

The Birth and Death of 25TV: Innovation in Post-Revolution Egyptian TV News Formats

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Abstract

This case study highlights an experiment that aimed to disrupt traditional television news production and presentation models in post-revolution Egypt. It is a snapshot of a brief moment in Egyptian television history when an attempt was made at innovating news production and content, but much like the Egyptian revolution, ultimately failed to change the status quo. The case study of 25TV examines how political, social, and economic dissatisfaction among Egyptian youth inspired innovation in news formats that gave more content production power to younger and less experienced news presenters and producers. Through the brief lifespan of 25TV, this article will discuss the role of social media and television in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the contentious relationship between freedom of speech and military rule, and the innovative ways in which television formats in Egypt were nurtured, grew and perished in the post-revolution era.

Introduction

As global youth movements struggle to rectify inequitable income distribution and promote social justice, political changes were among several upheavals occurring after the Arab Spring. There also seemed to be a pivotal shift in the expectations and standards of news audiences. While television was, and still is in 2016, the primary source of news for Egyptians (Mideastmedia.org, 2016), the 15–29 demographic that participated in protests and supported the revolution was increasingly attracted to social media and online news sources. State broadcasting and privately owned satellite channels struggled to maintain their ideological identity and audience loyalty during 2011 and throughout the post-revolution years. Internet penetration in Egypt is 37.8% and 26% are accessing the Internet on their mobile phones (MCIT, 2016). Economic and literacy barriers prevent the majority of the population from accessing alternatives to television. There is a media revolution unfolding worldwide, as young audiences are turning off their televisions, canceling satellite and cable subscriptions, and instead gravitating toward websites, mobile smartphones, and social media for their news. For 18–24 year olds around the world, 28% get their news from social media, 24% from television, and 6% from print sources (Newman, 2016).

The Jan 25th Channel, or 25TV, was founded in April 2011 in the short window of immediate post-revolution opportunity to provide Egyptians without Internet and social media access that fueled the uprisings with new locally produced alternatives to existing

state and private satellite channels. With news programs hosted by young, energetic, and passionate men and women mostly in their 20s, 25TV was a news startup founded by an entrepreneur who envisioned spreading the optimistic revolutionary voices of the youth throughout the country and to Egypt's global diaspora. By actively integrating Facebook and Twitter to television content, a relatively uncommon practice on Egyptian television prior to the revolution, 25TV was an experiment in democratizing media and an opportunity to completely rethink, and thus innovate, how the news was gathered and presented. From 2012-2016, social media have become generally more integrated into news and talk show content, but in 2011, it was less of a common practice.

Innovation is defined as, "The process of bringing new practices, culture and products alive within an organization, to preserve core values but serve them in radically new ways." (Silverman, 2015). In their roadmap for change "The Lean Newsroom" Brown-Smith & Groves argue that innovation in newsrooms does not happen quickly or easily, and they advise news organizations seeking to innovate that they ensure that not only new and different practices are implemented, but that innovation is a process that needs to become integral to all aspects of the company culture (Brown-Smith & Groves, 2014). Clayton Christensen's Disruptive Innovation Theory describes a process by which a product or service, "takes root initially in simple applications at the bottom of a market and then relentlessly moves up market, eventually displacing established competitors." (Christensen, 1997). Disruptive innovators in the news ecosystem include social media, which may eventually be the final nail in the coffin for newspapers. Both radio and television were heralded as disruptors of print journalism, but never truly replaced them. 25TV had the potential to become a disruptive innovator in the field of television news formats, but it was not an easy task. As is the fate of many startups, 25TV failed. The venture proved difficult and expensive, and in September 2012, after months of conflict with the Ministry of Information, according to its owner, the station's license was revoked and Egyptian authorities shut the channel down.

News format innovation is a global phenomenon, as youth around the world are taking control of how and where they access news. We no longer live in a world where the established news organizations are the only sources we believe and trust for our information. The global spread of citizen journalism has empowered audiences to create news stories and gather firsthand witness reports, by taking amateur pictures and videos and in the process generating alternatives to mainstream news agencies. This has become much easier and cheaper with the advent of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and news aggregators created or acquired by technology companies such as Alphabet (Google), Yahoo, and Apple. For content creators, it is relatively simple to be able to break a news story by uploading a video to YouTube or tweeting or even posting on Facebook. Most news organizations regularly integrate social media as sources of news, in tandem with traditional wire service reports and their own network of reporters and correspondents. Social media has had a democratizing effect on news as they have facilitated the emergence of the 'citizen journalist,' i.e., anyone who happens to be in the right place at the right time with adequate, if not professional, technological tools. These tools can be as simple as a mobile phone, Internet access, and the technical knowledge required to upload and share photos and videos.

The Evolution of Egyptian Television: Government and Private Channels

The broadcast media landscape in Egypt transformed dramatically in the pre-revolution years. State television, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), was established in 1960 and was the first state-run television station in Africa and the Middle East. In 2001, the first Egyptian private satellite channel, Dream TV, was established and the following year al-Mehwar, another private satellite channel began broadcasting to Egyptian and Arabic speaking diaspora audiences. In 2012, there were over 60 private Egyptian satellite channels, at least 20 of which were established in 2011. ERTU's reach is wider than satellite channels due to the cost associated with satellite transmission access, however satellite dishes are widespread, even in disadvantaged rural areas where several households share access. Satellite household penetration is approximately 80%, but terrestrial television reaches over 96% of the Egyptian population (Dubai Press Club, p. 44). Not all satellite is accessed through paid subscriptions, as Egyptians find creative ways to bypass paying for television and instead rig satellite dishes to capture paid content for free. Only 4% of Egyptian households pay for satellite television.

The ERTU has historically served as the official propaganda mouthpiece and has been continually subsidized and carefully controlled by the government since its inception in 1960. Egyptian presidents from Gamal Abdel Nasser to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi ensured that state television kept the public in line with their policies. During the Mubarak era, all satellite channels news producers and owners knew that they risked losing their licenses if they went too far in questioning the legitimacy of Mubarak's rule. The role of ERTU is to promote stability, inspire loyalty to the ruling regime and to rally public support of government policies. It was completely unheard of for state television to criticize or question authority, especially the president, his family, or the armed forces. Occasionally there was criticism of the prime minister or members of the upper and lower houses of parliament, however Egyptian journalists working for the ERTU knew that the red line was drawn at the presidency and that they would almost certainly face penalties that ranged anywhere from losing their jobs, being significantly demoted, or serving jail time if they were to say anything negative about the president or his family. This pervasive censorship and fear was among the many reasons that most Egyptians remained relatively complacent for most of the 30 years that Hosni Mubarak ruled the country and have come full circle as they returned to that state of complacency after the election of President Sisi in 2014.

State TV, which reached the vast majority of the Egyptian public until the 21st century, simply did not allow anything but sycophantic praise of Mubarak and his sons Gamal and Alaa, to the extent that it was almost a given guarantee had the 2011 revolution not happened, Gamal Mubarak would have succeeded his father.

Wealthy business tycoons with close ties to the Mubarak regime, along with businessmen from Gulf countries including the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar established private satellite channels. Television became increasingly lucrative as the potential for advertising grew exponentially and the number of satellite channels increased dramatically between 2001 and 2011. Most of these channels were either focused on entertainment or religious content. There were no Egyptian private satellite channels that broadcasted a full-scale newscast. The news was either covered in talk shows, which were two to three hours long, that featured interviews with the same

revolving door of ‘experts’ and ‘analysts’ or it was accessible via the 24-hour news channels that were not Egyptian but rather financed by Gulf money or Western financial ventures, such as Al Jazeera (Qatar), Al Arabiya (Saudi Arabia), Al Hurra (USA), BBC Arabic (UK), Sky News Arabia (Australia), or France 24 Arabic (France).

After the 2011 revolution, Egyptians began to see more clear distinctions between ERTU and private satellite channels, as the lines had blurred between what could be criticized and what remained off-limits. State television continued its pro-Mubarak stance throughout the 18-day uprising, and when Mubarak resigned on February 11, ERTU threw its support behind the Egyptian military, where it remains indefinitely. In the interim period between February 2011 and June 2012, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) ruled the country, and the ERTU became their propaganda arm. Journalists and political activists who questioned the military rulers was intimidated, threatened, or imprisoned. Meanwhile, private television stations had become far more emboldened after the revolution and those who tried to challenge military authority were met with fierce resistance from SCAF. Several private television stations, including 25TV, were threatened or attacked by the armed forces during the interim period, and journalists were subjected to interrogations, arrests, and torture (Iskandar, 2011).

The businessmen who started television stations in Egypt are among the wealthiest in the country with direct connections to ruling political power. These include Ahmed Bahgat, a real estate and manufacturing magnate; Hassan Rateb, whose holdings include Sinai Cement Company, universities, and tourism companies; Tarek Nour, an advertising mogul, owns a channel called al-Qahera wal-Nas; as well as Muhammad al-Amin, the founder of CBC (Capital Broadcasting Center), another wealthy real estate businessman. The al-Tahrir channel was also founded shortly after the revolution in February 2011 by Ahmed Abu Heiba, who made a fortune publicizing Muslim televangelists such as Amr Khaled, a popular preacher. Most of these satellite channels did not necessarily promote democracy and media critics accused some, such as CBC, of backing pro-Mubarak political candidates. The needs of the larger Egyptian population remained underrepresented, and the main audience of satellite channels was the elite, educated minority of the population concentrated in urban cities, mainly Cairo.

The Revolution of Egyptian Television: Birth and Death of 25TV

There are millions of people in Egypt who belong to what is affectionately known as *hizb al-kanaba*, or the ‘sofa party’ who watch a lot of TV and do nothing but complain about how terrible television content is. Mohamed Gohar did not consider himself a *hizb el kanaba* member. He identified a need to disrupt television production in Egypt. He founded the 25TV channel, which was radically different than established TV stations. It was intended as a channel for the people by the people, which was an innovation compared to the conventional model of television production in the Mubarak era, presented by polished, older professionals with extensive training and experience. 25TV was the polar opposite of that tradition. The show hosts were barely out of college with little or mostly no previous television experience, and as a result the channel had a rough yet tenacious element to it. The sets were low budget and it looked anything but professional as it was aimed at attracting the lucrative advertising revenue of the 15–29 demographic. The target audience was the youth who formed the core of the revolution,

whose demands for dignity, employment, and social justice formed the bedrock of the uprisings.

In an in-depth interview conducted in January 2012, Gohar said he was impressed with the demands of the youth of the Egyptian revolution, and wanted to further empower them. The revolutionary-inspired outpouring of artistic expression including graffiti artists, rappers, musicians, comedians, and theater groups needed to be televised. When the revolution began, he described a glimpse of what life could be like if Egyptians were allowed to freely express themselves. When Mubarak relinquished power, there was no turning back, everything had to change, Egypt had to innovate, and Gohar was going to help the youth spread their message.

With the profits from his production company Video Cairo, Gohar established 25TV. He had been involved with setting up Al Jazeera Egypt, as well as Orbit, al-Mehwar, and al-Nahreïn, an Iraqi private satellite channel. But he was mainly discouraged by the lack of freedom of speech under Mubarak. Gohar had served jail time along with the prominent Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim in a landmark legal case in which the Mubarak administration accused them of defaming Egypt's reputation abroad after they made a film criticizing the lack of civil society under Mubarak's regime.

Gohar was no stranger to government propaganda. In fact, he had even devoted a significant part of his career to producing it when the Ministry of Information needed stock footage to create television promotional material. Gohar started out in the broadcasting industry in the 1970s as President Sadat's personal director of photography. Since then he has had close ties with the ruling elite of the country, including President Mubarak, for whom he filmed official trips abroad and even filmed material for his 2005 and 2010 presidential campaigns. But the 2010 campaign would be the last official work that Gohar would do for the Egyptian government. He had numerous clashes with the Minister of Information, Anas al-Fiqi, and had his broadcasting licenses revoked several times between 2010 and 2011.

In March 2011, Gohar started preparing to launch a new channel that manifested his vision of giving the youth of the revolution a sustained voice. He interviewed young recent university graduates as reporters and anchors for the channel. Most of the men and women he hired did not study media or journalism, and a few were political activists. He also started looking for talented artists whose work could be featured on the channel, including singers, graffiti artists, and independent documentary producers who had filmed amateur video of the protests. In addition to its innovative news presentation model, one of the unique features of the 25TV channel is that it represented the premier outlet for creative expression after the revolution. Songs, poetry, and music by revolutionary groups and artists were regularly featured on the channel. These artists and bands had been previously banned but after the revolution they had a place to express themselves and to share their creativity. This creative approach was extended to the news, as Gohar proudly stated, "I'm starting a new program with a guy who is very talented. He will sing the news. He'll make up lyrics according to the news items and he'll sing his report right there on location. We call it News in Song."

Advertising revenues for the channel were a major challenge for 25TV, as large corporations preferred to spend their dwindling advertising budgets on traditional channels that supported the Mubarak regime and the Armed Forces. Advertising budgets significantly shrank after the revolution, as the economic situation in Egypt continued to deteriorate. The lack of stability contributed to a decline in tourism revenue and reserves of foreign currencies fell to critically low levels. Keeping 25TV afloat required its owner to put millions into operating costs because advertising revenue was sporadic and unreliable. Gohar says, “We didn’t build any news sets. It’s a waste of money. Even though it clearly looks low budget, our audiences don’t seem to care. I’d rather spend that money on more field reporters that I can disperse throughout the country and to cover the people in smaller poorer neighborhoods that never make it on TV.”

By using newsgathering techniques that were innovative for 2011, such as cell phones, text messages, email, Skype, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, overhead costs at the station were kept low and manageable. By hiring young reporters with little or no journalism experience the station avoided the exorbitant salaries of more famous seasoned journalists, as Gohar explains, “Most expenses were incurred by live streaming, satellites, and transmission technology, but the young people working for 25TV are doing so because they are fueled by passion, and they are willing to work for lower salaries around LE 3,000 a month. Some of them are pure volunteers. Motivation and innovation, that’s what drives us. Because anybody with a phone can be a producer, he or she can make news.” Eventually, financial and regulatory pressures contributed to the demise of the station in September 2012, although Gohar denied that the station shut down because it ran out of money. He said that he was prepared to personally finance it for another year or two, even though it was not profitable due to the lack of advertising revenue. There are no any reliable consumer data of the channel’s audience, and due to the turbulent circumstances during 2011, there is a dearth of audience metrics of the station, so it is difficult to ascertain how the station was received by its target audience. According to Gohar, the channel shut down after the Egyptian Ministry of Information refused to renew 25TV’s broadcasting license.

Programming Innovations

The news content and presentation on 25TV appeared to be targeting millennials, as on-air talent wore casual clothes, often jeans and T-shirts. In stark contrast to channels where older news anchors talked down to their audience, these young reporters spoke straightforwardly in a manner that was relatable and down-to-earth. News programming on 25TV heavily incorporated social media, an innovative way to reach Egyptians between the ages of 15 and 29. A news show called #hashtag was presented by Nada Wassef, an enthusiastic and talented recent college graduate. The show integrated tweets from activists and journalists to gather and report on the news of the day. This show was particularly groundbreaking because it used television to reach the majority of Egyptians without smartphones, who are not on Twitter. Wassef was part of a team of novice journalists who as she put it, “were trying to promote democracy with programs that covered remote places in Egypt and reached out to regular people, with the intent to raise their awareness of civic engagement, critical thinking, and freedom of political choice.”

Smartphones are expensive, therefore despite the fact that social media contributed to coordinating and gathering momentum for the revolution, it is television that enjoys a far wider reach to the population at large, particularly in rural areas. Youth of higher socioeconomic status in Cairo, Alexandria, and Mansoura (larger metropolitan cities) are among the most likely people to be using their smartphones to access and share information. But the wider population relies on television for their news, and 25TV reduced the digital divide, or technology access gap between the minority with access to Facebook and Twitter and the majority without. In a country where democracy is an immature endeavor, it became crucial to bridge that digital divide, because access to information from the Internet and social media is far from universal in Egypt.

One of the main goals of the news department at 25TV that distinguished them from other news stations in Egypt was their endeavor to pursue investigative stories that state and satellite television ignored. These stories covered minorities and under-represented populations in Egypt, including the Bedouin of Sinai and the Nubians in the south near the border with Sudan. Egyptian print and broadcast media tend to be extremely Cairo-centric. Cairo is the capital and millions of Egyptians gravitate toward it in search of job opportunities and a better life. However, Cairo represents a single perspective of life in greater Egypt, the view that most of the population watches on television, as most stations are based in Cairo and cover the greater Cairo region far more frequently than other cities. With 27 governorates, Egypt is a large diverse country with a mix of urban, agricultural and desert landscapes. Television news rarely covers this wide geographic span regularly, but 25TV had a team of 14 field reporters and producers who used social media and inexpensive reporting tools such as Skype to keep audiences up to date on events and developments around the country. 25TV had more programs outside of Cairo than inside the city, and had an editorial policy of covering stories from fresh angles, thinking outside the box, and outside Cairo.

One of the most unique programs on 25TV was a cooking show starring Ghalia, a down-to-earth cook who shared her recipes with audiences and cooked on a tight budget, making entire meals that cost less than LE20 (\$1). This innovative show was a departure from typical fancier cooking shows with elaborate, expensive sets, ingredients and equipment. Ghalia's kitchen looked like any average Egyptian's kitchen, with a cheap basic stove that she lit with a match, no measuring cups, just plastic jugs and threadbare utensils. Ghalia taught her audiences how to feed an extended family of 20 people with a realistic budget that reflected the poverty of majority of the population. She would only cook meat once a week, because that is what most Egyptian families can afford, if at all. Her ingredients were bought at a local market, and cameras followed her as she haggled and bargained the prices of vegetables, rice, and beans. Her show reflected the harsh economic realities for Egyptians, which only became worse after the revolution. Gohar claims Ghalia was quite popular (there are no independent ratings to confirm), and that her fans have been calling and texting her, yearning to see her back on the air after the channel was shut down.

On September 15, 2012, 25TV went off the air. Gohar released an email statement stating, "It was a unique experiment. We gave a voice to all minorities in Egypt. We spent a lot of time and effort calling for the political reform, educational reforms, women's

empowerment, encouraging business, trade, and entrepreneurs, and enforcing civil society. We used modern social media and new technological tools, like 3G phones to transmit live video pictures. We used social media's successful ways of starting with small ideas and allowing people the interactivity platform to enhance these ideas. On the 15th of September, 25TV's transmission was jammed, and prior to that, our license was denied. Since the new president of Egypt came to power, all our requests for permission were refused. I regret to inform you that 25TV had to shut down.”

The fall of 2012 during President Morsi's rule was particularly turbulent for Egyptian media, when harassment and intimidation campaigns against journalists were rife, and several stations were raided for “not operating with proper licenses”(CPJ, 2011) and broadcasters were denied requests for license renewals (Mansour, 2015). Nada Wassef resigned from 25TV, citing her displeasure with editorial policies at the station, low wages, and what she perceived to be questionable motivations of the owner. Wassef said the station could have been more balanced and fair, and gave examples of situations where she was not allowed to openly criticize the military or police. The moral question of financially exploiting the revolution for commercial gain came up in interviews with Wassef and other former staff members. Hussam Haddad, a Cairo-based news anchor at the station also resigned after feeling increasingly disillusioned with the station, despite his initial excitement and commitment to bringing a fresh perspective to Egypt's media landscape. Haddad said, “It truly was a privilege, and all of us at the station endured tough times and made big sacrifices to make it work, but it just wasn't sustainable and had deviated from the initial goals.” Hussein Nabil, a former sales manager at 25TV, said that while he was proud to be part of a brand new venture, he was “quite disappointed to face the reality of maintaining viability in a competitive media market with shifting allegiances and complex political and financial obstacles to success.” By December 2011, opposition newspapers including *Egypt Independent* had been temporarily suspended, and both NGOs and journalists were systematically targeted, jailed and repressed. The tight restrictions and constant threat to Egypt's press corps and its freedom of speech continue and have intensified in post-revolution years, rendering critics of the regime, military, police and national security criminals and enemies of the state.

The Challenges of Innovating News Formats

25TV may have had the potential to change the way Egyptians consume the news, especially for younger viewers without Internet or smartphone access. Unfortunately, we will not have the ability to measure that potential due to the limitations of the need to conduct audience research during that period of time to assess impact. The experiment in this narrow case study ultimately proved to be a brief exercise in television utopia, and this case study heavily relied on interviews with the founder and employees of the station. Future studies need to expand the scope of research to comparative studies of post-revolution television stations.

Media restrictions in its many forms continue in Egypt, including the most insidious type, self-censorship practiced by journalists who are avoiding inevitable punishment by the government, armed forces and security apparatus. In light of the long tradition of Egyptian media censorship, it was remarkable to witness a unique channel that was openly pro-revolution and pro-youth, even though that fleeting phase only lasted 19

months. It was not the only channel that was pro-revolution, ONTV, founded by billionaire Naguib Sawiris in 2011 was staunchly anti-establishment and enjoyed the support of well-respected, seasoned and prestigious journalists and talk show hosts such as Reem Maged and Yosri Fouda, whose ideology matched the revolutionary youth, but whose salaries and experience far exceeded those of the 25TV news staff. ONTV was founded with multiple millions of pounds, and its success is attributed to its vastly larger startup budget than 25TV. Revolutionary television content proved neither profitable nor prudent in post-revolution Egypt.

The future of Egyptian media is precarious at best. Innovation in news has been mostly stifled, innovators have left, and state television has seamlessly moved into the role of the mouthpiece for the government and a propaganda machine for the military, which has secured the allegiance of private satellite channels and has shut down or jammed contrary channels or programming. Muslim Brotherhood affiliated channels were immediately taken off the air after the military ousted President Muhammad Morsi in July 2013. The revolutionary satirical show *al-Bernameg*, which faced numerous challenges from military authorities and legal battles, switched the channel it broadcasted from three times in three years before it was shut down during the Sisi presidency and its host Bassem Youssef emigrated to the United States, where he produced a satirical show “The Democracy Handbook” for the Fusion Network.

Using low-budget production and newsgathering techniques, 25TV demonstrated the valuable point that stations do not need a multi-million dollar budget to create content that millennial audiences can potentially connect to on a personal level. They do not even need to hire prestigious journalists with decades of experience. Young people can easily be trained to run video equipment and tell stories the way they see fit to prioritize the information. However, the harsh reality for any startup is that innovation must be ultimately be financially viable. Even the lowest of budgets cannot be sustained indefinitely without a creative and dynamic marketing and sales team to ensure healthy advertising revenue.

The advent of citizen journalism has changed audience expectations in terms of production values and production costs have decreased as technology becomes more accessible and affordable. When mainstream news organizations regularly utilize Skype, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, audiences may no longer necessarily expect to see perfection in video quality or reporting, which requires more robust budgets to produce. Through their bridging of cultural and socioeconomic divides, 25TV demystified the Internet and social media to a public who does not universally enjoy the luxury of being connected, but either have a television set or know someone who does. The channel was among the few in Egypt to decentralize newsgathering outside of Cairo by branching out to cover stories from under-represented and often discriminated against communities within Egypt. By staying true to the goals of the revolution, 25TV kept the rebellious conversation alive for almost two years after the first day of the revolt on January 25th, 2011. Post-revolution Egypt remains a cynical country, with most questioning if the revolution was the right course of action.

For a brief moment in history, 25TV represented the hope that Egypt can be a better country, democracy and free speech can prevail, the old elitist model of media can be overturned and the people who were ignored and downplayed can have a voice in the public sphere. In this day and age of cheaply produced content, where anyone with affordable newsgathering tools such as a cell phone camera and an internet connection can tell stories and create news content, it is incumbent to re-examine our tired, worn-out typical mainstream news formats and seriously consider embarking on new, creative and innovative ways to make news that audiences can actually relate to, especially young people who are increasingly tuned out from the news. The revolution, and 25TV may have failed, but the Egyptian people have learned many valuable lessons along the way. The path forward will be difficult, but through fostering a national culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, not just in the technology and finance fields, but agriculture, manufacturing and media, Egyptians can and will find fresh and exciting ways to connect and stay informed.

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