What it truly means to be a journalist is one of the most pressing questions that countries affected by the Arab Spring have had to face. When the squares lit up, thousands of youths took to the streets in the double guise of protesters and citizen-journalists. They voluntarily and freely reported a chapter of history, which they actively contributed to creating, while state television channels continued to ignore it. When censorship and self-censorship barriers were torn down, both professional and amateur journalists found themselves immersed in a completely new media-communication sphere. Debuting within this new and unregulated context, these new journalists tasted the emotion that accompanies exercising rights, which they had regained during the protests.

These journalists were now able to grasp the influence they could have on the public – from whom they had had to partially veil the truth, and their own interpretation of events, for years. In a short period of time, the role of the journalist rapidly evolved (and, at least in the case of Egypt, subsequently devolved) into one that was increasingly militant. Neutrality and credibility struggled to assert themselves. In fact, today, programming is gradually being replaced by a staunchly politicised agenda.

With this in mind, this analysis self-critically questions the roles played by the media as they acquired greater authority during and after the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions. How did they act and what mechanisms did they set into motion during the transitions, especially in the highly polarised phases? Did they accentuate or reduce that polarity? In order to answer these questions, this analysis has closely followed the evolution of the complex – and still ongoing – media reform processes.

**Between Polarisation and Compromise: Tunisian Media during the Transition**

With the opening of the private broadcast sector for political reporting, the Tunisian audiovisual landscape changed dramatically. No fewer than twelve radio stations and numerous television channels began to broadcast without authorisation between 2012 and 2013. Indeed, widespread liberalisation animated the local television scene. As explained by Fatima El-Issawi,3 the excessive polarisation seriously threatened the new pluralism. National TV stations quickly became the main spearheads of politi-

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1 Azzurra Meringolo is a researcher in IAI’s Mediterranean and Middle East programme and the director of the Insight Egypt series. A professional journalist, she is also editor-in-chief of IAI’s website AffariInternazionali and the scientific coordinator of the Arab Media Report. Author of I ragazzi di piazza Tahrir, in 2013 she won the Indro Montanelli prize. Her doctoral thesis was awarded the Maria Grazia Cutuli prize.

2 Eight new privately owned television channels were created. Moreover, several private television stations that functioned through the Nilesat satellite can be identified. These commercial channels include Tunisia World, Al Janoubia, Tunisia News, Al-Hiwar, Ettounissia, Sport, and, more recently, Telzva, as well as four partisan channels of the Tunisian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood: Zitouna, Al-Imsan, Al-Mutawassit and Al-Qalam. Zitouna, for example, is directed by Oussama Ben Salem, son of Moncef Ben Salem, leader of the Ennahda Party and former Minister of Higher Education (between 2011 and 2014).

cal polarisation with businessmen investing heavily in the war between “leftist TV channels” and “Islamist TV channels.”

While considering the polarisation of the Tunisian media on the basis of an Islamist/secularist dichotomy is quite tempting, audience data show that channels existing before the revolution still dominate the Tunisian television scene, and Islamist and religious channels are not faced with a receptive audience. Thus, the political polarisation between an Islamic and a secular pole is not reflected in the media context, which more closely resembles a battlefield thick with different factors and competing interests.

At the same time, the approach advanced by partisan journalism has become one of the fundamental features of the Tunisian post-revolutionary media system. Even if the latter has failed to lobby for rights and freedoms, instead choosing to sweeten the images of political and ideological allies, the media sector has still undertaken an important reform process that deserves to be closely followed.

The positive approach to reform undertaken by the Tunisian media has still to show important results and Tunisian media have to achieve their own autonomous maturity vis-à-vis the political opposition.

So far, the media reform has dismantled most of the oppressive features of the former media system. The National Authority for Reform of Information and Communications (INRIC), a consultative body, conducted a review of the regulatory system governing national media. This was followed by two important decrees: the first (41–2011) replaced the old restrictive 1975 press code with a new one that ensures basic media rights, and the second (116–2011) established the High Independent Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA), tasked with regulating the industry with no interference from the government, especially with regard to state-owned media broadcasters.

All these – like the relevant provisions in the new Constitution – are important steps for the protection of media independence and rights. Nevertheless, several obstacles – above all the role played by the judiciary and the limited effectiveness of these decrees – limit the achievements of these reforms. The positive approach to reform undertaken by the Tunisian media has still to show important results and Tunisian media have to achieve their own autonomous maturity vis-à-vis the political opposition, with which they simply drift at the moment.

Lined Up and Defeated: Egyptian Media during the Transition

Post-revolutionary Egypt was not immune to the explosion of new media outlets. In addition to new media linked to political parties, some wealthy businessmen with ties to the Mubarak regime decided to create new outlets to promote their own interests, rather than the public one. As a result, there was a rise in both ethical and financial corruption.

Even if the 2013 Constitution provided real progress in the protection of freedom of information, this remained only on paper due to repressive campaigns implemented by the military-backed government. Successive regimes have taken steps to limit freedom of expression and control the narrative in Egyptian media coverage. Hopes for a more professional sector have been dashed by a state media apparatus that has, for all intents and purposes, supported whatever regime has been in power. In addition, the deep polarisation between pro-Islamists and pro-liberals – above all at the end of the Muslim Brotherhood era – transformed the media into the favourite political spin.

If Brotherhood control of the media was one of the most evident authoritarian aspects of the Islamist era – as well as a clear replication of the previous regime’s behaviour – the wave of populist propaganda associated with the 2013 military intervention was a

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4 This can be partly explained by the role played by all agents involved in the political and journalistic spheres. In a relationship of permanent competition and tension, they fall both strictly and directly under the influence of market approval and public consensus. Thus, economics dominates the organisation of the Tunisian media sector, which is characterised by the cohabitation of religion, politics, capital and entertainment.

5 Fifteen new TV channels have been licensed.
replication of the old regime’s tactics of mobilising public opinion and muzzling the media for its own benefit. Instead of mitigating the struggle between liberal and Islamist forces, the media magnified it, fuelling popular anger against the Brotherhood’s rule and supporting — or, rather, embellishing — the military intervention.

To date, journalists working both in private and state media have continued to share a propagandistic attitude, serving as the guardians of the regime, always ready to orchestrate media campaigns to glorify it whenever it is in danger. Many newspapers and television networks are able to transmit and report exaggerations, fabricate news and reports, and commit other infringements as part of their daily practice without being held accountable. They are also used to celebrating the government’s achievements, while ignoring its failures. The lack of a code of ethics and a proper media framework transforms journalists into nothing but spokespeople for their corporate heads, who themselves are often reiterating government rhetoric.

Hopes for a more professional sector have been dashed by a state media apparatus that has, for all intents and purposes, supported whatever regime has been in power.

Within this scenario, there were immediate calls by civil society for significant reform of the legal framework governing the media. The day after Mubarak’s resignation, a statement issued by the Forum of Independent Human Rights Organisations included a significant section on media law reform. The National Coalition for Media Freedom was then established and, on 3 May 2011, issued a Media Freedom Declaration in Cairo setting out the ten main principles of media freedom and calling for the abolition of the Ministry of Information and Supreme Press Council and their replacement with independent bodies. The Ministry was put into abeyance and many rules limiting media freedom were suspended. But this new trend did not last long. An early setback occurred when, on 9 July 2011, a new Minister of Information, Osama Heikal, was appointed — to the great disappointment of Egyptian human rights groups, which had hoped that this Ministry had been permanently abolished. This was followed by a series of new appointments to state newspapers made by the Shura Council, which is dominated by Islamist forces.

The lack of a code of ethics and a proper media framework transforms journalists into nothing but spokespersons for their corporate heads, who themselves are often reiterating government rhetoric.

It can be concluded that the legal framework, which formally remains almost entirely in place, has established a strict regulatory regime for the media that allocates a broad measure of control to the government. Today, state media reform is needed more than ever before, but the political will is lacking. Like its predecessors, the Al-Sisi regime has shown little interest in making the media more open and democratic.

**Conclusion**

This analysis has focused on the evolution of the Tunisian and Egyptian media sectors during the turbulent post-revolutionary transitions. Underlining that the reform of the media sector itself remains a challenge, this paper has shown the role played by the media in two different democratisation processes. While in the Tunisian evolution,

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7 Mendel, Toby; Abdel-Aziz, Yasser; Allam, Rasha Nabil; Al-Zahraa Abdel Fattah, Fatima; Mahmoud, Hany Ibrahim. *Assessment of media development in Egypt based on UNESCO’s Media Development Indicators*. Cairo: UNESCO Office Cairo and Regional Bureau for Science in the Arab States, 2013, p. 6–8 (available at: www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/assessment-of-media-development-in-egypt/). For a list of the new reform initiatives that have been undertaken since the revolution, see p. 78.
compromise and reconciliation have prevailed, the Egyptian involution has been dominated by polarisation and sectarianism. When the latter was reaching its peak, Egyptian media became the best platform for political lobbying. Transformed into a political battlefield instead of helping to moderate the heated social climate by focusing on fundamental challenges to national development, the media have exacerbated internal division and pushed the country closer to the brink of a civil war. The same cannot be said for the Tunisian landscape, where media played a more positive role. The turbulent but ‘sensible’ management of the constitutional transition by the Troika (Ennahdha, CPR and Ettakatol) avoided this danger, and the absence of this media polarisation did not exacerbate the political debate that could derail the country into a sectarian abyss.

Nevertheless, in both countries, the approach advanced by partisan journalism has become one of the fundamental features of their post-revolutionary media systems. While it is important to insist on institutional reform, in both countries civil society organisations should launch a comprehensive internal reform process. Focusing on the institutional path, this paper has shown that, once again, the Tunisian reform process has proved itself to be more successful than the Egyptian one. Even if it is still an ongoing process, it has achieved important goals. The opposite can be said looking to the Egyptian landscape. Not only has the debate around media reform been poor, but the formal reform process has not achieved anything of importance. Here, the only possible reform path seems to be via dissident voices inside the media backed by civil society and popular support. While legal reforms – like Tunisia’s – are necessary, they risk laying the foundations for change without actually creating any real change. It is now time for civil society organisations to launch a comprehensive internal reform process. Taking a bottom-up approach to reform, this process should focus on the eradication of self-censorship habits, the value of data, and the importance of a code of conduct. Supporting professional – rather than partisan – journalism, Egyptian media could play a more positive role, abandoning their propagandistic attitude and reducing – rather than exacerbating – the heat of the political debate.

Supporting professional – rather than partisan – journalism, Egyptian media could play a more positive role, abandoning their propagandistic attitude and reducing – rather than exacerbating – the heat of the political debate.