



World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development:

Regional overview of the
ARAB REGION



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Communication and
Information Sector

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INTRODUCTION

Freedom of expression in general, and media development in particular, are core to UNESCO's constitutional mandate to advance 'the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication' and promoting 'the free flow of ideas by word and image.' For UNESCO, press freedom is a corollary of the general right to freedom of expression. Since 1991, the year of the seminal Windhoek Declaration, which was endorsed by our Member States, UNESCO has understood press freedom as designating the conditions of media freedom, pluralism and independence, as well as the safety of journalists.

The present text is part of a compendium of regional overviews produced as a supplement to the 2014 publication *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development*.¹ The *World Trends* report, along with its supplemental regional chapters, examines progress as regards press freedom, including in regard to gender equality, and makes sense of the evolution of media actors, news media institutions and journalistic roles over time. The global report also contains an in-depth examination of the gender-related aspects of press freedom, through dedicated sections in each of the four thematic chapters.

World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development was prepared as the basis of a summary report on the global state of press freedom and the safety of journalists, presented to the General Conference of UNESCO Member States in November 2013, on the mandate of the decision by Member States taken at the 36th session of the General Conference of the Organization.²

The overarching global trend with respect to media freedom, pluralism, independence and the safety of journalists over the past several years is that of disruption and change brought on by technology, and to a lesser extent, the global financial crisis. These trends have impacted traditional economic and organizational structures in the news media, legal and regulatory frameworks, journalism practices, and media consumption and production habits. Technological convergence has expanded the number of media platforms, and access to them, as well as the potential for expression. It has enabled the emergence of citizen journalism and spaces for independent media, while at the same time is fundamentally reconfiguring journalistic practices and the business of news.

The broad global patterns identified in the report are accompanied by extensive unevenness within the whole. The trends summarized above, therefore, go hand in hand with substantial variations between and within regions as well as countries. It is these variations that are explored in the chapters that follow.

1 Available at <http://www.unesco.org/new/world-media-trends>

2 37 C/INF.4 16 September 2013 "Information regarding the implementation of decisions of the governing bodies". <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002230/223097e.pdf>;
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002230/223097f.pdf>

ARAB REGION: MEDIA FREEDOM

OVERVIEW

The past six years have been a tumultuous period for the Arab region, with several of its 19 countries experiencing popular uprisings, armed conflict, and reform movements that have had significant repercussions on press freedom. Previously closed and restrictive media systems opened amid the initial euphoria and confusion of the 2011 uprisings in parts of the region, and the situation continues to evolve as many cases are still in flux. Press freedom has since faced some challenges in countries with new governments as well as in countries that did not experience political transitions. The dominant trend that has emerged indicates ongoing restrictions on freedom of expression, opinion and the press even amid increasing pressure for liberalization, although there has been a countervailing trend towards more media freedom in some countries, and more widely there has been a trend towards the adoption of freedom of information (FOI) laws. Concurrently, digital news platforms and citizen journalism platforms have become increasingly popular and limited the effect of censorship mechanisms applied to traditional media; however, they have also provoked a response from authorities in parts of the region that has led to stricter laws and harsher penalties. The fluidity of ongoing developments has made trend observation challenging since such a major rupture in 2011 has meant little continuity of conditions over the period, and developments are ongoing.

It appears, overall, that there have been conflicting trends in the region.¹ Trends in favour of media freedom have included enshrining freedom of expression and the press within constitutions, adopting FOI laws, and an increasingly bold journalistic community willing to assert independence amid heightened public demand for alternative voices to be heard and political leaders to be held accountable. Countervailing trends have included ongoing and new restrictions across multiple platforms, particularly the internet, in many countries in the name of preserving stability and avoiding anarchy. Nonetheless, as the changes sparked by the popular uprisings have led to a more variegated landscape of governance types, so too have attitudes towards press freedom become more diverse. In addition to the ongoing use of direct censorship, subtler ways of limiting the media have become more common. Harassment through defamation cases, and economic pressure in the form of advertising boycotts, have been used as tools to restrict media freedom. In other cases, previously restrictive laws have been revised and authorities have taken steps, which are still underway, to liberalize the media system.

1 These were exemplified in a longitudinal analysis of Freedom House's assessment, by the decline over the past six years in the number of countries in the Arab region classified as having 'Free' and 'Not Free' media, and an increase in the number found to have 'Partly Free' media.

The uprisings and the transitional phases of some countries in the region have underscored an ongoing trend of viewing the media as a destabilizing force and as a source of discord and disunity. In the countries where there was a change in political leadership, new elites have seldom acknowledged the independent watchdog role of the press. State-owned media have not been vested with a public service mission nor been enabled to engage with media freedom, but instead have largely continued to lack editorial independence. In the same fashion that citizen journalism through social media and blogs played a role in the recent political changes, this phenomenon has continued to represent pressure towards more freedom of expression in the region.

LEGAL/STATUTORY ENVIRONMENT

Except for two countries of the region, the others (90%) had constitutional guarantees for press freedom and freedom of expression.² These guarantees have almost always been vitiated through qualifications in the constitutional text itself, such as the caveat ‘within the limit of the law,’ by penal codes and other laws, as well as in practice. Six countries have ratified Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), although none have done so since 2007. The region’s countries endorsed UNESCO’s 1997 Sana’a Declaration on promoting independent and pluralistic Arab media, which called on Arab States to ‘abolish those laws and measures that limit the freedom of the press’ including ‘red lines’ and monopoly control of news advertising. The past six years have witnessed some progress on these fronts.³ The dominant trend of the past period has been pushing such ‘red lines,’ particularly as a more competitive media environment of pan-Arab satellite TV and online via citizen journalists has put pressure on professional journalists and national mainstream media. Although the Sana’a Declaration stated that disputes involving the media should be tried under civil, not criminal, codes and procedures, all Arab States have retained criminal penalties for defamation. This is a trend that diverges from international standards, and one which has continued even in the writing of new constitutions and legal frameworks since 2011. In 2012, Algeria and Tunisia partially decriminalized defamation by eliminating prison terms, although whether this indicates an emerging trend remains to be seen. Truth has rarely been a defence to defamation and libel charges in the region, and such laws have been used to restrict reporting on a wide range of matters and have also contributed to self-censorship. Large fines have also been used to deter free expression and promote self-censorship, although the latter has appeared to be less widespread in the non-professional media [see ARAB REGION: MEDIA SAFETY].

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- 2 Palestine is included in this figure, as freedom of expression has been guaranteed under Article 19 of the Palestinian Basic Law, a ‘temporary constitution for the Palestinian Authority until the establishment of an independent state and a permanent constitution for Palestine can be achieved.’
 - 3 The Sana’a Declaration of 1996, which was endorsed in 1997 by the UNESCO General Conference in Paris, has been the only international document concerning the promotion of independent and pluralistic Arab media.

Sixteen (84% of) countries in the region had laws penalizing blasphemy, apostasy and/or 'defamation of religion', according to an analysis by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life. Lèse-majesté has been a constraint on freedom of expression in some parts of the region. Public figures across the region have used this, as well as defamation and blasphemy laws, to chill critical journalism and as a form of retaliation for such coverage. These laws have been used regularly to restrict expression of dissent, while the absence of independent judiciaries in much of the region has also made legal processes susceptible to political interference.

Vaguely worded concepts or ill-defined terms have been invoked to reduce freedom of expression, and laws relating to media and free expression have been generally restrictive and narrowly interpreted by the judiciary, with little change over the past six years. A trend towards using such laws against disrupting 'public order' and 'spreading false news' to constrain mainstream media, as well as general expression online, has appeared to grow in the wake of the uprisings, particularly in some of the Gulf States.

Throughout the Arab region, journalists have continued to be required to obtain licences to practice. There have been indications of an emerging trend towards extending such requirements to online publishing; three countries required registration for internet use, and there has been an emerging trend towards requiring news websites and/or blogs to register with the government and towards closing sites for non-compliance. According to a survey conducted by Northwestern University in Qatar, regional public opinion has supported regulating the internet more tightly, and thus it could be possible that this trend may continue and even gain momentum.⁴ There has been a general trend towards promulgating cybercrime laws that also restrict legitimate free speech, although Iraq's revocation of its cybercrime law in January 2013 was an exception to this trend.

In 2008/2009, the OpenNet Initiative found evidence of internet filtering in 15 (79%) of the 19 countries which it studied in the Arab region, although six countries did not filter specifically political content. The study found that the 'scope and depth' of filtering had increased since 2006, with a greater number of websites blocked and increased restriction of content related to social issues. There have been divergent trends in freedom of expression online, with dramatic improvements in some North African countries following the 2011 uprisings amid a general decline in much of the region, with increased censorship and attacks on citizen journalists [see ARAB REGION: MEDIA SAFETY]. The trend towards outright filtering of content appears to have reversed in some countries while continuing in others, especially in moments of high political tensions.

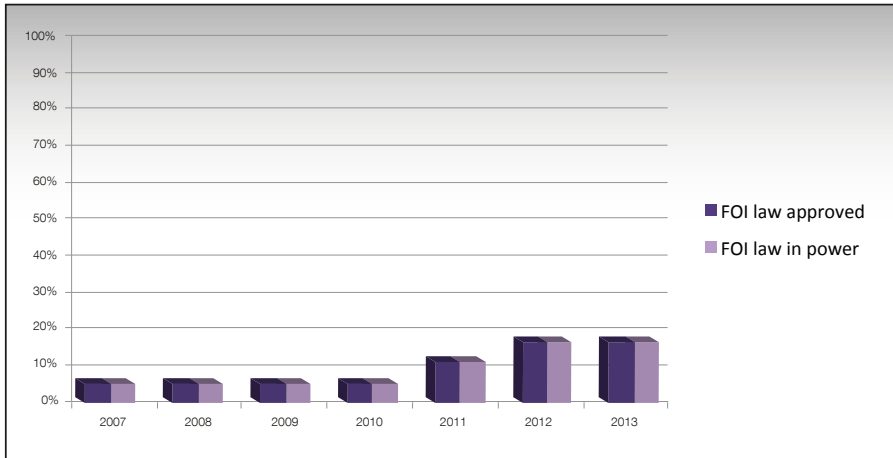
4 Fifty per cent of respondents in the eight-country survey said they wanted tighter regulation of the internet, 22% said they were undecided, and 16% opposed, although there were variations across countries.

Cyberattacks on websites of media outlets, journalists, and social media accounts have become increasingly common in parts of the Arab region following the outbreak of the uprisings in 2011, although this trend began earlier in situations of conflict. Defacing websites, particularly opposition and Western news sites, and hijacking social media accounts have reportedly been increasingly used as tactics by state and non-state actors.

A trend of 'co-censorship' has been observed in the form of self-censorship backed up by the possibility of direct (i.e. legal) censorship. In the vast majority of the countries in the region there have been 'red lines' around religion, the military and criticism of political leadership, although there has been greater freedom for broaching these taboos in pan-Arab and citizen media.

The past six years have seen an emerging trend towards recognizing freedom of information and access to information rights, with three countries passing FOI laws, all in the last six years, and at least another six considering or drafting such laws. In 2005, the League of Arab States adopted the revised Arab Charter on Human Rights, which 'guarantees the right to information and to freedom of opinion and expression'. In 2007, Jordan became the first country in the region to pass a FOI law. Tunisia and Yemen passed FOI laws and Morocco became the first Arab country to introduce a constitutional provision securing the right to access information in 2011, with a law in preparation. There have remained many impediments to the application and implementation of FOI laws. One is the culture of secrecy that prevailed under previous governments. Overcoming civil servants' reluctance to increase transparency has been a challenge compounded by the lack of training and inadequate records management. On the public side, weak awareness and lack of journalists' assertiveness have been obstacles to the effective use of FOI laws. The number of countries in the region that had source protection laws increased slightly to at least three.

Figure 1
Percentage of Member States with freedom of information (FOI) laws: Arab Region



Sources: freedominfo.org. (2013, March). *Consensus list of 93 countries with freedom of information laws or the equivalent*; Vleugels, R. (2012, 30 September). *Overview of all FOI laws. Fringe Special*; Open Society Justice Initiative. (2013, March). *List of Countries with Access to Information (ATI) Provisions in their National/Federal Laws or Actionable Decrees, and Dates of Adoption & Significant Amendments*

While investigative journalism has existed in some of the countries of the region, often in the tabloid press, it has remained an underdeveloped journalistic practice, and has required resources that few independent media have had, as well as access to information that has been hard to come by. Arab journalists established the non-profit Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) in 2005 to encourage investigative journalism through training, financing and legal support. ARIJ has helped set up eight investigative reporting units in the regional media and create partnerships with global outlets. Although there has been an emerging trend towards more investigative journalism by professional and citizen media, the overall lack of investigative reporting has remained as a perceived deficiency in Arab news outlets.

ARAB REGION: MEDIA PLURALISM

OVERVIEW

The most important change that took place in terms of media pluralism in the 19 countries that comprise the Arab region since 2007 has been the proliferation of internet and mobile telephone use and the introduction of social media, which have significantly changed the way people in this region access information and bypass structural barriers to media production. The past years have seen popular uprisings in several countries of the region and a wider reform movement that have been attributed, at least partially, to greater pluralism in the media. In an area where historically governments have owned and controlled most of the media outlets, the expansion of satellite television, including privately-owned channels, plus the popularity of the internet and the rise of online outlets, where people can communicate with greater freedom, have accompanied changes in the social and political fabric of the region.

The trend towards citizen journalism and blogging has picked up speed since 2007, meaning that social media users and young people in particular were able to spread information about the day-to-day happenings, including during popular movements, bypassing structural barriers in their national media ecosystems, and become alternate news sources for local and global media. This trend towards online user-generated content has contributed to a revitalization of the media landscape, in particular in light of the increasing demand for news, which has also been fed by a number of new satellite channels and print newspapers. In countries in the region that have experienced political transitions, particularly those where media freedom was highly restricted, there has been a proliferation of media outlets indicating a trend towards greater pluralism propelled by new legal frameworks and most significantly by increasing rates of internet, broadband and mobile penetration and particularly of user-generated content [see ARAB REGION: MEDIA FREEDOM]. Although national television markets have tended to remain largely in the hands of governments or a few closely allied media conglomerates, a range of outlets has increasingly incorporated user-generated content into the broader news mix, resulting in coverage with a greater range of viewpoints, although women have remained underrepresented.

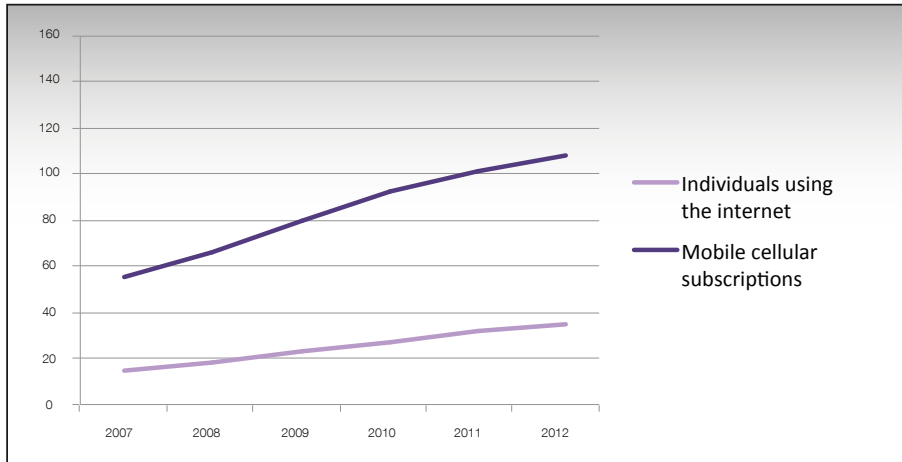
ACCESS

Over the past six years, the ongoing proliferation of digital media outlets in broadcast and online media has increased access to a range of media platforms and outlets. Most people in the Arab region had access to domestic and satellite (free-to-air) TV channels, which in turn doubled in number between 2007 and 2011 to 540, according to surveys by the Arab Advisors Group, a research, analysis and consulting company focused on the region's communications, media, technology and financial markets. Television (terrestrial and satellite) has had penetration rates of above 90% for most countries in the region, and is also the medium which most people in the region have relied on to get their news.⁵ Most people in the region have tended to consider television more trustworthy than any other medium, although the internet has become an increasingly important and trusted news source. The internet has also become the medium that by far provides the greatest plurality of voices, and the most opportunities for user-generated content, including news. The internet penetration rate in the Arab region more than doubled between 2007 and 2012, according to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), from 15% of individuals using the internet in 2007 to 35% in 2012. Over the same time period, ITU data show that the rate of mobile-cellular subscriptions nearly doubled, from 55 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2007 to 108 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2012. Internet penetration tends to be higher in urban than rural areas, and continues to be hindered by limitations of general illiteracy, computer illiteracy and cost, even as it becomes an increasingly popular news platform.

A 2009 Nielsen survey of four Arab countries found that although 41% of news readers accessed news via newspapers only, 40% of users accessed the news online, 17% on blogs, and 7% via mobile alerts. By 2011, the *Arab Social Media Report* found that 89% of women and 83% of men who responded used social media to get news and information, the most popular use of these platforms. The 2013 *Arab Social Media Report* underscored the decrease in traditional media as primary news sources, finding that 28% of respondents turned to traditional media sources for their primary source of news, with an equal percentage primarily getting news from social media sources and 36% from online news sources and portals.

5 The dominance of television has been declining, however, at least with respect to international news. TV was the primary source for international news for 80% of those surveyed in the *Arab Public Opinion Surveys* in 2009 and dropped to 58% in 2011, with news consumers moving to the internet (from 8% to 20%) and to some extent newspapers/magazines (from 9% to 14%).

Figure 2
Internet and mobile cellular penetration per 100 inhabitants in the Arab region



Sources: For internet penetration rates and number of mobile subscriptions, see International Telecommunication Union (ITU). (2013, June). 'Individuals using the Internet' and 'Mobile Cellular Subscriptions'. *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators database 2013 (17th Edition)*. For population, see World Bank. (2013). *World Databank: World Development Indicators*.

The number of newspapers in the Arab countries has increased, with 45 new publications appearing between 2003 and 2009, according to *Arab Media Outlook* reports. This trend has continued since then, with an estimated 12.2 million copies circulated daily in the region and a growth rate of 2% since 2007, with Egypt accounting for more than a third of this readership. Even though weakened by a slowdown in growth over the past few years, newspapers continued to be important sources of information for people in the region. Many regional outlets with low circulation have found bigger audiences online, however, with the Gulf States already having a significant online and mobile readership.

There has been a predominant trend of proliferation of social media in the region, particularly among young people, which picked up pace in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. This has been accompanied by rising perceptions that the quality of news reporting in the region has improved. Gulf countries have the highest rate for using social media, although the number of Facebook users even in countries with low internet connectivity has nearly tripled since 2010 to more than 45 million. The estimated number of active Twitter users in the Arab region at the end of June 2012 was almost 2.1 million, with the majority using this medium to obtain news and information and/or to communicate with journalists. This has led to more diversity in choice of news sources, particularly since time spent online has been steadily increasing in the region and has surpassed time spent watching television among certain age groups, a trend that has appeared likely to continue as online media expand.

ECONOMIC MODEL

The number of privately-owned newspapers, TV stations and online publications has been growing, although state ownership and government control of media have remained common in the majority of countries. However, there has been an increasing tendency to use less direct forms of influence, such as budgetary control or pressure, rather than outright ownership. News agencies have remained owned and run by the state or its institutions in many countries in the region, with funding provided by governments. Recognition of community broadcasting as a distinct part of media pluralism is rare in the region.

There has been a trend towards privatization of satellite TV stations in some countries, and the opening up to new private stations, particularly following political transitions. These have created new openings for media in previously state-dominated systems. Some of these channels have managed to provide an independent alternative to the government-oriented voices on state-owned television, particularly where governments have monopolized terrestrial transmission and thus coverage of national current affairs. In some countries, private television channels have been prohibited from providing political information or news bulletins, and therefore resorted to using talk shows to discuss political affairs and daily news of the country. The telecommunications sector has had more success with privatization efforts, and most telecoms in the region have been privatized. Cost and efficiency challenges in the region, however, have tended to discourage foreign investments in this sector.

Prior to the 2008 economic crisis, the advertising industry in the Arab region had been one of the fastest growing in the world. After experiencing a major drop due in part to the 2011 uprisings, this sector has continued to grow steadily, albeit more slowly. Although total advertising expenditures increased in 2012 by 19%, at an average of \$22 per capita, according to the *Arab Media Outlook*, advertising revenues in the region continue to be below level compared to the international market and some developing countries. Nevertheless, this growth in advertising expenditure resulted in a rise of revenues for pan-Arab media, which MediaME reported earned around 61% of total advertising spending in the region compared to 37% in 2007. At the same time, however, advertising revenues of national and local media have been declining, resulting in concerns about their sustainability. With TV taking the biggest share (close to 70%) of total advertising revenues, which marked an increase from 2008, advertising revenues of newspapers dropped from 41% in 2008 to 21% in 2012, according to MediaME. The level of advertising spending per capita in the region has continued to be low, and the emerging trend away from traditional platforms to digital ones seemed to indicate that there has been limited support for an independent private press regardless of platform, resulting in limits on media pluralism.

Over the past few years, a considerable portion of the audience for state broadcasters has migrated to the more competitive privately-owned media outlets, even though the former have remained popular, particularly in North Africa. Since national broadcasters have not had clearly defined public service broadcasting principles or editorial independence, these state-owned and government-controlled media outlets have tended in some countries to act as mouthpieces of the authorities rather than offering a public service. Content has been dedicated to entertainment as well as news and current affairs (particularly of the Head of State), although very few have covered parliament in their programming. Recently, recommendations have been made to transform these media outlets into public service broadcasting entities, and efforts have been made particularly in North Africa.

In the print media, state ownership and government control have loosened in some Arab States, and there has been slightly more leverage for the private sector as more countries have allowed for private ownership of newspapers. In a few countries there has been a wholesale shift in the print sector resulting in a plethora of new outlets, though many have not been sustainable. However, in many instances, ownership licences have been granted to businessmen who either were themselves part of the ruling elite or who maintained close ties to it. Also, frequently, the lines between ownership and editorial control have blurred, and owners have at times imposed their views on editors or dictated what to publish or what not to publish. Generally speaking, though, there has been more diversity of content in the printed press, partly because it encompassed state-owned, political party and private newspapers. Print advertising has been declining over the past six years amid a shift from traditional platforms to digital platforms, which has appeared unlikely to change given that the majority of the region's population was under age 25 and young people have tended to be the most prolific users of online and mobile media.

CONTENT

Increased diversity of platforms has made a greater diversity of news sources possible, allowing new voices to be heard, including those representing women and minorities. The proliferation of satellite television in the Arab region that got underway in the mid-1990s has continued over the past six years as national and pan-regional channels and news outlets have diversified the content available to regional audiences. Al Jazeera remained the most popular news and current affairs information source in much of the region, although national outlets have been gaining trust and viewership.

The numerical expansion of media outlets in the region has seen an accompanying gain in the diversity of views found in newscasts and talk shows, including a wider margin for dissenting opinions and more coverage of regional conflicts and even reporting on

sensitive political and social issues in some countries. In 2007, about 25 of the 290 free-to-air satellite channels were news channels, a number that grew to 32 by 2009, according to *Arab Media Outlook*, amid ongoing growth in the satellite media industry, which grew to more than 600 total channels by 2012. Much of the growth in the number of news channels appears to have been driven by state-affiliated Arab-language stations before the 2011 uprisings, and new private channels since then. In Libya, for example, 69 new television stations, more than 100 newspapers, and countless other media initiatives sprang up during, and particularly directly following, the fall of the Qaddafi government, while in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, dozens of new television stations and newspapers emerged in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. The sustainability of many of these initiatives, however, has been precarious.

Over the period, governments in the Arab world still controlled much of the content in mainstream media, by virtue of ownership or economic influence on one hand and of strict monitoring and control on the other. Change has largely been attributed to individual journalists pushing against restrictions in traditional media, and to content being produced and posted by citizen journalists on social media and blogs, which in turn influenced the news agenda of government-controlled media. The years from 2007 to 2012 witnessed an increasing trend in the region towards news and information initiatives by citizen journalists. These content producers have used online platforms and attempted to bridge the digital divide by screening online videos in public places.⁶ In Syria, citizen-generated content became a primary source of information for international media outlets seeking to cover the conflict there. Yet despite the prevalence of citizen-generated media and the plethora of online outlets, the mainstream media have dominated information flows. A 2009 study by Etling et al. as part of the Internet & Democracy Project, a research initiative at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, found that Al Jazeera and BBC Arabic were the third and fourth most popular sites linked to by Arab blogs, with Al Arabiya coming in seventh, and YouTube and Wikipedia ranking at the top.

There has been a dearth of media plurality in the region with respect to traditional news content and news making, a trend that has seen little change over the period. Between 2007 and 2011, the IREX Media Sustainability Index registered minimal improvement in pluralism of news sources, from 1.63 to 1.91, driven by small improvements in the Gulf and North Africa, whereas the Middle East experienced a very slight decline. Women, young people, minorities and people with disabilities have been among the most marginalized in national news content. The proliferation of satellite TV channels, however, has led to the creation of programmes oriented towards women or religious minorities.⁷ The trend of women employed as news presenters that started on satellite TV in the late 1990s

6 Examples are *Mosireen* (Insistent) which documented violence during the Egyptian uprising through short videos posted on YouTube, and *Kazeboon* (Liars) which held public screenings of videos on the streets. The group blog *Nawaat* became a platform for independent citizen journalists and garnered international recognition in the form of three awards for its role leading to and during the Tunisian uprising.

7 One example is the infotainment Al Aan channel which says it aims at Arab women and families.

has continued – by 2010 they made up 57% of news announcers, according to the Global Media Monitoring Project. However, women remain significantly underrepresented as reporters, with the 2011 *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media* finding they represented 33%. Women's low representation in the region's media has stagnated for more than a decade, with 16% of news subjects involving women and only 10% of news stories related to politics or government presenting women's voices.⁸ Only 9% of all news stories analysed in 2010 by the Global Media Monitoring Project focused on women, while in the national broadcasting sector women's issues made up just 1% of coverage. The invisibility of women was similarly underscored in a major study of 100 Arab-language news sources conducted by Al-Malki et al., four professors at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar and the USA, which found that 44% of mentions of women originated in just four liberal, London-based pan-Arab outlets. Country-specific studies conducted after the 2011 uprisings indicate this pattern has continued.

8 Statistics based on the Global Media Monitoring Project's series of five-yearly, six-country studies that include Israel, which is not part of the Arab region grouping of UNESCO. Other studies have indicated similar, if not even lower, representation.

**ARAB REGION:
MEDIA INDEPENDENCE**

OVERVIEW

Independence and self-regulation of the media in the 19 countries of the Arab region remained elusive throughout the period of study, and in many cases concrete structures did not exist or were relatively new and thus largely untested. In most countries, there has not been a loosening of the governmental involvement in news media outlets, with state licensing typically required for broadcasting, print and increasingly internet publishing. Such licensing has not been performed by independent bodies, but subject to a politicized process. There have been few regulations in place to prevent media concentration, which also has had an impact on editorial independence in the region.

Much of the region has witnessed decades of restricting freedom of expression that resulted in high levels of self-censorship among journalists. Developments in the media and press regulations, especially during the past three years, indicate a growing tendency among many governments to regulate online communications, reporting and opinion sharing. At the same time, the internet has enabled the development of a new generation of mainly online journalists, including many citizen journalists and bloggers, who have been more daring in their reporting. More freedom and independence have also been introduced through the increased number of privately-owned traditional media outlets during the past decade. Increasingly critical news and views as regards governments, discussion of social taboos and critical views on religion, have emerged in the media, particularly in countries undergoing political transition. These developments have helped to reduce the extent of self-censorship among journalists in the region.

INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-REGULATORY MECHANISMS

Media regulation has been relatively new in the Arab region given that media were largely state-owned and under direct government control prior to the 1990s. By and large, the regulatory bodies in the region dealing with media outlets and activities have been state bodies and parliaments. Despite the technological developments in several countries in the past decade and the ensuing shift towards privatization of media ownership, media have remained regulated primarily by the state through one of its departments or ministries. A 2012 study by the Panos Paris Institute and the Mediterranean Observatory of Communication found that four of the eight Arab countries studied had a regulatory authority other than a government ministry to oversee licensing and to monitor the content of national media. There have not generally been quotas on equal representation of women in media regulatory bodies in the region. Public service broadcasting has been virtually non-existent in the Arab region as a consequence of the lack of legal regulatory frameworks to support and promote this component of media pluralism. There have not

been independent press councils in the region, although this may be shifting in countries undergoing transitions.

The year 2011 marked an unprecedented development regarding media relations with the state in much of the region, especially the countries that experienced major political changes. These developments have prompted calls to revise media regulations and regulatory bodies to ensure independence. In the transitional countries, activists and journalists called for doing away with the institution of Ministries of Information or Communication. In Tunisia, the creation of an independent audiovisual regulatory authority was announced on World Press Freedom Day in 2013, a year after the country hosted UNESCO's annual global celebration of this international Day. In Libya, laws and regulations affecting media operations and practices have been changed, amended, or introduced. Elsewhere in the Arab region, there has not been lessening of government control through allowing an independent regulator to manage broadcast licensing or permitting print media to operate without licences. The regulatory functions have continued to be highly controlled if not directly administered by governments. There has been an emerging trend of regulating the internet in many parts of the region.

Routinely, the majority of the broadcasting and print media have been required to obtain licences before being able to operate in the Arab region.⁹ The process of licensing media has reportedly often been politicized. Government ministries, usually the Ministry of Information, have been responsible for media and publication licensing in several countries, particularly in some of the Gulf States but also in other countries.

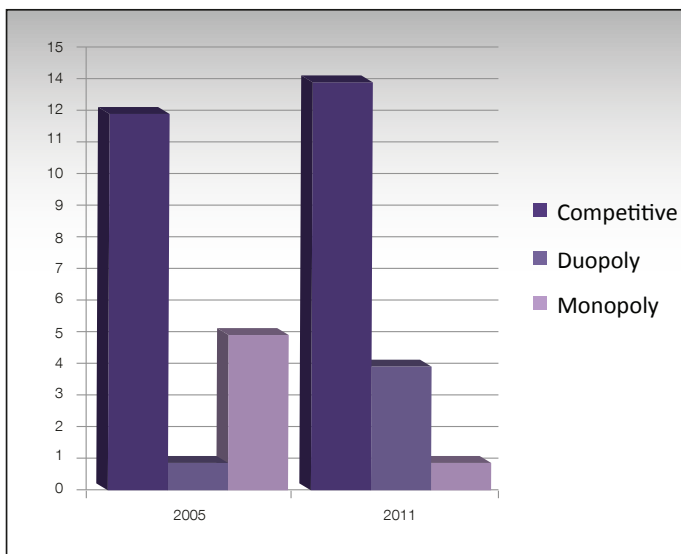
Barriers have remained for private TV news channels (terrestrial as well as satellite stations based in the country) because the state has remained dominant either through direct ownership and control over editorial content, or through the granting of licences to individuals affiliated with or favoured by ruling elites who often have vested economic interests that have limited their independence from government [see ARAB REGION: MEDIA PLURALISM]. Ownership rules and regulations have tended to be unclear in much of the Arab region, along with the procedures for obtaining a broadcasting licence, which has almost always been conditional on obtaining state security clearance. In many countries in the region, journalists were also required to be licensed, although this trend was most common in some Gulf States. The expansion of journalistic platforms has made determining who is a journalist increasingly complex, facilitating the selective targeting of bloggers.

The past couple of years have indicated a potentially emerging trend in the North African subregion towards the creation of independent regulatory bodies. In Algeria, the 2012 new media law established the Regulatory Authority for Print Media to manage newspaper licensing, which envisioned the creation of a regulatory authority for audiovisual media. In many transitional countries, the momentum towards a more independent regulatory system seems to have stalled.

9 Licensing of media outlets is the duty of various governmental bodies in the Arab countries.

State licensing has increasingly been required for internet publishing; independent bodies have not usually performed this licensing function. An emerging trend requiring news websites with local audiences to register and be licensed has been evidenced by new regulations introduced recently in many countries. Regulating internet news content has contrasted with a trend towards loosening the regulatory framework to provide for greater competitiveness in internet provision [see ARAB REGION: MEDIA FREEDOM]. The Arab Advisors Group reported that whereas there were five countries with internet monopolies and 12 competitive internet markets in 2005, there were 14 competitive markets in 2011 and only one monopoly.

Figure 3
Internet regulatory framework in the Arab region



Source: Bader, F. (2011, 9 February). *A Regional Overview of Telecoms and Media Markets*. Arab Advisors Group.

Media Free Zones, which are a mixture of public and private partnerships, have continued to be popular during this time period primarily for economic reasons; they have typically been regulated by different ministries than the rest of the media and were intended to provide for more freedom from government interference. Commercial and ownership regulations have tended to be more favourable in these zones, but governments nonetheless have reportedly sought to maintain control over content, including through direct censorship and through self-censorship by journalists.

The trend towards pan-Arab media regulation signalled by the adoption in 2008 of the Arab Satellite Broadcasting Charter appeared to have faded over the ensuing years, while there have been other initiatives aimed at establishing links between regulatory institutions. The Ministers of Information of all but two members of the Arab League signed on to the Charter in 2008, which sought to regulate the burgeoning satellite television industry as well as content. It appears to not have been put into practice. Concurrently, the 2008

creation of the Union for the Mediterranean, followed by the Mediterranean Network of Regulatory Authorities, has sought to build common links and strengthen cooperation across the Arab region and with the European region.

JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

Arab journalists have made considerable advances in professional and ethical considerations in the past few years, with a trend towards dealing with these issues more directly. This has partly been due to an increase in the role and quality of education and professional training for Arab journalists provided by both national and international NGOs, in addition to the ongoing public debate about the role and position of media, particularly in transitional countries. In some countries, journalists have reportedly intimidated colleagues who worked for media outlets seen as promoting an opposing political view or who were seen as having distorted public opinion under the previous government. There have been some regional non-governmental organizations that focus on promoting freedom of expression, and several countries have had national NGOs as well.¹⁰

All Arab States have had at least one trade association for journalists. There were no members from the Arab region in the international body, the Organization of News Ombudsmen. Some trade associations have historically been established by the respective governments and have been compulsory. Others, namely in the Gulf subregion, were founded within the past five to seven years, with renewed efforts in transitional countries to reconstitute journalist syndicates as independent bodies. There has reportedly been growing attention by Arab journalists to the level of independence and effectiveness of their trade unions over at least the past six years following a period during which many journalist associations were under the influence of the government. In some countries, journalists have expressed criticism of their associations.

Codes of ethics have existed throughout the region, which were either promulgated by state/governmental bodies or by syndicates/councils, although in some cases the latter were also under the purview of the government. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the Supreme Press Council and the Council of Ministers, respectively, established a code of ethics, while in most of North Africa the journalist syndicates did so. In 2013 various media actors in the Maghreb adopted a code of ethics aimed at strengthening their credibility and signalling an interest in self-regulation.

¹⁰ Examples include the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information and Doha Centre for Media Freedom.

Economic pressure and financial dependency on the government or its officials has remained the predominant trend, with concomitant limitations on independence. Governmental subsidies and financial support from leaders to journalist unions and directly to media outlets and journalists have remained common practices in many countries.

Women journalists have tended to enjoy similar employment terms, including salaries, as their male counterparts, although there has been a pay discrepancy in top management and governance levels, according to data collected by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF). In news outlets surveyed by the IWMF, women enjoyed full-time employment conditions similar to those offered for men. The majority of the companies had maternity policies, with paid leave for the mother that ranges between seven and eighteen weeks. Yet, in several countries, women's representation has been lower in high administration and decision-making positions. While numbers of female journalists have been increasing and more women have joined professional unions and associations in this region, women have been poorly represented in the boards and executive levels of these associations. Not all journalists associations have had female members and others have had significant gender discrepancies.

PROFESSIONALISM AND THE BROADER MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

For both men and women, journalism has come to be a popular subject taught in departments and colleges in many Arab States over the past decade. The number of undergraduate programmes also appeared to be on the rise, but statistics were not available on this.¹¹ Graduate programmes have also started to appear in many countries. Considering that, until recently, large numbers of Arab journalists had no degree in journalism, these shifts may indicate the emergence of a realization of the significance of journalism as an area of study and as a profession that merits independence.

The transitional countries have seen a trend towards not only journalism training, but capacity-building, association building, etc., largely by Western NGOs and governments. Despite the growing awareness among journalists and media companies of the value of training, very few Arab media outlets, outside the Gulf region, have invested significantly in professional development for journalists. Many international and regional organizations have been funding professional training, including UNESCO, IREX, the International Federation of Journalists, ARIJ and others. There has been no evidence to suggest any difference between men and women when it comes to opportunities for training and professional development. To the contrary, there has appeared to be a growing interest by international NGOs in training journalists to perform more gender-sensitive reporting in the region.

¹¹ In Jordan for instance, during the early 1990s, there was only one university department of journalism and Media (at Yarmouk University); by 2013 there were at least four departments.

ARAB REGION: MEDIA SAFETY

OVERVIEW

The past six years have been a tumultuous and increasingly dangerous time for journalists in many of the 19 countries in the Arab region even as new freedoms have been obtained. The wave of political uprisings created new opportunities for journalists but also more hazardous conditions for doing journalism across the region, particularly in conflict zones, leading to a surge in arrests, imprisonment, harassment, and confiscation of equipment. Two trends in particular have impacted upon journalists' safety: ongoing political turmoil, notably the uprisings that began in 2011 in parts of the region, and the expansion of journalism, both within institutional and citizen media. Increasingly tense relations between the government and the press in countries undergoing transition, as well as those attempting to prevent popular uprisings, have been compounded by the growth of independent and citizen media, some of which attempt to hold governments and the state accountable. Impunity has continued to prevail for the killings of journalists, with little progress in solving crimes against media professionals, which have reportedly occurred most often at the hands of state agents or political groups.

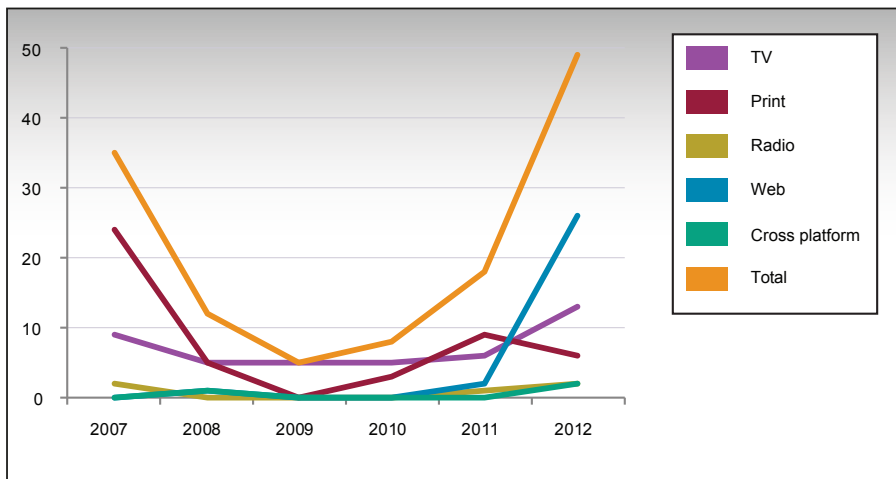
PHYSICAL SAFETY AND IMPUNITY

Over the last decade, since the start in 2003 of war in Iraq, the Arab region has been one of the regions with the highest numbers of journalist killings, often due to circumstances of violent conflict.¹² While the number of killings of journalists in Iraq has declined in recent years, the number of killings during the 2011 uprisings in parts of the region and the subsequent outbreak of armed conflict has continued to make this region among the most deadly for journalists. There was a major drop in the number of journalists killed between 2007 and 2010, from 35 in 2007 (a year in which print journalists made up the majority of those killed) to five in 2009 (when all journalists killed worked for TV). With the outbreak of popular protests and in some cases military intervention in parts of the region, the death toll of journalists has mounted significantly, indicating an upward trend in their death and imprisonment. All of the 127 journalists killed in the region whose deaths were condemned by UNESCO's Directors-General were men, with the exception of two female journalists killed in 2012, a disparity with the estimate that women have comprised about one-third of journalists working as reporters in the Arab region [see ARAB REGION: MEDIA PLURALISM].

¹² Based on UNESCO's internal database of *Journalist Killings and Status of Judicial Inquiry, 2007-2012*. Unless stated otherwise, the figures on killings of journalists that follow are taken from this database.

Journalists have been killed in at least nine countries in the region, with the number of these countries rising over the past six years. In 2007, the only recorded murders of journalists occurred in two countries that were experiencing violent conflict, whereas by 2011/2012 killings of journalists had occurred in at least eight countries. Prior to the 2011 outbreak of armed conflict in two countries, the number of journalists killed in war zones had been falling. War and violent conflict have remained particularly dangerous for journalists, particularly for local journalists, who risk death simply by being present and who have been targeted by state and non-state actors alike. Outside of war zones and violent conflicts, members of security forces and political groups have been the primary perpetrators of killings and harassment of journalists in parts of the Arab region over the past six years.

Figure 4
Killings of journalists in the Arab region per year by medium



Source: UNESCO's internal database of *Journalist Killings and Status of Judicial Inquiry, 2007-2012*

Impunity for killings of journalists has remained. As of mid-2013, one-third of the nine Member States where journalists had been killed had responded to requests by UNESCO's Director-General for an update on the status of judicial inquiry.

The general interest of many ruling authorities in silencing criticism using official and unofficial measures, including restrictions on dissemination of a wide range of information, has not shifted significantly over the past six years [see ARAB REGION: MEDIA FREEDOM]. In transitioning countries, new leaders have sought to consolidate their hold on power, while a number of other countries have intensified media controls in order to check actors pressing for reform. Throughout this period there have been cases of advocacy of violence against journalists, including calls for corporal punishment for journalists who publish 'incorrect information' as well as demands for the killing of specific journalists

and media owners. Such threats have encouraged and sustained self-censorship. At the same time, anecdotal and country-specific evidence has appeared to show that overall the incidence of self-censorship has eased in the region amid the burgeoning numbers of independent and particularly citizen media [see ARAB REGION: MEDIA FREEDOM].

In some countries there has been a reported increasing trend of repression against citizen journalists and bloggers, particularly those who seek to cover sensitive political or business topics, or engage in criticism of ruling elites, political and religious alike. Whereas in the mid-2000s, authorities tended to rely primarily on legal, infrastructural and self-censorship mechanisms to control access and expression online, the 2007-2012 period has seen several cases of officials implicated in physical threats, harassment and attacks.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression similarly noted in his 2012 annual report that there was a 'notable trend' of increasing attacks against journalists during street protests and in the confiscation and destruction of journalists' equipment in 2011, which was particularly evident in street protests in parts of the region. The Special Rapporteur also noted that authorities were increasingly confiscating computers and other digital equipment from bloggers attempting to cover social protest or travel abroad, particularly when this was related to activism. This response has intimidated bloggers and raised the costs of engaging in citizen journalism. The Committee to Protect Journalists recorded 500 attacks, including abductions, assaults, confiscation and destruction of equipment and footage, in the first quarter of 2011, typically aimed at preventing coverage of social unrest.

OTHER DIMENSIONS

The use of legal and judicial actions against journalists that was relatively common prior to 2011 was disrupted by the popular uprisings and transitions in some countries which up-ended legal frameworks, the security apparatus, and the functioning of the government. Despite a brief respite, legal measures resumed as a common tool against the security of journalists. The result has been that after having shown some improvement in the early 2000s, the trend of imprisoning and harassing journalists and bloggers has become stronger over the past six years, although the number of journalists reported to be in exile has declined.¹³

The figures for journalists reported as imprisoned in parts of the region have quadrupled over the past six years and the number of countries imprisoning journalists has increased from five in 2007 to seven in 2012. Terrorism laws, breaches of 'national unity' and defamation laws have been among the most common charges levelled against journalists. The number of bloggers imprisoned has been rising simultaneously, reflecting the growing

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, the figures for imprisoned and exiled journalists have been compiled from reports by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

prominence of online and citizen journalism, often practised as a way of bypassing government-controlled media. Among some Gulf States, in particular, citizen journalists and social media users reporting on political matters have been arrested, charged with defamation or insult typically with respect to Heads of State, with an increase in cases involving social media users reported over the past two years.

While charges against journalists have often included defamation or insult of political leaders, charges related to undermining the economy, as well as tax evasion, have become more common. There has also appeared to be a trend towards trying journalists and bloggers in military courts, particularly during and in the wake of the uprisings, although this has not been limited to only countries where such uprisings have occurred.

Restrictions on foreign reporters entering countries or specific areas have also increased during and after the 2011 uprisings, although such restrictions were not new in some countries. Foreign reporters have been prohibited from entering, and/or have been expelled from a number of countries and geographical areas deemed sensitive within others.

APPENDICES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Under the direction of UNESCO, an Advisory Group of specialists from around the globe renowned for their expertise in one or more of the thematic dimensions covered in *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development* contributed to the research, drafting and peer-review of the global report and its supplemental regional overviews. In addition, consultation with UNESCO communication and information specialists in each region and at headquarters took place at various times throughout the drafting process. Responsibility for the content herein rests with UNESCO.

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GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

ARIJ: Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism

ATI: Access to information

FOI: Freedom of information

ICCPR: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ICT: Information and communication technology

ITU: International Telecommunication Union

IWMF: International Women's Media Foundation

NGO: Non-governmental organization

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

LIST OF COUNTRIES IN THE REGION

As this publication was prepared for a report to UNESCO's General Conference, the presentation is organized around the six regions that make up the voting groupings within UNESCO.

Accordingly, the countries that make up the Arab region, defined on this basis, are listed below.

GROUP V.B. ARAB STATES (19)

Algeria

Bahrain

Egypt

Iraq

Jordan

Kuwait

Lebanon

Libya

Mauritania

Morocco

Oman

Palestine*

Qatar

Saudi Arabia

Sudan

Syrian Arab Republic

Tunisia

United Arab Emirates

Yemen

* Palestine became a member of UNESCO on 21 November 2011.