Journalism in transitional context: societal hostility, self-censorship and the expansion of 'one voice journalism'.

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Abstract

The transformations in the media and political landscapes in Egypt over the last decade and their implications on media pluralism and freedom of expression are well documented. However, less is known about how Egyptian journalists themselves *experience* these changes; how their relationships with authorities and ordinary citizens are being redefined, and how journalists' routines and practices are evolving. Through interviews with twenty Egyptian journalists working for different types of media outlets (government-owned, independent, privately owned, opposition and new start-ups), this article records and analyses journalists' experiences with both authorities and citizens amid the current transitional period, assessing to what extent these relationships and experiences are impacting journalism practices in Egypt. Findings reveal that journalists perceive a hostile stance from both officials and

ordinary citizens towards journalists due to a common belief that journalists played a role in the removal of previous regimes and therefore are seen as ‘destabilising agents’. This prevents journalists from accessing both information and news sources, forcing journalists to produce unified content and practice self-censorship and ‘service journalism’ as opposed to original and investigative stories. These challenges are discussed in light of research on media and democratic transition.

Keywords: Egypt, democratisation, transitional journalism, Egyptian journalists, Arab Spring, Journalistic autonomy

Introduction

Despite its success in toppling Mubarak’s regime, scholars argue that the 2011 Egyptian revolution generally failed in achieving the aspired democracy and in fully attaining the protestors’ demands summarised in the revolutionary slogan: ‘bread, freedom and social justice’. On the economic front, the Egyptian pound has witnessed a crippling devaluation against the dollar, while government debts have risen to unsustainable levels (HRW 2023). Meanwhile, living standards have seen steady deterioration since 2011, with approximately 30 million Egyptians living below the national poverty line (HRW 2023; SIS 2021), while the middle class has continued to shrink. Worsening economic conditions have led some citizens to question their participation in the 2011 revolution (Mostafa 2023; Young 2018), with some reports suggesting that citizens might be nostalgic towards the stability of the Mubarak era

(Young 2018). As far as freedom goes, the political landscape in Egypt has witnessed several regime changes since the ouster of Mubarak, with episodes of democratic transition often followed by shifts towards authoritarianism, with the latter seemingly prevailing over time. According to Aziz (2017), cumulatively, these shifts in Egyptian's *politik* include a) reduced civilian involvement in public life; b) disunited small political parties with weak influence in politics; and c) a judicial system willing to legally sanction existing laws and practices. While there is a growing case to argue that Egypt is now an authoritarian state, most scholars still consider – perhaps in hope more than expectation – it to be in transition (Allam 2019; Amin and Allam 2022; Abdulla 2016), with neo-authoritarian trends (Allam and Hollifield 2021). This uncertainty is captured by Allam (2021:299), who argues that "Although labelled 'transitional', the direction remains unclear as does the question of whether this transition will be to a different and more stable and enduring system".

Transitional periods are immensely changeable and challenging for journalists, as they must manage a volatile political period, where power is being renegotiated and new factions are formed, often in collaboration with media companies. Journalists can therefore be change agents in such periods, but equally, for many journalists transitional periods are precarious and uncertain, as they renegotiate their professional identities, and find themselves facing political and economic pressures, from both new and old forces (El-Issawi 2015; Voltmer and Rawnsley 2009; Waisbord 2010). In countries such as post-revolutionary Egypt, journalism can ultimately become a more dangerous profession than the one that many journalists had experienced before (RSF 2022).

In this paper, we bring attention to how Egyptian journalists *experience* these changes. Through interviews with twenty Egyptian journalists working for different types of media outlets, we focus on the how their relationships with authorities and ordinary citizens are being redefined, and how journalistic routines and practices are evolving considering these relationships. On the one hand, our findings offer a familiar picture of growing authoritarianism and its impacts on journalistic autonomy that has been previously documented in studies of transitional Egypt (Badr 2020; El-Issawi 2020; El-Issawi and Cammaerts 2016; Khamis and El-Ibiary 2022). But on the other hand, we reveal experiences of "hostility" from citizens that have been overlooked in previous studies, alongside the practical challenges of newsgathering in a climate of non-cooperation with journalists. Journalists also offered surprising reflections on the Mubarak era, that may encourage us to view the perceptions of journalists currently working in other non-democratic regimes in a more nuanced light.

Media, democracy, and political transition

Scholars contend that transitions towards democracy are not static and contain different phases. For example, Diamond and Myers (2001) argue that the democratisation process doesn't always achieve the aspired result of democracy. Rather, there are several results the process could achieve including a pseudo-hybrid democracy, or an authoritarian regime, in addition to the reverse waves (Huntington 1991) that may take place in between different stages of the process (Elsheikh 2018). In the Arab region, the notion of staged, uniformed progression to democracy does not apply, over a decade after the protests.

Extant research suggests that a persistence of authoritarianism is partially the result of uninformed citizens, and that access to information often serves to enlighten citizens about their rights and responsibilities, encourages political participation, and eventually leads to holding regimes and governments accountable (e.g. Smith 2016). Hence, the dissemination of the principles of democracy in transitional societies is dependent on access to pluralistic and reliable sources of information (Seib 2007). During political transition the media often become opened to private ownership, with reduced censorship and control of information, allowing the public to be exposed to wide range of information (Norris 2006). This can facilitate the media's role in setting the agenda, educating the public, providing a platform for public debate, and giving a voice for previously marginalised groups and emerging political forces (see: Jebril, Stetka and Loveless 2013).

However, transitional contexts often pose challenges to the above roles, and at times media can give a platform for antidemocratic voices or be an agent to support the status quo (Jakubowicz 2002). For example, studies conducted in Egypt between 2012 and 2014 (see: El-Issawi and Cammaerts 2015; El-Issawi 2014a, El-Issawi 2014b) infer that journalists played a role in supporting transition towards democracy immediately after the revolution, while undermining the delicate transition process in subsequent phases (El-Issawi 2020) through providing legitimacy to the new military regime (El-Issawi and Cammaerts 2015; El-Issawi 2014b) and helping in "preparing the ground for the return of autocratic practices" (El-Issawi and Cammaerts 2015: 549). Resultantly, the mainstream media in Egypt have suffered from a loss of trust that has shaken their credibility (Allam 2019).

Market constraints and media-state relationships during political transition

Voltmer and Rawnsley (2009:235) argue that during the process of the breakdown of old regimes, the media often use "the power of the vacuum to expand their own power", describing early phases of transitions as "a honeymoon" between the media and those in power, as media can address new topics and launch new outlets. Until it, that is, it gets confronted by market and political constraints, such as privatization and commercialisation (El-Issawi 2015), resulting in a "fractious media", where certain groups try to control parts of the media, resulting in marginalizing of independent media and public interest (El-Issawi 2015:4).

Several studies have examined the relationship between market constraints and media-state relationships during political transition. Waisbord (2010) argued that the process of democratisation in Latin America did not change the historic relationship between the media, state and the market. The 'client-patron' relationship between news media and political structures involves "the discretionary use of public resources by political officials to strengthen personal and/or partisan power" as well as "favour allied news organisations" (Waisbord 2010:154). Studies on the transformation of the Central and East European media landscape after the fall of communism suggest that ownership transition had mixed consequences on media freedom, ranging from diminishing autonomy, commercialization and tabloidization to the professionalization of journalism in some cases of foreign ownership (Stetka 2012).

Similarly, in the Balkans, studies examining the democratic transition in Serbia found that it was common for journalists to have a feeling of 'serving the centres of power' and promoting

the candidate of the party to which the media owner belongs (Milojević and Krstić, 2018), thus demonstrating the impact of clientelistic ties between media owners and political leadership on journalists' autonomy and self-censorship (Jungblut and Hoxha 2016). In post-socialist Slovenia, Volčič and Erjavec (2012) found a troublesome relationship between political/ economic elites and journalists that is consistent with previous research suggesting that privatization of the media itself is no guarantee of journalistic freedom from political pressures as private owners are eager to grant specific party officials a role in determining editorial appointments and media content – at a cost (Volčič 2011).

Through a survey of 27,500 journalists in sixty-seven countries, Hanitzsch et al (2019:288) found that journalists in "non-Western, less democratic, and socioeconomically less developed countries tended to perceive political and economic influences as stronger than did their counterparts in other regions of the globe". Their study found that journalists in transitional countries tend to resort to an advocative model of journalism because of journalists' low trust in public and political institutions, state fragility, and corruption, arguing that in such climates, "journalists tend to involve themselves in political struggles rather than act as disinterested bystanders" (p. 300). Their survey findings suggest that journalistic cultures in the Middle East are based on "an opportunity structure that is strongly shaped by state authorities", with a tendency from the state to "replace open press restrictions by softer means of coercion, such as providing economic disincentives for nonoperation with the state" (p. 303). They are also characterised by a wider agreement on cultural values that respect society and guarantee social harmony, with an emphasis on government-journalist partnership (p. 303).

Such ‘soft coercion’ has been documented in Tunisia (El-Issawi 2021) where journalists face interference by politicians and business in their work including threats of withdrawal of advertisements, political pressure on owners and shareholders, or through the nomination of executives in public media directly by the government. In Egypt, the absence of laws guaranteeing fair competition has made room for large corporations with diverse commercial interests to divert their roles as watchdogs for the public in favour of serving their political and economic interests (Abdulla 2014; Webb 2014; Allam 2018a). Such limitations have also affected smaller news media organisations. Sakr (2017) examined how several Egyptian start-ups experimented with novel revenue streams during transition finding that under political repression, narrow economic measures of media profitability and survival may give a misleading picture as to the sustainability of the kinds of journalism conducive to democratic practice.

The impact of political transition on journalism practice and routines

There are often limitations to the democratising role of the media in the early stages of transition due to its role under the previous regime (Voltmer 2008). Scholars argue that media outlets during transition will still be carrying the logic, values and constraints they had in the preceding regime and will apply “similar patterns of interactions when dealing with politicians” leading to “hybrid forms of journalism and political communication” (Voltmer and Rawnsley 2009:236), that “differ significantly from those in established democracies” (Voltmer 2008:37). In other words, the structural conditions of journalism in transitional media systems are shaped by legacies of the past and persisting power structures (Lohner et

al., 2017). These conditions are likely to influence and be reflected in journalists' role perceptions, practices, and routines in transitional periods.

Mellado and van Dalen (2017) studied the development of the watchdog and civic journalism role in Chilean newspapers during 22 years of democratic transition and found that there was no increase in the watchdog or civic journalism roles. Moreover, when critical journalism was present, this was almost always presented through critical sources, not the journalistic voice. Based on a cross-national study, Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020) also found that the interventionist application of watchdog journalism is more likely to be found in democracies with traditionally partisan journalistic cultures or experiencing socio-political crises, while in non-democratic countries the watchdog role is almost absent. This is consistent with previous research findings showing that in most transitional countries, with high levels of state intervention, detachment and less-intensive scrutiny are likely to be a precaution mechanism or function as journalists' safeguard against risk or hostile reactions from elites (Li and Sparks 2018). Obijiofor et al. (2017) showed that in Nigeria and Fiji, the transition from military rule to democracy has ushered in significant changes in the way journalism is practised. Here, ongoing restrictions on journalistic freedom led to the practice of 'development journalism' in Fiji, a genre of journalism in which journalists are compelled to work in partnership with the government in the name of national development and social harmony (also see Pintak and Nazir 2013; Hanitzsch et al 2019).

In the Arab context, Khamis and El-Ibiary (2022:1239) explain how post-Arab Spring democratic transitions heightened state regulations, impacting media freedom and professionalism, with consequences for "journalistic balance, accountability, and credibility".

El-Issawi and Cammaerts (2016) investigated the role of Egyptian journalists in shaping Egypt's complex and fast-moving political transition and found that monitorial and facilitative roles, which were prevalent in the early stages of the post-Mubarak era, were quickly overturned in favour of a radical and collaborative role. Egyptian journalists working in private media demonized their political adversaries, mainly the Islamists, transforming this political 'other' into the ultimate enemy. This arguably further destabilized the fragile transition to democracy. In a later study, El-Issawi (2020) argued that while journalists helped support democratization in Egypt in the immediate aftermath of the uprising, it also acted as a divisive platform, preparing the ground for the return of autocratic practices. According to El-Issawi (2020: 641), the experiences of journalists reflect a blend of political and business parallelism whereby journalists understand their bias as an expression of their loyalty to a 'mission', "that of defining the new identity of the regime, saving the revolution or saving the state".

The above literature review indicates that limitations to the democratising role of media during transition stem from both political pressures and market forces and that the structural conditions of journalism under the old regime are often reflected in journalism practices and routines during transition, where state-media relationships tend to be problematic.

Developments in post-revolutionary Egyptian media

Egypt has a rich history in journalism and is considered to possess one of the most developed media systems in the Arab region (ElMasry et al 2014; Abdulla 2014), with the Egyptian dialytic widely recognized throughout the Arab world (Abdulla 2014). Historically, Egyptian media has been an arm of Egypt's soft power (Badr 2020a).

By the time of the revolution in 2011, Egypt had relatively vibrant oppositional and independent/ private news media sectors, to counterbalance the state-owned media (Badr 2021c; Khamis 2011). Private TV channels, for example, allowed for discussions on taboo topics that were previously unheard of, such as the possibility of Mubarak's son inheriting the presidency, which was referred to as the "inheritance scenario", one of the 2011 revolution's triggers, to the extent that some scholars discussed the democratising effect of satellite TV (Khamis 2011; Seib 2007). Private newspapers concentrated on domestic politics, corruption, human rights, without total dependence on official sources but "members of the Egyptian public" as sources (Cooper 2008:6), leading to a diverse range of stories and news output, and a mix of different editorial priorities (Cooper 2008). At the same time, political blogs were well established, and social media was becoming more embedded; both played their part in the fermenting of dissent that led to the revolution (Allam and Hollifield 2021). The Mubarak period also witnessed a further professionalisation of the news sector through training programmes for Egyptian journalists offered by foreign countries, embassies, and NGOs (Harb 2019). This is not to suggest that Mubarak's era was in any way a golden age of press freedom. In its 2010 report, Freedom House classified Egypt as 'partly free', ranking it 130th out of 196 countries.

Post-revolution, scholars suggest that Egyptians witnessed four main transitional phases, each of which impacted the Egyptian media landscape considerably (see: Khamis 2011; El-Issawi 2016; El-Issawi 2020; Abdallah 2014). The first came after the 2011 revolution, in the Supreme Council of the Armed Force (SCAF) era (12 Feb 2011- 29 June 2012), where the media landscape changed dramatically, especially in the broadcast sector, with many satellite

channels opening without the need for a license (El-Issawi 2020). This period also witnessed talk shows challenging officials, discussing topics that were once considered as taboo (El-Issawi and Cammaerts 2016), and saw journalists countering official misinformation (Khamis and El-Ibiary 2022). Restrictions on media freedom followed - with the army remaining a strict red line (Yasin 2011) - and the media playing a role in smear campaigns against the revolution activities (Abdalla 2014).

Morsi's one year in power (30 June 2012- 3 July 2013) – the second phase – started with a brief honeymoon period, before a new wave of attacks on media (see: Elsheikh 2018; Trager 2016). 'Brotherhoodisation' of the state and the media occurred, (Elsheikh 2018; Trager 2016) where members of the Muslim brotherhood took vital positions in both the state and other organisations such as the media. It also witnessed a polarised media environment between Islamic and secular private outlets, "deepening political and economic instabilities and sectarianism" and "contributing to the rise of rumours and fake news" (Allam and El-Gody 2023:279).

Following Morsi's removal in 2013, and with the installation of the head of the High Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour, as president of Egypt for a transitional period (3 July 2013- 8 June 2014), there were hopes that media freedom would be restored (Abdalla 2014), yet during this third phase there was a crackdown on the Islamist-affiliated media outlets, leading to their closure. Some fled the country and continued broadcasting from abroad (El Issawi and Cammaerts 2016).

In El-Sisi's era (from 8 June 2014 to present), the media landscape changed dramatically in two ways. The first was a series of laws to regulate and control the chaotic media landscape (Allam 2021; El-Issawi and Cammaerts 2016; El-Issawi 2020). The second was the regime resorting to buying private media outlets through a government-affiliated company, United Media Service (UMS) (Bahgat 2017; El-Issawi 2020). The result is a new ownership landscape consisting of the traditional national outlets owned historically by the state, opposition outlets owned by political parties, private outlets owned by individuals or companies, and outlets that currently operate under the umbrella UMS. Operating from outside of Egypt (but blocked inside the country) are several private and opposition outlets in addition to dedicated Arab-funded TV channels broadcasting for Egyptians.

Scholars argue that Egypt remains in the transitional phase from 2011 with an accompanied transitional unsettled media system (see: Allam and Hollifield 2021; Amin and Allam 2022). Press freedom in Egypt has also been in steady decline since the Arab Spring. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ 2019) described Egypt as the world's third-worst jailer of journalists. Freedom House's Freedom Report in 2022 ranked Egypt as a not free country, stating that the Egyptian media sector is dominated by pro-government outlets with websites critical of the government systematically blocked. Badr (2020:64) states that "unlike former President Mubarak's policies—no politician will push for progress and investments in the media sector", arguing that "the Egyptian media is heading to the unknown: the death of journalism".

Given this context, there is a compelling need to understand the conditions in which Egyptian journalists are operating, and the impact of the external environment on their routines and

practices. An emerging body of research has examined the experiences of journalists during these transitional phases (e.g. El-Issawi and Cammaerts 2016; Badr 2020). Yet, these few studies concentrate on the immediate transitional phases following the 2011 revolution (e.g. see El-Issawi 2014; ElMasry et al 2014), with more recent studies on Egypt either built on older datasets from 2011-2014 (e.g. El-Issawi and Cammaerts, 2016; El-Issawi, 2020) or focussed on specific issues such as journalists' safety (Alazrak 2020), the use of analytics in newsrooms (Allam and Hollifield 2021), development journalism (Allam and ElGody 2023), constructive journalism (Allam 2019), or media policies (Amin and Allam 2022).

In this study, we draw particular attention to the challenges faced by Egyptian journalists considering the ongoing transitional period. More specifically, we examine how Egyptian journalists experience their relationship with the authorities in the current transitional period; how the broader media-politics environment impacts journalists' ability to access information; and how journalists' routines and practices change in response to the external environment.

Method

We address these questions by recording the experiences of 20 Egyptian journalists through semi-structured, in-depth interviews[1]. Interviews were conducted in October and November

[1] Following the operationalisation of Fusch and Ness (2015), this was the number of interviews by which the authors felt that data saturation had been met.

2021. The interviews were conducted via audio calls[2] (phone and internet apps) by the lead author, allowing the interviewers to bypass the physical restrictions caused by the ongoing pandemic, while maintaining the key principles of semi-structured in-depth interviews. These include flexible and free-flowing interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, space to obtain clarity and details from the interviewee on the questions asked, and a balance between structure and scope for digression.

Each interview lasted between an hour and 90 minutes. The interviewees were chosen via a purposive sampling strategy. The first criteria for selection were that – as a whole – the sample should capture the experiences of journalists from across the current media landscape in Egypt. This included the different ownership models across print, digital and TV, which includes: (1) established independent or privately-owned media organisations; (2) privately owned organisations that were recently bought by the state through UMS; (3) national news organisations that are funded directly by the state since the 1950s-60s; (4) news websites that were opened in 2020 and 2021, some of which are banned inside the country, and some of which don't have a license to operate, others were able to secure the license (our sample included journalists from all the three); (5) news media outlets belonging to opposition

[2] Participants were asked to choose the medium they prefer. This was on account of the poor video call quality and for at the request of participants' security. Journalists with Iphone preferred Facetime. Others preferred Botim and Telegram or phone calls.

parties; (6) journalists who stopped their daily work and responsibilities and converted to opinion writers because of what they see as challenges preventing them from carrying on their daily role; and (7) freelancers working for more than one outlet with various ownership modes. Across the sector in Egypt, it is common for journalists to hold more than one position in various outlets (for example, a journalist at a website or newspaper and at the same time an editor or producer in TV or radio programme), so most of our sample came from at least two of the above types of news outlet. Our sampling strategy also took into consideration other factors such as: age, gender, location (to include journalists working in both governates and the capital) and their position within the organisation/ media outlet. i.e., both in leadership and editorial positions. Journalism experience ranged from 5 to 32 years with a mean of 18 years. Accordingly, our sample ranged from those at reporter level to senior editors, with the majority having worked as journalists from before the 2011 revolution, witnessing several regimes. Identities of participants and the exact details of their employers cannot be given on account of the risk that authorities may identify them. Ethical clearance for the research was given by [Anonymous] University's ethics panel in the UK in October 2021, where such issues of safety and anonymity were reflected on.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic, transcribed, and translated into English before analysis was conducted. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews (Braun and

Clarke 2006). All authors were involved in the process of open coding and identification of major thematic categories; the management of sub-categories; and the development of dominant themes. Following this, a closer reading of themes took place in a process of meaning condensation (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

Findings

Journalists interviewed believed that polarisation in the Egyptian public sphere that started after the 2011 revolution (Elsheikh 2018) impacted the relationship between journalists and ordinary citizens from one side, and journalists and the state from the other side. This led to challenges for the journalists in accessing both information and sources, evolving into to what they describe as 'journalism of press releases', which led to more generic content across all outlets. Based on the four most prominent emergent themes, this section explains how journalists experience their relationship with both ordinary citizens and authorities and how this impacted the wider practices and content.

Societal "hostility" toward journalists

We start with a theme that neither the existing literature nor our own experiences would have predicted beforehand, but which emerged organically throughout the interviews, when we asked journalists about the main challenges they face in the ongoing transitional period.

Across our sample, journalists interviewed said that there is a “societal hostility” towards them. They explained how they used to have high status and prestige among ordinary citizens before the revolution. They gave examples how citizens used to approach them voluntarily with their personal problems or with any corruption they notice, asking the press to cover it. Now, journalists report of being kicked out of events or of being reported to the police by citizens. A 58-year-old senior journalist reported:

> "In Mubarak's era, we were the elite. Entering any place, even a café, people respected me, seeking solutions to their problems … Even my elderly father used to be very proud in front of everyone in his village when I appear on TV or when I publish. This is not the case now … We are not the elite anymore. Journalism is declining, and our self-image is diminishing. Other professions like army, police, and prosecution are now considered elite.

According to our participants, there is a common belief among citizens that journalists are one of the reasons – if not the main reason – for the toppling of both Mubarak’s and Morsi’s regimes, leading to instability and chaos in the country from 2011. A senior journalist working in a private newspaper and website explained:

> "Citizens remember this time, when their lives stopped, when they lost their jobs. They blame us … They want to have a normal life. They want a working state. They don't want any more revolutions".

A senior investigative reporter added that "citizens tell us bluntly, you – journalists – want to destroy our lives again. We won't speak with you." Other participants articulated feelings of betrayal from citizens towards the media; that they had been promised a better life by journalists, which gave them inaccurate information, and unreal promises. This jarred with the harsh realities of Egypt's struggling economy and political turmoil.

An experienced female journalist working in a famous privately-owned newspaper and website blamed journalists themselves and not the citizens for this situation. She argued that journalists were "no longer impartial, as they used to be before 2011" and how they transferred to "mob dictatorship" trying "to please the audience to increase newspaper distribution and website traffic" without producing "real journalism". She explained that "when they realised their mistake and tried to correct it by being balanced again, they were already classified" (as either for or against the revolution). Despite agreeing with her that all media outlets took sides from 2011 onwards, an editor for a national media outlet disagrees. He argues that they realised their mistakes and tried to balance, saying: "we did not try to

balance and present all sides now. We are converted to the one voice journalism. All outlets became the state's voice and sometimes doing propaganda for it". An editor for an outlet owned by UMS explains:

> "Citizens' hostile attitude towards us can't be limited to one reason. They don't trust us. They see some of us in prisons. They feel we can't help ourselves to help them. They see journalists copying and pasting, providing one voice journalism. They see their economic conditions are getting worse, while some media celebrities are getting huge number of salaries. Drama misrepresents journalists as well. So, why would they trust us anymore?"

State stance toward journalists

Journalists believe that the "hostility" towards media and journalists is not limited to ordinary citizens. Many feel that the state also believes that journalists are one of the main causes that led to the present economic and political turmoil. This feeling led to a different type of hostility towards journalists: hostility from the regime.

There was a consensus among all participants that the media environment was in a state of chaos after the 2011 revolution and that there was a need for regulation. Yet some believe that the regime used this situation to tighten its grip on press freedom and the public sphere in general, by creating what they described as "a single press with a single voice". Others think

there was a necessity for state stability – and not regime stability – but that it was mis-implemented. Journalists explained how foreign countries and Egyptian businessmen invest in Egyptian media and interfere in Egypt's internal politics and more importantly mobilise and influence ordinary citizens, which explains the state's current stance towards media. A journalist working for an outlet owned by the new company, UMS, says:

> "It's not acceptable now – from the state's perspective – for the media to be as strong as before. They will not kill the Egyptian media, but at the same time they will not let it stand up. For them, it's not to protect the regime. But it's to protect the state, and its national security. They want to build a state first. After stabilising the state, they can check the media and freedom. But now – from their point of view - they will not allow the media to destroy the state that is not built yet."

All journalists interviewed agreed that the media environment became chaotic immediately after the revolution, with many outlets opening, and too many talk shows. A senior journalist in a private outlet explains how "activists from Tahrir square" entered the field and worked as journalists, "without an understanding of the ethics and mechanisms of the job. The need for regulation - to protect journalists' safety as well - was also stressed by journalists who faced death threats and attacks on their workplace from Muslim Brotherhood supporters during Morsi's rule. An assistant editor in a private outlet explained how they used to "receive

death threats so as not to publish or cover specific stories", and how they used to "park our cars far away from the newspaper office and go to the office walking or by taxi" so as not to get it destroyed. A journalist in another private outlet also described how their "headquarters were torched and set on fire, after publishing specific story". This was echoed by other journalists, clarifying the different types of fears they felt during the Morsi and Al-Sisi regimes. An assistant editor of a private newspaper and website explained:

> "During the Muslim Brotherhood rule, the threats were real against you personally as a journalist. Against your life, safety and family. After 2013, we don't receive death threats. But we are afraid from legal action, losing our jobs or prison. So yes, we need regulation but not like this."

Journalists explained how the state resorted to blocking both national- and international-based websites in recent years when critical stories were published. Editors described their technical tricks to allow Egyptians to access their websites despite being blocked. Yet the problem remains that the blocking punishes them financially, as advertisers (including Google ads) will not pay money to advertise on a blocked website, thus causing them long-term financial challenges.

Access to information

Journalists explained that the current “hostility” from both citizens and the state created an environment where journalists cannot access information anymore mainly due to uncooperative inaccessible sources, and the absence of an information law. Most interviewees explained that it is no longer possible to speak directly with official sources and that they are only allowed to speak with the appointed spokesperson for each organisation, who refers them to press releases and refuses to answer additional questions. This forced journalists to copy press releases, resulting in homogenous coverage in all outlets; what some described as “journalism of press releases”.

Participants described how the role of the spokesperson is becoming a “replacement for the source”, changing the journalist’s job as they “deal with the spokesperson instead of officials, who write the press release and send photos”. An investigative journalist explains how it has now become a “very rare incident for a journalist to meet his source of speak with him”, transferring journalism to “a desk job”. Others complain that these press releases are not sent in time, but instead simultaneously published on the spokesperson’s Facebook page and sent to journalists. An editor of a private outlet explains that the press releases are distributed “without any extra time given to journalists to offer an added value to the audience. They speak directly with the public through social media. Why would the audience read us then?” The same extended to non-political sources. A journalist working in a private outlet explains:

“They don’t need us anymore and they don’t interact. They put what they want on their (social media) pages and ask us to take it from there. So, the result is that we all copy and paste statements, and this is not limited to official sources only”.

Journalists contrast dealing with sources during Mubarak’s era, where they had direct access to high profile official sources. While none of our participants missed Mubarak, many did miss the working conditions they enjoyed under his era (better salary, public prestige, and some relative freedoms). In relation to his management of the press, some journalists described Mubarak as “a wise man”, with one journalist explaining that Mubarak used the ministers and officials to act as “a shock absorber” for him, agreeing that the current regime is not doing this. Journalists complain of what they described as “line-manager approval or media office approval” that “extends to other low-profile jobs”, with one freelance journalist explaining that this extends to non-political sources such as “council officials” or a “museum managers” or “project managers”.

Even though the Egyptian constitution protects freedom of information, there is no functional associated law. Journalists explain that there was no law during Mubarak’s era either, but because both official sources and ordinary citizens cooperated with them, they were able to get the information or documents they needed. This is no longer the case, thus leaving the

journalist trapped and without access to information unless the journalist has “strong personal connections with someone inside the organisation” according to two journalists, the first working in a private outlet and the second working for a national state-owned outlet.

Self-censorship

In navigating such challenges, journalists resort to survival tactics like self-censorship, focusing on "safe topics" such as history and non-political stories, and embracing a form of constructive journalism. Participants offered varying perspectives on the extent of self-censorship when addressing certain topics. Some non-Muslim Brotherhood opposition journalists claimed the ability to publish anything if they want to, partly because they are already banned in Egypt, so are therefore publishing illicitly from outside of the country (via firewalls and other technical manoeuvres). For example, an editor from an unlicensed opposition website, already blocked in the country, shared, "I use VPN and social media to disseminate content. I publish with my moral authority in the field. It would be embarrassing for the regime if they captured me." However, the same editor admitted to practicing self-censorship within the team, stating, "I do self-censorship on journalists working for me. I don’t want them to be harmed. I drop the story. If it is significant, I publish it and remove their name for their safety”.

In private media outlets, our data suggests a pervasive culture of self-censorship, often enforced by editors, leading to stories being dropped or substantially edited. A columnist expressed frustration at the pulling of a piece proposing changes to the Human Rights Council of Egypt, saying “the decisions seem geared toward avoiding perceived headaches for the editor, not due to any actual wrongdoing in my writing.” The columnist’s frustration was only exacerbated when two weeks later, the government subsequently implemented the changes his article had advocated. Another journalist in a private outlet describes how “sometimes topics published in state-owned media are rejected for us, even though we are private. He (the editor) wants to prove that he is extra loyal, not only loyal."

Underlying this testimony is a fear of the state, and the consequences of doing so. Editors, while responsible for much of the self-censorship, positioned themselves as protecting jobs and the economic survival of their organisation. They explained that their main task is making sure that the outlet will not be closed or blocked because of a published story, with one editor-in-chief explaining that editors are “prisoners of the organisation’s survival. The censorship we do is in journalists’ favour.” As a result of their interventions, they argue, journalists “will continue working”.

Editors explained that they don't only fear the authorities, but also their competitors and the public, who can take their stories out of context and force the authorities to act, even if the authorities had no initial objections to the published stories. They also explained that none of them – or their legal teams – understand the laws that can be implemented on them. An editor in private outlet explained that "accusations like fake news or joining a terrorist group can lead to lawsuits. To be cautious, many of us prefer the safe side". In this context of fear and confusion, editors seek to minimise risk to their journalists, advertisers, and owners by publishing content similar to other outlets: "We see what others are doing and try to do nearly the same stories. We think this is the safest way" (Editor of a private newspaper and website).

In light of this restrictive environment, some journalists navigate limitations by cautiously engaging in political stories and moderate criticism (excluding the military and president). Many opt for "safe topics" like history, light features, religion, and other topics to avoid conflicts with editors and other external ramifications (such as legal action or the withholding of advertisements for the newspaper).

> "The majority of us now write about history. Everyone knows we are escaping from the current controversial topics to safe topics that will not annoy anyone or cause problems" (A senior journalist in a private outlet).

Oher safe topics include what journalists described as service or constructive journalism. As an assistant editor for an outlet owned by UMS explained, “We did a section to solve citizens’ problems. People send us their individual problems, we send it to Citizens Complaints Office in the cabinet, and we solve it”. Journalists in state-owned or state-affiliated media outlets explained working within the state’s vision by following, what is referred to in Egypt as ‘patriotic journalism’ but might also be described as performing the loyal facilitator role (Mellado, 2015). They gave examples how they tackle stories that explain to the citizens new projects implemented by the government, how they can encourage development, national unity and stabilise the economy. They also mentioned how they try to tackle any shortages in a constructive way without provoking officials as their aim is not to create an uprising or strife among citizens, but to solve and correct the shortages. As the assistant editor of a government-supporting private outlet explained:

> “If the journalist loves the country and wants it to develop, he will try to help the officials in developing it. if he publishes wrongdoings and problems, the treatment will be constructive and not to mobilise people against the state. My role is to help the state advance its citizens. What is the benefit if I destroy the state?”

However, some journalists criticize the concept, contending that it implies journalists will become "a tool for state propaganda at all times," asserting that they have not adhered to such a role, with a journalist working in a private outlet saying, “we did not stick to that mud”.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to understand the lived experiences of Egyptian journalists during the ongoing period of political transition. This inquiry was largely framed by debates concerning the relationship between media and politics in transitional periods, the foremost preoccupation of previous literature. Such literature tells us that during transitions there is no guarantee that journalists will experience greater freedoms than under the autocratic regimes they left behind (Stetka 2012; Voltmer and Rawnsley 2009; Waisbord 2010). In such contexts, transitional regimes may try to control the media by whatever available means - such as regulation, threats, or forced takeovers - and favour news organisations that are in line with their agenda and priorities (Waisbord 2010). In our case, participants described a media landscape defined by uncertainty and confusion, but with the unmistakeable influence of the state. Journalists experienced this directly, such as through the blocking of websites, and indirectly, through self-censorship and the control of information. Some argued that the current regime used the opportunity of ongoing transition not only to control media content, but to close and control the public sphere. All participants – including those from opposition outlets – agreed that there was a need for media regulations. However, they explained that the process of regulating the media landscape was poorly implemented by the current regime.

If the media-politics relations tell a familiar story, then a striking story – largely neglected by previous research – emerged from Egyptian journalist's evolving experiences with citizens. Every participant described an ongoing public "hostility" toward journalists and how this contrasted with previous political eras, with significant consequences for the work and daily routines of journalists. They explained how ordinary citizens used to contact them to cover any misdoing or to solve problems on their behalf, and now journalists were being kicked out of covering events by ordinary citizens, rather than by authorities. While a government's desire to curtail watchdog journalism may be predictable, the non-cooperation of the public with the press' daily work is far more surprising, and deeply concerning given its obstruction to news that is in the public's interest.

This dynamic is underpinned by a belief among citizens and officials that journalists were among the main causes for the toppling of both Mubarak and Morsi regimes. Journalists explained that ordinary citizens remember the instability, insecurity and unemployment following the removal of the regimes. According to the journalists interviewed, both sides – citizens and authorities – see journalists as a destabilising agent. While previous literature has suggested a lack of trust towards Egyptian journalists (El-Issawi and Cammaerts 2015; Allam 2019; El-Issawi 2014b), these findings give a richer picture of its causes and consequences for journalistic routines and practices. While citizens' lack of trust in media is usually related to perception of fairness (Newman et al. 2019), the dynamic seen here may be unique for post-revolutionary systems where the news media is perceived to have played a central role in regime change. The irony here, of course, is that that it was a regime change that was supported by most citizens, yet public views towards journalists in Egypt seem to have shifted

in the intervening years. Further research that speaks directly with citizens in these regimes can shed further light on this important dynamic in these settings.

These difficult relationships were also reflected in how journalists perform their day-to-day tasks, especially how they can access information. This applies to both types of information: (1) information obtained from human sources – whether official, high-profile sources or ordinary citizens usually working as employees in public or private organisations, and (2) information obtained from any type of documents whether official, confidential, or even public. Journalists explained that they can no longer contact officials directly. They explained how organisations directed journalists to a spokesperson rather than an official, with the aim of hiding information or preventing the journalist from publishing a story that diverged from the press release. Journalists also explained that if they were able to reach a source inside the organisation, the source – no matter how low profile he/she is – usually refuses to speak with them. Some claimed there were unwritten instructions inside various organisations not to speak with the media, others felt it was reflective of the wider societal hostility towards journalists.

Although the right to access information and official documents is guaranteed by article 68 in the constitution, journalists explained that it's still a constitutional right only on paper, and that an information law should be issued first to allow them to practice this constitutional right. Journalists also explained that they are not even able to access documents available in the public – such as old copies of newspapers, as the archive employee would find any excuse not to give it to them when they know it's for a journalist. Despite calling for it at the time, journalists now recognise that they did not feel the real need for this law in Mubarak's era, as

they had direct access to both official sources and citizens who were cooperating with them. But for now, they are left to copy and paste from press releases as they have no more access to primary sources. Dependence on press releases led to homogenous content in all outlets, or what the journalists in described as "one voice journalism", which invariably favours the state. While we are not the first to document efforts to control the Egyptian media towards a unified message (El-Issawi and Cammaerts 2016; El-Issawi 2020), our study reveals journalists' experiences of these forms of information control, where they are essentially producing output without having access to primary sources.

Amid fears of being prisoned or sanctioned, along with fears over the future of media outlets, our participants described various coping strategies. Aligned with previous work in similar contexts (Allam 2019; Jungblut and Hoxha 2016; Márquez-Ramírez et al. 2020; Mellado and van Dalen 2017; Webb 2014), these included imposing self-censorship, and resorting to what they describe as safe topics such as history or service journalism at the expense of investigative or watchdog stories. Journalists working in pro-government outlets explained how they try to work on informative, useful stories aligning with the government vision; what is often described in Egypt as patriotic journalism but has affinities with the authoritarian-benevolent strand of development journalism and the loyal facilitator role (Mellado 2015). This approach coincides with other literature suggesting that restricted media atmospheres can lead to the flourishing of this type of journalism (Pintak and Nazir, 2013; Allam 2019). These findings also seemingly align with data collected in the years that followed the 2011 uprising until the immediate phase after the removal of Morsi in July 2013, where journalists seemed to be driven by "a mission ... to define the new identity of the regime, saving the revolution or saving the state" (El-Issawi 2020: 641).

However, this is where the similarities end. Our findings depict a less idealistic and optimistic cohort of journalists, less occupied by fulfilling a 'mission' but instead finding ways to cope and survive. It is this pragmatism that has led them towards these forms of constructive or authoritarian-benevolent development journalism. Although both development and constructive journalism are common practices in the Global South (Pintak and Nazir 2013; Obijiofor et al. 2017), our findings show how controversial it can be in a transitional media environment. We witnessed a division among Egyptian journalists over whether the appropriateness of this type of journalism. Here, many journalists in opposition outlets accused their fellow journalists who follow this approach of being hypocrites, fulfilling a regime agenda, and making propaganda on behalf of the regime.

In parallel with all these concerning developments is the declining standing of journalism as a profession in Egypt, in terms of status, training and remuneration. Where once journalism was considered a high status, well paid, and appealing career, our participants spoke of moonlighting in other sectors just to pay the bills. Whilst barely touched upon in our findings, many journalists highlighted how the lack of professional training is impacting the young generation of journalists who entered the industry since the 2011 revolution. This has led to a generational gap in the industry between those who have received training and those who have not. Participants worried that even if state restrictions on journalism eased in the future, there is a generation of journalists who know nothing other than how to churn out press releases. Together, these are deeply concerning trends for the future of the profession in Egypt, and for democratic transition writ large. Without a free, independent, and economically viable press, Egypt is cultivating the conditions for corruption to thrive, and for

abuses of power to go unchecked. It is no surprise that all journalists interviewed in this research were worried about the profession and any hopes for democratising the media and the political sphere.

Such conditions, of course, may have been evident in the previous authoritarian periods of Egypt's history. However, journalists interviewed here gave surprisingly rose-tinted accounts of their work in previous eras (mainly under Mubarak). They described how they used to think that there was no press freedom then, but this perception is changed now. In fact, there was an agreement among journalists that the Mubarak era was relatively flourishing for journalism as they did not fear being imprisoned or heavily sanctioned and were all sure that Mubarak would intervene himself and pardon them if a legal problem arose. These reflections are an important finding for our understanding of journalistic culture in post-revolutionary transitional environments, especially as the journalists who now praise Mubarak's era were working in opposition outlets during his tenure and played a part in mobilising citizens against him. This finding potentially reopens debates around the extent of journalistic autonomy in transitional and/or authoritarian regimes. We might, for example, need to revisit our understanding of the pre-2011 revolution period again, highlighting new reflections from journalists working during that era – especially those who were working in opposition and private outlets. Similarly, it may encourage us to view the perceptions of journalists currently working in other non-democratic regimes in a more nuanced light. However, given the modest sample size of our study, further research is needed to explore such possibilities.

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