

ARAB MEDIA AND POLITICAL CONFLICT IN THE WAKE OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Ehab Galal, Associate Professor, Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen

The Arab uprisings in 2011 challenged the political regimes in the Middle East and put Arab national television in a precarious position. Television in countries like Tunisia and Egypt had gone through some degree of liberalisation but it could still be characterised by its historical role as mobilising the people for support and loyalty towards the regime,¹ at least until the beginning of the uprisings.

Television has thus maintained a strong allegiance with the ruling power in each country. But how should this loyalty be handled when the ruling power is first challenged, then shaken and finally overthrown? How does this process affect liberal ideas about journalistic standards of critical and objective coverage?

National television has gradually changed its coverage in accordance with the national development of the revolutionary movement. This paper will analyse these changes since the Arab uprising in 2011. The basis of the analysis is the coverage of the uprisings on television, primarily in news and debate programmes on state and privately-owned television channels in Tunisia and Egypt. The general argument of the paper is that national television in the two countries has gone through more or less the same seven phases in its coverage. These phases are closely connected to the development of the uprisings. Gadi Wolfsfeld, professor in political science and communication, argues that it may be useful to see the competition and conflict within media coverage as part of a larger and more important contest among opponents of political control.² I will analyse television coverage following this argument as a reflection of the change in political control rather than the trigger for political change.

¹ William A. RUGH. 'Do National Political Systems Still Influence Arab Media?' in *Arab Media & Society*, 2007.

² Gadi WOLFSFELD. *Media and political conflict. News from the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Television as a Revolutionary Force, or Revolution as a Force to Change Television

Television has been an active player in accelerating and enlarging the revolution's success or failure in the countries where demonstrations took place. Al-Jazeera fast-tracked the event while national television tried to minimise it or turn around the influence and effect of the demonstrations. Al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya and some other television stations, such as CNN and BBC, often supported the protesters. They presented facts, consciously or not, within their coverage that may have mobilised other players to participate in the demonstrations. These television stations played a key role, in a way, by offering a platform for communicating and promoting the protesters' messages during the uprising. They provided a platform for the activists, which national television did not until much later. Consequently, access to more pluralistic media did not trigger the protests but provided a space for communicating the protests to a wider audience inside and outside the nation. They allowed millions of people all over the world to watch pictures of, listen to and participate in narratives from the Arab Spring. People thus became engaged in the revolutions without being physically present, contrary to the protesters who risked their lives in the town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia or Tahrir Square in Cairo. The competition between the television stations and control over television broadcasting were a major element of the Arab uprisings in 2011. Let me now turn to how this competition and control resulted in specific media coverage during the revolution.

From Silence to Making a U-turn: Seven Phases of Television Coverage

1. Silence

The first phase of television coverage was characterised by "silencing" the facts about what was happening in the streets; nothing about the uprisings was mentioned. The main reason that this strategy did not succeed was the lack of media monopoly since the emergence of satellite television and the internet.³ Satellite channels such as al-Jazeera transmitted directly from Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, Tahrir Square in Egypt, Benghazi in Libya and Sana city in Yemen, while state television channels chose to ignore or keep silent about the demonstrations that took place.

2. Denial

The second phase of the coverage was characterised by national television channels in countries like Tunisia and Egypt denying the fact that protests and demonstrations were taking place; pictures appeared of peaceful streets without the presence of any protesters or clashes. They claimed that the pictures of mass demonstrations were streamed by the country's enemies and were Photoshop productions.

³ Ehab Galal. *Arab TV-Audiences: Negotiating Religion and Identity*. Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2014.

3. Concession but suspicion

The third phase involved national television channels admitting that something unpleasant was happening to challenge their news coverage. They used three strategies in an attempt to weaken the opponents, rather than covering the politically-legitimate protesters' claims and the critical responses they received. The audiences were firstly told that the number of protesters was very low; secondly, the protesters were discredited and presented as young trouble-makers or traitors paid by foreign powers to destroy the country; and, thirdly, the protesters were patronised and told to stop because now they had done enough.

4. Compromise

The fourth phase was characterised by an acceptance of the political competition behind the demonstrations, and the claims of youths as legitimate. This acknowledgement did not, however, lead to full acceptance of the means or the players involved. A number of strategies were once again used by the news presenters. The initiative and claims for reforms by the young activists were praised; the protesters were presented as small and naive children who had to be satisfied since they had obtained their goals; and there was a message that enough was enough. The protesters were asked to go back to their schools and leave the rest to older and more experienced people. A number of guests, experts and youths were invited into a television studio. The young participants confirmed that they had taken part in the demonstrations when they started but, because the changes were on the right track, they now supported the call to stop protesting. However, the activists were still discredited by the interviewers and other guests, who drew on the widespread conspiracy theory that the protesters had been paid by foreign powers in order to bring down the country. What made this phase different from the previous one was that one or more young activists, who still found reasons for continuing the struggle, were also occasionally invited to the studio. Their voices were indeed heard, although they were part of programmes broadcast very late in the evening.

5. Doing a U-turn

National television made a U-turn in the fifth phase. This U-turn was made symbolically very clear by national television channels: (i) they replaced some newsreaders and programme hosts with new journalists; (ii) the use of semantics changed, when concepts like "revolution" and "revolutionary" replaced the notion of "traitor"; (iii) state channels introduced direct coverage from the streets; (iv) interviews with the protesters, who were now called "the sons and daughters of the revolution", were broadcast; (v) young people who supported the revolution were invited into the studio to talk about their claims, expectations and hopes.

6. Continuously tossing a coin

National television channels were caught up in an unsettled situation after the fall of the regimes. They did not know who, among the political players, would gain power. They were

trapped between the traditional role of supporting the autocratic regime, which, to some degree, still clung to power, and, at the same time, having to oppose the criticism they faced after the change of the political system. This phase of national television strategy seemed to offer space for all kinds of different opinions. There were still limitations, however; different opinions were expected to be presented in a civilised manner, and to fall within frameworks that may have disagreed with the discourse of the ruling power but would not openly reject it.

7. Retreat to the old pattern

The political power in Tunisia and Egypt had changed hands from a transitional secular authority to Islamist political control in the previous six phases while, in the seventh phase, the power returned to the original secular political system. The development of these political extremes was reflected on national television. This retreat has again left the Arab media as loyal supporters of the regimes, theorised by William Rugh, professor of public diplomacy, before the Arab uprisings in 2011. These seven phases could raise the question of where the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the 25 January Revolution in Egypt have gone. Have the Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans and Yemenis already forgotten for what they were struggling? Or, how is it possible to explain the apparent return to a formerly rejected political and media model?

Conclusion

National television channels have demonstrated how they took one step forward, while still being stuck in old patterns that made television look to the ruling power to define the political field. The question is, though, whether the developments have made television open to more pluralism in socio-cultural and political voices. Following Wolfsfeld's perspective, this will depend on how the political field in the Arab countries where the uprisings took place appear in the coming years. If the political field becomes more pluralistic, there is hope that television will too. The situation, as it is now, shows that the Arab uprisings have resulted in sustained civil war in Syria, fragile political democracy in Tunisia, successive regime changes in Egypt, civil war in Yemen and regime maintenance in Bahrain. If there is any pluralism, it is extremely fragile.

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