

## **Investigative Journalism in the Arab World: Issues and Challenges**

*'If it is journalism, it must be investigative'*

Source: *Jornalismo Investigativo*, UNDP Report  
International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth, 2010

The media play an important role in affecting public opinion, and in turn hold significant power in shaping political, social and ideological views and positions. Investigative journalism, which aims to uncover the truth to the public, can be utilised to become a 'democratising' power whereby it plays a necessary role in bringing to light issues and discourses that are new and often 'hidden'. By definition, investigative journalism is a branch of journalism practice which seeks to uncover important and crucial happenings and occurrences that cannot be ignored or undermined. Several scholars have their own interpretation and understanding of investigative journalism and this has been discussed in their work (Hunter 2012; de Burgh 2008; Ettema and Glassers 1998). James Aucoin (2006) interprets it as informing the public about something that is of importance to them and which they do not know. The Dutch-Flemish Association for Investigative Journalism (VVOJ) defines it as 'critical and in depth journalism' (VVOJ, 2011). Yet, a comprehensive and encompassing definition of investigative journalism has been articulated by Robert Green, where he sees investigative journalism as 'the reporting, [primarily] through one's own work product and initiative, matters of importance which some persons or organizations wish to keep secret' (cited in Ullmann, 1995: 2). Investigative journalism, therefore can be understood as a form of reporting that seeks to uncover a 'secret', something which someone or some entity wishes to keep unknown to the public. With this in mind, investigative reporting, can take the shape of a democratising tool which aims to inform the public, pressure those who are hiding the 'secret', and ideally lead to change.

Investigative journalism has a few defining aspects that differentiates it from other forms of journalism: first investigative journalism is about digging deeper on a particular issue or topic which is of public interest; it is a process rather than an event; it needs to be original and proactive; it must shed light on new information; it should be multi-sourced; and due to its in depth nature, it calls for greater resources, teamwork and time than a routine news report. (Ansell et.al, 2002: 4-5). Ideally, such journalism, as the opening quote from the UNDP report above stipulates, is what journalism should be doing in general. Nonetheless, and as this report will showcase, such a form of journalism is costly, dangerous, and time-consuming. This is a universal problem for investigative journalism, and not just in the Arab world. However, as will be discussed in this report, in addition to these issues, investigative journalism in the Arab world has some region-specific teething problems which makes investigative reporting a challenging process in the pursuit of a deliberative democracy and change.

Investigative journalism has a role to play in deliberative democracy through informing the public, thus opening up issues and topics for debate. Its power is noted through its ability to reach the masses and create public debate, thus becoming an essential tool in the process of deliberative democracy. As a general definition, deliberative democracy is seen 'as a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching

conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future' (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 7). It is necessary to note that for investigative reporting to achieve a role in this process of deliberative democracy, it would need to do so at a public level. Thomas Patterson and Philip Seib (2005) argue that deliberative democracy is achieved at a public level rather than an individual level. They state that:

[t]he notion that informed citizenship emerges from a deliberative process also poses analytical problems. The unit of analysis is not the individual citizen but the public as a whole. The test of an informed "public," as opposed to the informed "citizen," is the level of public debate and discussion (Patterson and Seib, 2005: 189).

Hence, if investigative reporting were to play a measured role in democracy building through the uncovering of hidden facts, which would in turn lead to actual reform or action, then this can only be achieved at a 'public' level. Here I argue that 'change' is a key element in defining the success of an investigative story. Its power in shaping deliberative democracy needs to extend beyond that of just *informing*, to that of *change*, be it policy reforms, political action, or social development. Journalism in relation to deliberative democracy, therefore, as articulated by James S. Ettema, 'must itself be a reasoning institution that aggressively pursues, rigorously tests, and compellingly renders reasons that satisfy the key criterion of deliberative democracy' (Ettema, 2007: 145). Within this context, investigative journalism as a specific form of journalism, has the ability to do just that. In sum, investigative reporting, as I argue in this report through the Arab experience, needs to go beyond just uncovering the truth and informing the public, to that of achieving actual change.

The project, *Investigative Journalism in the Arab World: Issues and Challenges*, is the first research to date that looks into the state and role of investigate journalism in the Arab world before and after the protests of the 'Arab Spring'. In an environment of political instability and change, it would be expected that this form of journalism could take on a more prominent role, especially in relation to the new stage that the region faces in recovering and developing towards an emerging democratic political and social environment. The fact that the 'Arab Spring' is still happening in parts of the Arab world, such as Syria, means that this topic is not only timely but also one that could be ongoing. The necessity of this research lies in the importance that the media play in informing and empowering society, in order for it to play a democratic role in a region where this has previously been taboo. This study, therefore, explores how investigative journalism training and practice can be used to develop and nurture democratic social and political systems in Arab countries affected by the recent wave of 'Arab Spring' protests which have either led to reform or to change in political regimes.

Prior to the 'Arab Spring', the media were mainly state-controlled and the practice of investigative reporting, which aims to 'dig deeper' and uncover facts on various issues of concern, was regarded as foreign. Commercial media enterprises sought to steer away from social and political issues and focus more on entertainment as a safer option, since it was also an area that yielded larger financial return. News reporting in Arab countries, therefore, has historically been controlled and opinion pieces have been monitored. However in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, which have undergone a structural regime change, media institutions and journalism practice have supposedly been freed from the control of the state thus enforcing their role as the fourth estate – at least theoretically speaking. This study, therefore, maps and uncovers the extent to which investigative journalism—as a form of knowledge building journalism—is actually developing in the region through investigative journalism training and practice before, during and after the Arab Spring protests. Specifically, the research focuses on how investigative journalism training and practice has

been developing to provide in depth news reporting in order to foster a democratic and transparent environment, which could lead to sustainable and proactive political participation in post ‘Arab Spring’ regions. Through interviews with Arab investigative reporting trainers, supervisors and journalists, along with a close analysis of published investigative news stories and the observation of journalists training and working on investigative news stories, this report uncovers the issues, challenges, and opportunities facing investigative journalism in the Arab world, and in turn provide a policy framework for improving investigative journalism in Arab countries.

This study, therefore, offers a clear perspective on the conditions, limitations and opportunities for investigative journalism training and practice in the Arab world, thus allowing for a better understanding of the extent to which such practice could play a role in democracy building and social empowerment. It discusses investigative journalism for print, radio, television and online platforms. Specifically, this study answers the following questions:

- To what extent have the recent changes and implications brought about by the ‘Arab Spring’ had an effect on the culture of news reporting?
- What kind of issues, if any, have now been possible to report on post ‘Arab Spring’?
- Does the quality of current investigative reporting seek to use facts-based investigative reporting?
- Are there any significant limitations to investigative reporting? Is it safe to assume that previous limitations have been gradually lifted, or do previous constraints continue to limit investigative journalism practice?
- What are the opportunities, if any, to the rise of investigative journalism post the ‘Arab Spring’, as a tool of democracy building?
- How can the role of investigative journalism training and practice be defined in light of the limitations and opportunities presented to investigative reporters in the Arab world today?

In light of the above questions, this report provides a set of policy recommendations on the state of investigative journalism training in the Arab region based on uncovering the limitations and opportunities investigative reporting is currently undergoing. These recommendations will present a clear direction on what needs to be achieved or improved in order to allow investigative journalism to become a knowledge-building tool and a form of social empowerment, especially when the public is dependent on the media in post conflict times to reach a state of peace and development. Accordingly, this study explores the extent to which investigative journalism training and practice for Arab journalists can be regarded as a knowledge and, in turn, a democracy building tool within the Arab world.

## **Historic Account of Media in the Arab World**

Historically, and up until the spread of satellite television channels and the advent of the internet, Arab audiences received their news from their state controlled newspapers who used the media ‘as a political tool to mobilize the masses and propagate the official line’ (Rugh, 2004: 184). The government played a role in the manufacturing of news where ‘Ministries of Information provided the editors with guidance on political programming [...] instructing editors to ignore sensitive issues rather than to exploit certain themes for their propaganda value’ (Rugh, 2004: 193-194). News, therefore, to a large extent functioned as a platform for the state. This was evident in evening news bulletins which

‘consistently presented evidence of the latest achievements of the government, and extol the virtues of the top personalities’ (Rugh, 2004: 193). This was also very visible - and in some states still is – in first pages of newspapers. As Naomi Sakr suggests, this impeded media from acting as a ‘fourth estate’ within the Arab world, since ‘[b]roadcasters cannot be relied upon to act as a watchdog on government if the way they are regulated makes them subject to government control’ (Sakr, 2007: 18).

Consequently, Arab audiences did not develop a trusting relationship with their media and slowly became a sceptical audience. Hugh Miles notes that ‘Arabs learned to despise and distrust everything they heard, read or saw in the media. All the media came to be regarded, quite rightly, as appendages of the government, which only ever echoed, never investigated or criticized, what their leaders said’ (Miles, 2005: 25). This resulted in mistrust between many Arab people and their national media, which was further augmented during periods of major crises such as the initial wars with Israel, and at a later stage the Gulf War in 1991, as Miles illustrates:

Whenever Arabs began to turn back to their state media, for example in times of war, their trust would be disastrously betrayed. The most famous instance of this was during the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, when Arabs everywhere were glued to the Sawt al-Arab radio station founded by Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of the United Arab Republic (Egypt). The beloved announcer Ahmad Said, a household name in the Middle East, declared that the Arab armies had crushed the Israeli army and that Israeli planes were ‘falling from the skies like flies’. The rest of the Arab media went on to repeat this message until a week later, when Arabs found out from foreign sources that they had, in fact, been utterly defeated. Arab trust in the media was shattered. Since then the media has done little to win it back [...] (Miles, 2005: 26).

Media from outside the nation state were also received with some degree of caution. Incoming transnational radio stations broadcasting in Arabic from Western origins gained presence within the Arab public sphere such as the *BBC Arabic News Service*, *Radio Monte Carlo*, and *Voice of America* which was particularly seen as a propaganda service for the United States. Miles notes that ‘[a]lthough these stations were extremely popular and offered a higher standard of news than anything produced domestically, they were Western and so still subject to some suspicion’ (Miles, 2005: 25). Global news television networks broadcasting from outside the Arab world, such as CNN, were introduced at a later stage but were only available to the few who could afford it. During the Gulf War in 1991, CNN was the sole foreign broadcaster broadcasting from within Iraq, thus marking the first modern-day televised coverage of war in ‘real time’. The power of this central role played by CNN was noted by Arab audiences and governments alike, and consequently ‘the strategic possibilities of satellite television were reconsidered’ (Miles, 2005: 26). This in turn led to the emergence of 24-hour news satellite channels within the Arab world. Overall, the mediated Arab public sphere during the national phase was a very restricted model. Arab audiences relied on discourses which circulated within Arab streets and in private gatherings. With such a tightly controlled mediated Arab space, the advent of transnational satellite television was seen by many as a phenomenal opening up of the communicative space. In view of that, the satellite television industry in the Arab world witnessed a tremendous growth throughout the region.

After a long period of state media control, where Arab audiences could only get their news from government-controlled media, there was a need for them to be exposed to other perspectives and other agendas. Equally, private enterprises were also awaiting opportunities to launch their own satellite

channels. With the spread of satellite television technology in the Arab world, this meant that both private investors and Arab audiences alike could make use of this new technology. Culturally, this meant that the Arab world had opened up to each other, and Arab audiences could further be exposed to different Arab publics. Politically, this meant that multiple political views reached the Arab living room from national, transregional and transnational channels. Satellite technology was introduced to the Arab region with the launch of ARABSAT satellite in 1985. However, it was only a couple of years later that this technology was put to use (Miles, 2005: 26). Issues of access were generally not a problem, as the mushrooming of satellite dishes can be seen across rooftops and on balconies in the Arab world. Marc Lynch (2006) provides an insightful account of the mediated Arab public sphere and its evolution from state control to the opening up of satellite television stations. He notes that the transnational mediated Arab space has resulted in connecting Arab and Muslim countries together, in addition to including and engaging the Arab diaspora around the world (Lynch, 2006: 52). Accordingly, transnational Arab media share similar issues, beliefs and identity that form the basis of their mediated discourses (Lynch, 2006: 52). Despite the cultural and linguistic differences across the Arab world, this transnational commonality ultimately formed an Arab public sphere that had a shared collective set of discourses. These discourses mainly centred on counter-discourses in response to a perceived Western hegemony.

In light of this brief account of the Arab media environment serving as an historical background, this research looks into the role and emergence of investigative journalism in various parts of the Arab world before, during and after the Arab Spring protests, specifically outlining the role of investigative reporting in relation to the Arab Spring in some affected countries. The following section will briefly outline this role, in addition to some of the issues and challenges faced by investigative journalism in the Arab world.

## **Investigative Journalism in the Arab World**

Investigative reporting in the Arab world is not new, in the past there have been individual investigations that were carried out in the 50s and 60s by a few reporters such as Hassanein Heikal, an Egyptian journalist who took the position of editor-in-chief of the Cairo-based newspaper *Al-Ahram*, and who focused on developing investigative reporting at the paper by taking on graduates and training them in investigative journalism. However such investigations were not sustained, and were isolated cases that did have some specific factors which led to their success. For example in the case of Heikal he had close ties with Gamal Abdul Nasser, president of Egypt at the time, and therefore had access to information. Organized institutional investigative reporting has been recent, and the emergence of investigative journalism units as part of various news platforms has been evolving slowly.

In 1995 investigative journalism training was launched in the form of an institutionalised training and coaching programme through the establishment of the *Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism* (ARIJ) in Amman, Jordan as the first institutionalized investigative journalism training in the Arab world. ARIJ was set up through a Danish-Arab Partnership program where a committee of foreign ministry officials from Denmark and members of the Danish Investigative Journalism Association came to Jordan and interviewed over a 100 journalists from Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Out of these 100 journalists only five people voiced the need for investigative reporting and the need

for support through training workshops, coaching, and funding, thus introducing Arab journalists to the concept of investigative journalism. The ministry officials and the journalists came back with a suggestion to create a network through the establishment of ARIJ. The allocation of funds comes through the Danish Parliament for ARIJ. (Sabbagh, 2013). Accordingly ARIJ was established as a pilot in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Currently there are 12 investigative units as part of various media platforms across the Arab world that were set up through the assistance of ARIJ. For example, in Egypt there is an investigative unit in *Al Watan* paper and *Al Nahar* TV. There is an investigative journalism unit in *Al Hayat* the London-based newspaper. In Jordan, *Roya* TV has developed an investigative unit. In Yemen, there is an investigative reporting unit in *Al Thawra* newspaper, and ARIJ is in the process of initiating a new unit in the *Yemen Times* with the first independent community-based radio station in Yemen, which is an internet based radio.

It is necessary to note that ARIJ was set up before the ‘Arab Spring’ protests, thus the introduction and emergence of investigative journalism is not a direct result of the Arab Spring. In fact, investigative reporting’s development in some cases was more prominent before the start of the Arab Spring in the region. In other countries, however, the political change that came about as a result of the Arab spring made investigative reporting easier to pursue. For example in Jordan, where the protests in the street did not constitute a leadership change but did lead to political reform, investigative reporting which was previously limited to basic social and environmental issues, now expands to more crucial political matters such as corruption and election fraud. In other regions of the Arab world, such as Syria, investigative reporting which was flourishing prior to the Arab Spring, completely froze during the protests and civil war. As for Tunisia and Yemen, investigative reporting was minimal prior to the leadership change, but started to develop after the Arab Spring. Egypt, on the other hand, witnessed varying degrees of uncertainty in investigative reporting in accordance with the political unrest that the country has witnessed. This study looks into the specific development of investigative reporting in these Arab countries, both through training and practice. It is important however to note, as this research will discuss, that the development of investigative reporting in the Arab region depends on a variety of circumstances dependent on each Arab State. Although generalisations can be drawn across the region, there are specific political, social and economic factors that play a role in each country. To add, the challenges faced by each Arab state in developing investigative journalism, are not only related to the Arab Spring, but are tied to other factors such as the culture of journalism, social norms, and funding issues.

## Issues and Challenges

Overall, investigative journalism is facing challenges at a global level, such as funding and political restrictions across both the developed and developing world. Investigative reporting is an expensive form of journalism, as it requires lengthy time frames spanning from months to years with little financial return. Nonetheless its impact could be significant depending on the kind of story that is being pursued. Political and often social restrictions put journalists’ lives in danger. At first instance it is expected that Arab investigative journalists would face similar challenges to those experienced by investigative journalists worldwide, however the issue of funding for example is not a major concern in the Arab world at these beginning stages, since investigative journalism in the Arab region is being sustained through seed funding. Funding, however, is not guaranteed on the long run and will eventually become an issue if not addressed early on. In addition to these issues which are experienced

by Arab journalists worldwide, this report uncovers a variety of challenges which are characteristic of Arab investigative reporting.

### **Access to Information**

Although each Arab state has its specificities, there are common problems faced by states across the Arab world. The first of these is the issue of *access to information*. According to UNESCO, progress on freedom of information legislation has been slow in Arab states in comparison to other parts of the world. Jordan passed an FOI law in 2007, which has undergone a difficult implementation phase. In Tunisia, a decree law on freedom of information was enacted since 2011, following this Yemen passed an FOI law in 2012. In Morocco's new constitution adopted in 2011, a provision in article 27 was included to secure access to public information (UNESCO, accessed 5<sup>th</sup> August 2013). According to ARIJ's Executive Director Rana Sabbagh, the issue in general regarding FOIs in Arab countries is that there is no clear policy and procedures, and the policies which are put in place are seen as 'window dressing for donors'; in addition to the fact that journalists themselves prefer getting information through traditional paths such as buying information (Sabbagh, 2013). Arab states do not grant themselves press freedom, unless they are challenged, thus making the whole process of media freedom a continuous challenge.

### **State Control**

A second obstacle to the development of investigative journalism overall is that Arab states are authoritarian systems which practice *state control*. This undoubtedly makes the whole process of investigative reporting a tedious and challenging exercise. Although the Arab Spring has offered changes to this, new leaderships that replaced the old regimes have not necessarily opened up the media space. From what has been observed in Tunisia and immediately after the first revolution in Egypt, the state of media control in these countries have to some extent remained unchanged. So although, as in the example of Egypt, there has been a regime change, the media have mainly just transformed from being one mouthpiece of a regime to another. Although investigative reporting has been made more possible through online platforms, which have also played a significant role in the Arab Spring overall, journalists are still operating under state control and regulations.

### **Social Pressures**

In addition to state restrictions on investigative reporting, there are *social pressures* which journalists face. Although journalists working on investigative stories see themselves as uncovering the truth for the benefit of society and the people, there are instances where often investigative reporting uncovers truths that are too confronting for society itself. Society does not always see itself as comfortable with change, and in turn reacts by criticizing investigative reports and journalists. Therefore journalists find themselves not only restricted by the state but also by society. With the rise of investigative reporting in Arab countries, journalists are being accused of destroying the country through their investigative pursuits, especially those who are trained by ARIJ which is often an organisation that is accused of being foreign-funded (Sabbagh, 2013). According to Sabbagh, society does not want to go through the painful analysis of what is wrong and what is right. Sabbagh points out that 'there are so many social, religious, cultural taboos which are present everywhere in the world but are magnified in our area'

(Sabbagh, 2013). Social change, therefore, continues to be a challenge for Arab investigative reporters.

### **Culture of Journalism**

One of the obvious challenges to the rise of Arab investigative journalism is the *culture of journalism*. Despite there being a standard underpinning of journalism practice across the globe through ‘an all-encompassing consensus among journalists toward a common understanding and cultural identity of journalism’, there are, however, different ‘professional ideologies’ which are articulated through journalism cultures (Hanitzsch, 2007: 368), and in turn reflect a variety of journalistic practices. As discussed earlier, Arab investigative reporting in the Arab world is relatively new despite there being various individual attempts in earlier times. Arab journalism has traditionally followed set formulas, and even set linguistic news expressions. Journalism in the Arab world has not been re-vamped or challenged to date. Daily reporting takes the role of massaging public opinion with the use of literary expressions that motivate and evoke emotions. Such journalistic practice feeds and breeds social norms, and fails to challenge, educate and liberalise social thought. For social change to occur however, journalists themselves need to be trained to challenge their culture of journalism that they have long practiced. Investigative journalism coaches who have been training young journalists have expressed, through this study, that this change has not been easy. This has also been noted in training sessions during the author’s observations. Training young journalists, for example, to base their reporting on facts and not emotional pre-selected opinions requires a different journalistic approach to covering a story. Other requirements for change include the need to pay attention to details and to be meticulous, which also requires new journalistic skills. However, according to Sabbagh this is a transitional stage, and although young journalists are slowly making this transition, their editors-in-chief do not seem to accept this change (Sabbagh, 2013). Young journalists who have undergone investigative journalism training tend to report back complaining of how their editors do not support them and do not appreciate that often investigative reporters need to be left alone in order to produce a good investigative story. Young journalists end up having to do both the daily reporting and investigative reporting, so a story that takes six months could end up taking two to three years; progress is therefore slow and constrained (Sabbagh, 2013). It is necessary, however, to distinguish between each Arab country’s ‘culture of journalism’ as they differ depending on the nature of the country. This is a point that came out very clearly in the research and will be discussed in chapters four and five on practice and training. Although the region shares many commonalities, it is necessary not to consider it as homogenous.

### **Journalism Education**

Another issue for investigative reporting is *journalism education*. Most Arab journalists, according to Sabbagh, are products of schools and universities that do not encourage critical thinking. The journalism curriculum teaches theory that stems from the 50s and 60s. University journalism students graduate without understanding how investigative journalism is different from daily news reporting. There are reasons behind this as there is some reluctance on behalf of journalism educators themselves at university institutions to teach investigative journalism. Firstly, university educators do not necessarily have the know-how to teach investigative journalism as they have never practiced it themselves. Other reasons include the fact that most universities are government institutions and



governments do not favour this form of journalistic training, and in turn professors fear being expelled. Also university educators want to protect students who are working on investigative stories that could potentially lead to uncovering any form of corruption as an example. Since students are not professionals they are not protected under any form of legal cover. Now, however, there are slight improvements whereby there are 11 universities that are starting to introduce investigative journalism courses in Tunisia, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank.

### **Instability of the Region**

The *instability of the region* adds to the tension experienced by Arab reporters in general, where they feel that they are working in environments which Sabbagh describes as ‘moving sands’ (Sabbagh, 2013). Revolutions could start anytime and when that happens investigative reporting is frozen, and all the progress in improving the state of investigative reporting comes to a halt as in the case of Syria which had witnessed an increase of published investigative stories up until the start of its political upheaval.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the issues and challenges outlined above, this study provides the following recommendations:

- The need to develop FOIs that ensure access to information for Arab journalists.
- The need to ease state control in media reporting, allowing journalists to operate and report freely to ensure a democratic communicative space post-Arab Spring.
- The need for journalists to continue to educate people that freedom of the media empowers society and, therefore, this development cannot be realised without the mutual understanding between journalists and the society they operate in that freedom of media is essential and beneficial for all.
- The need for continuous focus on emerging and young journalists to develop the Arab culture of journalism they operate in, with the aim of adopting current skills and reporting styles.
- The need to develop university curricula to allow journalism university students to learn and develop in line with international journalism standards.

## **Conclusion**

This report argues that for investigative journalism to bring about change it needs to go beyond the role of informing the public to that of achieving policy reform or political and social amendments. This concept has been observed through this study, where during the training of Arab investigative reporters they were trained to always revisit an investigation a few months later to check on the development of the story and monitor whether any actions or reforms have been conducted. This form of journalism allows the media to become active participants in the process of deliberative democracy. This argument draws on the existing literature on deliberative democracy, arguing that the role of the media in deliberative democracy needs to extend beyond informing the public, to that of *change*.

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