

**The Scene of the Crime:
October 9th, Maspero, and Egyptian Journalism after the Revolution**

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On October 9, 2011, violence broke out in front of the Maspero building in downtown Cairo, turning a peaceful march into clashes that resulted in the deaths of over twenty protesters. Immediately, accusations targeted the state-owned media, claiming that it had reverted to Mubarak-era practices of provoking inter-religious violence and had failed to acknowledge the possibility that the military had purposefully killed protesters. While covering the story, independent journalists found themselves working out their relationship to activists as they tried to build a credible case against the state-sanctioned version of the events. This is the story of the march, its aftermath, and the way it was covered, along with brief forays into the history of Egyptian media, offering a broad look at Egyptian journalism a year after Mubarak's fall from power.

The march was to begin shortly before sunset at Shubra square, in the largely Coptic Christian neighborhood of the same name, and proceed to downtown Cairo, ending in front of the Maspero building, the headquarters of state-owned television studios. At the same moment, another group of protesters were already gathering near Maspero, on the east bank of the Nile, and would join the march as it arrived.

For months, many in Egypt's Coptic community had been denouncing both attacks on their churches and the state-run media's coverage. Shortly after midnight on January 1, 2011, a church in Alexandria had been bombed, resulting in the deaths of over twenty worshippers. In March, a church in the southern outskirts of Cairo was torched. When Christians protested the burning in front of Maspero, they were attacked by a mob, and then agreed to disband when the military agreed to rebuild the church.

Even with Mubarak gone, this trend did not change substantially. In May, another church was attacked in Imbaba, a working-class neighborhood across the Nile from Shubra, after rumors spread of a Christian convert to Islam being held hostage. On September 30th, the Mar Girgis church in the southern village of El-Marinab was attacked by thousands and torn down after months of bickering over renovation plans.

I have used the passive voice in describing the attacks, because in many cases investigators failed to find culprits. The reasons for these failures were widely debated; some activists went so far as to accuse the Ministry of the Interior of purposefully bungling the investigations, and former president Hosni Mubarak of fanning the flames of sectarianism to ensure that he would be seen as a protector of the Copts. They accused

state media of collusion in the plan. Others accused the state media of simply ignoring the myriad problems facing Copts at the hands of Islamic extremist groups and the government's inability or unwillingness to protect them.

“Both state-affiliated and independent newspapers consistently misrepresented the circumstances of the church burning [in El-Marinab] and its immediate aftermath,” wrote Mariz Tadros of the Middle East Research and Information Center, “raising serious questions about the ethics (or perhaps the skills) of journalists in the post-Mubarak era and suggesting, again, that the SCAF’s penchant for censorship and press intimidation is on a par with that of the deposed regime.”¹

These were several of the reasons that members of the Coptic community planned yet another march to the Maspero building. An *Ahram Online* reporter later described the march as it began at Shubra square: “People walked peacefully, holding flowers, crosses and singing Christian hymns. There were lots of priests there as well: some of whom stood in the beds of pick-up trucks with microphones and speakers.”² In the meantime, buses carrying army personnel began to arrive on the two bridges north and south of Maspero. Protesters began to chant: “We thought you would unite us, but you actually divided us.”³ In a later account for *Al Masry Al Youm*, journalist Sarah Carr wrote, just as she foreshadowed: “In the front row was a group of men in long white bibs, ‘martyr upon demand’ written on their chests.”⁴

At 6 p.m., as the sun was setting over the Nile, the march proceeded down El-Galaa Street, passing the headquarters of the state-owned newspaper *Al Ahram*, which had once supported Mubarak uncritically. “A single rock was thrown at the door,” Carr recounted, “likely a comment on its coverage of violence against Copts.” The demonstrators began to chant, “Here are the Coptic Christians. Where is the press?”

Al Ahram was actually founded by two non-Coptic Christians, the Lebanese brothers Beshara and Salim Taqla, in 1875, out of a small office in Alexandria. Ten years later, they moved the operation to Cairo and over the course of successive generations of editors, mostly drawn from the Taqla family, *Al Ahram* grew into Egypt and the Arab world’s most widely read newspaper. In 1950, scholar Helen Kitchen called *Al Ahram* “The ‘Times’ of the Arab World.”⁵

“On the most minor domestic issues,” she admired, “*Al Ahram* plays the part of the wise old man, giving a gentle prod here and a mild hint there, uncolored by either sectarian or partisan bias.” During World War II, both the Allied and Axis sides tried to get the paper’s editors to sell their editorial opinions to the highest bidder. When the editors refused, both sides accused them of supporting the other. In the late 1940s, the paper’s circulation jumped from 30,000 to 80,000 copies.

Some Egyptians were bothered, however, that the most powerful newspaper in Egypt was not run by Muslims. In 1957, Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, now undoubtedly the most famous journalist in recent Egyptian history, took over *Al Ahram*. He wrote a report to the board of directors in his best literary Arabic only to find out that the board, in keeping with its Christian-Lebanese roots, largely spoke French.⁶

Such a situation would not last for long. In 1960, President Gamal Abdel Nasser oversaw the nationalization of the Egyptian press, and Heikal became his close advisor. “Heikal was Nasser’s alter ego,” wrote Louis Awad, a literary editor jailed during the period. “When Heikal contradicted him, Nasser was in fact having a dialogue with himself.”⁷

Heikal focused on technological innovation and his personal taste for cleanliness became legend. One impressed observer wrote of “immense marble reception halls, adorned with gouache paintings and ceramic sculpture” which “lead to antiseptic rooms where technicians in immaculate smocks tend electronic perforators, American computers, and British typesetting machines.”⁸

At the same time, the content of the newspaper slowly became a reflection of the Nasser administration’s desire to control information, a trend that succeeded Nasser himself. “I want freedom of the press,” President Anwar Sadat said after withdrawing and then reissuing press licenses in the early 1970s to keep journalists in line. “At the same time I want it to be a dedicated press.”⁹

“The Egyptian editor feels under no obligation to print the full text of yesterday’s speech by the president of the Republic,” explained former ambassador and media scholar William Rugh, “although he frequently does.”¹⁰

The early Mubarak years were marked by optimism about press freedom. Rugh wrote that “in 1983, the International Press Institute stated that the Egyptian press under Mubarak had achieved the highest level of freedom since the fall of the monarchy in 1953.”¹¹

But over the next decades of Mubarak’s rule, overt censorship plagued the newly founded independent newspapers, while self-censorship pervaded the state-owned publishers. *Al Ahram* and its peers continued to be accused of marginalizing Coptic concerns and whitewashing attacks on the Coptic community carried out by Muslims. The criticism was not that they were consistently wrong, but rather that their coverage always reflected the government’s interests.

“Journalists are banned from addressing issues such as the problems of copts [*sic*] in Egypt and issues related to the armed forces,” explained editor and journalism professor Mahmed Habeb.¹² In early 2010, after the murder of eight Copts by a Muslim gunman in

Nag Hammadi, Coptic activist William Wissa declared: “State media, which is actually a publicity tool in the hands of the regime, is used to violating the most basic professional rules when covering news about crimes against Copts in particular.”¹³

On October 9th, after the Coptic marchers passed the *Al Ahrām* building, they were joined by a number of Muslims in solidarity as they continued to make their way to Maspero, home of state-owned television. A monument to Nasser’s dreams of state centralization, the Maspero building rises up on the east side of the Nile, visible from a wide swath between two bridges, its smoothly rounded base giving way to a sharp rectangular central tower upon which rests a thinly protruding collection of satellite dishes. Since January, the building had been surrounded by several thick rings of barbed wire, where soldiers stood ready to meet the coming march.

Several protesters and journalists wrote on Twitter that the scene around them was still peaceful as they approached Maspero at dusk. “A tiny old lady walked among them,” wrote Carr, “waving a large wooden cross,” while chanting “God protect you my children, God protect you.”

What exactly happened next is largely a matter of whom one chooses to believe. No two reports are precisely the same. Many protesters later described rocks raining down from above as they passed under a bridge. Gunshots rang out. Tear gas was thrown. The army moved towards the groups of civilians, although who was attacking whom and why, was still unclear. “At a traffic underpass at the end of Shubra Street,” wrote Carr, “...there was the sudden sound of what sounded like gunfire.”¹⁴ Egyptian blogger Zeinobia added that the march “was met by rocks hurled and gunshots in the air by some people.”¹⁵

“As I neared the crowd, scores of mostly young Muslim men pushed their way past me carrying large wooden sticks and whatever rudimentary weapons they could fashion out of household kitchen items,” wrote Reva Bhalla for the intelligence company Stratfor.¹⁶ “Walking in groups of three or more with a confident swagger, they told everyone along the way that Copts were killing Muslims and soldiers and called on others to take revenge.”

In the meantime, Central Security Forces and military police raided several offices in the Maspero building itself, including those of two independent stations, 25TV and Alhurra TV, smashing windows and forcing the former to go off the air. Alhurra is funded by the U.S. government, and a presenter remained on air, trying to speak with soldiers searching the studio. He grew increasingly frantic, shouting repeatedly “I’m Egyptian, I’m Egyptian!”¹⁷

Several groups of people did not have to wait until later that night for a news story of what had happened, much less until the next day for print. I became an unintentional

member of one of these groups: the small community of Egyptian and American journalists, local activists, and other users of the social media platform Twitter and the myriad blogs to which it often leads. Tweets and blog posts spilled out continually almost as soon as the violence started, with people at the scene instantly communicating what they saw and others far away culling and curating the information into longer, more cogent writings.

“What we are seeing in #Egypt is a clash between military & civilians, not Muslims and Copts,” tweeted reporter Reem Abdellatif. “But of course,” wrote Tony Karon in a blog post, as if responding, with instant analysis, “the sectarian issue itself is one easily manipulated to create a specter of chaos -- and make the argument for Egypt to be ruled by a strong hand.”¹⁸

The Twitter and blog conversations were as speculative as they were reactive, and often I read the commentary before I read the facts. I came across a tweet asking, “How come there isn’t a single photo or video of a Copt with a gun?” I had to quickly imagine that someone else must be accusing Copts of having weapons, which would mean that they, and not the army exclusively, were responsible for the violence, and that this tweet was trying to combat that accusation by asking for evidence.

It turned out that the tweet was not a response to an accusation made on Twitter, but rather to one made on television. Shortly after 8 p.m., on state-owned Channel One, presenter Rasha Magdy was reporting live on air about the events outside the Maspero building. “Three martyrs have fallen, as well as 20 injured, all are army soldiers,” she said. “And by who? Not by Israelis, or an enemy but by the very hands of a certain class of this nation’s citizens. This is the army that protected the revolution; the army that refused to fire a single gunshot at its citizens, is getting fired upon, at this moment.”¹⁹

With rising distress in her voice, Magdy then called upon “honest” or “honorable” Egyptians (“erroneously, without evidence, and possibly with malignant intent,” suggested Thanassis Cambanis of *The Atlantic*²⁰) to come out into the streets and protect the military from the protesters. Meanwhile, Nile TV, another state-owned station, began to echo the report that several soldiers had been killed.

“State television has behaved thus far tonight much as it did during the 18 days of the Egyptian uprising,” observed Issandr El Amrani on his popular blog *The Arabist*. “In other words, it has deployed propaganda, unverifiable allegations, talk of ‘foreign agendas’ and ‘outside hands’, and extremely partial reporting. It has repeatedly used sectarian language, with presenters referring to protestors as ‘the Copts’ and using sentences such as ‘The Copts have killed two soldiers.’”²¹

Just as outrage began to spread among Twitter and blogs about the likelihood that the military had sparked the violence, so too did disbelief at the state television coverage, being produced right above the violence, which suggested that the Copts were to blame. The stream of accusations, reactions, and images of blurry violence had turned the usual pathway between producers and consumers of media and reporting into an impassable maze of information, disinformation and commentary.

The next day, the state-owned newspaper *Al Akhbar* reported that the protesters “attacked military police with machetes and Molotov cocktails.”²² Another state-owned paper, *Al Gomhurriya*, printed a question in large bold letters: “Who is Setting Egypt on Fire?” and quoted a military source as vaguely, yet ominously, suggesting “the events were planned.” *Al Wafd*, which is run by one of the country’s older political parties, printed the headline “A Bloody Disaster in front of Maspero” and described protesters attacking soldiers with “metal chains, daggers, and Molotov cocktails.”²³ It informed its readers that “groups of Coptic youths managed to seize automatic weapons from the soldiers but chose not to use them.” The independent *Al Dustur* wrote that the attacks were carried out by “criminals,” but that before the violence broke out, “50,000 Coptic protesters launched an armed protest, unprecedented in the history of the church.”²⁴

Al Ahram, both in English and Arabic, largely held off from swinging accusations at first, focusing instead on the military’s immediate promises to investigate, on condemnations from domestic and foreign leaders, and calls for reconciliation. On Tuesday, October 11th, *Al Ahram* called the events the “Maspero incident,” while other papers used words in their headlines like “massacre,” “tragedy,” “bloodbath” and “conspiracy.” *Al Masry Al Youm*, in an ostensibly sober press review, sarcastically noted the “slasher-film sensibilities” of its competitors.²⁵

The next morning, *Agence France-Presse* reported that the Coptic Church officially blamed “strangers” who “infiltrated the demonstration and committed the crimes for which Copts are being blamed.”²⁶ The Muslim Brotherhood released a statement claiming “America is planning to occupy Egypt by inciting sectarianism.” Politician (and now presidential candidate) Mohamed Selim Al Awa thought that the peaceful protest was taken over by “trained and hired” forces.

In the independent newspaper *Al Tahrir*, editor Ibrahim Eissa asked “If the SCAF has been aware for a while now of the existence of a conspiracy, why did it wait until the protest to send in armored vehicles, instead of subverting the counter-revolutionaries at an earlier opportunity?” A veteran of jail time for his publications under Mubarak, Eissa knew to paint his misgivings with subtlety. “If the Maspero events were the result of a conspiracy,” he asked the military, “did you not contribute to its success by spilling the blood of protesters?”²⁷

Only a few, openly anti-regime outlets reported immediately on events that would later be recognized as the most horrific that night. On widely dispersed YouTube videos, armored personnel carriers (APCs) could be seen in grainy, shaky images, wildly careening through crowds of running protesters, overtaking many and trapping them.

“All of a sudden we saw a speeding APC zigzagging towards us, from the street onto the sidewalk,” said protester Vivianne Magdy in a television interview not long after.²⁸ “The next thing I remember was the APC knocking Mosad [her fiancé] off the ground. He was thrown onto the other side of the street, and his skull and leg were broken. His leg was almost separated from his body, and his head was bleeding. Then a group of military officers gathered around him and kept beating him while he was trying to breathe.”

Western newspapers and agencies largely held off at first from laying blame squarely on the military. *The Guardian* reported only “Coptic Christians clashed with security forces.” “Clashes broke out,” was the BBC’s subject-less version.²⁹

At the same time, some Western publications indirectly hinted at their position about the truth by placing descriptive weight on the grief of the victims, the anger of the Coptic community, and the firm belief by some of the protesters that they had been attacked by soldiers. “Women in Cairo’s Coptic hospital wailed for their dead on Monday and Christians accused Egypt’s generals of failing to protect them from strict Islamists,” wrote Tamim Elyan for *Reuters*.³⁰

“An angry crowd of thousands gathered at the largest cathedral here on Monday to mourn the death of two dozen Coptic Christian demonstrators killed the night before in clashes with security forces,” began David Kirkpatrick for the *New York Times*, “as liberal activists lamented the military’s increasingly tight hold on power.”³¹ Online, the *New York Times* also published a blog post by Robert Mackey titled “Social media accounts of violence in Cairo challenge official narrative.”³² Tom Gara, who writes for *The National* lamented on Twitter “Egyptian propaganda managed to turn a massacre of protesters into a two-way deadly ‘clash’ with deaths on both sides.”³³

On Wednesday, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) held a press conference, where they denied any military role in the deaths of the Coptic protesters. They had already called upon the civilian leadership to form a committee to investigate the events. That same day, the state-owned Middle East News Agency cited a military source claiming that the army had buried some number of soldiers killed on Sunday.³⁴ SCAF member General Adel Emara said that “while he could not deny that some people might have been hit, it was not ‘systematic’.” David Kirkpatrick, in the *New York Times*, quoted Emara’s account of the situation he thought the soldiers, all of whom were quite young, found themselves in that night:

“I want you all to imagine, as parents would,” Emara told a sea of microphones, “the soldier in his vehicle who sees the scene and wants to run for his life. He sees a car burning, and if people jump out, the crowd beats him up severely, so this is not safe either.”

“What can he do,” the General asked rhetorically, before answering himself, “other than try to drive his car out of this hell to safety?...He wanted to get away with his car; he must’ve been traumatized.”³⁵

Kirkpatrick refrained from joining the chorus of Egyptian journalists by then adamant that the army and state media were to blame. Still, his assessment invariably seeped out. From many possible anecdotes, he chose to conclude his article with a few paragraphs on Vivianne Magdy.

By then, Magdy had become an icon after going on television on Tuesday, still raw with grief, and describing how her fiancé was run over and killed by one of the military vehicles. Kirkpatrick placed Magdy’s experience at the end of his article, leaving the reader with a harrowing image of a woman holding the hand of her fiancé, dead in the hospital. The takeaway was clear.

On Thursday, I attended a press conference held by several youth organizations to present a counter-narrative to the SCAF’s statements the day before. I climbed several flights of stairs to get to a small pair of rooms, the offices of *Al Tahrir* newspaper, and struggled to make my way in among thick crowds of journalists and activists. The conference room, really a foyer, was so small that journalists had to take turns getting good positions to film and hear the speakers, who took turns stepping into the fluorescent haze of the cameras, positioning themselves in front of microphones rigged into staplers and held in the air by arms protruding anonymously from the mass of people.

Every few minutes, the murmurings of cameramen jostling for space and reporters making quiet phone calls were enough to overtake the speaker’s voice, at which point the organizers would scream at everyone to quiet down. As the activists, many of whom were journalists themselves, described their experiences on Sunday night, the reporters scribbling down notes and holding up cameras often tossed in their own comments, on occasion even interrupting the speaker to correct what they felt to be a missed angle or a hidden issue. An American journalist commented on some footage being shown on a small laptop screen. “It’s just so dark,” she said skeptically. “Sorry,” the speaker, who had shot the video, responded, “It’s from my mobile phone.”

A 25-year old journalist named Lobna Darwish stood to speak. Her memories were full of the scattered, incomplete impressions of violence that everyone seemed to have of Sunday night. She stressed that the march was initially “full of families.” “Things were

fine,” she said, “until we reached the Shubra underpass,” at which point “rocks were thrown at us.”

“At first when I saw the first truck, I thought it was an individual case of a military officer who went crazy,” she said, in *Daily News Egypt* reporter Heba Fahmy’s translation. “But there were four armored personnel carriers running over the people again and again.”³⁶

By the third hour of the conference, the crowd had thinned. Some of the activists who spoke late in the afternoon shortened their accounts into tight takeaway points for the tired reporters, who still dutifully jotted notes and held their microphones in the air. One activist showed a video depicting a military officer riding a public bus following the clashes, who announces, “I shot one of them with three bullets” and receives applause.

In a room next door and on the street outside, the witnesses repeated their stories in front of different television cameras. Their narratives gradually became less scattered and hazy, and congealed into consistent, persuasive, and passionate accounts. The most damning and clear evidence, however, was not in pictures, but buried deep past the lead in some of the independent press. Manal Khaled, who works at the Maspero building, was quoted in the *Daily News Egypt* as saying that military police told employees at Maspero to leave the day of the violence by 2 p.m., and that the military police “told us that armed Copts would come to the TV building and [violent clashes] would erupt.”³⁷

As I prepared to leave, a woman handed me two pages in English, a translation of the press conference’s official statement, which wove Sunday night’s violence into the broader struggle of the revolution. It went farther than prior analyses, calling the violence a “full-fledged conspiracy” by the army.

Around the same time, a group of activists and journalists collected their accounts on a website called *Maspero Testimonies*. In both English and Arabic, they are filled with accounts of vivid brutality, jumping between short, reportorial sentences and longer, more speculative interpretation. This excerpt from Bishoy Saad’s piece is a good example of the cinematic tone found in many of the testimonies:

“All at once all the lights went off and I heard the sound of a car grating on the ground. I looked and saw an army tank coming from afar at insane speed with a soldier at the cannon opening machine gun fire in every direction. People were running like madmen in every direction and the tank was crushing anyone in its path. The light was very faint and almost no one could see in front of them...we could just hear screams and the window glass in the building next to Maspero shattering from the gunfire.”

Many of the writers quoted the Qu’ran: “And do not conceal what you have witnessed—for he who conceals it is sinful at heart.” Others mentioned Twitter as the way they initially heard about the events, which spurred them to rush to the scene with the kind of impulsivity found equally in activists and war correspondents. Many of those writing the testimonies were both writers for an independent newspaper as well as members of a revolutionary organization. Manar Ammar, a journalist who described herself as a “neutral observer,” wrote “we were attacked by the army and the extremists who had believed the state media.” Ahmed Magdy, a journalist for *Al Tahrir* as well as a member of the Alliance of Socialist Youth, peppered his account with his personal reactions. “Somebody called me and told me to turn on national TV because the demonstrators were setting fire to Maspero,” he wrote. “No one would believe how glad I was, because that building needs to be set on fire 20 times in a row and it might still be the official building of fraud and deception.”

After the violence on October 9th, the community of independent journalists in Egypt found that they had become advocates for the narrative favored by activists, and could do little to affect the overwhelming narrative printed by the state-owned press. At the same time, some independent newspapers simply continued their prior tendency to side with the ruling powers, either by choice, because the editors and publishers are connected in various ways to the leadership, or by force, because they have been fired or put in jail in the past.³⁸

The scene for such a situation had been set long before the uprisings last January. “As an independent journalist you’re cornered,” Sarah El-Sirgany, managing editor of the *Daily News Egypt* (DNE) told me over lunch one day several weeks later. “You’re classified as anti-regime right away, no matter how objective you are.”³⁹ Amira Salah-Ahmed, the business editor at DNE, agreed. “When your independence entails bringing out the truth, and the truth is very, very ugly, and it’s always against the current regime and the status quo, then you’re instantly opposition,” she explained. “So you’re always put in this position, unwillingly maybe, and sometimes unintentionally, of opposing the regime, when in fact what you’re doing is a completely objective portrayal of certain situations.”⁴⁰

When I asked her about October 9th specifically, she was quick to defend the independent journalists and indict the state press. She singled out Rasha Magdy, the presenter who called upon “honorable Egyptians” to come to Maspero and defend the army. “It kicked off at 5:30 or 6 and she was on the air at 8, and she’s in the Maspero building. All she had to do was look outside her window. It’s not an excuse,” Salah-Ahmed told me, shifting into the second-person to accuse Magdy. “You’re part of the problem. You’re part of the scene of the crime as it’s happening. Look outside your window or ask someone to find out what’s actually happening, rather than just reading the script and not thinking of the

consequences of that. Because even if that were true, let's say that the Coptic protesters were attacking the military, what good is it going to do for you to tell more unarmed citizens to go to the streets and go protect the military?"

For Salah-Ahmed, Magdy's behavior was more than just a one-time mistake. It was indicative generally of state media, which in her mind is "the exact opposite of what good journalism is—what we do."

El-Sirgany also criticized state media personnel, but in a more personal vein. "You have two different types of people working there," she said. "You have the people who realize it's a job they have to do to put money on the table and that's it, and others who actually, by working there long enough, believe everything the state media does." El-Sirgany's comments to me had been common among critics in the days after Maspero. "It's probably almost unfair to expect them [state media] to suddenly become real journalists," writer Ashraf Khalil said on Al Jazeera's *Listening Post* program. "They exist to support the power structure."⁴¹

In 1979, William Rugh, one of the seminal scholars of contemporary Arab media, made the same point less caustically, finding a way to grant state media workers a status a bit higher than that of cogs in a sycophantic bureaucracy. He described the Egyptian media as a "mobilization press," meaning that the purpose of journalists and their editors was to rally readers to the cause of nationalism by explaining and defending the policies of the country's leadership. In some countries, he argued, the privately owned press always loyally supported the regime, but in Egypt and other countries where the business had been nationalized, the press "does not criticize the basic policies of the national government," but "may carry stories and editorials critical of government services on the local level."⁴²

While the "lower level bureaucrat rather than the national leadership is held responsible," he explained, "the criticism serves a pedagogical purpose for the leadership as well as providing an outlet for very limited debate."

The state-owned newspapers received more freedom during the 1960s and 1970s, but the question became whether anyone was reading them. In 1960, about a month after newspapers like *Al Ahram* were brought under state control ("organized" was the official term⁴³), Nasser oversaw the opening of a new television headquarters. Named for the famous French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero, the building was inaugurated on the eighth anniversary of the 1952 revolution. Three channels began broadcasting six hours a day, joining with state-controlled radio stations, which since the 1930s had reached Egypt's vast illiterate population.⁴⁴ Both radio and TV featured far less criticism of government policy than newspapers. In 1970, Nasser, in his final days, established the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU). ERTU consolidated the control of media under the

authority of the surreptitiously named Ministry of Information (which had once been more optimistically named the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance).⁴⁵

Long-time media scholar Abdallah Schleifer put it thus: “Arab television, which came into being during the high tide of republican police states, did not even attempt journalism. Its photographers covered only occasions of state, and there were no correspondents, since it was ‘information’ not news that was sought. Anchors could do the job of reading state news agency wire copy describing these ceremonial occasions while unedited footage was transmitted.”⁴⁶

Part of the explanation also had to do with the perceived necessities of war. “Steeped in a culture of perennial confrontation shaped by the conflict with Israel,” explains Lawrence Pintak, dean of the Edward R. Murrow School of Communication at Washington State University, in his recent book *The New Arab Journalist*, “the patriotic fervor so often seen among reports in countries at war became a permanent fixture of Arab media.”⁴⁷

Perhaps more crucially, the Maspero building and ERTU became part of the vast state apparatus that proliferated during Nasser’s rule. Unlike the historical lineage that led to mainstream television news in the U.S. and Europe, the bureaucratic form of Nasser’s revolutionary government led to a situation in which state media workers were more akin to their counterparts in any other ministry than to the kind of journalists that had once been cultivated at *Al Ahrām*.

When the Egyptian uprisings began in January 2011, many observed that the headquarters of Mubarak’s National Democratic Party were allowed to burn while the Maspero building, with its over 30,000 employees, was fortified quickly and heavily. To this day, the area surrounding the building looks like a military compound, with multiple layers of barbed wire, tanks, and armed soldiers in full gear. During the revolution, several state-owned stations told viewers that protesters were being given money and a meal from Kentucky Fried Chicken (there is a branch at Tahrir square), by “foreign entities,” while others showed footage of pandas and tranquil views of the Nile.

The day after the violence at Maspero in October, the English-language version of independent paper *Al Masry Al Youm* published an article quoting Rasha Magdy, the presenter who had called upon “honorable Egyptians” the night before. Magdy defended herself primarily by attacking the independent media. “Unlike state media that is owned by the people,” she said, “private channels have their own agendas, working against Egypt’s democratic transition for the sake of a scoop.”⁴⁸

Over the year since Egyptians forced Mubarak from the presidency, articles have trickled out, in both independent newspapers and *Al Ahrām*’s English online version, reporting that Maspero workers were angry with their superiors’ actions during the revolution and

afterwards. Many workers at the building protested against how their stations had covered the uprisings and wanted to see changes in leadership. Some took indefinite leave while others formed organizations with like-minded colleagues.⁴⁹ Still others, like the well-known presenter Shahira Amin, spoke angrily to other press, both domestic and foreign. Amin, who herself received harsh criticism for interviewing Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit after his release, had resigned from her position on state TV on February 3, 2011.

In late November, Minister of Information Osama Haikal (no relation to the former *Al Ahrām* editor) spoke about October 9th to *Al Masry Al Youm*.⁵⁰ He had appointed a committee to investigate the state media's coverage and appeared on talk shows.⁵¹ "There was a real revolution in January and we seek to establish its goals," he said. He answered questions with questions, and chalked the events up to "professional mistakes," arguing "the campaign against us is unjustified:"

"On 9 October they accused us of incitement. Does incitement precede the event or does the event happen and then the incitement occurs? We were covering with great balance and no other television station was covering because it was right downstairs. The real problem is that some presenters were overwhelmed by the situation and started to defend [the military]. Some people said we didn't mention the number of Coptic deaths but the question is who gave this number before us?"

Asked the pointed question "Should there be a Ministry of Information in a democracy?" Haikal equivocated. "No," he said. "I myself was opposed to the Ministry of Information in the past and when it was abolished I objected to its sudden abolishment. It will be abolished sooner or later, but things must be put in place before doing that."

The forensic truth of what happened on October 9th, and the wide gap between state and independent coverage represented a dynamic that had been growing steadily for several years. Ever since the eighteen days of uprisings in January and February that resulted in the end of Mubarak's rule, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) had slowly begun to rely on the structures of media production and consumption that defined the Mubarak years. "Suffice it to say that the gulf between state and private media has never been wider than it was between April and December 2011," argued media scholar Adel Iskandar on the website *Jadaliyya*. "The state media's superior terrestrial reach in Egyptian homes and its advantage over private satellite networks has given the military the assurance that the majority of Egyptians will watch their shows. Additionally, SCAF has also gambled on the Egyptian people's loyalty and respect for the armed forces through decades of indoctrination in the media and education."⁵²

By allowing this gap in coverage to widen on October 9th, the military council had succeeded as well in pushing the revolutionary activists and their independent journalist

colleagues politically away from the majority of the Egyptian public, which would later be dubbed the “Silent Majority.” Reading the news, not just reporting it, became a difficult, time-consuming enterprise simply not possible for the majority of Egyptians, and the SCAF assumed that most Egyptians would take at face value the state-owned media’s narrative. They assumed Egyptians would trust that their leaders had acted in good faith, just as they had in the days of Nasser.

Independent journalists and activists attempted to counteract this narrative by holding their own alternative press conferences and organizing initiatives like the *Maspero Testimonies* website, but they simply could not compete with the organizational power and institutionalized reach of state-owned media. The lines between activists and journalists had blurred, to the degree that the journalists’ presence at the scene of the crime made their accounts, counter-intuitively, less plausible to those already predisposed to blame the protesters for the violence, especially as there was increasing talk of a return to stability and an end to political agitation.

Al Ahram’s English coverage, which often presents a more skeptical, anti-regime perspective than its Arabic counterpart, declared that October 9th was the first time a military attack on protesters was documented on video, and yet such compelling visual evidence failed to make an impression on the wider Egyptian public, which continued to tacitly support the SCAF’s rule.

In the days and weeks that followed October 9th, the reality of the events only became more obscure amidst a web of investigations. Some Western outlets reported that Nile TV retracted its story that Coptic protesters had shot soldiers. Stratfor, the U.S. intelligence company, reported instead that “a journalist not affiliated with Nile TV was in the studio and stated on-air that there was no evidence of Coptic involvement in the soldiers’ deaths” but that “there was no retraction; state media stood by its story.”

As if on cue, the sectarian pot-stirring that the original march was meant to protest returned in full, if subtle display. Makram Mohamed Ahmed, the head of the Journalists’ Syndicate (to which many independent journalists do not belong, as their newspapers have foreign publishing licenses), explained in *Al Ahram* that he believed Coptic intellectuals and public figures were accusing military rulers of committing genocide against Copts.⁵³ In the party-owned *Al Wafd* paper, an op-ed accused a priest of “calling for the killing of Aswan’s governor, who some accuse of igniting the violence.”⁵⁴ Of course, the problem is that accusing someone of fomenting sectarianism often opens one up to criticism of having done the same thing.

The discussion of what really happened on October 9th gradually shifted from the media to a military investigation, where, as with Mubarak’s ongoing trial, it would wallow in bureaucracy. It was also overtaken by the violence at Tahrir in mid-November, which

would once and for all cement the distance between Tahrir and the “Silent Majority” that had been tested by the military on October 9th. “Maspero cristallized [*sic*] the rejection of SCAF that many revolutionaries have felt and that is being echoed widely on the internet these days,” wrote Issandr El Amrani. “But we forget that it may have also cristallized [*sic*] the majority of Egyptians in another direction: that of supporting the army, and condemning challenges to it, precisely because they believe the best way to avoid a worsening of the situation is reducing tensions.”⁵⁵

On February 2, 2012, nearly four months later, violence again broke out at a soccer match in Port Said, leaving over seventy Egyptians killed and hundreds wounded, and renewing questions about whether the SCAF had fomented violence in order to assert the necessity of their rule. By then, much of the independent press had given up its qualms about directly accusing the SCAF and even some of the state media had felt free to suggest a conspiracy, citing the poor response of official security forces in the stadium. Much of this accusatory coverage took the form of quoting politicians who were suspicious of the SCAF, and who thus represented a critical bloc of public opinion-makers not as available to the press back in October.⁵⁶

“It’s not about the absence of facts or the lack of facts,” El-Sirgany of *Daily News Egypt* told me. “The facts are out there. It’s what type of reality Egyptians want to believe. And you can see there is a collective state of denial...for them to acknowledge that this is happening, this brutality, it means that they have to go out now in the streets and say down with the military. They’re not ready to do that.”

While the events of October 9th represented a point on a timeline rather than a radical break, they clarified a set of dilemmas facing independent journalists in the post-revolution period. In press conferences and online networks, the increasingly tight-knit relationship between these journalists and the activists they cover affected their ability to reach a greater audience than those predisposed to believe them. If these journalists represented themselves as impartial observers, but then clearly sided with anti-regime activists, who would believe them? What reason would anyone have to believe them? The tragedy was that these anti-regime journalists, by aligning themselves so closely with activists, gave up the tool they had wielded with more pride than any other: their claim to impartiality.

Journalists, activists, and a wider community of analysts began after October 9th to speak more openly and lucidly about the failures of the “revolution,” broadly conceived. They began to fill blog posts, articles, tweets, and conversations with the idea that ensuring the successful legacy of the eighteen days of January and February that brought down Mubarak would involve far more than the formalities of a power transfer from the SCAF to a civilian government. It would involve more than a new constitution and the removal

of various “remnants” of the Mubarak era from the positions of influence they still occupied.

The revolution’s success would also demand a fundamental change in the cultures of state institutions and among the employees who work for them. This necessity was clearer in the context of state media than any other state institution, and clearer on the night of October 9th than ever before. The Ministry of the Interior and others may have continued to operate after the revolution as they did before, in secrecy, with exact hierarchies and lines of authority kept murky to outsiders. But the state media, despite the anger of its critics, continued its work in the tall, cylindrical monument to state centralization on the Nile, its transmissions and hence its opinions in full view.

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⁴³ Law no. 156 of May 24, 1960, according to Rugh, "stipulated that no newspapers could be published without the permission of the country's only political organization, the National Union (later renamed the Arab Socialist Union)" p. 37.

⁴⁴ It should be noted, however, that even before radio many illiterate Egyptians received news, official or otherwise, through personal networks. Newspapers around the turn of the last century were often read out loud at cafés and political cartoons were often understood by illiterate audiences. For more on this phenomenon, see Fahmy, Ziad. *Ordinary Egyptians*. CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.

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