

Assessing media roles in Egypt: A journalistic perspective on liberal media functions

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Abstract

This study critically engages with four main basic normative media functions that are commonly adopted in democratic media systems and assesses their relevance and suitability to a post-uprising context like Egypt. By interviewing twenty journalists representing all forms of news outlets and ownership models, this study examines whether journalists see these normative functions as important to Egypt's political context and/or potential democratization, whether and how they try to engage with them, and what are their perceived societal benefits and limitations. Our findings suggest that despite the historical influence of the liberal paradigm on journalism practice in Egypt, the perceived benefit of some of these normative media functions in Egypt is quite limited. Structural and societal factors appear to influence the perception of these functions, in addition to other factors related to the journalists' views and perceptions. The study's findings are discussed in light of research on de-westernizing media studies and the role of media in democratization.

Keywords: *Egyptian journalists, democratization, liberal media functions, de-westernization*

Introduction

Unlike most democratic media systems where the normative functions of media in society are well defined based on the characteristics of representative or liberal democracies (see McNair 2011; Norris 2020), there is less research that explores how exactly the media can fulfil their role and contribute to democratization in emerging media markets and non-democratic contexts (Jebril et al. 2015; Iordanidou et al. 2022). Emerging democracies tend to develop unique types of media systems that differ significantly from those in established democracies, and journalistic professionalism is argued to be embedded in the wider cultural traditions of a given

country (McConnell and Becker 2002). There is therefore little agreement on the suitability of the democratic normative functions of journalism in these contexts (see Curran and Park 2000; Wasserman and De Beer 2009; Hanitzsch and Vos 2018; Obijiofor et al. 2017).

In this study, we critically examine the perception, relevance, applications and limitations of four main liberal normative media functions commonly adopted in democratic media systems. We do so by engaging with Egyptian journalists representing all forms of outlets and ownership models (government-owned, independent, privately owned, opposition and new start-ups). These media functions represent the main ideals and framework for media's role in democracy and include serving as (1) an informative tool monitoring the political environment (McNair 2011), (2) a forum encouraging pluralistic debate about public affairs, (3) a guardian/watchdog against abuses of power and (4) a mobilizing agent encouraging public learning and participation in the political process (see Norris 2000; McQuail 2005).

We try to examine whether journalists see these normative functions as important to Egypt's political context and/or potential democratization, whether and how they try to engage with them and what are their perceived societal benefits and limitations.

Normative theories of news media and society

Normative theories of news media and society examine ideas of how the news media ought to be organized and to behave in the wider public interest or for the good of society as a whole (McQuail 2005: 162). Although the media is essentially free to choose or avoid, various ends as long as they do not cause harm, normative theories recognize certain unwritten obligations, which are mainly derived from the historical link between democratic political institutions and the role of the media as carrier of news and former of opinion, that have been observed to be positively valued (McQuail 2005: 163). While the literature on journalistic roles has proliferated to consider such functions as providing infotainment and service for news audiences (McQuail 2005), four of the foundational normative functions of the news media remain central.

Based on classic models of liberal democracy (McNair 2011), the first of these is for news media to act as an informative tool, with most scholars considering this function as a prerequisite for other normative media functions (see Norris 2000; McNair 2011). For media

to be able to perform this informative role, journalists need to have access to multiple diverse relevant cooperative sources, in addition to a supportive legal freedom. However, in more repressive regime contexts, even these prerequisites are not always guaranteed, leaving journalists as potential mouthpieces for ruling authorities (Lewis and Al Nashmi 2019).

A second key function of the news media is to act as a civic forum for pluralistic debate. According to this function, media is expected to act as a platform for both citizens and officials so that they can communicate effectively, discuss ideas regarding matters of public concern, facilitating the formation of public opinion (McNair 2011) and activating public participation and community involvement (Massey and Haas 2002). Norris (2000) argues that in order to perform this role, media should act as a link between politicians and electorate, where messages are communicated both downwards – from officials to citizens, and upwards – from citizens to officials. She further highlights some indicators to assess media performance to this function, such as extensive accessible political coverage and a rich information environment, with multiple sources about regular news.

This media function is closely related to pluralist theory where media is expected to reflect the diversity of society (see Norris 2000; McQuail 2005). McNair highlights the importance of media providing ‘a space for the dissent’ and ‘a channel for the advocacy of political viewpoints’ (2011: 19), while Norris warns that the role of the news media as a civic forum becomes problematic if most major news outlets consistently favour only one party or viewpoint, if they systematically exclude minor parties or minority perspectives, or if citizens rely upon only one news source (2000: 27)

A third foundational function of the news media is to act as a watchdog or a fourth state, making it one of the essential checks and balances in a democracy (Norris 2000; McNair 2011). In this function, investigative journalism is often paid extra attention as the main form through which journalists can perform this function. Norris argues that implementing this function means that journalists should not report on political stories ‘straight or unfiltered from politicians to public’ (2000: 29) without adding the necessary comments, questions and explanations.

Finally, journalists have responsibility – along with other institutions – as mobilizing agents for citizens to participate effectively in political life (Norris 2000). The news media have often

been blamed and associated with increased political cynicism political apathy, detachment, a loss of social capital (see Norris 2000), which can be due to reasons such as: a prevailing focus on style, strategies and performance in politics at the expense of issues; increasing journalistic negativity and cynicism towards politicians and increased tabloidization (Norris 2000; Jebril 2013a). Yet, others find a more ‘virtuous’ relationship between news consumption and political engagement, knowledge and participation (Jebril 2013b; Norris 2000). The role of media as mobilizing agent is often associated with mobilizing citizens to vote in elections to enhance democracy (Norris 2000). Yet, limiting the mobilization role to elections only could be controversial especially in non-democratic countries, where regimes might use elections to split oppositions into factions (Linz 1978), identify and target opposition groups (Way 2005) and buy time for a later exit (Hermet et al. 1978).

De-westernizing journalism: Journalism practices in Egypt and beyond

The prominence of the liberal model of journalism as prevailing even in non-western countries in both theory and practice has been studied extensively (see Chalaby 1996; Curran and Park 2000; Wasserman and De Beer 2009; Obijiofor et al. 2017; Hanitzsch and Vos 2018), with some scholars describing journalism as ‘an Anglo-American invention’ (Chalaby 1996: 303). While some literature argue that the ‘democratic model of liberal democracy remains the implicit or explicit normative ideal against which journalism in non-Western societies is measured’ (Wasserman and De Beer 2009: 431), a growing amount of literature questioned the suitability of liberal media functions in transitional contexts and emerging democracies and disputed it, calling for de-westernization of the field (see Curran and Park 2000; Wasserman and De Beer 2009; Hanitzsch and Vos 2018; Obijiofor et al. 2017) and for a more international global inclusive theory of journalism that take into account other parts of the world other than the United States and western Europe (see Josephi 2005).

The call to de-westernize communication and media studies arises from criticism of the prevailing elitist ‘Western’ axiology and epistemology of universal validity, neglecting Indigenous and localized non-Western philosophical traditions (Glück 2019). For example, the concepts of objectivity and detachment have their roots in nineteenth-century Western scientific rationalism, reflecting a dominant epistemology centred on empirical observations and personal detachment to minimize subjectivity (Harkins and Lugo-Ocando 2016).

According to Gunaratne (2009), despite the inherent openness of the media studies field towards other disciplines, the field has, since the beginning, been shaped and dominated by US-led problems, ideas and practices and inherited the full flavour of European universalism since it originated in the academic institutions of the centre countries.

Critics point out that US-American approaches cannot necessarily address issues in other parts of the world, where different contexts and epistemologies prevail (Rao 2011). Scholars thus call for de-westernization across all aspects of the research process, encompassing ‘the subject of study, the body of evidence, theoretical and methodological perspectives, research inquiries, and academic professional cultures’ (Waisbord and Mellado 2014: 363). In this context, a culture-centric approach that prioritizes culture as the central focus of inquiry and seeks to embrace the complexities of culture is considered (Kuo and Chew 2009). Nevertheless, according to Gunaratne (2009), despite the increased reactions to European universalism and emerging alternatives in the 1990s and 2000s, mainstream Western theory and methodology continued to dominate the field of media and communication, leading to global divisions.

The call for de-westernization is also closely linked to postcolonial theory, which aims to challenge the universal claims of the Enlightenment as a political project (Glück 2019). As noted by Shome (2016), as media studies undergo a pivotal shift, striving to break free from its Western-centric roots, the adoption of postcolonial frameworks not only disrupts entrenched Western perspectives, particularly in the United States and British academic contexts, regarding the history and functioning of mass media but also expands the horizons of media studies in productive ways (2016).

Wasserman (2011) suggests that attempts to integrate global perspectives into journalism studies frequently fail to question the dominant theoretical assumptions in the discipline. Although these efforts gather case studies from regions beyond the developed countries, they often fall short in critically examining fundamental principles in the field of journalism studies, such as the connection between journalism and democracy, the underlying ethical principles of media or the interaction between technology and society. Additionally, he notes that at times, the inclusion of global perspectives may seem like an afterthought, potentially relegating the developing world to a marginalized position, which is akin to what Shiva refers to as ‘the West as theory, the East as evidence’ (1989: 118).

It is worth noting that when examining the applicability of liberal media functions in non-Western contexts, empirical research often relies on studies concerning journalists' role perceptions and practices, rather than their explicit assessments of these functions.

For example, a growing literature has looked at journalism practices around the world, with many studies pointing to a significant difference between western and non-western countries (see Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Curran and Park 2000; Hanitzsch and Vos 2018; Obijiofor et al. 2017). In their comparative study of eighteen western and non-western countries, Hanitzsch et al. (2011) found that detachment, non-involvement, providing political information and monitoring the government are considered 'essential journalistic functions around the globe'. Yet they argue that western journalists are less supportive to social change, unlike journalists in non-western countries who adapt an interventionist approach.

Previous studies from the Arab region have also shown some conflicting roles. For example, Pintak and Ginges (2008) found Arab journalists see their mission as driving political and social reform, seeing themselves 'as agents of democratic change' (2008: 206). While Lewis and Al Nashmi (2019) found that the loyal-facilitator role was dominant in the Arab countries, arguing that 'the watchdog role conception dominant in the Global North cannot be expected to replace the loyal-disseminator role so engrained in Arab societies' (2019: 1210).

In 2004, seven years before the 2011 Egyptian revolution, Ramaprasad and Hamdy (2006) found that Egyptian journalists 'considered democracy-sustaining functions second in importance, but were able to perform them least often, at about the average level' (2006: 167). They also found out that 'Egyptian journalists placed two basic journalistic functions – provision of timely and accurate information – in the same league of importance as supporting Arabism/values' (2006: 180), stating that within the democracy factor, journalists gave greater importance to discussion and analysis than to investigating and examining the government. Possibly, investigative journalism is still sometimes out of the reach of these journalists given the history of control and prevailing restrictions on press freedom. Still, Egyptian journalists were willing to scrutinise the government and even subject national development policy and practice to such scrutiny and criticism (2006: 180–81)

Through interviews with Egyptian journalists in 2013, just after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime, El Issawi and Cammaerts conclude that 'the monitorial and facilitative

roles, which were prevalent in the early stages of the post-Mubarak era, were quickly overturned in favor of a radical and collaborative role' (2016: 549), where Egyptian journalists 'demonized their political adversaries, mainly the Islamists, transforming this political "other" into the ultimate enemy' while at the same time, 'the new military regime was being revered and celebrated' (2016: 549). Importantly, such studies demonstrate the fluidity of some roles under changing political and economic circumstances, which in the case of Egypt, have continued to evolve since 2013. Here, Egypt has witnessed increased state interference in the media, alongside an increasingly challenging economic media environment (Badr 2020). Considering these circumstances, and their likely ongoing impacts on the practices, cultures and values of journalists, more research is needed on how journalists in post-uprising media systems perceive and perform various normative roles.

The influence of liberal paradigm on journalism in Egypt

Egypt has been influenced by the liberal paradigm of journalism in both theory and practice since its modern history. Egypt knew journalism in its modern form as a western invention during the French Expedition, when Napoleon Bonaparte introduced Egypt's first printing press. When Mohamed Ali – the founder of modern state in Egypt – took power, part of his modernizing plans was an intensive programme of scholarships, where he sent Egyptians in all fields to study abroad, where they were introduced to various western systems and practices, including in journalism. The Egyptian Gazette, the first official Egyptian newspaper, was developed to explicitly resemble western newspaper standards (see Abdel Rahman and Kamel 2020: 40–54). Private printing houses flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century, typically in both French and Italian languages, and followed Ismail's (1863–79) ambition to make Egypt to be 'a part of Europe'. With his approval, Egypt's most well-known newspapers were established and are still operating in Egypt now (Amer 2014).

The Egyptian press underwent coercive nationalization under Abdel Nasser, which was then steadily loosened under Sadat and then Mubarak (Hilal 2010). Mubarak's era witnessed a continuation of western influence through training programmes offered by foreign countries, embassies and NGOs in Egypt and a migration of journalists to and from Arabic-speaking international media organizations. Journalism students also learnt western curricula both in Egyptian universities and international universities in Egypt (Al Nashmi et al. 2018).

Mubarak's rule ended with the 2011 revolution, to start a new phase after the Egyptian uprisings. The Muslim Brotherhood's one year rule in power witnessed their attempts to influence and control media outlets, and Egyptian journalists mobilizing against them (El Issawi 2014). This was followed by the current era, starting with the election of Abdelfattah El-Sisi as president in 2014. His era started with a short honeymoon period with the media before being transferred into a restrictive media environment (see El Issawi and Cammaerts 2016; Badr 2020), with some scholars describing journalism in the current period as 'death of journalism' and 'heading to the unknown' (Badr 2020: 64).

This brief history demonstrates some of the influences on Egyptian journalistic culture, the legacy of which may still be present today. The aim of this study is to understand Egyptian journalists' perspectives on the four liberal media functions discussed above; assessing their importance to Egypt's current context and/or potential democratization, whether they try to engage with them and what are their perceived societal benefits and limitations. By doing so, we not only aim to examine the gap between normative liberal media functions and their perceived significance among journalists in Egypt but also to understand the news media's responsibilities within this dynamic context from journalists' perspectives.

Method

We record the experiences of twenty Egyptian journalists through, in-depth interviews.¹ Interviews were conducted via Zoom and telephone in October and November 2021, by the lead author. Each interview lasted between an hour and 90 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for a wide range of topics to be introduced by participants, but with an emphasis was on obtaining stories about their lived experiences of the roles they perform, past and present.

We followed a purposive sampling strategy that sought journalists with a minimum of five years' experience in journalism and were chosen to represent the different ownership models across print, online and TV. Journalism experience ranged from 5 to 32 years with a mean of eighteen years. As such, our sample ranged from those at reporter level to senior editors, with the majority having worked as journalists from before the 2011 revolution. Ethical clearance for the research was given by Bournemouth university's ethics panel in the United Kingdom in October 2021. Given the increasingly precarious climate that Egyptian journalists are operating

within, no personal or identifying information is given in our findings. 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.

Findings

Informative role

Some journalists believed the informative role is ‘an old-fashioned role’, arguing that officials, organizations, public figures and celebrities now communicate whatever information they want to the audience through their social media accounts, without the need for a journalist to re-communicate the message. For these journalists, ‘news’ is no more needed, and they see the ‘information/news’ aspect of the role as a ‘copying’ role, converting their job to copy from both press releases and social media pages. Others highlighted that they are converted to fact checkers to citizens stories published on social media, converting their role to ‘news verifiers’. Many journalists also explained that they prefer doing other types of stories rather than straightforward news, such as providing an analysis to a news story already published on social media, leaving the ‘news disseminator’ element to younger journalists who recently joined the industry.

In addition to beliefs about the importance of this function in the age of social media, several obstacles seem to prevent journalists from performing it. This includes the difficulty in accessing sources, as each organization has its own spokesperson who deals with journalist requests remotely by distributing press releases, without replying to additional questions. Many journalists gave examples on how they used to publish COVID-related stories without even understanding it, with one journalist in a private outlet explaining:

“The ministry of health used to issue a statement with daily figures. We didn’t understand the death numbers in these figures. Does it include the death numbers in hospitals, or homes or both? We didn’t understand. The spokesperson never replies”.

Another challenge is the deteriorating relationship with citizens, who used to act as sources in previous eras (Elsheikh et al. 2024a). Journalists explained that their relationship with ordinary

citizens deteriorated after the revolution. They explained that citizens do not cooperate with journalists anymore, thus journalists cannot access information from ordinary citizens as well: “Even if a citizen has a problem and he is convinced to speak with a journalist, he will be afraid least we should distort his speech or comments. The concept is that we journalists are not accurate, that we are self-interested and biased”. (journalist working in a private outlet)

The absence of an information law (see also Elsheikh et al. 2024a) has also been highlighted as one of the challenges since it prevents journalists from accessing necessary documents: “There are restrictions even to release an old edition of a newspaper. Not restrictions from the authorities, but from employees working in this place. The employee refuse to search for it or keep postponing, or claim that the employee responsible for this is on leave or sick leave [...] etc. They do all what they can to make you get tired and not ask. There is a culture not to cooperate or help a journalist” (journalist working for an outlet owned by the government)

Yet, other journalists explained how this has provoked them to try and produce a different informative content, adding a fact-checking dimension to their job. An editor in a national newspaper explained how they try to overcome this obstacle, by correcting wrong information sometimes published by the spokesperson in the press releases: ‘A journalist who is good in research can still do their job and provide information by following, analysing and comparing. They can prove the contradictions in official press releases. This is what one of our colleagues did’.

Such testimony is indicative of an evolution in the informative role away from gatekeeping and towards ‘gatewatching’; a process that has been well established in western contexts (Bruns 2005). However, in Egypt, this evolution is not just technologically determined – through the rise of social media as a breaking news platform – but is accompanied by a diminution of access to both elite and everyday sources (see Elsheikh et al. 2024b). Through circumstance rather than choice, journalists are remaining relevant by providing analysis, fact checking and verification.

Media as a civic forum

Various perceptions emerged in relation to the news media's function as a civic forum. While some of the interviewed journalists agree that the media should function as a civic forum to facilitate debate, others explained that it is not their role. Interestingly, most journalists explained that such functions are declining in favour of 'service journalism' and 'infotainment' (see also Elsheikh et al. 2024a). For example, a junior journalist working in a private outlet told us that 'public debate is a useless concept at this age. It will lead to nothing'. An assistant editor for a private start-up rejected the idea that media should provide a platform for civic debate:

"Mass media platforms are not the correct platforms for such issues. The correct platforms are research centres, political parties and perhaps partisan papers. But why us? I will never discuss topics such as political participation or reasons behind weak political parties. This is not our job".

But other journalists disagree, arguing that media should act as a civic forum and provide platform for debate. The degree of implementation varies though. Journalists who write weekly and daily articles explained that they can still do some functions such as institutional reform and encouraging the debate through their articles if they used moderate language. A reporter in a private outlet who also writes weekly opinion articles elaborates that it is usually easier to 'implement this role in an opinion article, where responsibility lies more on the writer than any other formats or types', despite highlighting that 'the editor sometimes removes paragraphs from my article discussing some topics. They claim that we are not allowed to discuss these topics'.

All journalists explained that they can criticize or call for reform in certain public sectors, but not others. An opinion writer in a private outlet elaborates,

"In my opinion articles, I try to act as a vehicle that convey citizens' voice, opinions, feedback and problems to the officials. I can do this freely in three main sectors: health, education, and housing. But I choose my wording carefully and try to provide solutions".

Another opinion writer in a national outlet adds:

“It depends on which institution I am writing about. Of course, I can’t speak or write about the army, police, or court, but I can – and I do write about institutional reform in many other institutions. Such as: education reform, Covid 19, housing, disabled people. I always write about this. But for example, I can’t write about other services if the army is a partner in it.

Apart from opinion writers, some journalists explained that the information is usually going downwards from officials or the press release to the public, and not vice versa”.

A producer for a famous talk show explains:

“yes, we can easily bring officials to our programme. But of course, I can’t bring audience in the studio to confront him or question him. There are no written rules. But if I tell the managers, they will refuse. And personally, I would not suggest this to avoid problems”.

On the diversity of voices represented, there was a distinction between written stories and TV or video stories. Print and website outlets explained they can put sources as anonymous if they think it will cause them or cause the source any problems. But most journalists explained that they cannot interview someone from the Muslim Brotherhood.

An assistant editor in a private newspaper adds ‘there are even lists of banned writers: public figures who are no longer allowed to write opinion articles’. Those working for TV outlets mentioned that they have a list of banned guests and that it is not always limited to politicians or those in opposition. A journalist and programme producer in an outlet owned by the government explains:

“They don’t have to be banned because of political reasons. It could be a problem they made in their organisation. They will not be allowed to use the mass media in their own battle to solve their problem. They will also be punished by not having the space and prestige they are after in the public sphere, through the media”.

An editor of an outlet owned by the government explains how the audience attention is shifting away from any news related to politics:

“We realised that one of the top topics for Egyptians is the services. Topics dealing with traffic, weather, new roads, exams results, addresses for Covid vaccinations centres. These types of

services that affect their daily lives. Any topic of these is more readable than millions of political stories”.

Other journalists explained that they tend to concentrate more on trivial and scandalous topics (see also Elsheikh et al. 2024b), as it brings them more traffic and thus money.

Media as watchdog

There was a consensus among journalists on the importance of the watchdog role. Despite acknowledging that it is a western concept and that its application might be difficult in other non-western societies including Egypt, most journalists described it as the ‘ultimate form’ of journalism and declared their wish to implement it. Discrepancies appeared, however, in the way it should be implemented in the current political phase. Some journalists preferred other forms of journalism such as constructive or patriotic journalism (see also Elsheikh et al. 2024a), while others – especially those who used to work in investigative and in-depth departments – explained that they cannot do or do not know any other type of journalism. These journalists called for a margin of freedom and legal protection to allow them to implement this role, which acted as the main obstacle to engaging with this function. A journalist working in a private outlet explains this:

“It’s not an opposition role. It’s journalism role to act as a fourth state and oversee the work of public bodies. But it’s very difficult to do now. It may lead to clashes with the legislation bodies and end in holding you accountable. The laws are flexible, and journalists can be accused of publishing fake news”.

Other journalists highlighted that they can still do this role if they have access to documents. A journalist working in a private outlet explains further challenges:

“I can still write if I have documents and evidence. But the process was different from the past. In the past, when I used to do this type of journalism, sometimes officials phone call disagreeing. I used to take their comment and publish it, to give them the right to reply. But now, when I do this, the official or the source calls to fight. Even when I try to give them a chance to reply, they don’t give me substance or argument or reply to what is mentioned.

Instead, they start lecturing me about my style. Simply, they don't understand what the role of journalist is or what to say when they have the right to reply. For them, I am writing because I have some personal interests or prejudices”.

An editor working for a TV outlet owned by the government, says that it is impossible to launch an investigative piece to uncover corruption:

It's impossible. Imagine I want to write a story proving that this official takes bribes. His manager is the same one managing the media organisation I am working in. At the end, all officials are hired by the same body. I can't say that he takes bribes until they themselves say it officially or until he is accused officially. Otherwise, I will be accusing them all. [...] I can only cover what the regulator or audit announce. This era of starting, initiating and discovering it has ended.

An investigative journalist for a private outlet told us that ‘this (watchdog) role can be easily done in investigative and in-depth departments. Almost all these departments are now closed because of the financial crisis. What is allowed now are investigations and in-depth reporting about the regime's achievements only’.

Other journalists elaborate that the watchdog function does not necessarily need to be applied typically as in western countries. An assistant editor working in a private outlet mentions: ‘I'd like to have space to work in. But I am speaking about an Egyptian space, not necessarily a space like those in Scandinavian countries [...] We don't have to implement everything exactly like the west’.

Media as a mobilizing agent

There was a consensus among journalists that media should not be acting as a mobilizing agent, especially in politics. They argued that media should remain impartial and respect citizens' stance even if it was to boycott elections or not to participate. Despite this, they explained that they sometimes perform the mobilizing role, and many expressed their regret for doing it in the past due to the negative impact it had on society and the aspired democratization process they wished for after the 2011 revolution (see also Elsheikh et al. 2024a). Yet, they highlighted the positive impact media mobilization might have if implemented about a non-political topic.

Journalists explained the ‘bad reputation’ associated with the term ‘mobilization’ in the Egyptian political and media contexts. Several journalists gave examples to elaborate this point. One of the examples mentioned by several journalists has to do with the controversies around a headline published by a private newspaper called Al-Masry Al-Youm during the coverage of the presidential elections in 2018. In the third day of elections, the newspaper published a headline saying, ‘the state mobilises voters’. The result was that those who were involved in the story, nine journalists including the editor in chief, were investigated by supreme State Security Prosecution and other media regulating apparatus. The issue did not end until the editor in chief resigned. A journalist at a private newspaper elaborates: ‘The newspaper meant positive mobilising from the state – and not from the regime – to encourage citizens to participate. The term was misinterpreted and misused’.

Some journalists also explained how they used to act as a mobilizing agent during the 2011 revolution and the aftermath events. A journalist in a private outlet explains:

“We all took sides. We were all mobilising citizens either with or against the revolution. That’s one of the reasons why citizens do not trust us anymore. We were not mobilising them by raising their awareness, but by directing them in specific directions”.

Now, the journalists interviewed – except those of opposition outlets – believe it is not the media role to mobilize citizens to vote in elections, or to boycott them. Several journalists felt that the news media were responsible for the increasing polarization in Egyptian politics. One journalist working in a private outlet spoke to this in relation to mobilizing citizens in the 2012 presidential elections – the first and only multi-candidate elections after the revolution:

“Despite our good intention, media participated in the polarisation. We destroyed the two moderate candidates in a Televised debate. Then we started covering the polarised messages for the most polarising candidates, helping them to win and participate in increasing the polarisation in the society”.

Yet, the interviewed journalists explained that the era of mobilizing has ended, mainly because there are no more multi-candidate elections.

An editor in an outlet owned by the government explains: ‘After the 2014 elections, the political situation became static. We don’t have other elections to mobilise voters for’.

Yet other journalists refuse the idea of mobilizing citizens to vote, arguing that they should encourage them not to vote as well, with one journalist in a private outlet saying:

“There is a difference between raising awareness and between mobilising in a specific political direction. When you are mobilising citizens to vote in any election, you are taking a position against other political groups who might be calling citizens to boycott it. So, which position you should take. We shouldn’t take any of these positions. We should provide information only. But unfortunately, we don’t do this and take sides”.

An editor of an opposition outlet further explains:

“I am an opposition political outlet. I mobilise voters against voting. Or I mobilise them to vote for my candidate if I have any. This is journalism in other countries. We do it in Egypt but is it helpful for the country? I doubt. It is good for us, but not good for our country”.

An editor of a private outlet refuses the idea of practicing and implementing such media function:

We shouldn’t worship all western codes. Journalism is not working in vacuum. But there is a context that determine what should be applied and what not. We don’t need to apply what the western established democracies are applying. Simply, they have elections. We don’t as such. We know the result in advance.

Other journalists noted that mobilization – in the Egyptian way – harm society and any potential for democratic transition in general, with an editor of a private outlet explaining:

“In elections, we mobilise by slandering, distorting, and intimidating the other candidates. We mobilise by threatening citizens of the penalties fees for not voting. The mobilisation may succeed in making a candidate win, or in creating a high voting turnout. But it leaves us with a polarised, destroyed country after the election”.

Another journalist working in a national outlet claimed that ‘[a]ny talks about mobilizing like the western countries in a country like Egypt is a mistake. It leads to disasters after the elections’. Despite the negative impact and negative consequences associated with political mobilization, journalists agreed on the important role media play in mobilizing in non-political issues.

A journalist in a private outlet explains:

“Mobilisation in non-political issues is very different. It’s important. you need to mobilise citizens to follow the health and social distancing instructions in a pandemic such as Covid. It’s for their own safety and for the safety of the country”.

Discussion

The study’s findings suggest that there are varying perceptions about the importance of these liberal media functions in general, and their suitability to be applied in Egypt in particular. There were also challenges among those who try to engage with these functions ranging from structural challenges related to the sociopolitical legal system to societal and individual challenges related to journalists’ perspectives on these normative roles.

Our findings point to two external limitations regarding the media’s function as an informative tool in Egypt, which is considered a prerequisite for all other normative media functions (see Norris 2000; McQuail 2005). The first relates to social media disruption, where many journalists see their roles shifting from information seekers and providers to verifiers, similar to the transition seen in western counterparts as discussed by Bruns in 2005, while the second relates to a lack of both source accessibility and a supportive legal framework (Elsheikh et al. 2024a). Journalists explained that they do not have access to multiple sources as ordinary citizens or officials or celebrities refuse to cooperate. Additionally, the absence of an information law means that journalists can no longer access necessary documents to provide information to citizens.

Our findings also show that the civic forum function is limited by structural and individual factors. In terms of the structural factors, this was evident in the absence of a rich information

environment, lack of diversity of sources with journalists explaining that they cannot interview certain figures, in addition to messages usually communicated downwards from officials to citizens and the absence of extensive political coverage in comparison to other types of coverage such as infotainment and service journalism. Importantly, the absence of this function is also attributed to journalists themselves, as some argue that it is not the media responsibility or role to act as a civic forum suggesting that it is the role of other institutions such as political parties and research centres, preferring to resort to what they described as more ‘beneficial’ forms of journalism such as service or infotainment journalism.

Interestingly, unlike other normative media functions, there was a consensus among journalists that media should act as a watchdog describing it as the ‘ultimate form of journalism’. However, challenges about performing this media function in the Egyptian context are mainly related to structural factors including the current political system and the absence of legal protection. This is compounded by financial difficulties within the sector, leading to the closure of investigative departments. Overall, the results about this function incorporate previous findings from the region suggesting that ‘this role cannot take shape without a review of structures, especially the dubious relationships between media ownership and the powers in place’ (El Issawi 2020: 642).

Unlike the consensus around the importance of the watchdog function, there was an agreement on the dangers of using the media for political mobilization. Despite admitting the use of this function in previous presidential elections, all journalists explained the harmful impact it had on Egyptian society, arguing that it led to distrust in the media and journalists, polarization in society and sectarian strife. Journalists also explained that this role is often done by ‘slander, distortion and intimidation’ and not through constructive, positive means as when media perform this function in non-political issues. This aligns with Voltmer’s argument that adapting the liberal journalism model in transitional countries can lead to ‘more inequality, violent inter-group conflicts and political polarization’ (2013: 5).

Overall, our results indicate that journalists’ perception and application of the four basic normative media functions vary. The watchdog function – appeared to be a desired function in the Egyptian context, despite difficulties in its implementation because of political and financial factors that are not related to the journalists themselves. But in other functions such

as the mobilization and civic forum, journalists' beliefs, perceptions and previous experiences appeared to be the main factors that led to questioning the relevance of these functions.

Our data generally lend support to previous studies on Egypt suggesting that journalists were willing to scrutinize the government (Ramaprasad and Hamdy 2006) as well as to comparative research showing that journalists across the globe pay high regard to normative ideals such as acting as a watchdog of the government. They also challenge the argument that 'the watchdog role conception dominant in the Global North cannot be expected to replace the loyal-disseminator role so engrained in Arab societies' (see Al Nashmi 2019). Moreover, the view among journalists in developing and emerging democracies that media can be 'a catalyst for economic development and national building aiding the government in its efforts for stability and prosperity' (Xiaoge 1998: 39) is aligned with some of the perspectives that emerged from journalists' data (see also Tamam and Abdullah 2015).

The study findings have implications regarding the normative theory of media and society. While the study shows that liberal media functions are not completely irrelevant to a post-uprising context like Egypt, it demonstrates that the relevance and applicability of this model can vary based on cultural and political variables. That is, while journalists around the world seem to share some key values and perceptions, their views of their roles are also substantially shaped by cultural, political and social variables. In that regard, the findings offer additional support for questioning the presumed universal applicability of liberal media functions (see Rao 2011; Glück 2019) and align with the call to adopt a culture-centric approach that prioritizes culture as the central focus of inquiry (see Kuo and Chew 2009).

It is important to highlight that the analyses conducted in this study are limited to a specific context, while acknowledging the diversity of journalism forms within the Arab region. As noted by Miladi and Mellor (2021), the Arab media landscape is exceptionally intricate, reflecting the intertwining dynamics of local, regional and global media, alongside the significant influence of national security interests on media power structures. Mellor (2023) also underscores how the persistence of the digital divide in the region is compounded by the unequal distribution of digital technologies. Additionally, despite Arab journalists sharing commonalities with their global counterparts, including elements of professional identity and practices, scholars note that Arab journalistic practices can be distinguished from Anglo-American journalistic culture (Mellor 2007). Moreover, it is worth noting that audience

expectations regarding journalistic liberalism are often restrained in the region (Mellor 2014). Thus, understanding journalists from a cross-cultural perspective necessitates acknowledging and articulating these differences (Mellor 2007).

In that regard, the study findings indicate that Western-developed theories cannot be uncritically applied to the Arab context and should be tested in other non-Anglo-American countries' experiences (see Mellor 2007). Here, the notion of a liberal media, as commonly understood in the West, can be challenged by factors like government controls, economic constraints and diverse professional identities among Arab journalists (see Mellor 2014; Jebril and Abunajela 2023; Jebril and Moussa 2023; Elsheikh et al. 2023). These limitations are not exclusive to the Arab context but are also present in emerging media markets characterized by relationalism, informal economies, state-owned enterprises and relatively low internet penetration rates (see Elsheikh et al. 2024b; Iordanidou et al. 2022; Takas et al. 2023). The findings therefore hold significance in relation to academic calls for the de-westernization of the media studies field. Wasserman (2011) suggests that integrating global perspectives into journalism studies often neglects to challenge dominant theoretical assumptions in the discipline, such as the relationship between media and democracy, and treats the inclusion of global perspectives as an afterthought. The results of this study show that examining non-Western cases is not only necessary to challenge entrenched Western views or grow the field of media studies (Shome 2016), but it is also essential to critically rethink how liberal media functions manifest themselves in diverse media and political systems. This involves identifying disparities between such functions and journalism practices in non-Western contexts, as well as specifying the factors that either restrict or enhance their societal and democratizing relevance, particularly in post-uprising political environments.

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

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