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THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES ON NEWS. A CASE STUDY OF ALGERIA'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The dramatic political events of 2011 that swept many Arab countries and largely fostered the advent of new technologies of information and communication have led to news changes of media structures, policies and practices in other parts of Africa. Algeria, as a reference in this paper, which kept their citizens waiting for 50 years under state monopoly, has been affected by these changes. As a result, it has been compelled in the end to authorize private television channels operating in the new audiovisual media landscape. In January 2014, the national assembly adopted a new audiovisual bill that ended up a long-term public audiovisual media ownership. Since then, the local audiovisual landscape has been flourishing but without having an impact on the way news are conceived, gathered, dispatched and perceived by the public in relation to the new editorial policies and ethical norms. Media professionals are adopting new rules, new regulations and new practices in producing news and securing their impartiality. The impact of the new news approach on the public's expectations and needs is perceived from the way the audience perceives, reacts and interacts. The new approach goals set goals to bridge news credibility gaps with the audience tired of lies and rumours, and also to maintain the news development and sustainability in Algeria.

Keywords: *pluralism, diversity, impact of technologies, conceptions, practices, public perception.*

Introduction

In this paper, the aim is to present a critical review on the way news media were and are produced before and after the introduction of information and communication and social media and on how new news editorial policies and ethicals norms have emerged to meet the public's expectation and attractivity. This work is based on series of observations and remarks carried out through different informal contacts with some editors and managers in the absence of a particular methodological approach, because of lack of time and resources. But fairly this essay can reflect the

reality (from my own experience as a media professional rather than a scholar) of news media conception and perception in the Algerian case which shifted from a unique party system to media pluralism in the 1990s.

Far form being too analytical, the work tends to offer a descriptive approach on how news media content has evolved and developed in relation to political system changes and new technologies and social media pressures. So, this essay is an attempt to present the Algerian media landscape in the wake of technological changes, how these changes will bring about new news editorial policies based on fairness, credibility and independence. The impact of ICT in everyday life is perceptible and palpable everywhere, Algeria cannot be an exception. So, how are technologies of information and communication and social media introduced in the sphere of media and communication and particularily in the news collection, production, delivery and reception by the public? More importantly, how will the new changes affect news content and quality in terms of impartiality and independence? Also, how are social media putting another set of pressures on media managers and editors to take into account their weight in adopting and advocating new news editorial and ethical policies? Will the impact of social media content on the news production be considered by news managers? These are the questions that this essay will answer.

The Rise of Social Media and Social Networks

The quick rise of social networks and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn and others has been affecting the communication ecosystem, the private, public and corporate space [1]. These networks enable a mass participation, provide to users new means of expressions and connection. Further, social media have widely contributed to public life democratisation by offering new tools of political and social protests. Also, they suggest more interactive types of journalism and allow direct contacts between public, politics and culture elites [2].

Through their technological architectures, social media facilitate users' interaction with each other, reshape citizens' personal interactions and affect institutional structures and professional entities. In Algeria, the introduction of information and communication technologies has an impact on the multiplication of platforms, websites and blogs, television and radio channels; also the rate of internet penetration has increased and with it the number of users.

Since 2014, viewers have been formally enjoying a multiple news choice and current affairs programs that were previously under the government's strict control. This new opportunity is the result of the parliament's adoption of new media pluralism policies. On the other hand, technologies paved the way to more news diversity and media pluralism. In fact, the technological impact on media policies and ethics can be observed in the way news is conceived, gathered, produced, delivered and broadcast to the public by different supports.

Undeniably, internet facilities and services, social media and social networks have brought about new media policies, conceptions, practices and news perceptions. The audience is no more passive; citizens are interacting, they report and speak out their minds and opinions on different matters. News consumption is changing; online communication is growing through different social networks. This innovative approach of news has yielded more credibility and trust between the media and the public. Further, even traditional media have integrated the internet, social media and social networks as parts of their new strategy package to regain the audience and re-appropriate their natural audiovisual space. The trends show that technologies are gradually affecting the political arena and the way activists, militants and political parties' leaders implement information communication tools, how they communicate and interact with citizens. Also, the emergence of new communication practices such as online communication has become part of the present political and communication system.

Algeria's Media Landscape

Algerian media underwent historical changes in news development policies and precisely for news gathering, editing and delivering with the use of new technologies facilities and services. This approach is in fact imposed by information and communication technologies and social media pressures. Also, public needs and expectations are growing and becoming more demanding, interactive, they ask for more news quality and credibility [3]. These facts are explained by a tendency that a large public is using social media tools and social networks.

Thus, Algerian press has flourished after the adoption by the parliament of the 1990 bill of information that authorizes individuals and private companies to create their own newspaper [4]. At present, there are 200 titles

and most of them belong to the private sector and only six are in public hands. Electronic papers flourish on the internet with 20 daily titles. Also, most daily newspapers have electronic editions but few have online versions. The Algerian broadcasting arena, however, has been the exclusive domain of the government for most of the country's history; it is since 2014 that the country has allowed new privately owned broadcasters to operate in the Algerian audiovisual landscape.

So, it took almost 50 years of strictly state broadcasting before Algerians finally saw the first private national TV channels. Moreover, it was only in 2014 that the national assembly adopted a law that legally ended the public media monopoly. Thus, at present, the local audiovisual landscape includes 43 private channels, but only five of them are formally accredited. The rest, though still in operation, are awaiting a formal authorization by the new regulatory authority of audiovisual communication.

Although it is too early to make any assessment of private TV channels' performance and popularity, the Algerians hope these channels will deliver on the promise of providing a variety of news and current affairs programs, debate, diversity and objectivity [5]. For the radio sector, for instance, nothing has changed yet, the present national and local radio stations network is still in a public ownership and private radio projects do not operate because of lack of frequencies spectrum (FM). Nevertheless, several radio stations 'broadcast' on the internet and other social media and networks supports.

In parallel, foreign channels have become routinely intrinsic parts of Algeria's media consumption habits. Over 16 millions parabolic dishes mushroom on roofs of buildings and houses and enable viewers to receive hundreds of satellite television channels. Moreover, the advent of new information technologies, internet services and social media also has generated a new alternative public media sphere.

Political and Media System

Since its independence in 1962, the country advocated socialism and a single party system. As consequences, the information field was strictly monitored and controlled by the party ideology and policy [6]. The Algerian radio, television and printed press alike were under a scrupulous scrutiny from both the National Liberation Front as the only political party and the state. The country was in fact under the status of a 'party state', in which the ruling party – National Liberation Front – was the sole unchal-

lenged authority, it had a total and strict control of everything. However, in 1989 and following national and international pressures, Algerian authorities shifted to pluralism and democracy by adopting a constitution that paved the way to political pluralism, the freedom and diversity of the press.

The first fruits of this move were the admittance of political opposition and approval of dozens of other political parties and associations. On the media grounds, the bill of information adopted in April 1990 authorized in the first instance only the written press to exist after years of public monopoly. Equally, the creation of the high council of information body strengthened public media pluralism and freedom of the press.

Although Algerian television and radio were under public ownership, the wave of reforms that took place in the eastern European countries in November 1989 impacted the political and media system in Algeria which had close relations with them. As such, radio and television adopted a new news editorial approach, changed the nature of tone and advocated a great margin of freedom. Consequently, the news and current affairs programs attracted huge numbers of viewers. In fact, the success was also linked to the respect of public services values which were largely observed by different parties; government, opposition and ordinary citizens. The audio visual sector was under an independent high council of information supervision; seen as a watchdog to monitor any breach of ethics and deontology rules [7]. In the written press, journalists elected freely their representatives in the new independent council of ethics and deontology, a professional body to oversee independence, pluralism and diversity of the press.

Technology and Convergence

Nowadays broadcasting, telecommunications and computing facilities and services are converged to provide to the world common solutions at a reasonable price and meet various public needs regardless of their political, cultural and geographical attribution [8]. The country is committed to proceeding to a complete review of broadcasting, frequencies and space policies in order to reach rational, efficient and coherent results. Thus, television channels face many challenges: access to technologies and public audience erosion [9]. Although digital direct television broadcasting provides an answer to this issue but will it be able to displace the powerful and well-rooted position of parabolic dishes in the imagination of millions of viewers?

As already mentioned, over 16 million parabolic dishes enable to have access to thousands of satellite television programs. Thus, some technologies such as fiber to home (FTTH), internet protocol television (IPTV) and asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) are the alternative technologies that are competing with satellite monopoly. The proliferation of electronic newspaper edition, emails and alerts on telephone sets and the broadcasting of radio and television programs over the internet (webcasting, WebTV, WebRadio and Internet Protocol Television) is one of the main technological opportunities. Streaming and podcasting of programs on the network are other alternatives that technologies can offer to meet readers' choices and expectations.

Before assessing the impact of information and communication technologies on news editorial policies in Algerian media, it is worth presenting the latest figures of the information and communication technologies and their deployment throughout the country and in different institutions and structures. According to the ministry of PICT (www.mptic.dz), there is a potential, robust and vast network consisting of 65 000 km of optic fibers cable, with 44 000 km hertz fibers and 2 000 km of international submarine connections These figures are some of key achievements generated by the bill reforms of 2000 on information and communication technology deregulation.

Figures released by an Algerian regulatory authority [10] show that in terms of ICT, Algeria is ranked 42nd worldwide and 4th in the Arab world. There is a telephone network with a rollout of 3 200 000 land lines (9.6%) and 45 million of mobile phones set subscribers (75%). 12.8% inhabitants have access to the internet for a population of 39 million. The country has 4.5 million Facebook accounts, 400 000 twitters, 6 000 Algerian websites exist but host abroad in Europe and North America due to the poor quality of services of local internet service providers.

A recent study carried out by Ericsson's ConsumerLab [11] found that 30% of mobile phone users in Algeria access the internet through smart phones. Further, the study shows that users are young: 74% are between 15 and 24 years old, 63% between 25 and 34. However, geographically, services and infrastructures are clearly unbalanced and favor the centre of the country: the centre of the country has 51% with Algiers having 29.28%, the East has 23.97%, the West 15.68% and the South 9.36%. A survey carried out in 2012 by the Webdialna agency [12] reveals that 74.2% internet users are male and 25.8% are female.

ICT and News Policies

The new technological environment has affected the political climate and media space in every way, especially with the emergence of new practices, new virtual political online communication [13]. But public media in Algeria are still under fierce criticisms for lack of news coverage fairness, impartiality and independence. The public's question is how they can watch news on national public television when they only offer formal news about officials' activities. We can observe that news is emptied from its values, only reading press communiqués, official messages and pictures are presented. As a result, huge fringes of society have since switched either to other foreign satellite channels or social media and internet facilities to seek reliable and credible news about their own country. Critics argue that the public media editorial policy is dictated by series of political interferences and pressure groups and lobbies. Also, public service values are not the main concerns and priorities. In sum, news and current affairs content in the public media is clearly biased towards authorities by ignoring more often the views and opinions of political opposition and civil society.

For the private television channels that are still in their infancy, it is too early to assess their performance and credibility; they have not proved their independence yet. In fact, public and private media should operate more independently from political interferences and economic pressures in order to maintain public confidence and sympathy. Further, they have begun to create new platforms for information, communication and, more importantly, set up bridges of contacts and interaction with the audience [14]. Thus, traditional media should consider the internet, social media and social networks as parts of their new strategy package to regain and meet the audience's expectations and needs.

Impact of ICT on News Making Process

The internet is a technology that unleashes powerful opportunities [15], but their achievement depends on the inclination of humans to exploit them in creative ways and on the capacity of the entrenched stakeholders in both the private sector and the state to use such tools as copyright, regulation, surveillance, and censorship. The internet has been "a disruptive technology" [16], reshaping industries and rendering long-established business strategies unsupportable, while introducing new ways to organize produc-

tion and distribution. Equally, the internet has become a converged technology, a forum for interaction and communication due to its ubiquity, variety and interactivity. The computer screen has become the main source for news and entertainment for ordinary citizens who can watch television, listen to radio programs, listen to music, carry out some administrative tasks, email and connect with friends.

Thus, watching television on a traditional and passive screen is gradually getting outdated [17]. Computer, mobile and tablet screens are getting more popular and attractive especially for the younger generation. However, a quick overview of existing private television channels indicates that most of their premises are equipped with latest digital technologies; news gathering**,** producing delivering and broadcasting process is completely digitized. Channels have their own platforms, websites, blogs, Facebook, YouTube and others, they provide forums and spaces for comments and feedbacks.

Newsrooms are provided with different electronic news production systems, computers are equipped with web transfer and drop box software to ensure news commodities and storage, also internet connection, fixed and mobile telephone lines, several television screens as new technologies are integrated in the new news environment [18] in which the reporter has his own personal computer and connection. The diversity and variety of news sources are secured and come from different institutions, associations and individuals through faxes, telephone calls, SMS or emails. Other conventional media and social media sources (Facebook, YouTube) are used. Some media professionals consider the crowdsourcing concept for a possible use in an attempt to meet the audience's concerns and commitments.

On editorial basis, briefings are daily held in presence of news editors, journalists and technicians to set up the agenda according to their editorial policy. Facilities are provided to ensure live coverage of main news, software and tools for storage and archives of documentaries are also provided. More importantly, social media tools are involved in transforming news production and the ultimate interaction with the public [19]. This appears to be a new, innovative and original approach for the news policy area in the Algerian media. Thus, Facebook, for instance, has become not only a tool for interaction but also a source of news and current affairs programs.

Biased Editorial News Policies

In sum, the positive effect of information communication technologies on news gathering, producing and delivering is perceptible in terms of interactivity, rapidity and immediacy.

However, when it comes to assessing the news credibility, attraction and objectivity, it can be noticed that editorial policies of each media have not changed in the objective manner; they are still motivated by personal and political interests with a total disregard to real news values and impartiality principles. In spite of the technological prowess that was introduced in the media, political interferences and financial pressures tend to derive them from their editorial independence and fairness.

At this level, we can ask the questions of censorship and manipulation by pressure groups and if the Algerian media face direct censorship. We can assume that in general more forms of censorship remain of great concern for journalists and media rights organisations in many parts of the world. In fact, direct censorship remains an exception; however, it would be fair and reasonable to say that soft censorship is likely to proportionally affect a greater number of the media through financial constraints and political pressures. Indirect censorship is defined as "an array of official actions intended to influence media output, short of legal or extra-legal bans, direct censorship of specific content, or physical attacks on media outlets or media practitioners" [20].

Conclusion

The trends show that information and communication technologies are poised to shift from a static, bureaucratic and mismanaged society to more dynamism and prosperity. The gradual implementation of digital technologies in different parts of the country is being a major driving force in Algeria's economic and social development. In addition, the younger population perceives new technologies as the main means to transform Algeria into a modern and efficient country. Yet, internet services and facilities have become huge challenges for conventional media. For instance, Algerian public television channels have been losing grounds and audience to the benefit of social media and internet platforms which attract a younger and more interactive public. In fact, it can be noticed that the failure of news and current affairs programs' credibility in Algeria is not related to technology; on the contrary, technology remains essential in the process, but what is more important is the news programs' content and values.

Thus, on the broadcasting ground, the digital technology has certainly brought about more choices for viewers, more public access but not necessarily enough of media freedom and pluralism as long as the principles of

genuine public service values are neglected. On the other hand, the pace of daily journalism is faster as there are more readers, with many more information demands and platforms. Also, journalists are expected to enrich the reader's experience by adding audios, videos, photos or other types of visual data to their stories. Social media are another challenge that many media companies have to face. Will they introduce social media as part of their new news editorial policies and strategy? The answer shows a limited use or reference to it due to lack of accuracy and authentication. But, in practice, the trends notice that the public is very active, prolific in producing news items and building up their own news package on the new platform, marking thus a total independence from media structures.

Truly, the tasks of newsgathering, news making and news broadcasting are getting complicated with the multiplication of sources, networks and platforms, but the technology of information and communication is poised to bring about more efficiency, immediacy, inclusion and interaction with the society. But, more importantly, media professionals and media citizens alike should keep their independence from political interferences and financial constraints in order to preserve the press freedom and media pluralism in Algeria.

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