapes in Egypt, one thing remains certain: The flame of cyberactivism that sparked the Egyptian revolution was not extinguished upon Mubarak's resignation. In fact, there is sufficient evidence to prove that it is still glowing. National issues are still being discussed and debated online, as well as in mainstream media. Global Voices (2011) reports that the debate over the recent constitutional referendum raged in the blogosphere, as well as in newspapers and video advertisements, and that the yes and no votes were almost even on Twitter and Facebook. The "We Are All Khalid Said" Facebook page also polled its members regarding the vote.

Brisson et al. (2011, p. 17) report that "every week sees the launch of new citizen-driven websites eager to provide an online meeting place for civic debate." Also, in Egypt, Wael Ghonim's current project is using Google Moderator, a product of his company "to help sketch out the direction of the country's future" (Hopkins, 2011). According to Adel Iskander (2011), more than two million Facebook accounts have been created in Egypt since the revolution.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces also started using social media—in the form of SMS messages—to update the masses on its view of events (Brisson et al., 2011, pp. 29–30). They also created their own Facebook page, in an attempt to catch up with the wave of technological advancement sweeping the country. The new Egyptian prime minister, who was nominated by the popular revolution, also set up a Facebook page for his government.

Just as the political battle for democratization is not over yet, we can also conclude that the battle for media freedom is far from over. Cyberactivists in the Egyptian online community have continued to defend free speech advances since the resignation of Mubarak. A case in point is that of the Egyptian blogger Maikel Nabil Sanad, who was recently sentenced to three years in jail, after a military trial, for posting comments that criticized the military establishment. Global Voices (2011) reported that he was arrested on April 11, 2011, for posting remarks critical of the military. By the next day, more than 2,700 Egyptians had joined the "Free Maikel Nabil" Facebook site, and a "dedicated Twitter account (@MaikelNabilNews) was created within hours of Nabil's sentencing." Some political activists also started a Facebook page titled "We are all Maikel Nabil" to rally public support for him.

It is important to remember that media in the Arab world are only part of a complex and interrelated set of variables, and that, although they may act as catalysts or stimulators of change and

reform, one should be careful not to assign too much power to them in the transition toward democratization. This is certainly applicable in Egypt.

The Transformative Egyptian Media Landscape: Comparative Perspectives

The above analysis of the Egyptian media landscape clearly reveals a scene that is undergoing drastic changes and constantly facing pressing challenges. Before the eruption of the 2011 revolution, it would have been possible to describe the Egyptian media as representing "a transitional and synergic media model [with] a strong belief in the regulatory role of the state . . . traditional neglect of the market-driven logic and the 'grassroots' societal initiatives [and] 'top-to-bottom' media policy" (Vartanova, 2008, p. 24).

A close look at the Egyptian media landscape before the 2011 revolution reveals that it resembles what was occurring in some of the countries studied by Duncan McCargo (2008, p. 13) in Pacific Asia that are characterized by "the role of clientelism, the strong role of the state, the role of the media as an instrument of political struggle, the limited development of the mass circulation press, and the relative weakness of common professional norms."

What is striking about the Egyptian media case is the different route it has taken to change that. As McCargo (2008) explains, like many developing countries, Egypt is certainly diverging from, rather than converting to, the standard formula of "Americanization and the rise of a global journalism culture … and modernization, secularization, and commercialization," as predicted by Hallin and Mancini (2004, p.15).

I agree with Kleinsteuber (2010, p. 38) that there is a dire need to extend media research to areas of the world that have been traditionally left out, including Arab countries, sub-Saharan Africa, and some Asian countries. A systematic study of the interaction between politics and media in these regions, from a comparative perspective, may very well yield new variables and processes deserving further analysis and investigation. This is especially more pressing in light of the recent political upheavals that are sweeping the Arab world.

This will enable us to highlight the diverse roles of the media as political actors, through determining the kind of role they play "in relation to processes of democratic transition and consolidation in the developing world" (McCargo, 2003, p. 3).

Another factor deserving examination in this research is whether the system of government in each country is parliamentary or presidential (Albuquerque, 2008). Many developing countries, including Egypt, have a presidential type of government, and therefore, they have a vastly different political experience compared to parliamentary democracies in the West.

The previous discussion of the Egyptian media landscape highlights major distinctions from the media environments of Western countries, where media liberalization and reform were accompanied or even preceded by a strong shift to democratization, an active civil society, a free market economy, and a

strong multi-party system. Paradoxically, in the case of Egypt, the free flow of information, as exemplified in cyberactivism through digital and technologically based communication, could be said to precede, rather than follow, the transition to democratization and political reform.

The assumption that media liberalization in Arab societies will not happen "unless and until the underlying political system becomes a more liberal and democratic one" (Rugh, 2004, p. 161) has turned out to be inapplicable in Egypt, as well as in a number of other Arab countries undergoing political turmoil. The falsehood of this assumption is clearly related to the bottom-up, grassroots, and largely leaderless nature of current political movements in many parts of the Arab world.

In fact, two of the most striking aspects of the Egyptian uprising were its loose structure and its lack of identifiable leaders, as it was largely a grassroots movement that had a bottom-up, rather than a top-down, structure. Charlie Beckett (2011) notes that the Egyptian uprising was "not the work of conventional opposition parties or charismatic leaders" and says the "diffuse, horizontal nature of [such] movements made them very difficult to break. Their diversity and flexibility gave them an organic strength. They were networks, not organizations."

Such movements are also more about processes, rather than people, because they are characterized by collective and effective group mobilization, both online and offline, rather than by individual leadership. That's why they were generally described as leaderless revolutions. This provides further evidence that they were a genuine expression of public will mobilization, as previously mentioned. The protests were organized and led largely by a loose network of young people, most of whom demonstrated significant capacity for organization, discipline, restraint, and integrity, resulting in a unique, peaceful, and youthful revolution.

What is truly unique in the current Arab awakening is the absence of the prerequisites of democratization, as defined in the Western context, such as vibrant and well-organized political parties with a strong and popular base of support, structural reform, an active and dynamic political life, and an energetic civil society. These preconditions of democratization, to which authors such as Hallin and Mancini (2004) referred, have largely been missing in the Arab countries that have had successful revolutions so far, such as Tunisia and Egypt, as well as in those that are currently struggling to win their battles against their dictators, such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

In these countries, the effective deployment of new media to enhance civic engagement and enable citizen journalism paved the way for structural reform and political liberalization, rather than being the byproduct of such processes. In Egypt, as in many parts of the Arab world, new media were effectively deployed as catalysts and stimulators for effective democratic reform and therefore changed from being safety valves to becoming effective mobilization tools.

Another important concept to examine is political parallelism, which has been investigated by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as a process determining the relationship between the press and political institutions, especially political parties, in mostly parliamentary, Western democracies. The Egyptian media case diverts from the concept of political parallelism, as discussed in the countries of early and late

democratization in Hallin and Mancini (2004). That's because the Egyptian case clearly negates the earlier claims that, for "media to act as an agent of political change, they must be integrated into the institutions of civil society" (Fandy, 2007, p. 141), and for "the media to have a powerful impact on changes to the political system . . . it will be extremely important to improve their links to civil societies and the political opposition" (Hafez, 2008, p. 4).

What is truly unique in the Egyptian case is that non-mainstream media activism led the way for structural political change and transformation, rather than the other way around. This was accomplished through popular activism, rather than political parallelism, whereby transformation was led and orchestrated by political activists, both online and offline, who largely represented grassroots, popular movements, rather than organized political institutions or parties.

In other words, contrary to the predicted path to democratization in most comparative media literature, the Egyptian case demonstrated not only a divergence, but even a reversal, when it came to widely held assumptions regarding state-media relationships in general, and the concept of political parallelism in particular. That is mainly because, in Egypt, the main economic, political, and social structures in society did not witness fundamental changes; an active and vibrant civil society was not already in place, and a process of comprehensive political, economic, and social change was not underway. Rather, it was public will, as spread through new media outlets, that paved the way for structural change and political reform.

This leads us to conclude that the real power of Egyptian media lies beyond the official realm of structured political parties. Rather, it lies within what could be best described as "public spheres . . . in which the contest over public opinion has begun, with governments 'spinning' public relations and political challengers trying to widen the definition of authoritarian censorship" (Hafez, 2008, p. 4). The case of the Egyptian revolution clearly revealed that the challengers who were competing against the government included groups as varied and diverse as Arab nationalists, leftists, Islamists, secularists, and feminists who were trying to manipulate public opinion through mostly non-mainstream media outlets, and were united in their struggle against the Mubarak regime during the 2011 revolution, leading to a largely peaceful, across-the-board, grassroots popular uprising.

This view of a contest between often clashing players, including the government, various social movements, and the media, is a much more accurate depiction of the complex and ambivalent Egyptian media landscape, and it cannot be fully grasped by focusing just on the concept of political parallelism as defined within the Western context.

This arena was particularly evident during the Egyptian revolution, when both political and communication struggles erupted between the government and political activists. This was clearly manifested in the government's efforts to control the flow of information via national, state-owned media, and even blocking cell phone and Internet communication.

Another element that should be examined in understanding the concept of political parallelism and its applicability, or lack thereof, in Egypt is media ownership. Government control over media in the

Arab world, including Egypt, has traditionally taken different forms, including ownership, funding, the appointment of key media personnel, and even licensing regulations. Therefore, "in discussing Arab media ownership, the distinction between private and public state media, according to the models developed in Europe and the United States is of little analytical value" (Fandy, 2007, p. 9). That's because, in many parts of the contemporary Arab world, "questions of ownership encompass economic, political, and family interests" (ibid.). This represents a form of media parallelization that is complex because it is deeply entrenched and closely intertwined with the political, economic, and ideological interests, as well as the prevailing cultural norms, religious beliefs, and social fabric.

The case of Egyptian media presents a unique form of parallelism that is developing along largely unstructured trends and currents of thought, grassroots popular movements, and non-mainstream media in a country that has a presidential political system, has not yet been democratized, and does not have strong and vibrant civil society institutions or well-organized political parties, and that also combines parallel, although paradoxical, or even contradictory, processes, such as secularization and (re)Islamization, private and public ownership, authoritarianism and resistance, and official and popular spheres.

The Egyptian media landscape manifests the unique case of a shift toward vigor and diversity that has not been preceded by political freedom and actual democratic practice, and has not been accompanied by a comprehensive, holistic reform in the political, economic, and social spheres. It represents a heterogeneous and divergent model that does not fit the predicted path of media homogenization as a result of convergence to democratization, liberalization, commercialization, and secularization, as applicable in the Western context and defined by comparative media scholars, including Hallin and Mancini (2004).

What the Egyptian case exemplifies, instead, is what Jakubowicz describes as, "the "appearance of alternative and opposition public spheres" (2007, p. 137) which reflect a wide array of conflicting currents of thoughts, including leftists, secularists, Islamists, and feminists, among others. This led to the creation of a "dual media system" (ibid.), whereby official, state-controlled media coexisted alongside oppositional papers, websites, and blogs, highlighting a role for modern Egyptian media as both "agents of continuity and change" (Vartanova, 2008, p. 24).

Moreover, the fact that Egypt has a presidential, rather than a parliamentary, political system is a key element of distinction. This is mainly because, in "presidential countries, political parties play a minor role in making up and sustaining the government, as well as articulating government programs" (Albuquerque, 2008, p. 21), in addition to "the emphasis on the individual (rather than collective forces) and the focus on the administrative aspects of the government (rather than on the political parties)" (Albuquerque, 2008, p. 22). These factors have been certainly visible in the one-man show that prevailed in Egypt from 1952 to 2011.

The restrictive political environment, which prevailed in Egypt before the recent revolution, has not enabled the growth of an active civil society, a strong multi-party system, or truly independent media.

This explains why change and reform came through a popular, grassroots movement using non-mainstream media.

Therefore, the concept of political parallelism "must not be considered as a single, independent variable" (Albuquerque, 2008, p. 23). Rather, it should be viewed as a comprehensive, dynamic process that can help to assess the role of the media as an agent of change, a sustainer of the status quo, or both, and to what extent it reflects the currents of political activism in society or contributes to them.

Concluding Remarks

The picture emerging from this analysis of Egyptian media is that of a highly transformative and dynamic system that has both confronted significant challenges over different historical phases and undergone a number of major changes.

The eclectic and paradoxical nature of the modern Egyptian media landscape, which combines the binary opposites of authoritarianism and resistance, public ownership and privatization, official and popular spheres, and secularization and (re)Islamization, offers an interesting case of heterogeneity and divergence, reversing Hallin and Mancini's (2004) hypothesis of homogenization, which predicts that the development of the free press goes with the shift toward democratization and the development of liberal institutions and mass markets, which in many countries beyond Western Europe does not seem to be the case.

In Egypt, the emergence of oppositional and resistant voices indicates a transition to a more pluralistic media arena, where many trends are allowed to compete. However, this shift to a more vibrant and pluralistic media arena has only been recently paralleled by an equal shift toward political change, thanks to Egypt's popular, youthful revolution.

If we were to perceive media transformation as a journey, every country could be said to depart on this journey from a different point to reach its own destination. In the case of Egypt, the departing point was through popular, grassroots activism, rather than through formal institutions or organized political parties. Therefore, it has a different journey to transformation from those of other nations, especially in the West.

The Egyptian revolution revealed that the gap between the increasing margin of press freedom and the slim margin of political freedom and democratic practice is starting to narrow because of a spillover from the realm of virtual activism into real activism, and vice versa. The country is undergoing a post-revolutionary, transitional stage that can safeguard freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The exact form and pace of this transitional stage, however, cannot be easily predicted in light of the current rapid developments in both the political and communicative landscapes in Egypt.

The hybridization, uniqueness, and complexity of specific media cases, as byproducts of their specific historical, cultural, and political contexts, mean that the application of Western theories to non-Western countries and media systems has to be treated with maximum caution. This necessitates

adopting a culturally sensitive approach in conducting cross-cultural comparisons of media systems, which, as Hallin and Mancini (2004) point out, does not apply comparative frameworks mechanically to other regions, since doing so in an uncritical way creates the potential for distortion. This allows the evaluation of each media system according to its own unique features, indigenous qualities, and dynamic transformations.

Moreover, there is a need for more indigenous research from the Arab world, through adopting a culturally sensitive, locally informed, globally aware, and academically sound approach. This necessitates a high level of inclusiveness, comprehensiveness, and cultural sensitivity in mapping the developments in the region as a whole, as well as the consideration of specific dimensions, such as language, culture, historical background, and religion in studying each individual country's media system. Analyzing the complexities and paradoxes of the transformative Arab media landscape to capture the cultural, historical, political, and social specificities of this region, as well as the specific conditions of each country in it, is especially important because of the political turmoil that is sweeping this region.

Academics need to enhance their ability to localize, globalize, synthesize, and contextualize their approaches in studying the Arab media landscape, through adopting a deep, comprehensive, flexible, porous, and comparative approach. This is especially important since "the Middle East is a highly complex region" and, therefore, "the pressures toward and dynamics of political change need to be examined both from outside and from inside the region" (Sreberny, 2008, p. 20).

Future comparative media research should not only cover new areas of the world, such as the Arab region, but should also cover new types of media. Of equal importance is analyzing the complex factors that come into play in triggering public will mobilization, igniting civic engagement, and enabling citizen journalism that are unique in each country.

Moreover, the chronological sequence of change in every country needs to be analyzed to determine whether this change is introduced through official or popular, public or private, mainstream or non-mainstream spheres of communication, and which one of these precedes the other, or whether the change encompasses these multiple spheres simultaneously in a cyclical, overlapping, intertwined, and comprehensive process. In doing so, scholars must respect the complexity and individuality of each case and acknowledge the multiple factors shaping media in the hope of advancing, extending, and refining future comparative media research.

References

Abdel Rahman, A. (1985). Studies in contemporary Egyptian press. Cairo: Dar Al Fikr Al Arabi. (Arabic).

Abdel Rahman, A. (2002). Issues of the Arab press in the 21st century. Cairo: Al Arabi lil-Nashr wal Tawzi'. (Arabic).

Abdulla, R. A. (2006). An overview of media developments in Egypt: Does the Internet make a difference? *Global Media Journal* (GMJ), Mediterranean edition, *1*, 88–100.

Albuquerque, A. (2008, September). "On models and margins: Comparative media models viewed from a Brazilian perspective." A paper presented at the "Media Systems in Comparative Perspective Workshop," University of California at San Diego.

Al-Kallab, S. (2003). The Arab satellites: The pros and cons. Transnational *Broadcasting Studies Journal* (TBS), *10*. Available at http://www.arabmediasociety.com

Atia, T. (2006, July). Paradox of the free press in Egypt. USEF Expert Panel Discussion Notes, Washington, D.C.

Beckett, C. (2011). After Tunisia and Egypt: Towards a new typology of media and networked political change. *POLIS*, journalism and society think tank. Retrieved from http://www.charliebeckett.org/?p=4033

Boyd, D. A. (1977). Egyptian radio: Tool of political and national development. *Journalism Monographs*, *55*, 501–507, 539.

Boyd, D. A. (1999). Broadcasting in the Arab world: A survey of the electronic media in the Middle East (3rd Ed.). Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.

Brisson, Z. et al. (2011). *Egypt: From Revolutions to Institutions.* New York: Reboot. Retrieved from http://thereboot.org/wp-content/Egypt/Reboot-Egypt-From-Revolutions-To-Institutions.pdf

Daily Mail. (2011). How the Internet refused to abandon Egypt: Authorities take entire country offline . . . but hackers rally to get the message out. Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1351904/Egypt-protests-Internet-shut-hackers-message-out.html

Economist. (2007). Bloggers may be the real opposition, *54,* 54.

Fandy, M. (2007). (Un)civil war of words: Media and politics in the Arab world. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

Global Voices. (2011). Egypt: Basboussa for President! Retrieved from http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/04/06/egypt-basboussa-for-president

Hafez, K. (2008). Introduction. In K. Hafez (Ed.), Arab media: Power and weakness (pp. 1–14). New York: Continuum.

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Hamroush, A. (1989). The story of journalism in Egypt. Cairo: Al Mostaqbal. (Arabic).

Hopkins, C. (2011). Protesters use Google Moderator to brainstorm Egypt's future. *Read Write Web.* Retrieved from http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/google_moderate_used_to_brainstorm_egypts_future.php

Idle, N., & Nunns, A. (Eds.). (2011). *Tweets from Tahrir: Egypt's revolution as it unfolded, in the words of the people who made it.* New York: OR Books.

Ishani, M. (2011). The hopeful network. *Foreign Policy.* Retrieved from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/07/the_hopeful_network

Iskander, A. (2006, July). Paradox of the free press in Egypt. USEF Expert Panel Discussion Notes, Washington, D.C.

Iskander, A. (2011). Adjunct faculty at Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arabic Studies. Phone interview on April 24, 2011.

Jakubowicz, K. (2007). Rude awakening: Social and media change in Central and Eastern Europe. Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc.

Joyce, M. (2011). The 7 activist uses of digital technology: Popular resistance in Egypt. *International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.* Retrieved from http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/images/stories/webinars/joyce_webinar.pdf

Khamis, S. (2004). Multiple literacies, multiple identities: Egyptian rural women's readings of televised literacy campaigns. In N. Sakr (Ed.), Women and media in the Middle East: Power through self expression (pp. 89–108). London: I B Tauris.

Khamis, S. (2007).The role of new Arab satellite channels in fostering intercultural dialogue: Can Al Jazeera English bridge the gap? In P. Seib (Ed.), New Media and the New Middle East (pp. 39–52). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kleinsteuber, H. J. (2010). Comparing West and East–A comparative approach of transformation. In B. Dobek-Ostrowska, M. Glowacki, K. Jakubowicz & M. Sukosd (Eds.), Comparative media systems: European and global perspectives (pp. 23–40). Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press.

Lynch, M. (2005). Assessing the democratizing power of Arab satellite TV. *Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal* (TBS), *1,* 150–155.

Maaty, A. (2011). Social media's role in recent events in the Middle East. Talk at Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC, March 2011.

McCargo, D. (2003). Media and politics in Pacific Asia. London: Routledge Curzon.

McCargo, D. (2008, September). Remodeling Asian media: Convergence versus divergence. A paper presented at the "Media Systems in Comparative Perspective Workshop," University of California at San Diego.

Mustafa, M. (2011). Egyptian political activist and coordinator of the "National Coalition for Change" campaign. Skype interview on April 23, 2011.

Nasser, M. K. (1990, December). Egyptian mass media under Nasser and Sadat: Two models of press management and control. Journalism Monographs, 124.

Nelson, A. (2008). The Web 2.0 revolution—extended version. *Carnegie Reporter*. Retrieved from http://carnegie.org/publications/carnegie-reporter/single/view/article/item/71/

Rugh, W. (2004). Arab mass media: Newspapers, radio, and television in Arab politics. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

Sabat, K., & Abdel Azim, M. (2001). The history and development of Egyptian mass media. Cairo: Al Anglo Bookshop. (Arabic).

Sakr, N. (2001). Satellite realms: Transnational television, globalization and the Middle East. London: I.B. Tauris.

Salmon, C. T., Fernandez, L., & Post, L. A. (2010). Mobilizing public will across borders: Roles and functions of communication processes and technologies. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, *25* (3&4), 159–170.

Seib, P. (2007). New media and prospects for democratization. In P. Seib (Ed.) New media and the new Middle East (pp. 1–18). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Seymour, R. (2008, April). Middle East bloggers set cat among the pigeons. *Middle East*, 388, 62–63.

Sreberny, A. (2008). The analytic challenges of studying the Middle East and its evolving media environment. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, *1*, 8–23.

Vartanova, E. (2008, September). "Russian media model: Agents of continuity and Change." A paper presented at the "Media Systems in Comparative Perspective Workshop," University of California at San Diego.

Vila, S. (2011). South by southwest Arab Spring panels put final nail in the "Twitter revolution" coffin. *Movements.org*. Retrieved from http://www.movements.org/blog/entry/south-by-southwest-arab-spring-panels-put-final-nail-in-the-twitter-revolut

Weyman, G. (2007). Western journalists report on Egyptian bloggers. Nieman Reports, *61*, 2. Retrieved from http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=10021

Zayani, M. (2008). The challenges and limits of universalist concepts: Problematizing public opinion and a mediated Arab public sphere. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, *1*, 60–79.