



**News Values:
An Assessment of News Priorities
Through a Comparative Analysis of
Arab Spring Anniversary Coverage**

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Abstract

In recent years, the emergence of well-resourced Arab media had already begun to challenge the unipolar tendencies of Western media. 2011 was a bumper year for news, from the Japanese tsunami to near meltdown in the eurozone, from the global Occupy movements to the UK press phone-hacking scandal. Before all that, came the extraordinary events of the Arab Spring, from Tunisia through Egypt to Libya and many other states. Having had so much to cover, how well did news perform in the year-end review of these epic events in the Arab World, and what does the reporting tell us about news makers, their values and objectives? As they covered the first anniversaries of the uprisings, this paper reviews the relative importance broadcast news operations attach to the various outcomes, the definitions of democracy and freedom deployed, and compares the quality of coverage across their different platforms.

Contributor Note

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In a year consumed with concerns about journalism's failures, as exposed through the Leveson inquiry in the UK, it might have been timely for more introspection in the industry about its editorial role and contribution to the public sphere. But the combination of public vilification and commercial contraction has seen much of the news media on a defensive back foot, more concerned with evading statutory regulation than mature reflection. Foreign news offers a welcome distraction from discomforts at home, but also exposes stresses and strains within news organisations on both sides of the Atlantic. The events that came to be called 'the Arab Spring' started a year (2011) of monumental international stories, which shrunken foreign bureaux and resources¹ struggled adequately to cover, as the revolt ignited from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya and points further East. 'It's mainly a matter of funding' says Head of BBC Newsgathering Operations, Martin Turner.² ABC Middle East Bureau Chief Simon McGregor-Wood adds:

¹ 'In the 1980s, American TV networks each maintained about 15 foreign bureaux; today they have six or fewer. ABC has shut down its offices in Moscow, Paris and Tokyo; NBC closed bureaux in Beijing, Cairo and Johannesburg. Aside from a one-person ABC bureau in Nairobi, there are no network bureaux left at all in Africa, India or South America – regions that are home to more than 2 billion people.' Pamela Constable, 'Demise of the Foreign Correspondent', *Washington Post* 18 February 2007; (ii) 'BBC cuts: up to 650 jobs in journalism could go', *Press Gazette*, 7 October 2011; (iii) Josh Halliday, 'BBC foreign correspondents warn cuts compromise impartiality' *Guardian*, 21 October 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/oct/21/bbc-foreign-correspondents-cuts>

² Martin Turner, interviewed by author, 13 February 2012.

'Driven principally by budgetary constraint, as well as a desperate fear of challenging the viewer with material they may find dull, US news editors agonise over foreign news coverage'.³ But, as CNN's Cairo-based senior international correspondent Ben Wedeman said in October:

I think it's important that journalists who are serious about covering what is being called the Great Arab Revolt, the Arab Spring, they need to follow up, they can't just cover the big moments because this is a story of huge historical importance that will reverberate for years afterwards, a bit like World War I and its impact on the Middle East that we feel to this very day. It's important not to take a snapshot but to take a long video of what's going on. (Marshall 2011)

As McGregor-Wood observes, it is not in the nature of news – nor increasingly within its budget – to stay on a story beyond its audience's attention span. For television news in particular, the repetition of images has a fast-decaying impact, as Barbie Zelizer's work on news iconography and the 'moveable standard' governing pictures of violence has shown, with a growing distaste for the graphic (Zelizer 2010). Yet key stories can produce iconic images, which embody the significance of the moment and enable return in what Lisbeth Clausen calls a 'commemoration event' (Clausen 2003). Clausen's research was into coverage of the first anniversary of 9/11, but the same potential exists for memorialising other historic events, such

³ Simon McGregor-Wood, writing to author, 30 January 2012.

as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Has the news media the perspective and potential to pursue Wedeman's purpose, in keeping an open eye and mind on the Arab world, not least in reporting the anniversaries of these seismic events?

Clausen's significant conclusion is that globalisation has produced a countervailing 'domestication' of stories, where the international has to be filtered through domestic sensibilities and interests, similar, she acknowledges, to Gurevitch et al's research into European news a decade earlier, which also found conventions of 'a narrative framework that is already familiar to and recognisable by newsmen as well as by audiences' (Gurevitch, Levy and Roeh 1991: 207). To what extent was the Arab Spring refracted through a Western news reflexivity, and what does the continuing coverage tell us about the values of news organisations, when comparing the prominence and priority accorded by different Western news outlets? How different are the major players, and the propositions offered on the multiple platforms most now produce?

To address these questions, and extract some common themes from competing news media, this paper took a comparative sample of multimedia coverage across the UK and US of the anniversaries during three significant dates: from the initial self-immolation of the Tunisian stall-holder Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17th 2010, widely credited with kick-starting the revolution, and the resulting flight of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali on January 14th 2011, to the initial big Egyptian demonstration in Cairo's Tahrir Square, calling for President Hosni Mubarak to go, on

January 25th 2011. Several themes emerged from immersion in the news media over that period.

1. Retrospective recognition of a global movement for change

The first of these dates fell as the Western news machine was grinding down for the extended Christmas break, and anniversaries are a standard fallback of the news diary. With the 17th December also being a Saturday – the non-news day of the TV week – BBC2's *Newsnight* got in first, the night before, with Diplomatic Editor Mark Urban's upsum of the year:

Today there is violence in Syria, upheaval in Egypt, and a kind of armed truce in Libya. In Yemen, the President has stepped down, though his clan still runs the country, and in Bahrain the ruler has conceded that his riot police used excessive force against protestors.

Did we predict all this dizzying dysfunction last year? Well no, we didn't. And what is the bigger picture we can draw from it? That's still very hard to say, apart from the fact that Arab leaders who tried to do business as usual are facing an unprecedented challenge. But there are some clues emerging as to the trend of these events. (Urban 2011)

At the same time, the *Guardian* website was running a penetrating analysis of the 'Arab Spring anniversary: how a lost generation found its voice', finding a strand of common cause around the world, from Chile to Korea, Athens to New York, with a new generation of educated, unemployed young finding its

voice in revolt against the established order. '2011 was the year of a global youth revolt' (Malik et al 2011).

You would not have known it from the following day's print *Guardian*, which did not run the piece, nor from other UK newspapers, none of which marked the anniversary on any of their front page leads or subsidiary leads. Domestic TV News, BBC and ITN, did not feel the anniversary newsworthy, with the US withdrawal from Iraq and the Philippine floods taking precedence. Sky News did not consider the Arab Spring in any context worthy of inclusion in their 'Top 20 World News' stories. So, all of Britain's main traditional news sources tacitly agreed that the anniversary did not signify.

It is only when you turn to the BBC's international propositions that the issue finds favour. The World Service's *News* and *World Today* on 17th picked up the story, the latter with Lyse Doucet's emotional interview with Mohamed Bouazizi's mother, followed by a report and discussion on Libya (World Today 2011). And the BBC News Channel's *Dateline London* the same day discussed the Arab Spring within the wider context of the year's worldwide protest movements. *Time* magazine's London bureau chief Catherine Mayer was involved in both programmes, and in the choice of *Time's* Person of the Year as being 'The Protestor', which – similar to the *Guardian* online piece – yoked together the dissidents of the Arab Spring and the Western Occupy movements in a global narrative (Anderson 2011). In *Dateline London* Mayer pursued *Time's* idea of this being a watershed moment: 'The political

process isn't working and political leaders are like rabbits in car headlights ... but we don't know where it will all end up'. Syrian journalist Mustapha Karkouti added: 'The people are sick and tired of their leaders... They want change in their leaders. The leaders are not fit to lead anymore' (Dateline London 2011).

These more thoughtful pieces were beginning to establish a global context and comprehension for the movements sweeping the world, but news is ill configured to maintain that perspective. Academe appears to have seized the moment with more assurance. In a special 2011 edition of the *International Journal of Communication* dedicated to the Arab Spring, Harlow and Johnson undertook a content analysis of *New York Times* coverage of Egyptian protests, vis-à-vis one NYT correspondent's Twitter feeds, and the citizen journalist blogsite *Global Voices* (Harlow and Johnson 2011). They found that the new media were much more attuned to the character and complexity of the evolving protests, whereas the *New York Times*, representing old media, was reliant on a tired and inadequate 'protest paradigm' – essentially unchanged since the unsympathetic coverage of 1960s student sit-ins – which tended to privilege official sources and 'marginalize and undermine protestors ... and even justify the Mubarak government'.

The NYT employed a spectacle frame that hyped violence and drama far more than injustice, sympathy, or legitimizing frames, thus indicating that the excitement, fever, and even volatility of the protestors were more newsworthy,



and thus important, than the underlying causes of the protest or the plight of the protestors. (Harlow and Johnson 2011: 1367)

News organisations argue that it takes a huge investment of journalistic capital to make sense of covering such complexity, yet thought and discussion cost little, and an obsession with hardware can divert appropriate energies. ITN correspondent Bill Neely, writing in *Mirage In The Desert? Reporting The 'Arab Spring'* (Mair and Keeble 2011), comments on the raging technophilia and triumphalism surrounding news organisations' reflection on their actions: for instance how Sky News' Alex Crawford was the first reporter into a liberated Tripoli, 'whipping the BBC's ass'. He accuses many 'hackademics' of buying in to this 'boys' toys' narrative, and failing to realize that Egypt is much more important than Libya: 'Libya is not significant in the way Egypt is. Egypt's revolution is crucial. It's still not clear whether the revolution there will stick. What is clear is that it's not over' (Mair and Keeble 2011).

2. Declension from headlines to sidelines

One notable outcome of the rundown of foreign bureaux mentioned earlier is that there cannot be constancy of coverage, and features are largely reliant on big name correspondents being jetted in to give both star quality and weight to the piece. That is an unsustainable modus operandi. In fairness, some of the year-end upsums did appreciate the ongoing nature of the revolution. The BBC's Gaza correspondent Jon Donnison charted the

Tunisian anniversary and the ongoing fatal street clashes in Egypt, Syria and Yemen, with the proviso that: 'Throughout the region a process of momentous change is far from over.... One young Tunisian was the trigger for the Arab Spring; a year on, for millions of people across the Middle East, it is not over' (Donnison 2011). Similarly, Mark Austin's *That Was 2011: News Review of the Year* recalled his own reports of 'the chaos and revolution up close' in Egypt and the 'amazing' downfall of Mubarak, but he concluded: 'the struggle for power in Egypt went on through 2011 and the revolutions in the Arab world were only just beginning' (Austin 2012). But, tellingly, this programme was aired on ITV in the first hour of New Year's Day, when few would be watching.

At BBC News, says Head of Newsgathering Operations Martin Turner, 'there is a resistance to anniversaries', both because they don't see them as news, and because they have substantial current affairs and documentary departments to cover this angle.⁴ The BBC's Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen, ended the year with three radio documentaries, broadcast on successive nights on both Radio 4 and the World Service. *Tales from the Arab Spring* committed thirty minutes each to Egypt, Libya and Syria, bringing the human insights this reporter is renowned for, if not the overarching commentary its history requires (*Tales from the Arab Spring* 2012). BBC TV waited until February 3rd to broadcast *Egypt: Children*

⁴ Conversation with Martin Turner, Head of Newsgathering operations, London, 30 January 2012.

of the Revolution, a one-hour *This World* documentary on three young Egyptian activists on BBC2 (*Egypt: Children of the Revolution, This World* 2012), which continued the narrative of this as a youth revolution. Interesting though such features are, in this way the BBC – also through having its separate *World News Today* bulletin open BBC4 each weekday evening at 7 pm – tends to park much foreign news in such minority ‘zones of special interest’.

3. Re-appraisal of news priorities

Since 9/11 popular American media had mostly followed the Bush agenda of characterising the Middle East as the crucible of terror, with only Israel as a symbol of democratic values. The Arab Spring forced a re-think, though the popular media could not easily embrace the philosophical recant that came more easily in Britain. On 13th January, Robin Lustig presented Radio 4’s *The World Tonight* from Cairo, also marking the completion of the third and final round of the Egyptian elections. A round-table discussion of the achievements of the Arab Spring concluded that the elections were an accurate reflection of a pan-Arab desire for freedom and democracy, which was felt even in countries still suppressing dissent, and where change would come eventually. Equally importantly, both Western and Eastern commentators agreed that the over seventy per cent vote for Islamist groups accurately reflected popular feeling, but did not preclude a workable accommodation with secularist groups and women’s aspirations. This sanguine BBC appraisal was not quite the way that

some commentators were responding in the USA, whose influence in the region has sharply fallen due to these events. One American concern would be exacerbated by the *World Tonight* interview with the Vice-President of the Egyptian election winners, the Muslim Brotherhood, when asked about Israel:

I hope that Jewish people descry that there is now a new era of democracy. They were describing themselves all the time as the only home of democracy in a desert of dictatorships. The opposite is [true] now. The state of Israel now is the only apartheid state in a democratic field. (*The World Tonight*, BBC Radio 4, 13 January 2012)

Rhetorical hyperbole though this is, it is the voice of the majority party in the democratic government in Egypt, presaging major change in the geopolitics in the region. It is one reason that Western statesmen, like Tony Blair, supported Mubarak, encouraging him to hang on long past his point of no return. As Chomsky reflects (Chomsky 2011), Western diplomacy supports democracy only so far as it serves its ends, witness the outlawing of the democratically elected Hamas in Gaza. One notable effect observed was that the coverage of the Arab Spring displaced Israel from its usual role as a key foreign affairs story, though its centrality to the American polity undoubtedly underpinned extraordinary interest in the Arab story. US diplomat Anne Patterson, interviewed in Cairo by Canada’s *Global News*, cautiously commented: ‘Democracy is a process. It’s not just one election. It’s election after election and the parties that are elected will have to deliver

assurances to the people' (Anne Patterson on Global News TV, Canada, 20 December 2011).

American audiences are traditionally uninterested in and poorly informed on foreign affairs (Curran et al 2009: 25-7), unless they involve US troops; and with the closure of so many foreign bureaux, it might have been assumed that the television coverage of the Arab Spring would be modest at best. In fact, the three main US TV network weekday news programmes increased their coverage of foreign affairs in 2011 by over 10 per cent, with Libya the top story of the year and taking 5 per cent of all coverage – some 685 minutes across the 3 networks. Egypt attracted 489 minutes, more than the lead domestic story, issues around the federal budget (477 mins.). These figures have been collected for the last 24 years by Andrew Tyndall, whose *Tyndall Report: Year in Review 2011* collates and compares them all, and shows NBC and CBS broke 20-year records in the amount of foreign coverage, although ABC fell behind (Tyndall Report 2011), having invested excessive resources chasing a last interview with Gaddafi.⁵ Much less time was devoted to the uprisings in Syria (143 minutes), Bahrain (34 minutes), and Yemen (29 minutes), as well as to consideration of the broader discourse that some experts have called the 'Arab Awakening' (42 minutes). The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism also recorded 'a jump of more than a third in coverage of international news', with 'Middle East unrest' filling 12 per cent of what they

⁵ Source: Simon McGregor-Wood, *qv*.

term 'the newshole' (Journalism.org 2011).

The hole was demarcated by the spectacle frame, the protest paradigm that made Tahrir Square as well known as Tian'anmen Square in 1989. Apart from the chants of the protestors, the voices heard remained primarily those of American reporters braving the streets for their daily bulletins. Tunis had been difficult; Cairo was coverable. But it was Libya that provided the action footage and engaging narrative of war with a US involvement, albeit that America only (officially) provided air support. People taking to the streets – and mobile phone footage from within crowds facing live ammunition – made exciting news a year ago, but the unseen machinations of diplomats and the long tail of political negotiation make poor television. Street demonstrations after a while all look the same, and the US networks do not engage in the deeper analysis provided by British current affairs programmes. So, despite the 2011 coverage, the anniversaries did not make the primetime cut. Tyndall told the radical news website *Nation of Change*.

Simply put, the type of foreign policy that attracts the most attention is war – the use of military force. Diplomacy is much less newsworthy and leaves room for more of the international angle in covering global hotspots. [The networks showed] less and less resistance to using cheap, mobile, non-professional news-gathering tactics and sources, such as cell phones, Twitter, and Skype, over the years. This means that one of the major past obstacles to global stories appearing on the news agenda – the

relatively high logistical cost – is being removed. (Nation of Change 2011)

4. The over-hyped impact of new media

This phenomenon was first noted in the coverage of the protests that followed the Iranian presidential elections in 2009, where mobile phone pictures filled the hole left by absent news crews. Certainly news managers everywhere are now very aware of the benefit of public sourced footage, using phones and social networks. BBC News has a dedicated UGC (User-Generated Content) hub to process such source material, which enriches coverage, but has yet notably to alter editorial values. News organisations fetishised the use of new media in liberating voices across the Arab Spring, but largely failed to analyse the true extent and effectiveness of these tools. For instance, nowhere was it noted that mobile phones had achieved 95% penetration in Tunisia by the time of the uprising, and internet access was enjoyed by at least 34%. However, Tunisia had some of the most draconian internet censorship outside China. This was abolished by President Ben-Ali in his resignation speech on 13th January 2011, in what Wagner recognises as a belated ‘understanding’ of his people’s needs:

In regards to the political demands, I have told you that yes, I have understood you [ana fahimtkum] and I have decided: full and complete freedom of information in all its media [wasa'il al i'lan], no more blocking of the Internet websites and the rejection of all

forms of censorship and surveillance [raqaba] (Ben Ali 2011. Translation from Arabic by Heinrich Köllisch, University of Tübingen, Tunis, Tunisia – quoted in Wagner 2011: 1297).

Yet much commentary has continued to confuse the medium with the message; new technology was undoubtedly an enabling feature, but not the prime cause, of the Arab Spring. As Anne Alexander says, due to the prevailing story which ascribes to technology unrealistic powers, the pre-existing voice of dissent – which had led to hundreds of strikes across Egypt since 2006 – has been ‘eradicated from the narrative’ (Alexander 2012). Al-Jazeera’s chief political analyst Marwan Bishara comments, in *The Invisible Arab: The promise and peril of the Arab revolutions*, that the West has tended to take undue credit for gifting the Arab world the tools of its salvation. ‘Tools have always been important’, he says. ‘The Arab awakening a century ago was helped thanks to the printing press’ (Bishara 2012a). Speaking to journalists in London, he explained:

Shortly after the beginning of the Arab revolution, the media began to fixate on the role of social media, ignoring other social and political factors. While important, there is no need to sensationalise the role social media played, treating it as if it were a silver bullet... Facebook doesn’t organise, people do. Twitter won’t govern, people will. (Bishara 2012a)

Harlow and Johnson (2011) did not define a ‘new media’ frame, but that would undoubtedly have been more common to all three of their studied

media. It would have been one frame that appealed to all American audiences. But there were obviously deeper-seated reasons for the American interest in the Arab Spring. In part, it may be that this was – in contrast to the generally dire news from Iraq in recent years – a geyser of good news and hope in the public mind, that ‘American values’ of freedom and democracy were penetrating that part of the world, albeit (pace Libya) without American ordinance. Notably, Fox News continued to run stories about the region which other networks ignored, clearly reflecting their partial, pro-Israeli stance, as did Al-Jazeera from the Arab perspective. Indeed, there was widespread US paranoia about the unleashing of fundamentalist Islam, which is how much of public discourse characterises ‘the enemy’ in the ‘War on Terror’.

5. Re-configuring the politics of fear

John M. Owen, a professor of politics at the University of Virginia, wrote about the Egyptian elections in the *New York Times*, in terms that spectacularly confirm Harlow and Johnson’s ‘protest paradigm:

Political Islam, especially the strict version practiced by Salafists in Egypt, is thriving largely because it is tapping into ideological roots that were laid down long before the revolts began. Invented in the 1920s by the Muslim Brotherhood, kept alive by their many affiliates and offshoots, boosted by the failures of Nasserism and Baathism, allegedly bankrolled by Saudi and Qatari money, and inspired by the defiant

example of revolutionary Iran, Islamism has for years provided a coherent narrative about what ails Muslim societies and where the cure lies. Far from rendering Islamism unnecessary, as some experts forecast, the Arab Spring has increased its credibility; Islamists, after all, have long condemned these corrupt regimes as destined to fail. (Owen IV 2012)

Commentary from the serious European press can be more nuanced, recognising that Islam is a cloth of many colours, no more homogenous than ‘Christianity’ or ‘Western thought’. But it took a political journal to explore those deeper textures. The *New Statesman* on 19th January led with ‘Has the Arab Spring been hijacked?’, an incisive piece by Olivier Roy, professor of social and political theory at the European University Institute in Florence. He argues that the West needs to ‘set aside a number of deep-seated prejudices’, including ‘the assumption that democracy presupposes secularisation’ and that ‘a democrat is, by definition, also a liberal’.

The major conflict that is taking shape is not a clash between the Muslim world and the west. Rather, it is the one that pits the conservative Sunni Arab world against the ‘Shia crescent’ around Iran, with Saudi Arabia’s ‘unholy alliance’ with Israel in the background. The [Muslim] Brotherhood will struggle to carve out a distinct role for itself in this context, and it knows it. In the final analysis, the victory of the Islamists is part of the normalisation of the Arab world, as much in internal affairs as on a geostrategic level. (Roy 2011)

Normalisation presupposes people acting with individual autonomy, rather than merely as expressions of a particular mass belief. Whilst accepting Islam's centrality to Arab culture, Marwan Bishara quotes a recent poll of 16,371 Arabs across 12 countries, which found that nonetheless a majority felt religion should not interfere in politics, and a majority in favouring acceptance of government by any party achieving a democratic mandate, even if they did not agree with their policies. 'People have lost their fear, broken with the past', he says (Bishara 2012a). The Indian American academic, and self-proclaimed Marxist, Vijay Prasad sees the Arab Spring as not least the casting off of the chains of American client status, with the \$1.5 billion annual security subvention the US paid Mubarak the link that was throttling them. It is, he commented to the *Radical Notes* website, 'a revolt against the market', in marked contrast to the East European 'revolt for the market' twenty years before.⁶ But, as Prasad's new book *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter* (Prasad 2012) argues, it was not in the neoliberal interest for media organs to promote this narrative, concerned as the West is to retain its economic and security interests in the region: 'For the Arab lands, these events of 2011 are not the inauguration of a new history, but the continuation of an unfinished struggle that is a hundred years old' (Counterpunch 2011).

⁶ 'If power is not seized, counter-revolution will rise' (Prashad 2011).

6. Fracturing fault-lines prove too difficult for news

As the 25th January anniversary of the Egyptian uprising approached, the situations in both Syria and Yemen continued to deteriorate. Radio 4's *Today*, with 17 hours to fill each week, has room to report such events. The BBC's Middle East Editor Jeremy Bowen was in Homs, and spoke with angry supporters of President Assad, members of his Alawite sect, who form some ten per cent of the population. They blamed continuing civil disturbance on a Western conspiracy orchestrated through the media, notably blaming both the BBC and Al-Jazeera. For much of the Arab Spring, Syria was underreported on both sides of the Atlantic, due to competing stories and difficulties of access. Having eventually let journalists in, the Syrians were furious that the Alawite narrative was not getting sympathetic coverage. Even Arab League observers were forced to pull out because of mounting government interference, to which the Assad government responded by accusing the Arab League of 'plotting to internationalise the crisis' and rejecting any further 'Arab solutions' (Agence France Press 2012). Bowen concluded by identifying how significant this propaganda war was in the defining the politics of the moment:

This crisis is defeating diplomacy, because Syria sits on some of the Middle East's most important political, religious and ethnic faultlines, from Turkey and Iran to beyond.... Weakening Assad might undercut the Iranians. The crisis over President Assad's future is much more than who rules Syria. It

is a big part of who matters in the Middle East. (Today 2012)

Noam Chomsky continued to antagonise conservative America with his observation that 'across the region, the overwhelming majority of the population regards the United States as the main threat to their interests', asserting that 80% Egyptians would prefer Iran to have nuclear weapons, but noting that 'coverage of these polls is precisely zero in the United States' (Chomsky 2011a). Whether or not we accept his charge that news priority is determined by ideological interests, the geopolitical complexity of the region and its faultlines prove too complex for conventional news bulletins to convey to a lay audience in any meaningful sense. Longer-form programmes, whether on radio, like the *Today* programme, or on television, such as Al-Jazeera English's *Witness* or Channel 4's *Dispatches*, have the chance to dedicate time to specific subjects but - as serious current affairs fights for its survival against more popular forms - are decreasingly likely to take on dense analytical overseas subjects. As Martin Turner, Head of Newsgathering Operations, admits:

It's telling that al-Jazeera provides the space to cover stories in a way that the BBC used to do. This is partly - perhaps mainly - a question of having the funding to support a regular stream of 30 minutes or longer programmes.⁷

ABC's Simon McGregor-Wood agrees, saying: 'I believe it's difficult to find this level of regular in-depth analysis on

⁷ Martin Turner, interviewed by author, 13 February 2012.

other networks including the BBC and its multitudinous outlets'.⁸ That said, BBC News Channel's *Hardtalk* lives up to its name by addressing tough subjects, mainly through the old-fashioned medium of lengthy interviews. Presenter Stephen Sackur went to Yemen for the 25th January edition, another Middle East hotspot that has arguably had less cover than the situation warrants over the last year. In that time, civil war has driven tens of thousands of refugees south to the port of Aden, with the town of Zinjibar and large parts of the country in the hands of Ansar al-Sharia, the local Al-Qaeda front.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula has become the most potent offshoot of the global jihadi network... The authority of the Yemeni state has crumbled in the face of a people power uprising inspired by the Arab Spring. (*HARDtalk* 2012)

Sackur's report clearly indicates that Yemen is a serious news story, but one most news media continue to ignore. The UN Refugee Agency's Navid Hussein observed that the media had concentrated on the politics of the region, without recognising the growing human costs.

Yemen is going through a serious humanitarian crisis. This crisis is being overlooked and ignored. And we are very convinced that if the situation is not addressed, we might see a new Somalia in the making ... in humanitarian terms. (*HARDtalk* 2012)

⁸ Simon McGregor-Wood, writing to author, 30 January 2012.

7. The tendency to homogeneity

Prasad sees ignoring the Yemen story as part of the West's self-serving myopia in relegating stories that do not accord with national or NATO interests, noting how slight the cover of troubles in the Gulf Cooperation Council⁹ states has been (Prasad 2012). As news editors have struggled to adapt to the 24-hour news cycle that their websites have thrust upon them, an inevitable homogeneity has emerged, not least due to a growing reliance on agency sources and pooled footage (Lee-Wright et al, 2011:30). This can also lead to a disconnect between web and print or web and broadcast, as stories run during the day do not necessarily make the cut of the final edition or bulletin. Thus, on 25 January, BBC News did not mention the Arab Spring on either radio or terrestrial television bulletins, despite the News Channel having a nicely nuanced report from Jon Leyne in Cairo – 'It's part demonstration, part celebration. Tahrir Square today is a bit of a noisy street party, but there are plenty here pressing hard for a quicker move to democracy' (John Meyne, BBC News Channel, 25 January 2012) – and the BBC News website being updated halfway through the 10 O'Clock News on BBC1 (BBC News Website 2012). ITV News also ignored the Egyptian anniversary throughout the day, and on the longer Channel 4 News it only merited a passing mention. The 24-hour rolling news channels had more room to mark

⁹ GCC: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates.

the occasion. Sky News' Emma Hurd filed from Cairo about frustration with the rate of change, but included a rather more upbeat interview with the lead candidate for the Egyptian presidency, Abr Moussa:

It is a matter of time that change will take place in several societies, ... peoples, states. Because change is the hope of all citizens. We cannot continue to live under dictatorial regimes or with the rule of oppression, telling people what to do and how to feel. (Abr Moussa, Sky News, 25 January 2012)

This is an archetypal example of the Harlow and Johnson (2011) 'protest paradigm' privileging the official voice over those of the oppressed themselves. For Al-Jazeera English, Sherine Tadros reported that 'Tahrir Square has for some become a symbol of people power, to others a sign of the country's inability and turmoil'. She alone went to the shanty-towns to give voice to the poorer half of the population, who live on less than two dollars a day and have found life harder since the revolution. One housewife says: 'The revolution has done nothing for us. It has stopped our work. There is no buying or selling; and everything is more expensive' (Al-Jazeera 2012). As Tadros concludes, 'After one year, there is as much fear as there is hope for the future of the country'. Bishara also echoes Alexander's reminder of the unreported worker protests in identifying the untold story: 'Those who struggled from within these societies were made invisible by those in power.... The reason for the Arab revolutions were the young people of the Arab world' (Al-Jazeera 2012).

Bishara talks about the Egyptian revolution as ‘a lot of old people killing a lot of young people’ and the need to move on from that shattered hierarchy. Annabelle Sreberny argues that we need a new ‘sense of historicity and specificity’, defeating the simplistic dualisms (online/offline; optimism/pessimism) which characterise discourse about digital technology’s role in political change (Sreberny 2012). New media help the emerging democracy articulate its hopes and needs, but have yet to establish a creative coupling with conventional media in Egypt, still largely in the same hands as before the revolution. When the Mubarak government attempted to stem revolt by closing the phone networks and ISPs, Al-Jazeera stepped into the breach and broadcast the time and place of planned action. It is hard to underestimate the importance of this ‘legitimizing frame’ from an international broadcaster that had already won Egyptians’ respect and trust.

8. In every sense, the Arab Spring is unfinished business

Al-Jazeera’s reputation in the region was won through its apparent freedom from proprietorial bias, and its willingness to engage in dialogue with its audience. In a survey of news trustworthiness in the journal *Journalism Practice*, figures for Egypt in 2006 note that 59% trusted Al-Jazeera as a news source, compared to 12% for Channel 1 Egypt TV and 4% for Nile News (Cushion 2009: 479). By comparison, a 2009 Pew study of news believability among US audiences rate their own networks (including Fox) in the

mid-20 per cents, with only CNN making 30% and 42% trusting PBS ‘a great deal’ (Cushion 2009: 477). Egyptian state media remain essentially in the same hands that ran it under Mubarak, giving weight to widely blogged concerns that this was a soft coup d’état more than a revolution,¹⁰ and leaving issues of trust unresolved.

In Britain, trust in journalism has plummeted not just through the phone hacking scandal. A YouGov poll for *Prospect* magazine in 2010 found that public trust in broadsheets had fallen from 64% to 40% since 2003, in the BBC from 81% to 60%, and in ITN from 80% to 47% (Kellner 2010). The market response appears to have been a move towards ‘giving people what they want’ – more domestic news, more self-interest angles and less foreign news. And yet, a 2007 Ofcom report found that ‘the main reasons given for following news were to keep abreast of what is happening in the world (70 per cent)’, 5% more than the priority accorded UK News (Ofcom 2007: Annexes: 4). In his 2009 review of international coverage in UK television, former BBC executive Phil Harding reviewed the explicit licence commitment of all UK public service (i.e. terrestrial) broadcasters to international programming, but found no strategic commitment, a sharp decline in ITV and Channel 5 foreign coverage, and a widespread cost-conscious, risk-averse commissioner culture that produced ‘a distorted view of the world’, heading

¹⁰ For example: ‘Egypt: a revolution or a soft coup d’etat’ <http://www.politicsforum.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=32andt=130410>

down the path of US-style introversion (Harding 2009: 10).

Yet the Al-Jazeera effect has not only produced a plethora of Arab channels around the Middle East, but also stimulated new and competitive investment in this fast-evolving media market by the West. The BBC launched its Arabic TV channel in 2008, and saw its audiences nearly double during the Arab Spring, from 13.5 million to 24.4 million (BBC Media Service 2011), evidence of the continuing soft power of the World Service. Other developments are more nakedly commercial. In April, Sky News announced the launch of its own 24-hour Arab language channel, Sky News Arabia on 6 May 2012, broadcasting from Abu Dhabi (Sky 2012). Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation has also acquired 14.53 per cent of the Saudi Prince Al Waleed bin Talal's Rotana Media Group, which has moved its operation and its new 24-hour Alarab TV station to Bahrain (The National 2011).

With so many million newly free hearts and minds to attract, there is everything to play for, while Arab journalists are warning that government media owners in the Middle East have begun to exercise increasingly invasive control. In September 2011, the Palestinian journalist Wadah Khanfar was replaced as Head of Al-Jazeera by a member of the Qatari royal family who owns it. More recently, a former Al-Jazeera reporter, Ali Hashem alleged that the owners had previously interfered with the coverage of Bahrain and Syria. 'Governments who own media organisations in the Middle East, and impose their agendas, are pushing them towards journalistic

suicide', he wrote on the *Guardian Comment is free* site (Hashem 2012).

The critical relationship between a free media and democratic freedom is being played out throughout the Middle East, just as it is in the High Court with the Leveson inquiry. But the news circus has moved on, leaving the story unfinished. On 25th January the US cable HBO2 channel ran a documentary featuring the reporting of American-Egyptian Sharif Abdel Kouddous for the daily online broadcast *Democracy Now* with Amy Goodwin. *In Tahrir Square: 18 Days of Egypt's Unfinished Revolution* (HBO2 2012), Emmy-winning film-makers Jon Alpert and Matt O'Neill capture the guerrilla reporting of this charismatic young journalist, as the rapidly evolving events lead to the emotional result of Mubarak's resignation. Appearing from Cairo on *Democracy Now* that same day, Kouddous explained that he had felt obliged to stay there as the situation had deteriorated since the world's media had moved on, reporting the 'deeper struggle targeting the real backbone of autocracy in Egypt, that is the military' (*DemocracyNow* 2012). 12,000 people had been tried in military courts since Mubarak went, more than in the 30 years of Mubarak's regime, and over a hundred had been shot dead by troops in the last three months. This story has not remained prominent in either UK or US news. Former ABC Middle East Bureau chief Simon McGregor-Wood sees this as inevitable.

The bottom line realities of US network foreign news coverage are undeniable. There is less money to spend and it is increasingly hard to maintain frontline presence on a

story once the white heat of the breaking news stage has cooled. US news managers will argue that when it matters the US networks will still be there in force. But the big sustained deployments of yesteryear are a thing of the past. The US network viewer may still get the key headlines, but they no longer get the perspective. Stories that don't have direct impact on American interests may struggle for coverage.

Conclusion

New media specialists and executives of all stripes scoff at the wolf cries of old media hands regretting the cuts that US and UK newsrooms have suffered. Even the BBC's former Director of Nations and Regions, Pat Loughrey says, of BBC newsroom complaints, that it is still comparatively well-staffed: 'It's like Kolkata... I have never seen so many people in a newsroom'.¹¹ Priority is still determined by pre-existing news agenda and modes of operation. The Arab Spring anniversaries were no more than a diary item filler for the main news operations and platforms, many of them content to rely on AP and Reuters feeds to service them, often leaving them to the website rather than the main bulletins or print runs. Specialist journals and programmes did make use of the opportunity for mature reflection, though not all succeeded in finding new, deeper perspectives. The increasing homogeneity of news as it becomes more competitive was noted by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1998) and has become an

¹¹ Pat Loughrey, in interview with the author, 25 April 2012.

academic cliché, confirmed by much content analysis (see Redden and Witschge in Fenton 2009).

Despite social media's generative centrality to the Arab Spring, its use by the media has not significantly changed editorial perspective, although the material emanating from Syria has knowingly influenced Western coverage, causing the BBC to consider whether they should introduce a separate category to distinguish it from conventional UGC. Egyptian-Americans like Sharif Abdel Kouddous combine sympathetic understanding with the objectivity of the reporter, but such work requires a bigger canvas than a short report. Feature-length journalism or a regular outlet on 24-hour or online news affords them the space necessary.

News bulletins are incapable of encapsulating complex truths. For that very reason, the historian-journalist Mischa Glenny resigned as the BBC's East European correspondent during the Bosnian war, rather than have brevity travesty his knowledge (Lee-Wright 2010: 27). This level of reduction does not merely distil material, but tends to distort it by forcing concentration on one aspect rather than all the others. News becomes an uneasy balance between what the network can afford and what the audience will wear. This is easier to accept where the mutual bias is understood, even if it is the unashamedly American-Israeli political axis ground out on Fox News.

The dissatisfaction and disillusion of Tunisians and Egyptians a year on did not make good copy, but few reports went the extra mile beyond Tahrir

Square that Al-Jazeera English did, to talk to the poor whom the changes have hurt rather than helped. And in those exchanges the viewer sees played out the human transformation that has at least freed these people to talk. For decades state-run media had denied them a voice; tyrants everywhere forbid free speech. As Barnett recounts, since 1996 al-Jazeera had introduced to the Arab world the notions of democratic debate and the realisation that alternative futures were possible (Barnett 2011: 219-224). These superseded the propagandistic binary so beloved of the despots and George Bush – ‘if you are not with us, you’re against us’ – and freed minds to imagine the wider vistas of what became the Arab Spring. Barnett quotes the former BBC journalist Rageh Omar’s justification for defecting to al-Jazeera English:

I will never forget seeing Israeli politicians and spokesman being interviewed, arguing Israel’s case, some of them speaking Arabic as they did so. It was a shocking and breathtaking sight. The truth is that al-Jazeera has completely transformed the Arab world, which was accustomed to muzzled state broadcasters. (Omaar 2011)

Yet the warnings are clear that no organisation is entirely free of its paymasters’ interests, and the main Arab TV channels are all based in and dependent upon the funding of states that have yet to enjoy the liberation of the Arab Spring.

For mainstream Western media, the Arab Spring seems to have been more of a blip than a rebirth of internationalism, too amorphous an umbrella to sustain

interest a year on. Individual journalists, like BBC Newsnight’s Paul Mason, and academics, like Vijay Prasad writing for the online political magazine *Counterpunch*, have seized the opportunity to evolve a new reading of the Arab Spring. Mason’s book, *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere*, extends the *Guardian* vision of a global youth rebellion, distinguished and connected by ‘a surplus of the most valuable properties on earth: skill, ingenuity and intelligence’ (Mason 2012: 211). Both see this as a seismic shift in history, which may not fit any neatly dated timeline, but which will determine political futures.

Just as the Iron Curtain crumbled without a defining invasive ideology, so it may well be years before new alignments clearly emerge. The late historian Tony Judt did not live to see the Arab Spring, but his last, posthumously published book, *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, charts the West’s ‘discursive shift, since the late 1970s, towards economics’ (Judt 2012). He noted the disjunct between a liberal obsession with promoting an idealised redistributive democracy abroad, while fetishising an individualistic aspiration to wealth at home, a confused message not aided by the near collapse of the finance sector. Prasad’s view that this was principally an Islamist revolt against Western values may yet be the defining vision.

News organisations fighting over diminished resources, audiences and public trust still need to question their values to justify their existence. Just as the Arab uprisings communicated through social networks, people are migrating to twitter feeds and other news aggregators that supply the news they

want. Centralised broadcasters and press cannot easily serve this fluidity of consumer choice; but they still can produce the unique content and insight it demands. Meanwhile, *Open Democracy*

reports that January 2012 in Algeria was characterised by 'a wave of protest and contestation', not that we heard that anywhere on our regular news channels (Rahmouni 2012).

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