

Mubarak gone, Egyptian media picks up pieces - where to from here?

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7 Apr 2011

After nursing its wounds inflicted by the tyrannical regime of Hosni Mubarak, Egyptian media - aided by the Jasmine Revolution - has begun to count the costs of the oppression, pull itself together and plan for the future. As the road to freedom is still littered with 'technical' obstacles, many observers wonder: where to from here?



Jane Duncan, media professor at South Africa's Rhodes University, who recently attended a media conference in Cairo, bares her soul to Bizcommunity.com yesterday, Wednesday 6 April 2011, about the destiny of Egyptian media.

The conference, which was organised by the Universities of Westminster and Cairo, involved a discussion with civil society and academia about what needs to be done to transform the Egyptian media in light of the January revolution.

Removing state stranglehold on media

Duncan says the conference discussed, among others, the steps to be taken to remove the state's stranglehold on the media.

"The state broadcaster has 46 000 employees. By comparison, the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is a minnow," Duncan charges.

"The state newspapers employ the same number of employees, so in a country with a high unemployment rate, the challenges of transforming these huge state media industries are severe," she says.

"The employees cannot simply be fired, yet at the same time, they - especially the senior management and editorial staff -

contributed to propping up Hosni Mubarak's regime.

"Internal transformation is already taking place. While I was there, many media workers were on strike and all the senior editors in the state media were fired by the army."

Journalists switching sides so easily

Duncan, a Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) former executive director, stresses that while journalists are central to the transition process, what concerns many in civil society is that they have switched sides so easily.

"Yesterday they supported Mubarak, and today they support the revolution. This has raised questions about the depth of the transition in these institutions, and whether state-controlled journalism has actually been replaced by independent journalism."

Like many analysts, Duncan fears that if this change in newsroom practices is not deep-rooted, then the possibility is strong that the state media will merely switch loyalties, singing the praises of whoever is in power rather than raising the critical issues that need to be raised.

Mubarak, a US and Israel powerful and strategic ally, was forced to quit after 32 years of iron-fist rule, which saw thousands of political opponents and outspoken commentators and journalists jailed and tortured.

Conflict of interests in the media industry is also the name of the game in Egypt. Duncan reveals that the independent media in Egypt tends to be tied to powerful business interests, which are in turn often linked to sections of the ruling party, which is still, to all intents and purposes, in charge despite the fall of Mubarak.

Reflect the reality of Egyptian society

The shocking reality is that, according to Duncan, the media is metropolitan-focused and Nubians and Bedouins do not have much of a voice in the media.

"There are real dangers that if these problems continue, then the traditional media's failure to reflect the reality of Egyptian society will continue," a concerned Duncan says.

"If this happens, then the state media will lose its relevance and people will continue to turn to social networks and blogs for information. But journalism is still needed to interpret this information. The craft of journalism remains more relevant than ever before in the era of social networking."

Furthermore, she showers Qatar-based TV channel Al Jazeera with praises, saying: "It's important to acknowledge the groundbreaking role of Al Jazeera.

"Being in Egypt brought home to me the absolutely central role of the network. It is not just a source of news and information, it is a phenomenon.

"It is also a source of great pride in North Africa and the Middle East - a role model for journalism if you like. Its role is not uncontroversial, but it has set the agenda for professional journalism in the region.

"But at the same time, at the start of the Tunisian uprising and since then, even Al Jazeera had to rely on Facebook and Twitter to source information about what was happening," she concludes.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across

Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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