

# Striving for Excellence in Egyptian Media

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Findings from the Egypt Media Forum

October 1-3, 2014 | Washington, DC



Published by *Arab Media & Society*  
in collaboration with the Egyptian American Dialogue Initiative.

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## Acknowledgements

The Egypt Media Forum resulted from collaboration between the Egyptian American Dialogue Initiative, George Washington University, the Gallup Organization, with support and input from several distinguished individuals in the field. From the Egyptian American Dialogue Initiative, we would like to recognize Mahmoud Abdallah, Amir Abdallah, Anna Levinger, and Jonathan Hafferkamp. From the George Washington University we wish to thank Phillip Horne, Frank Sesno, Samara Sit, Jennie Eaton, Kimberly Gross, and Dean Ben Vinson III. From Gallup, we are indebted to Jon Clifton and Mohamed Younis.

Credit is also due to Char Beales, Hafez Al Mirazi, Adel Iskandar, Abdel Monem Said, Hossam Ibrahim, Sahar Khamis, Mirette Mabrouk, Lawrence Pintak, Janet Steele, Sue Valentine, William Youmans, and Inas Youssef for their aid with the production of the Forum.

We would also like to thank our distinguished moderators and panelists for their invaluable contributions to the discussion, including Frank Sesno, Mohamed Salmawy, Mirette Mabrouk, Hafez El Mirazi, Hani Shukrallah, Sahar Aziz, Ziad Bahaa El-Din, Yasser Abdel Aziz, Abdel Latif El Menawy, Courtney Radsch, Michael Getler, Charlie Firestone, William Youmans, Samer Shehata, Judy Miller, Frank Wisner, Adel Iskandar, Abdel Monem Said, Khaled Dawoud, H.A. Hellyer, Ayman Mohyeldin, Lee Huebner, Silvio Waisbord, Sarah El Sirgany, Tarek Atia, Daniel Kurtzer, Maged Osman, Fatemah Farag, Salah Diab, Hisham Kassem, Jan Schaffer, Brian Conniff, Craig Aaron, and Gamal El Shaer.

Additionally, many thanks to our note takers Deep Pal, Nick Gyongyosi, Austin Donohue and Jonathan Hafferkamp.

This report is published by *Arab Media & Society*, the online journal published by the Kamal Adham Center for Television and Digital Journalism in the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at The American University in Cairo, and the Egyptian American Dialogue Initiative. It was compiled by Sarah El-Shaarawi, Amir Abdallah, and Anna Levinger. For more information about *Arab Media & Society* please visit <http://arabmediasociety.com>.

The Egyptian American Dialogue Initiative (EADI), in collaboration with The George Washington University School of Media and Public Affairs and the Gallup Organization, hosted the Egypt Media Forum in Washington, DC from October 1 to 3, 2014. The Forum brought together a group of prominent Egyptian and international experts on media and policy to discuss media sector reform in Egypt. Through a series of panels and roundtable discussions moderated by distinguished media scholars, leading Egyptian media practitioners examined the environment that journalists face in Egypt today. Participants discussed comparative global experiences and highlighted ideas to advance excellence in Egypt's media for consideration by the country's policymakers. The goal of the forum was to allow participants to assess critical components of media professionalism, ownership models, and regulation from a local and global perspective in order to generate practical steps for improving media in Egypt. Participants included media owners, bureau chiefs, academics, and young journalists representing a wide array of perspectives. Over three days, they discussed their global experiences, as well as the challenges and possible solutions in regard to three overarching themes:

- I. Media Legal and Regulatory Frameworks.** Considering the issues surrounding current regulatory frameworks and international experiences, participants discussed constitutional declarations and the scope of regulatory and professional bodies. This conversation included dispute resolution options ranging from incorporating ombudsmen to when it is appropriate to include the court system.
- II. Criteria for Media Ethics, Professionalism, & Self-Regulation.** Participants explored current issues associated with developing a professional cadre of journalists, including capacity building needs and industry oversight bodies for promoting professional behavior. The conversation covered the key challenges impacting professionalism in the sector, an acceptable code of conduct and mechanisms for self-regulation, and effective enforcement mechanisms that uphold professionalism without jeopardizing freedom of expression.
- III. Media Ownership and Influence: Defining Standards of Governance and Transparency for Private and Public Ownership.** Participants discussed how private and state-run media could present diverse opinions, and ensure independence in reporting and day-to-day operations while limiting conflicts of interest among business owners or government officials. Some focused on how to increase levels of public access to diverse media and consumer demographics, with a close look at new media trends, including citizen journalism and local media that are challenging contemporary ideas of ownership and media governance. In addition, discussions explored governing structures and incentives to encourage professionalism and accountability for public and privately owned media.

This diverse group of leaders in Egyptian media alongside international counterparts engaged in a uniquely open and candid discussion on issues impacting Egyptian media and opportunities in the current climate. Some of the key points of discussion that emerged during the Forum include:

- **The historic role of the media as a mobilizer of the public.** The role of the Egyptian media in the context of Egypt's ongoing transition came under debate. It was argued that the media should move away from attempting to direct public opinion, and instead move toward serving as purveyors of information that provide context. Many voiced their desire to see the Egyptian media serve to facilitate an informed national debate on issues of importance to Egypt's future.
- **Increased risks in revolutionary times.** Many participants expressed that the media sector is operating in the context of Egypt's national challenges, including intense polarization, the rising threat of terrorism both domestically and regionally, the weak institutionalization of government functions, and the shifting state of the economy and the rule of law, all of which contribute to a riskier environment for journalists.
- **The crisis of ethics in a polarized climate.** Discussion emphasized that the sector faces a crisis of ethics where fact-based reporting is being drowned-out by unsubstantiated accusations of extremism or incitement of violence against those of opposing views. Many believe the media should help moderate the heated social climate and focus on the fundamental challenges to national development. The need for balanced self-enforcement mechanisms for code of conduct violations, including ombudsmen, was emphasized repeatedly.
- **Violence against and jailing of journalists.** Although certain voices in Egyptian media are able to criticize the state without reprisal, many participants condemned the ongoing violence and wrongful arrest of journalists, voicing concerns over the inability for media professionals to perform their jobs properly without risk of incarceration, violence or loss of employment.
- **The power of pioneers.** Lessons from Latin America pointed to the value of supporting media organizations leading the way in ethics, professionalism and accountability, suggesting it is not necessary to aim for entire sector reform, but to support entrepreneurship and help enable pioneers to lead change from within.
- **Monopolization in state and private ownership.** The objectivity and continued relevance of state-owned media outlets came under question. The state owns the majority of media outlets in the country, yet these outlets operate with significant losses, raising concerns over their purpose and motivation. Many voiced similar skepticism over the main privately owned media outlets, which are controlled by a select few individuals. Some participants pointed to monopolization of ownership in media as a barrier to promoting professionalism and avoiding conflicts of interest.

- **The relevance of legal reforms.** There was debate about whether legal reform would actually lead to substantive change in the sector. Questions about enforcement were raised in light of weak institutions and loose professional norms. In the case of alternative forms of ownership, laws would help bring clarity to the legality of their operations and help to close certain loopholes that tend to leave alternative voices vulnerable to state intervention. It was argued that laws set the foundation for change, but do not create change. Nonetheless, it is imperative to ensure that adequate laws, reflecting the values of freedom of expression and media independence articulated in the 2014 Constitution, be drafted and passed.
- **The decentralization of a Cairo-centric media sector.** Several examples of new business models that aim to provide local media solutions were discussed. Participants debated the need for diversified sources of financing for such ventures, as well as alternative ownership structures that could help these new organizations scale their operations and unlock an untapped market for media in Egypt.
- **The bottom-up approach to reform.** The bottom-up approach to advancing journalistic excellence was debated, with many supporting pioneer reform from within and suggesting the creation of new initiatives or independent bodies that recognize and reward professionalism. These civil society organizations would foster a culture of excellence through journalism awards or certification programs for organizations that abide by a code of ethics, train journalists, and enforce accountability measures for unethical conduct.
- **The value of data.** Participants were concerned that Egyptian media do not adequately utilize data in reporting. Participants debated how data collection and analysis could shed light on public perceptions and could be used to either aid in the reconciliation or polarization of society. Many acknowledged the value of such information and the need for further analysis across Egypt's governorates to uncover a more complete picture of Egyptian society. In turn, media organizations must develop their capacity to utilize such information responsibly.

This report offers a summary of the discussions that took place over the course of the Egypt Media Forum held in Washington, DC from October 1 to 3, 2014. The ideas presented in this report provide a blueprint for future efforts in mobilizing decision makers toward a set of practical initiatives to move Egypt's media sector forward. Further work is needed to ensure a continuation of dialogue as leaders work to build consensus on the vision for Egypt's media sector, as well as practical steps that can be taken collectively and individually to advance the sector toward excellence.

For the purposes of facilitating open and constructive dialogue, the forum was held under the Chatham House Rule. Therefore, no names have been attributed to the opinions and perspectives summarized in this report. For further information about the goals and agenda of the forum, please visit [www.egyptmediaforum.org](http://www.egyptmediaforum.org).

# The Evolution and Challenges of the Egyptian Media Sector

To open the forum and encourage discussion, broader questions were posed addressing the media and its role in society: What is the role of the press? What are the rules that govern this role? What changes are required? What are the dynamics in a country undergoing transition? How do new technologies and social media magnify these issues? In this context, what do we see as the foundational principles of a free press, including the search for truth, independence, and accountability? Does the press also have a stake in the national wellbeing? If so, how is this expressed? How can the media accurately reflect the debate in Egypt without taking sides?

## A Crisis in Egyptian Journalism

Panelists were asked to share their perspectives on the biggest changes in the Egyptian media environment since the January 2011 revolution. There was a general consensus that three and a half years of transition had resulted in dramatic change that has led to an unprecedented crisis in Egyptian journalism. The media exists in a vacuum, unable to operate effectively, and unable to determine its role. In print journalism this has been a contributing factor to the dramatic drop in readership. One panelist articulated this stunning decline through metrics indicating that when Egypt had a population of 30 million, readership amounted to 3 million, today for a population of 90 million, readership has been cut in half, representing 1.5 million people. Some cited the removal of restrictions, lamenting that this increase in freedom has not translated into improved standards and ethics. This, according to one panelist, may be chalked up to an absence of self-awareness on the part of those in the media, as several in the industry do not recognize these deficiencies. Another panelist argued that the media, specifically broadcast media, has remained stagnant since 1934, through royal, socialist, and military leadership. The changes resulting from this transitional period have not manifested yet, but their impact will gradually become evident in the coming years. While there seemed to be consensus regarding the deficiency in journalistic ethics, what participants did not agree on was the reason. This was perhaps due to a lack of consensus around how restrictive the current media environment is.

Panelists were also asked for their reflections on the current state of Egyptian media. Specifically, what needs to happen for the media to accommodate the changes occurring in Egyptian society? The collapse of journalistic ethics was reiterated, although there was



disagreement about whether this absence of ethics has been exacerbated by the events in recent years. It was articulated that there has been a disregard for the constitutional provisions protecting freedom of expression and substantial interventions by intelligence forces and police. In terms of the media's function during transitional periods, it was argued that during times like this a component of the media's role is mobilization. This occurred during the brief tenure of the Muslim Brotherhood; the press contributed to the regime's downfall by encapsulating public opinion. However, in the current climate the media must find a new, forward thinking, more informative role. Public mobilization is for revolutionary times, the media now should play the role of leading public debate. Objectively, it is not the job of the press to tell people what to think, though many attendees agreed this is perhaps too idealistic. Since 1952, the Egyptian press has served as a public address system. The press in Egypt plays the role of the agenda setter; they do not provide information for people to arrive at decisions independently. Rather, they designate what Egyptians are going to think about. There are some outlets that allow contributors to share alternative points of view, but the emergence of independent media has really only occurred in the last eight years.

***“Is it practical to publicly criticize a government that conducts surveillance on social media networks? We have ideals relating to individual rights but in today’s context, we must examine whether or not these ideals are realistic.”***

***“Public mobilization is for revolutionary times, the media should now play the role of leading public debate.”***

The discussion then shifted to the role of broadcasters. Panelists argued that on paper, the new constitution offers print media relative freedom, however this has not been extended to broadcasters, who wield more power. Control is delegated to the state. There was optimism about the prospect of decentralizing power in terms of broadcasting, and that new constitutional amendments would help facilitate this transition. However, several attendees felt no amendments were necessary, believing the focus should instead be on implementation. Though a group of journalists have been drafting a blueprint of what actions the parliament should take and what freedoms are needed, there was not a great sense of optimism that any plan would come to fruition.

In the context of this initial framing, discussion about ownership structures was somewhat fragmented. There is no such thing as public ownership, argued one panelist; there is government, party, and private. The government has the right to run its own newspaper, but it was conveyed that problems arise when there is broader government control. We have the right to keep these newspapers going, said one panelist, and we also have the right to make them independent, which was attempted in the new constitution by stipulating that there should be a higher council, a regulatory body that looks at how these publications are run. According to the constitution, it is up to the law to indicate how this independent regulatory body can be formed, but it should be composed of individuals in the media, so they can set rules, look into their own affairs, and establish a code of ethics. But the credibility of such a body would be called into question as the intentions of those in the media are often seen as self-serving. Government pressure and state regulation are not at fault, one participant argued, it is the lack of support in the industry, and the weakness in the syndicate.



Part of the limiting pressure is social polarization and the subsequent polarization of the press. The two-sided discourse that emerged after the Muslim Brotherhood was removed from power has resulted in intense pressure on journalists to distance themselves from the organization. There is a fear among journalists of losing employment or even facing criminal prosecution for being viewed as sympathetic toward, or supportive of, the Brotherhood. Structurally we are seeing the result of decades of authoritarianism, said one participant. Egyptian journalists are not trained to view the media as a tool for informing the public. The future of journalism in Egypt is dependent on democratization. There is the potential for unprecedented levels of freedom in the media, but this is limited by conditions that inhibit those in the industry from taking full advantage of this new openness.

### KEY POINTS

- **The dramatic changes in the last 3.5 years have led to an unprecedented crisis in Egyptian journalism, where the media exists in a vacuum, is unable to operate properly, and unable to determine its role.**
- **One of the major issues of this crisis is an absence of media ethics and professionalism in the industry.**
- **On paper, the new constitution offers the media relative freedom but the constitutional provisions protecting freedom of expression have been disregarded.**
- **The Egyptian press plays the role of agenda setter, generally not providing information for individuals to arrive at decisions independently.**
- **Another great limitation is the intense social polarization, which has subsequently resulted in the polarization of the press.**

### Barriers to Effective Regulation in Egypt

As the fourth estate, the role of the press is to ensure that the three official branches of government are fulfilling their obligations. A prerequisite for this is an independent press. When examining media legal and regulatory frameworks, some broader questions need to be addressed. What exactly does independence mean? Does it imply complete freedom to publish anything? If not, who decides regulatory processes? What are the responsibilities of the journalists in protecting the legitimacy of their profession? Finally, what laws are employed to censor journalists in the name of national security?

The amended constitution offers eight articles directly addressing media rights. Other positive developments include an increasing number of outlets, and greater investment, complimented by a growing audience as Internet penetration rates rise. The industry has also become more localized. Despite this, since 2011 there have been several attacks on journalists and media outlets. Press freedom remains limited, and the promising constitutional articles have not been implemented. The continued threat of terrorist attacks, and a failure to translate constitutional entitlements into effective laws present the greatest threats to media freedom. But the establishment of the Supreme Council for Media provides an opportunity to enforce substantive change. The existing regulatory bodies are predominantly determined by state appointment. There was a general consensus among participants about the interconnectedness of political relationships and the media. As one panelist put it, the fate of NGOs, syndicates, and political parties is intertwined, and the media inevitably has a role in how these relationships play out. Above all, however, is the influence of the judiciary. There has only been a parliament in place for six of the last 44 months. This inhibits putting forth legislation, laws and regulations.

***“In lieu of waiting for a new constitution to be drafted, there is a golden opportunity to interpret articles of the existing constitution into law. Before this step can be taken however, a clear and narrow definition of what constitutes a threat to national security must be established.”***

One participant expressed the view that there is an inherent tradeoff between security, and democracy and constitutional rights. This, the panelist argued, is not often spoken of plainly, but issues of press freedom largely revolve around this duality. There was disagreement about whether the Egyptian public prioritizes issues of press freedom. However, there was no disagreement among forum participants about the deficiency of skilled professionals in the media sector. A high degree of professionalism is required to operate effectively within the confines of the current Egyptian media landscape. One panelist brought up the triangular nature of any media structure, asserting that state oversight, independent regulatory bodies and freedom of expression must all operate as equal parts of a pyramid to ensure a healthy and vibrant media landscape. When talking about regulation, particularly in the context of the press law of 1996 that is used by the government to censor the press, one must look at the content of existing articles. This includes 102 articles that limit political freedom, including 12 publication laws, 7 relating to intelligence, and 2 relating to documentaries, including the law in existence since 1936, that relates to insulting the head of state.

## Exploring the Use of Ombudsmen in the Egyptian Context

In the context of examining legal and regulatory frameworks, the discussion turned to the potential value of ombudsmen in Egypt, as explained by an American ombudsman. Presently, although the role is being considered in Egypt, no media entities maintain ombudsmen. The primary role of an ombudsman is to investigate complaints and publish findings. In the context of media, ombudsmen look into complaints of bias, unfairness, partisanship, and inaccuracy. Independent ombudsmen are the best way to hold news organizations to high standards and enhance their public credibility. As an ombudsman, one gains authoritative access to reporters and publishers and can hold them accountable. An ombudsman must be independent and assured no interference by the news organization. The model of regulation is based on a set of standards, norms, and laws.

Using China as an example, one participant explained that they have both a freedom of expression law and censorship. The variable, of course, is who enforces the law and a large component of how it is enforced is dependent upon culture and norms. A culture of tolerance is necessary for the success of these activities, particularly in an environment with significant social polarization. Participants were unsure how such a culture could be cultivated in the Egyptian context, but many participants agreed that the government, professional bodies and media outlets themselves had a responsibility to denounce extremist rhetoric and promote greater tolerance of differing views to make way for constructive discourse on national issues.

Sometimes the United States projects itself as a beacon of press freedom. However, by examining the historical narrative, it seems America has only recently improved its media practices. It wasn't until the 1960s that press freedom really came to the fore in the United States. It was then that the defamation law emerged, and cases like *Sullivan* (1964) and the *Pentagon Papers* (1971) began to advance the notion of press freedom in the country. In these cases, *The New York Times* was willing to risk publishing these materials. Throughout this time, the Supreme Court portrayed press freedom as a safety valve for political tensions to be released.



In the United States, the concept of an ombudsman is viable because the role of the journalist is established; that is, there are clear parameters defining what a journalist is supposed to be. In Egypt, the role of the journalist and broadcaster are less clear. They may be characterized as human rights activists or an army advocates; the Egyptian context lacks consistency. There was skepticism among participants that additional legal structures would be productive. The question was posed: Is it practical to publicly criticize a government that conducts surveillance on social media networks? We have ideals relating to individual rights but in today's context we must examine whether or not these ideals are realistic. There was consistent disagreement among forum participants about whether Egyptian society is "ready" for this type of discourse on media. Since the revolution, it was argued that the most significant gain was breaking barriers and allowing diverse opinions to be voiced. Bassem Youssef is a well-known case, however, even he faced continuous pressure by government forces during the brief period he was on air, and his show was eventually cancelled under the current administration.

***"The Egyptian media should be a source of information for the people rather than a tool for directing public opinion."***

One panelist offered perspectives from the experience of Indonesia. When the country first began reforms with the transitional government in the late 90s, they encountered problems with the ombudsman system. If an ombudsman reported that something had been misrepresented, this gave credence to anyone wishing to file a lawsuit. To remedy the problem, an independent press council headed by a retired Supreme Court judge was established.

In any society, the people need to understand the role of media in the democratic process. Media literacy is a key skill required for this. In response to surveillance, there should absolutely be push back, said one panelist emphatically. If a public official is impeding a journalist's constitutional rights, the journalist should be able to sue them for damages. Discourse about the importance of the people's voice implies that the press is a proxy for that voice. In today's environment this voice has been extended to online platforms, which has raised new questions about regulation and legal reforms.

### **Regulation in a Turbulent Landscape: Preliminary Recommendations**

As the first panel drew to a close, the discussion to this point reflected consensus that the Egyptian media is facing severe challenges. It was agreed that issues of the press and the broader political environment are inseparable. However the question remained as to whether the argument that society must choose between stability or democracy is reflective of the current Egyptian landscape, or a false polarization.

One discussant emphasized that in lieu of waiting for a new constitution to be drafted, there is a golden opportunity to interpret articles of the existing constitution into law. Before this step can be taken however, a clear and narrow definition of what constitutes a threat to national security must be established. In terms of ownership, it was argued that the system must be opened up to allow for alternative ownership structures. Regarding broadcast media, discourse should be fostered to determine how ownership can be diversified beyond the state and how the community can play a larger role.

It was argued that there is virtually no investment in human capital in the industry. Additionally, it is imperative that adequate training is available to journalists. In Egypt, even at the level of the syndicate, there is no certification program. Education and training should be the gateway to introducing new, well-trained journalists into the system, and to reinforce standards such as fact checking.

One participant emphasized the importance of paving the way for society to accept free speech and a multiplicity of views in the media landscape. The current public attitude toward journalists is largely one of suspicion and distrust for alternative narratives. The broader question was broached: Are the current problems with the media the result of internal dysfunction or the effect of larger issues in society? One participant posited that the cause is political, and the effects of these political problems manifest in the way media operates in the country. Another discussant argued that we must maintain the struggle for a free press and continue to push back against the regime.

### KEY POINTS

- **There is opportunity for regulatory change given the amended constitution, which offers eight articles directly addressing media rights.**
- **According to participants the greatest threat to media freedom is the failure to turn these constitutional entitlements into effective laws, and the continued threat of terrorism.**
- **In the context of the 1996 Press Law, which mandates licenses for publishing, any discourse about regulation must take into consideration the 102 articles that limit political freedom, including 12 publication laws, 7 relating to intelligence, 2 relating to documentaries, and the law against insulting the head of state, in place since 1936.**
- **Encouraging media literacy is critical; individuals need to understand the role of the press in the democratic process.**
- **In terms of ownership, the system should be opened up to allow for alternative structures.**
- **The industry needs more investment in human capital. It is imperative that adequate training is made available to journalists, as even at the level of the syndicate there is no certification program.**

### Barriers to Building Professionalism

At the outset, some general questions were again asked. What constitutes media ethics? As a media professional, what does it mean to operate ethically? How can we define professionalism and self-regulation? How does this apply to the Egyptian context and what can we learn from international experiences?

Throughout, participants were careful not to generalize using global experiences: each context is different and what works in one environment may not work in another. The Egyptian media is highly political. As articulated by one participant, the media delegitimized Mubarak, which was a major contributor to his ousting and a similar fate befell Morsi. Many attendees voiced that the Egyptian media should be a source of information for the people, rather than a tool for directing public opinion. Individuals in the media have an opportunity to spark support for reforms or facilitate rational debate on important issues. However, this opportunity is being stifled by overrepresentation of the political and economic elite, censorship of unpopular views, and reluctance on the part of media owners to support discursive news. When seeking to build professionalism, it is not just a matter of dealing with the existing culture; consensus must be built among media professionals and owners around best practices and expectations, as well as a code of ethics. But to develop these criteria it is critical that a safe space exists for reporters and owners to discuss these issues openly.

In addition to contextually relevant consensus, owners need to be interested in fostering quality journalism. The Nation Media Group (NMG) was brought into the discussion as an example. The company was created 55 years ago during Kenyan independence to provide content from non-colonial sources oriented toward quality journalism. Now, with several branches across Africa, it has become the largest independent media house in East and Central Africa. The group has experience dealing with governments that may not welcome a watchdog. The company is publicly owned and has been traded on the Nairobi Stock Exchange since the 1970s. There are strict guidelines and an editorial board of local citizens to advise journalists. They have a spirit of discipline, and the company has gone out of its way during elections to strive for balance. In addition, NMG has recently begun working with independent auditors to evaluate content, determine how it is perceived, and where it stands on the political spectrum. There has been substantial internal training, and the reputation the group has built has at times served as protection from outside political pressure.

However, can the elements of this example be applied to Egypt? All of the advice we can garner will be helpful, articulated one panelist, but we must also recognize three things: Tension in the country is at an exceptionally high level and must be stabilized; the national discourse on terrorism is not just a narrative – people are dying; and the reinstitutionalization of the country is a necessity to move forward. The media becomes one component of this reinstitutionalization. The advice that owners and managers are in need of at the moment is how to enable professionalism among journalists in a time of chaos.

These last thoughts were met with resistance, in part due to the divergent perspectives of an academic and a practitioner. Among the disagreements was the characterization of this time in Egyptian history as exceptional. The panelist argued that Egypt has been in an abnormal state for 60 years. Under Mubarak, there was no direct war, but there was the “War on Terror.” There was the suppression of ideas, torture, and despite these restrictions, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to become an organized and powerful organization when the curtain of authoritarianism fell. Egypt has 54 government owned publications, a level of control that is completely unnecessary, but there is no political will to loosen the degree of

state control. Suppressing freedoms will not fight terrorism, the panelist argued, it will only make things worse.

The three parameters articulated above were contested by another participant who felt that two critical components had been ignored: Specifically democracy and pluralism, and building the economy. It will be impossible to build a strong economy and institutions without a natural, gradual (re)introduction of democratic principles. The nature of the Egyptian economy requires an open system and broad participation to make way for innovation and production.

***“To be a journalist who matters, one must be willing to be fired, to be repressed, to leave a job, to be censored, and to keep doing the job despite all of these barriers.”***

The question was posed: Is it the media’s responsibility to bring down the heat? Journalists and the media are responsible for providing context. Facts and figures are presented, but an unbiased media is a myth. Numbers are never neutral. Context is critical and it is the media’s responsibility to provide this context. Another international example – the United Kingdom – was brought into the discussion. The UK has restrictions on speech, but the nature and scope of these restrictions are clearly laid out. Revisiting the issue of terrorism, there was agreement by several, but not all, participants that sacrificing civil liberties in the name of fighting terrorism creates a false dichotomy and “allows the enemy to win.” Some participants set the goal of actively denying this dichotomy. Impeding this however, is the fact that there remains sharp disagreement among many journalists and Egyptians at large about Egypt’s priorities in the current context, and how best to tackle the security issues. Many believe that prioritizing civil liberties is overly idealistic given Egypt’s weak institutions, and that Egypt would be better off combatting the growing threat of terrorism and its faltering economy. Others view the continued repression of civil liberties as inflaming terrorism and preventing the economy from flourishing.

### **Rebuilding in a New Context: Encouraging Entrepreneurship and Pluralism**

To be a journalist who matters, articulated one participant, one must be willing to be fired, to be repressed, to leave a job, to be censored, and to keep doing the job despite all of these barriers. In order to rebuild, the media community must be persistent. As already mentioned, the constitution offers a good base, but the biggest concern lies in implementation, and whether or not the media councils can be independent instead of another body heavily controlled by the government. The Internet helped to create a sphere for public dissent, and the shrinking of this sphere spurred by surveillance and crackdowns on opposition figures is of great concern. What is unclear is whether this is a harbinger of the future or just a natural part of the transitional process as the country moves toward democracy. Journalists are part of the elite, and in Egypt social norms afford a great deal of influence to those in the elite. How these questions are answered will bear heavily on the future.

The conflicting ideas about the terrorism narrative bled into the discussion about media entrepreneurship as one panelist expressed discontent about framing, using the United States after the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 as an example. Trying to control the narrative around terrorism is precisely the problem in Egypt, it was argued. After 9/11, the hysteria, hypernationalism and polarization that emerged in the United States led directly to heightened surveillance by the National Security Agency (NSA) and the establishment of the Patriot Act. In this case, had the media evenly represented all sides of





the debate, and facilitated free discussion, the country may have been able to avoid the hysteria that ensued. Egypt now too finds itself in a state of hypernationalism because of the threat of terrorism, and there isn't a robust debate around how best to deal with it. The media should create space across all cross-sections of Egyptian society to express their viewpoints. The space for divergent views and rational discussion does not exist in the current landscape. Some voices continue to try to enable this discussion online or in independent newspapers, and some are trying to put in practice those rights outlined by the constitution.

One participant cited Ahram Online as being one of the best places for online journalism. They expressed that the publication has shown a commitment to providing context and going against the grain, in an effort to bring issues to light that have not been covered elsewhere. Even in states where you have complete freedom of expression engendered in law and properly implemented, other pressures inevitably exist, whether they are from political players or those in the business world. It is critical to have independent, alternative journalism to act as a social mirror and keep individuals honest. While historically the country fluctuated from the fever of Arab nationalism, to heightened religious fervor, Egypt is now in the process of finding its balance, argued one participant. Public sentiment plays a major role in the media landscape. This fact has at times been of concern as the line between collectively fighting for a cause and mob mentality can be very thin.

In light of what was mentioned above, one panelist articulated the importance of distinguishing between instances of crisis, polarization, and public hysteria, and attempts to use the presence of such things for pushing a specific agenda. There is terrorism, a system that has been traumatized and a public that is weary, but despite all of this it must be remembered that there are forces bent on capitalizing on these circumstances. In this discussion, we must be frank and specific and look at agents of state bodies who are involved in the media and how they are impacting the media landscape. The panelist used the example of the "quack" that claimed to have invented a machine to "treat every disease on earth." When this came out, if you dared question or criticize it, you were attacked: "Why do you hate Egypt? Why do you hate the army?" When you have a judge who sentences 5 200+ to death with impunity, you cannot criticize these actions without being slandered and accused of being a front for the Muslim Brotherhood. This is not a recipe for progress; this is not a climate conducive to anything, argued the participant.



Egypt faces a common enemy, articulated one panelist, that is polarization, and it is having a negative impact on the quality of journalism in the country. As a nation, Egypt has never witnessed the level of fragmentation it is facing now. Fragmentation is not necessarily bad; it means a diversity of ideas, but polarization is dangerous. It is polarization that cultivates enemies and facilitates the narrative of “with us or against us.” It labels people, and creates an unhealthy environment where dialogue, building trust, building institutions, are impossible. An Egyptian-American dialogue is important, continued the participant, but nothing is more important than an Egyptian-Egyptian dialogue. This polarized mindset that associates everything Islamist as anti-democratic must be overcome. In terms of the role of the media, professionals have tools at their disposal to assist in the process of depolarization and it is up to the media to determine the best use of these tools. In the process of ousting Mubarak, the participant argued, the media was united and was used to create positive change; now it is clear that the media is enhancing the existing polarization. The question that arises is: How can we take steps as Egyptians to overcome this?

### KEY POINTS

- **In order to foster professionalism, consensus must be established among media professionals and owners around best practices and expectations, as well as a code of ethics.**
- **To facilitate this, a safe space for reporters and owners to speak openly must be established.**
- **The constitution offers a good base, but the biggest concern lies in implementation and whether media councils are able to act independently.**
- **In all contexts, even in states where complete freedom of expression is enshrined in law and implemented adequately, other pressures remain. It is thus vital to have robust independent and alternative journalism to act as a mirror for society.**
- **It is critical to distinguish between instances of crisis, polarization, and public hysteria, while remaining attentive to attempts by some to use turbulent circumstances to push specific agendas**
- **The media has the tools to assist in the process of depolarization, and it is up to the media to determine how best to use these tools.**

### **Defining Standards of Governance and Transparency for Private and Public Ownership**

This session looked at the issue of ownership, a key component to ensuring the success of all other elements discussed throughout the forum. Nearly all Arab countries have codes of ethics but compromises must be made to reflect the environment. In the United States, for example, the notion of fairness and neutrality has been flexible. After 9/11, as the country responded with a heightened sense of patriotism, some media outlets allowed themselves to become mouthpieces for the administration. Looking at the media in Pakistan right now, the climate is even less hospitable for journalists because of repression enforced by the intelligence services but also because there is a media war. It ultimately comes down to the owners, and in Egypt's narrative the owners are often framed as villains. But is this characterization accurate?

The panelists reflected that owners may take on the role of the villain but this is not always the case. One panelist tells the story of the inception and ownership trajectory of *Al Masry Al Youm*, Egypt's largest independent daily paper. His family was in the business, which he too eventually joined. He was then offered a license for a newspaper. He lamented that he did not have a cause; he was not fighting occupation, imperialism, the regime, and this made the publication peculiar: An independent newspaper by birth, not by intention, purely by circumstance. At the time that he acquired the license there was no concern about the intentions of the publication. He expressed that if he had been blocked while finalizing the license, he would have backed off. This participant reflected on his experience with the *Al Masry Al Youm*. He lacked experience, so gathered a group of friends, consulted a media scholar, fired 200 people and the Editor in Chief, and launched the publication.

Ten years later the paper is one of the most established in the country, but another participant who had previously worked with the paper voiced questions about the longevity of its success. Ultimately, he left the publication because of concerns over the ownership structure. During the revolution the profile of the publication was bolstered, as people looked to it for reliable information on the events taking place. This, the panelist insisted, was not the result of them promoting the revolution; it was because people believed what they were writing.

***“It is impossible to have adequate investment in the media sector at the same time that freedom of speech is being quashed and journalists are being arrested.”***

*Waled al-Balad* offers a different perspective. Going into its third year, the publication operates exclusively outside of Cairo with ten offices throughout the country. The unusual nature of this publication begs the question of why this model is so different. Why is there no vibrant local media? Licensing is very centralized and journalists are not allowed to own media outlets. It's an environment that is very restrictive and dangerous, a fact that is exacerbated by low skill levels. People are afraid of fragmentation and polarization in the media landscape, but *Waled al-Balad* seeks to cover stories that are relevant to the communities, including stories about agriculture or water, not about the revolution. The focus is on human-interest pieces. This decentralized model needs to begin with ownership. Another major element to setting up this alternative model is distribution, which has long been monopolized. What are the entry points? We need a more complex landscape that facilitates free distribution. Philanthropy and

public service journalism are also important. The question was raised: Why is there a stigma around receiving foreign funding?

Consistent with the lack of funding and skilled professionals, are poor working conditions, poor salaries and little job security. But these limitations, it was pointed out, are not only the result of government control. Advertisers can interfere with content as well. There was an incident where one mainstream paper was forced to pull a story because an advertiser was threatening to pull out. Ideally a publication or website would have its journalists as its owners and would be self-sustaining to help maintain neutrality. The legal framework impedes media outlets' ability to achieve this goal, as they are required to register as a company, not a media organization.

It was asked whether there are lessons to be learned from the United States. Media entrepreneurship has reached unprecedented levels in the US thanks to digital technology, and women are playing a substantial role in this growth. These entities are largely taking the shape of digital news startups; while investors are helping them scale up and, sometimes, tackle international markets. A substantial infusion of funds has been brought into the landscape from tech companies. Legacy media has, for some time now, recognized the threat presented by the evolving media landscape and has responded with ideas and contributions to the digital media landscape. Some "bottom-feeders" entered the market and have since been building; BuzzFeed and VICE are both good examples of this. The investment and profits these companies have seen have been enormous. VICE has a huge portfolio and 35 bureaus worldwide, and BuzzFeed recently hired a Pulitzer Prize winner to run a portion of their operations.

The market is transforming as growing numbers of traditional journalists are moving to digital. According to The Marshall Project, from 2003-2012 US papers lost 16 200 jobs, most likely to digital media outlets like those mentioned above. We're seeing a number of other trends emerging in the form of investigative startups, independent news startups, hyperlocal for-profit startups, non-narrative journalism (such as comics and data), drone journalism, sensor journalism, news games, collaboration and partnerships (legacy organizations have partnered with several startups in the field), niche sites, and soft advocacy. Small budgets are building an increasingly big news ecosystem.

What lessons are there for Egypt in this experience? The panelist speaking from the perspective of US public broadcasting offered this insight: In terms of structure, it is critical to ensure that one individual or entity does not have too much influence over the company. NPR and PBS both generate funds from a variety of sources. The fact that Egypt does not



have a tax write-off structure creates a disadvantage in terms of receiving support from diverse sources. US public broadcasters have critics that represent opposing views in terms of what the administration should be doing; despite being a federally funded operation, they have the ability to function with relative independence. News companies have now been consolidated down to 5 or 6 entities and this is a process that is worth examining. What is going to fill in the gaps as local journalists move to national and online media? Some of these wounds are self-inflicted. The Internet has changed the ways in which audiences are reached and media systems have become more detached from local media. It is up to owners to facilitate adaptation to these new conditions and the policies made pertaining to the inevitable switch to online platforms will have a substantial impact on the future of journalism.

A country does not need an entire press to foster pluralism and ethical journalism; pioneers are needed to disrupt the status quo, making different contributions to democracy with eventual ripple effects to the system. An entrepreneurial owner with a progressive concept of what journalism will hire accordingly and based on that, create a business model and journalistic model around these different ideas. To help foster this type of model, collaboration between journalists, civil society-groups, and NGOs is needed. This work must be done outside of the newsroom, but within the media regulatory and institutional framework. You need civil society mobilized around these issues. In recent years, all of the pioneers of Egyptian media have been online. The capacity of young Egyptians to publish content forms a robust online debate, and the ability to report in a way that makes intellectual repression by the state more difficult. Also in recent years, innovative forms of local media have begun to take root, with pioneers like Mantiqi providing highly customized news following a grassroots, inclusive business model. Thus, the most vibrant debate in Egypt seems to be taking place online and in community papers, not Egypt's traditional news outlets.

It is impossible to have adequate investment in the media sector at the same time that freedom of speech is being quashed and journalists are being arrested. The issues around media ethics discussed in earlier sessions are even more prevalent outside of Cairo, which presents a substantial challenge in terms of setting up media in rural areas.

## KEY POINTS

- **The question of ownership is key to ensuring the success of all other elements discussed in the forum; specifically regulation, professionalism and media ethics.**
- **Egypt lacks a vibrant local media landscape. This is partially the result of centralized licensing and restrictions on journalists in terms of ownership rights. Low skill levels exacerbate these issues.**
- **There is insufficient funding, which contributes to the poor working conditions, low salaries, and minimal job security for media professionals. These barriers and content issues are the result of tight government control, faulty ownership structures and pressure from advertisers.**
- **In terms of structure, it is critical to ensure that one individual or entity does not hold too much control over the media landscape. While many international public broadcasters are able to receive funding from diverse sources, the absence of a tax write off structure puts Egypt at a disadvantage in this regard.**
- **It is impossible to have adequate investment in the media when censorship is at a high level and journalists are operating in dangerous conditions**

As the forum drew to a close, there was clear consensus that discussion and debate had been fruitful. In the context of open discussion and addressing the challenges being faced, it was articulated that at least psychologically, the prospects were better than before. Five key points and questions emerged with respect to developing Egyptian media:

- What role can the media play in reducing the heat in the Egyptian political landscape?
- How can those in the media function in an environment where insecurities are a constant threat?
- As the country goes through the process of reinstitutionalization, it is critical for those in the media to support one another.
- The question of democratization; it is critical for media professionals and influencers to investigate and ask questions as Egypt continues to go through its transition.
- The economic wellbeing of the country, and what this means in terms of the privatization of the press.

It is the law that creates the structures and red lines that influence the direction of the industry. If we do not have good laws that are properly enforced, nothing else will be able to grow. We need to resist cooption into the narrative that the law does not matter. Journalists should not be imprisoned, and if they are, they must be given due process. The new generation, particularly those that have emerged since the revolution, have not waited for media reform, but instead have taken the initiative. We have a constitution but the laws being applied are not reflective of it. An example that came up during the forum was a newspaper that was pulled because of a law against publishing intelligence. It is the responsibility of the new parliament to make the new constitution a reality, and to do this they must illuminate any laws that contradict the new constitution.

As media ownership was a major topic of discussion, it was reflected in the concluding discussion that government ownership of several companies requires reconsideration. More broadly, the concept of media as a state tool needs to be changed. There must be accountability and a code of ethics must be established and implemented across the board. To encourage this, we also need to reward those who maintain high standards of journalistic ethics. We need to publicly recognize excellence in journalism. To help facilitate this movement away from the status quo, innovative solutions must be found to finance media organizations. This must also be coupled with entrepreneurship in the areas of syndication and distribution, including regional distribution networks. Furthermore, we must collectively lobby for a Freedom of Information law, and laws allowing for philanthropic contributions and corresponding tax breaks. But we must keep in mind that there are 55 state owned institutions, and we must remember that any discussion about shutting them down or making them more efficient may jeopardize the livelihoods of a huge number of people.

The landscape is very diverse and Egyptian youth are the future; they need to be included in the discussion on the future of the media sector in Egypt. Egyptian journalists have an opportunity to move forward, and across the board, the current direction points to decentralization. With this in mind, the question that arises is: What can be done to scale up local and online media? Progress on this front will inevitably create distance from the old modalities of running media in the country.

## **MOVING FORWARD: PROPOSED NEXT STEPS**

**Develop another forum to be held within Egypt, with a smaller international presence.**

**Create committees focused on improving the quality of journalism departments at Egyptian universities and develop programs to train journalists on best practices and professionalism.**

**Advocate the establishment of a media investment fund to offer financing for new media companies and provide capacity building for business plans and structuring.**

**Actively support emergent journalism in the country, such as *Mada Masr*, *Mantiqti*, and *Welad ElBalad*, by helping to professionalize and financially sustain operations.**

**Support the development of Egypt's media outside of Cairo to better represent the country as a whole. One step toward this goal may be strengthening linkages between Gallup, Baseera, and Egyptian journalists.**

**Create a civil society organization that uses consumer-choice incentives to rate news sources in print and broadcast on truthfulness and fact checking. If successful such a service would incentivize reporters, managers, and owners to commit to this minimum standard.**

**Develop a certification program that offers accreditation to budding media organizations and connects them to a network of potential donors, investors and media professionals, to offer support and build credibility.**

**Develop exchange programs to promote and empower the local entrepreneurial media ecosystem. This would be facilitated through collaboration between universities, for example between The American University in Cairo and George Washington University.**

**Developing an international award for excellence in journalism in Egypt that provides support to exceptional journalists and media organizations that serve as examples of professionalism and leadership in the country.**

**Look into a policy framework that would be supportive of the ownership structures of alternative media, providing a legal framework to offer greater certainty for these outlets to develop.**

## Appendix I: Conversations with Global Partners

The forum also included a discussion with representatives from the World Bank, faculty from the George Washington University, and a presentation from Gallup. These components represented focused inputs from relevant global partners, as well as insight from external economic influencers and population metrics associated with global media trends.

### World Bank Discussion

The World Bank has a board of 184 countries that vote on all major decisions. Its primary purpose is to offer support to countries who are experiencing tough economic times. It also provides technical assistance when invited to do so. In Egypt, the organization is currently running a project worth \$5 billion USD. The Bank has advised Egyptians to push for the creation of laws for the management and regulation of credit, purchasing power parity (PPP), bankruptcy, and the creation of a privatization court. In their view, the goal should be to simplify the business climate and remove the red tape. Despite this, the World Bank is generally optimistic about the country's future potential, informed by its strategic location and promising young population. However, there are some barriers to implementing programs because of the residual stigmatization around acquiring foreign debt, remnants of the country's historical experiences of foreign takeovers of the Suez Canal and Aswan Dam.

The World Bank is currently completing a preliminary report to be published December 2014 that will include an analysis of joblessness and poverty in Egypt. It will analyze metrics by age group and assess the reasons for joblessness within each grouping. The report will also include a diagnostic section that will address current financial risks the country is facing. The World Bank and Egypt have seen increased levels of cooperation since the ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak. This has facilitated increased dialogue, particularly around issues such as education.

In-house staff conduct all World Bank surveys with support from consultants in academia and civil society, as well as those who shape public opinion. Outside parties are consulted for agenda-setting purposes, in order to establish the most pressing issues in a given region. In the case of Egypt, the top issues as identified by the World Bank and those surveyed were all related to education. They included teacher salaries, lack of accountability, hiring/firing processes being too centralized, and a resistance on the part of teachers to service rough areas.

According to the Bank, the inextricable link between education and employment will be responsible for the next big explosion in the country. Minimum wage policy in Egypt favors and helps facilitate the vast social inequalities. The informal work sector is massive, and employers are incentivized to hire workers informally to avoid minimum wage requirements. This also manifests in other ways. For example, in the case of educators, although teachers may teach, they are paid small salaries by state educational institutions, and they often receive the bulk of their money in the grey market, working as tutors. To grasp the size of the informal economy, the sector represents approximately 27 billion EGP annually, whereas the formal sector represents 62 billion EGP.

In terms of the relationship with the media, the World Bank's involvement remains limited. Representatives lamented that journalists underutilize the Bank, and the organization is open to assisting to unlock issues buried in dense published data, which is free online and offers research on health, education, poverty, economic growth, and inclusion. The organization recently published a piece in *Mada Masr* to stimulate conversation. This publication was chosen because their readership tends to be young and progressive. The World Bank is of the opinion that state-owned media is unsustainable, and there is interest in starting an investment fund for innovation in the media. As already discussed, the Egyptian media landscape is

fragmented, which creates an environment where it is hard for the Bank to publish findings without suspicion and backlash about perceived political alignment.

### **George Washington University Discussion**

The forum hosts held a discussion to flesh out possible roles for the university to play in Egyptian media. During the session participants discussed possible exchange programs, consulting, and training. In terms of exchanges, there were multiple suggestions including mutual internship programs for media students to work in newsrooms and acquire technical knowledge, and professor exchanges to teach media classes and lead seminars. It was proposed that the university could provide consulting to media outlets, particularly offering guidance for those transitioning to multimedia newsrooms. In terms of training, human interest reporting, digital media and storytelling are areas of need that the university could offer training for both production and educational purposes. The importance of research collaboration was also highlighted and the journal *Arab Media & Society*, published out of the Adham Center for Television and Digital Journalism at The American University in Cairo was identified as a promising venue. The next steps toward implementing these ideas are determining the capabilities of the university and identifying major areas of need on the Egyptian side.

### **Gallup Presentation: “Leading With the Right Metrics”**

Gallup has done several polls since the 2011 ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak. The latest data was primarily collected from June 19-27, 2014, shortly after President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi was elected. It indicates improvement in several areas since the last measurement taken in the weeks leading up to the ouster of former president Mohamed Morsi. Gallup measures wellbeing using the classifications “thriving”, “struggling”, or “suffering” as measured on a ten-point scale, 0 representing the worst possible life and 10 representing the best possible life. Respondents are asked to rate both their current lives and their projected lives in five years. The data shows a substantial fluctuation in perceived wellbeing from one year to the next. The 2013 numbers indicated that a record high 34 percent of Egyptians considered themselves as “suffering,” whereas the most recent numbers indicate this has dropped to 16 percent. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the number of individuals who consider themselves to be thriving has risen markedly from 9 percent in 2013 to 17 percent in 2014.

In terms of public safety, the 2013 numbers showed that 45 percent of respondents said they didn’t feel safe walking home compared with recent numbers that indicate 74 percent say they now feel safe. Similar numbers were reported when respondents were asked about economic conditions. Whereas 75 percent of Egyptians described their national economy as poor in the weeks leading up to the ousting of Mohamed Morsi, by June 2014 that number had dropped to 36 percent. The numbers reflecting public faith in the government showed a similar trend, but Gallup points out that the increased confidence is contingent on how the new government performs. In terms of media freedom, in 2013 Egypt ranked 37 globally reflecting 74 percent of respondents indicating that the media had a lot of freedom, despite this relatively high ranking, young people were less likely to respond positively.

Since the revolution, the dynamics of public opinion in Egypt have been characterized by rapid changes. An example of this can be found in presidential approval ratings during Morsi’s tenure. With an initially high rating of 78 percent approval within the first one hundred days, this number dropped to 57 percent with the constitutional amendment in late November. Geographical and social disparities must also be taken into account, as those in Upper Egypt retained a higher level of support for Morsi over time than those in urban centers. The same can be said for those with lower levels of education, versus university graduates.



Following the presentation, the Gallup representative fielded questions about how Gallup operates, how metrics are determined, and the reliability of results. Gallup is owned by its employees and shareholders, so data collection is funded by those shareholders. The Gallup World poll has over a dozen regional directors, either from within the corresponding region or external experts who train locals on the ground, meaning (in this context) that Egyptians are polling Egyptians. The regional director is responsible for follow-up and quality control. In the case of the discrepancies between Upper and Lower Egypt, explaining the variability is not a simple task. The regions have different education levels, different perceptions, and different media sources. Their engagement with the central government, and vice versa, is relatively limited, and therefore they are less likely to feel they are part of the system.

In terms of reliability, the difference between phone and face-to-face interviewing was addressed, as was the honesty of participant responses. Face-to-face interviews require permission, and present additional barriers including cost and security concerns. Phone interviewing facilitates faster data collection. The honesty of responses is always a concern with polling. There is substantial incentive to throw out unreliable data, and Gallup has a rigorous evaluation system. All surveys are carried out by locals, in the local language, and by and large even in dangerous situations individuals are forthcoming with information.