

Arab journalism and the Covid-19 pandemic: challenges and opportunities

Nouran Sallam*

ملخص الدراسة:

هذا البحث يركز على الإعلام العربي في ثلاثة نماذج منه، صحيفة الأهرام المصرية، قناة LBC اللبنانية، وقناة سكاي نيوز الاخبارية، لمعرفة كيف تأثرت تغطياتها الصحفية لأزمة جائحة كورونا بالقضايا الكبرى المتحكمة في المشهد الاعلامي مثل الاستقلالية التحريرية لهذه المؤسسات، تنوع الأصوات المعكوسة عبر المنصة، ومحاولات اللحاق بركب التكنولوجيا الرقمية في الاعلام. تم اختيار هذه المؤسسات الثلاث من أطر سياسية وثقافية متباينة. يعتمد البحث منهجية من شقين: المقابلات الشبه الرسمية مع عشرة عاملين في كل مؤسسة من الثلاثة المذكورة آنفا. وسيشمل العاملون صحفيين ومراسلين ومنتجين ومرساليين ورؤساء تحرير. أما الشق الثاني فهو تحليل محتوى ذي صلة من كل من تلك المؤسسات. محتوى كالمقالات ونشرات الاخبار وبرامج تلفزيونية سيتم تحليله للوقوف على اجابات للتساؤلين التاليين:

- ١- إلى أي مدى وجد الصحفيون انفسهم مقيدين تحريريا اثناء تغطيتهم لجائحة كورونا
- ٢- الى اي حد تمكن الصحفيون من الاستفادة من واللاحاق بركب الرقمنة الذي هيمن على قطاع الاعلام العربي

يتوقع أن تظهر نتائج هذا البحث تأثير جائحة كورونا على صناعة الاعلام العربي. في زمن الوباء يتعاطم دور الإعلام في نشر المعلومات ورفع الوعي. لهذا البحث فرصة كبيرة ليتطور إلى بحث دكتوراة لا سيما في ضوء الفجوة التي تملؤها هذه الورقة البحثية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاعلام العربي، كورونا، استقلالية تحريرية، مصر، لبنان، الامارات، الرقمنة.

* باحثة دكتوراة - جامعة داربي - المملكة المتحدة

Abstract:

The objective of the current investigation is to compare how the pandemic was covered by various Arab newsrooms across different political and cultural contexts. The research will include AlAhram newspaper in Cairo, LBCI TV in Beirut and Sky News Arabia in Abu Dhabi, which should cover various ends on both the political freedom (Freedom House 2022) and the affluence (World Bank & OECD 2021) spectrums. This study will use a twofold qualitative research strategy. Firstly, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 10 journalists each from Egypt, Lebanon, and the UAE. Secondly, qualitative content analysis will be another qualitative research method implemented in this study. Content such as editorials, news stories and TV programmes will be analysed to find out the extent to which it was possible to maintain editorial autonomy and diversity of voice. The questions to be addressed here will be:

- 1- How editorially restricted did journalists find themselves in reporting on Covid-19, and
- 2- To what extent has their reporting benefit from and move along the digital advances in the industry.

The paper is expected to highlight the profound impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the Arab media industry (Al-Rawi, 2020). The pandemic has brought to light the critical role that media plays in disseminating information and raising public awareness, particularly in times of crisis (Al-Jazeera, 2020). Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, including a decline in advertising revenue (El Qassim, 2020) and increased competition (El-Nawawy, 2021), Arab media outlets have adapted to the changing circumstances by embracing new technologies and formats (Al-Rawi, 2020). The findings of this paper, once complete, should shed more light on the extent to which reporting on Covid-19 was impacted by the salient issues of editorial independence, diversity of voice and the strife towards digitisation in the region. Based on the above, this project has a strong PhD potential due to there being a gap in research on the specific area of study proposed.

Keywords: Pandemic - Cover-19 - Arab media - editorial independence - digitisation - Egypt - Lebanon - UAE

Aims

This project aims to explore how issues of editorial independence, diversity of voice and the move towards digitisation played out in the Arab media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Development plan

When Covid-19 hit the world, Arab newsrooms were already under financial pressures, grappling with political powers and striving to catch up with, and potentially lead, the technological advances of the industry. This research aims to examine how the big issues around Arab journalism impacted the coverage of the pandemic. Questions of editorial independence, or the lack thereof, diversity of voice and the strife towards catching up with an increasingly digitised industry had all been at play when Covid-19 occurred. The aim of the study is to find out how these elements manifested in the coverage of the pandemic.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, journalists have been a major source of information for the general public. But like every other sector, the media industry has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in various ways in the Arab world and beyond. Job insecurity is a problem that plagued journalists long before the pandemic hit. However, it intensified remarkably post-Covid. Financially, many news outlets were faced with an existential crisis as a direct result of the pandemic (Oscar, Pickard and Westlund, 2020). Conversely, remote working has created new opportunities, facilitating contact with sources and cutting down on travel costs. This is a development that dramatically accelerated digital transformation (García-Avilés, 2021). However, it has been argued that working from home exacerbated feelings of anxiety and isolation in journalists (Simunkak, 2021).

The media landscape varies across Arab countries. State and privately-owned media coexist. However, the simple facts of public or private ownership do not help us fully understand the picture in terms of media freedom. In Qatar for instance there is a tendency for the media to be either state-owned, owned by prominent members of the ruling family or by businessmen with close connections to the ruling elite (Galal, 2021), (Rugh, 2004). In some circles, Qatar is synonymous with the Al-Jazeera network. Despite that, the media in Qatar is consistently deemed “Not Free” by Freedom house (Freedom House, 2022).

In Egypt, the most populated Arab country and the oldest player in the Arab media field, the state dominates the media landscape either through direct ownership or indirectly through state-friendly entities. Egypt is a country where there exists a paradox between formally acknowledging press freedom (on paper, in the 2014 constitution) and tightening control of it in practice (Badr 2021). After the uprising of 2011 in Egypt, there was an initial level of freedom of the press, captured by a Freedom House report that, for the first time in decades, called the Egyptian media system “Partly Free.” (Freedom House, 2012). This, however, was short-lived. Observation of recent media developments has shown nontransparent acquisitions and monopolistic practices in the Egyptian media industry. (Reporters Without Borders, 2019b).

In conclusion, the Arab media landscape is par excellence characterised by government control (Mellor et al. 2011). Understanding the landscape is crucial in designing the current project as the case studies would be ideally chosen from different poles of the Arab media landscape spectrum for maximum representativeness, allowing for the drawing of more accurate conclusions.

Literature review

This brief literature review will highlight key literature relevant to this study and highlight the specific gaps within the field that this study seeks to address.

When attempting to investigate Arab journalists’ expectations for their future post-Covid the researcher will be examining the implications of the Covid pandemic and its effect on prospects for change within the Arab media landscape, and equally whether it served as a kind of turning point or critical moment for Arab journalism. Quandt and Wahl-

Jorgensen (2020) make the case that the Covid-19 pandemic should indeed be seen as a critical moment for journalism. To that end, they cite the definition of Laws (2020) of a critical moment as “a moment of significant importance and reconsideration of past, present and future”. They understand a critical moment as a “defined breakpoint, where some processes and developments come to a halt, and some essential aspects, issues, practices, actors and interactions become observable, including ones that may have been previously overlooked” (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). They go on to explain that a critical moment can indeed be a turning point, but it can be so much more. They detect multiple developments that are co-occurring, overlapping and paradoxical; which means that a critical moment can be “(a) a turning point, (b) a transformation, (c) an amplifier, (d) a starting point or (e) destruction.” (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021).

In the following few paragraphs each of the previous manifestations of a critical moment will be briefly outlined and an attempt will be made to apply them to Arab journalism.

According to Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, *transformation* processes took shape in the changing of the composition of staff or their responsibilities, in relying upon virtual communication and in strengthening the online news presence. In Arab newsrooms, the increased reliance on remote work and software such as Zoom, and Microsoft Teams was an indubitable transformation.

The researchers also argue that the crisis acted as a *turning point* when it triggered a change of direction or in some cases full reversal of strategies. News organisations moved closer to online journalism in response to increased consumption on these platforms. In her book, *Arab Digital Journalism* (2022), Noha Mellor addresses the pros and cons of the rise of digital technologies’ use in Arab newsrooms.

Of particular interest are the cases in which the pandemic acted as an *amplifier* or accelerator for processes that had already started long before; such as using the pandemic to justify job cuts or previously planned alterations in working conditions.

As a *starting point*, the researchers argue how new attention was directed at health journalism and data journalism. The crisis transformed journalists around the world, including in Arab countries,

into “knowledge brokers” whose job became, among other things, to explain data and position it into context relying on data visualisation.

The researchers link their views on the crisis acting as a starting point with the following argument by saying that the start of something new also means the *destruction* of something old. With Arab journalism, “destruction” seems to have manifested itself strongly with the advent of the pandemic. In his report, *Will the Pandemic Kill Arab Print Journalism?* (2020), Aron Lund finds that as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the Middle East, governments responded with curfews and bans on newspaper printing and distribution in several countries including Jordan, Syria, and Morocco. He notes that combined with a major economic crisis, the impact of the pandemic on Arab print journalism is likely to be devastating.

Based on the above, Covid 19 shall be considered as a critical moment for journalism as the definitions above apply to the impact of the pandemic on the industry. Therefore, this study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1. The extent to which Arab journalism was equipped to survive the critical moment that is the pandemic in ways that would allow it to fulfil its various roles.

RQ2. The ways in which Covid-19 has disrupted Arab journalism and in particular if the disruption qualifies as a turning point.

RQ3. Whether editorial independence and diversity of voice were upheld and maintained during the pandemic coverage.

RQ4. The manifestations, if any, of a move towards digitisation in the selected newsrooms as a direct result of Covid 19.

The pandemic did not hit the media industry in a vacuum, but rather in a broader context of political, economic and technological variants. This project will seek to examine that context in-depth. Politically, the research will look more closely at how the years leading up to the pandemic witnessed a shift towards authoritarian regimes in many countries including Arab countries. Economically, advertising revenues received a blow that caused smaller media outlets to close. In technological terms, there was a pre-Covid trend towards more online working and reliance on the plethora of social media platforms.

Therefore, any transformations brought about by the pandemic should not be understood as isolated incidents. Many of them had antecedents and were not unanticipated. Understanding the context in which these transformations occurred in Arab journalism will be essential for this research.

It is vital to form an awareness of how the intended project will be positioned within the available research, especially research concerned with the impact of Covid-19 on journalists. In her paper *Pride and anxiety: British journalists' emotional labour in the Covid 19 Pandemic* (2021), Maja Simunjak focuses on the emotional impact of the pandemic on UK political journalists. She argues that with the pandemic new practices were followed in media such as working from home, reporting on health and science issues by non-health/science specialist journalists, and reporting on trauma for the first time for many journalists especially when some of them were themselves living through trauma.

Working from home for journalists has been the focus of many studies even pre-Covid, and for this paper it will be necessary to examine previous research that addresses the use of Online Collaborative Software (OCS). If remote working is to be considered as a new practice in Arab media that became increasingly essential during the pandemic a need will arise to analyse its pros and cons in order to assess its potential for longevity. In this regard it was found that “*Our newsroom in the cloud’: Slack, virtual newsrooms and journalistic practice*” is a particularly useful study. The authors put forward The Panama Papers as an example “of what can be achieved using virtual newsrooms (as opposed to physical ones)”. They mention how easy it was to pool “knowledge, skills and perspective” from many countries around the world using software such as Slack, an OCS. On the negative side, the study finds that “the lines between the private and the professional were blurred for many journalists”. Another disadvantage was that journalists sharing the same physical space simply experience more efficient interactions that virtual space is able to offer. The authors were told by one of the interviewed journalists that the difficulty with Slack is that:

... [you] haven't quite got that feeling of 'We're all working together on this one project' ... when things have worked is when you had everybody

kind of chipping in and helping out, and that really in the London office was much better. (Bunce, Wright & Scott, 2018, page 12)

In trying to determine whether Covid 19 will prove to be a turning point for Arab media, it will be key to find out the views of Arab journalists. In this respect one global survey was found to be especially important, namely Journalism in the time of Covid that John Crowley and Andrew Garthwaite conducted at the start of the pandemic in which they found that 94% of journalists agreed that the lockdown would either radically or somewhat change newsrooms. If working from home is to be adopted as the way forward for journalists, then the researchers find that news leaders had better heed concerns from their staff about their mental wellbeing. Some 59 per cent said lockdown had come with further worries and stress. Crowley writes:

The question was posed through the prism of their working environment. It was clear that working from home either with families, flat mates or being on your own had exacted a toll. (Crowley & Garthwaite, 2020, page 5)

For guidance on qualitative research methods the study will be based on Hammersley's *Defining qualitative research: What is Qualitative Research?* In his book, Hammerley explains that the label qualitative research emerged in the 1960s to set it apart from quantitative research methods. One qualitative research method is relatively unstructured, in-depth interviews that get the interviewee to speak comfortably using their own words to describe their experiences and perspectives. In using unstructured or semi structured interviews Hammersley states that the researcher should strive to build rapport with his subjects as well as prompt them to address relevant topics without bearing too much on the flow of the interview.

Methodology

In order to answer the aforementioned research questions, this study will use a twofold qualitative research strategy. Firstly, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 10 journalists each from Egypt, Lebanon, and a Gulf country (Qatar or the UAE (United Arab Emirates)). Please see Appendix 1.

In Egypt, state-owned *AlAhrām* newspaper is one of the oldest in the Middle East; established in 1875. It boasts the largest circulation in Egypt and enlists thousands of employees. It is no secret that *AlAhrām*

is financially struggling as well as underdeveloped technologically. Including it in the research will be valuable given its stature and the challenges it is encumbered with.

In Lebanon, LBCI was the first privately-owned TV station ever licensed. Founded in 1992 by acquiring the assets, liabilities, and logo of LBC - an entity established in 1985 during the Lebanese Civil War by the Lebanese Forces militia - LBCI went global in 1996 when it launched its satellite channel *LBC Al-Fadha'iya Al-Lubnaniya*. Incorporating it into the study will enrich the research since it is considered one the main media outlets in the Levant.

Egypt and Lebanon are dissimilar in terms of the lack of freedom in the Egyptian press and the partially and relatively free press in Lebanon (Freedom House, 2022). In Qatar or the UAE, the media scene is drastically different from either Egypt or Lebanon. Both Sky News Arabia in the UAE and Aljazeera in Qatar enjoy high budgets that enable them to keep up with the latest technological advancements and the reflection of plentiful resources on the output is evident. However, both media outlets are situated in countries that consistently rank low on freedom of expression indexes. Therefore, adding one of these two Gulf channels will enhance the research's value and allow for comparisons with lower-budget outlets (AlAhran and LBCI) and potentially freer (LBCI) organisations. Furthermore, the inclusion of a Pan-Arab channel from the Gulf with local outlets should also be enlightening.

The interviews will be conducted with journalists, producers, editors-in-chief, and correspondents. The questions in these interviews will revolve around the overbearing issues of editorial independence, diversity of voice, and whether the pandemic offered an opportunity to accelerate the digitisation of the industry in the Arab region. The interviews will also aim to shed light on the practices which became predominant with the advent of the pandemic such as working from home, remote meetings, and virtual rather than in-person interviewing techniques. Secondly, qualitative content analysis will be another qualitative research method implemented in this study. Content such as editorials, news stories and TV programmes will be analysed to find out the extent to which it was possible to maintain editorial autonomy and diversity of voice. The questions to be addressed here will be:

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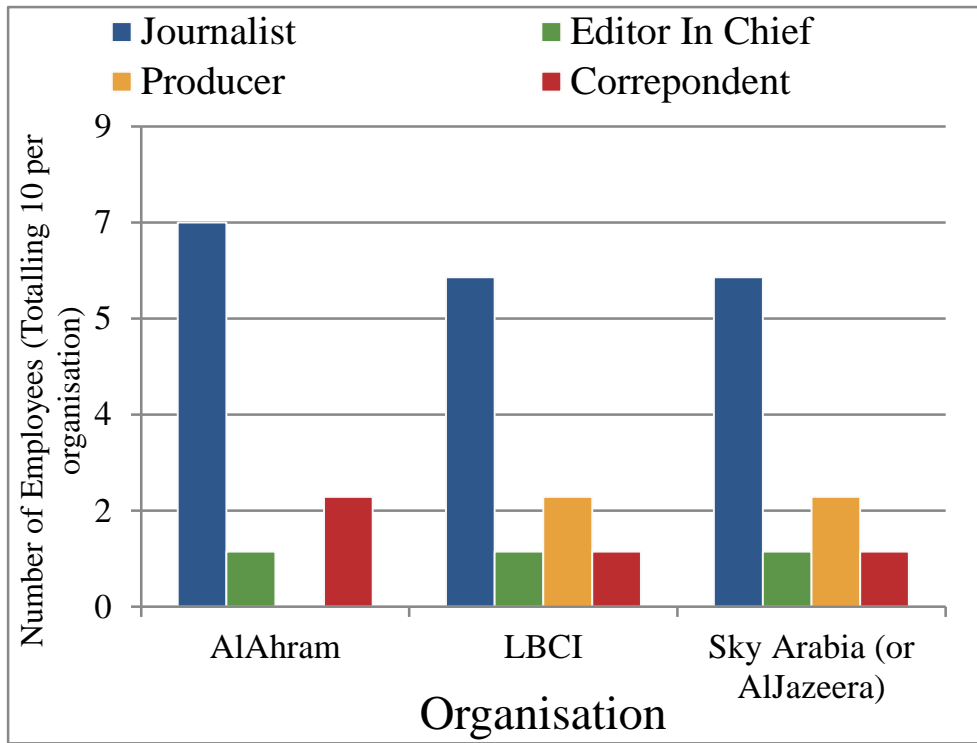
With regard to qualitative content analysis, Kuckartz (2016) will be referred to. He has suggested as a first step an in-depth reading (or watching) of the material and an initial coding of relevant phrases that pertain to the research questions. In a second step, these initial codes are reviewed, systematised, and summarised so as to find distinct patterns.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the Arab media industry (Al-Rawi, 2020). The pandemic has brought to light the critical role that media plays in disseminating information and raising public awareness, particularly in times of crisis (Al-Jazeera, 2020). Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, including a decline in advertising revenue (El Qassim, 2020) and increased competition (El-Nawawy, 2021), Arab media outlets have adapted to the changing circumstances by embracing new technologies and formats (Al-Rawi, 2020). They have utilized their platforms to provide reliable information (Al-Jazeera, 2020), support public health efforts (El-Nawawy, 2021), and promote social cohesion (Al-Rawi, 2020). The Arab media has demonstrated its resilience and ability to respond to changing circumstances (Al-Jazeera, 2020), and it will likely continue to play a critical role in shaping public opinion and guiding public discourse in the years to come (El Qassim, 2020).

The findings of this paper, once complete, should shed more light on the extent to which reporting on Covid-19 was impacted by the salient issues of editorial independence, diversity of voice and the strife towards digitisation in the region. Based on the above, this project has a strong PhD potential due to there being a gap in research on the specific area of study proposed.

Appendix 1



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