

# **Moroccan Media in Democratic Transition**

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## **Abstract**

A core assumption of much of the literature on media in developing countries is that a more independent press with greater freedom will make a positive contribution to political change. In Morocco, a democratic transition started in 1997, when the opposition socialist party came to power and led the government. The new government's mission was to enact political reforms that aimed at promoting human rights, civil liberties, an open and pluralist media, and at establishing the rule of law. This paper examines the interplay between media policy, media institutions, and the government. To evaluate the nature of the political role of media in democratic transitions requires close scrutiny of three major factors: the legal, the economic, and the political environments. One important outcome of this research is that it will help determine whether Morocco's democratic reforms are meaningful reforms, or just empty attempts to pacify domestic and international public opinion.

## **1. Introduction**

The relationship between media and democracy has been widely researched. Classical liberal theorists from Milton through Locke and Madison to John Stuart Mill have argued that free and independent media can play a critical role in the process of democratization. Edmund Burke's concept of the 'fourth estate' has traditionally been regarded as one of the most efficient mechanisms of checks and balances. In the Arab world, this interplay among mass media, politics and society did not lead to political change. It is a common belief among communication scholars that Arab mass media were inefficient in promoting democratization in the Arab

societies in which they operated (Rugh, 1987). Rather, mass media functioned as a support system for the authoritarian regimes. Arab regimes used mass media mostly for propaganda and entertainment purposes at the expense of other functions and services (Ayish, 2003). The effects of mass media on democracy, politics, and society were at best minimal.

Since the late 1990's, some Arab governments have taken steps towards the democratization of their political systems. In Morocco, a democratic transition started in 1997, when the opposition socialist party came to power and led the government. The new government's mission was to enact political reforms that aimed at promoting human rights, civil liberties, an open and a pluralist media, and at establishing the rule of law. The new government led a campaign to formulate a new press law that promised to enhance press freedom.

A core assumption of much of the literature on media in developing countries is that a more independent press with greater freedom will make a positive contribution to political change. According to the literature, the media performs one of three specific political roles in a given society: an agent of stability by helping preserve social and political order (developmental press), an agent of restraint by denouncing government corruption (social responsibility), and an agent of change by helping oust authoritarian regimes (revolutionary press) (Hatchen, 1993). One of the shortcomings of this conceptualization of the relationship between media and society is that it tends to focus on the relationship between media and political systems (authoritarian, libertarian, communist, etc.) and it tends to ignore the relationship among media policy, media economics, and issues of access to media contents.

This paper provides a historical analysis of the major developments in Moroccan media since the country's independence in 1956. To evaluate the nature of the political role of media in

democratic transitions requires close scrutiny of three major factors: the legal, the economic, and the political environments.<sup>1</sup> The paper examines the media policy as enacted in the Press Code, the Audiovisual Communication Law, and the *Haut Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle* HACA (High Commission for Audiovisual Communication), and it explores the potential for further policy reforms. The paper also provides a careful and detailed examination of the economic and political environments and addresses the degree of political control over the contents of news media and the government's tendency to use media policy to limit the ability of media to operate. Finally, the paper addresses the issues of access to media contents, and it argues that the potential of Moroccan media to have a positive impact on the democratic transition does not depend only on the existence of an independent and free media. The media are only efficient for democracy if all sectors of society, especially those which are most disadvantaged or marginalized, can access media contents to gain information and make informed decisions that affect their lives.

The paper will first provide a brief historical analysis of the major developments in Moroccan media. It includes print, broadcasting, and the Internet.

## **2. History of Moroccan Media**

### **2. 1. Print Media**

Early newspapers were issued by foreign colonial rulers, namely French and Spanish. By 1911, there were 17 foreign publications and all served as instruments of colonialism. The root of Moroccan press lies in their reactions to these papers (Alami, 1985, p. 25). Moroccan nationalists used the print press to mobilize people against colonialism. By 1956, there were a dozen publications issued by Moroccan nationalists. Print press remained a tool in the struggle for liberation and independence. Under the imperative of security, the French colonial powers

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introduced a number of press laws to regulate the nationalist press and contain its influence. For instance, in the 1950's, as the struggle for independence intensified, all Arabic papers were banned (Jaidi, 1999).

After the independence in March 1956, print media became a site of political tensions between the opposition political parties and the monarchy (Ben Ashour, 1992). The print press was mostly owned by political parties. Opposition leaders used newspapers in particular as chief weapons of political agitation because they had no alternative for articulating their challenges against the regime, given the fact that TV and Radio were government-owned and controlled. If we consider the high rates of illiteracy among Moroccans, estimated in the 1960's at 86%, it remains to be seen what kind of effect, if any, newspapers may have had.

The relationship between the regime and the print media took a radically different turn when the opposition and socialist party led government in 1997. Government restrictions on the press have eased. Today, Morocco is home to a large number of print publications, many of them owned by political parties, and a growing number is owned by private persons. The independent print press opened new spaces where journalists are not tied to the strict and highly politicized editorial policies of their employers.

As of December 2005, there were 20 political party newspapers, six private newspapers, 19 of which were in Arabic and seven in French. The total circulation was of 350,000 per day, one of the lowest circulation rates in the Arab world; less than 1 percent of the population read a newspaper every day. The largest daily newspaper was *Al Massae* with a daily circulation of 120,000 copies. The second was *Essabah* with a circulation of approximately 60,000. The third and fourth were *Al-Ahdath Al-Maghribiya* and *Le Matin du Sahara* with a circulation of

approximately 30,000 each. The circulation of other newspapers was less than 20,000 each.<sup>2</sup>

The new political environment also prompted diversity in the magazines industry. Major Moroccan magazines target different kinds of audiences and specialized topics such as women, health, sports, films and businesses. The democratization process gave these papers a circulation boost. Rapid growth occurred in both the number and in the circulation of independent magazines.

Since 1987, the Moroccan government has followed the policy of giving a fixed subsidy to newspapers and magazines that support its official versions of political reality. In 2006, the government subsidized 50 print media organizations (18 dailies, 27 weeklies, and five monthlies). The total amount was US\$ 4 million.<sup>3</sup> The government realized the effectiveness of this subtle maneuver of controlling the print media; it decided to increase the amount of subsidies granted to the print media as part of its mechanisms of political control. Given the percentage of illiteracy,<sup>4</sup> there are large numbers of non-literate or marginally literate individuals who live out their lives in print-scarce environments with few or no reading materials in their homes but have easy and regular access to radio and television.

## **2. 2. Radio**

The French colonial rulers were the first to start broadcasting in Morocco in February 1928, when radio signals were sent from the city of Rabat. The French Resident General<sup>5</sup> was positioned to appoint the director of the station and to supervise news programs contents (Alami, 1985). The Moroccan resistance sought the use of radio in their fight for independence. Nationalist leaders used clandestine radio stations based in Spain and Italy to voice their ideas

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for liberation (Alami, 1985). The colonial powers issued a royal decree in 1929 to define the scope of the monopolization to include all signal transmissions, whether they were radio, telephony or telegraphy (Ibahrine, 2007). This restriction was designed mainly to prevent Moroccans from using radio transmissions. The *Voice of Cairo*,<sup>6</sup> the Egyptian pan-Arab radio station established by Egyptian president and Arab revolutionary figure Gamaal Abdel Nasser, was the new platform for Moroccan nationalists and allowed them to communicate their political messages in their fight for independence (Alami, 1985, p. 22).

In March 1962, the government established the country's broadcasting system offering radio and television services by the name of *Al-Idaa WaTalfaza Al-Maghribiya* (Moroccan Radio-diffusion and Television; French: *Radiodiffusion et Télévision Marocaine*, RTM). The Moroccan government either took over or bought the existing infrastructure in Rabat, Tangier, Tetouan and other major cities (Ibahrine, 2007). RTM provided one Arabic Language and one French Language radio services and was under the control and administration of the Ministry of Information<sup>7</sup>. As the central mouthpiece of the government, extending radio services to reach all Moroccan citizens especially in isolated areas has been a top political priority for RTM since the 1960s (Ibahrine, 2007).

Moroccan radio's golden age happened during 1970s. A 1973 study found that 92.1 percent of the urban population and 75.2 percent of the rural population listened to radio on a regular basis (Ibahrine, 2007). The advent of TV and satellite broadcasting, however, dramatically affected radio. The number of radio listeners declined substantially in the late 1990s.

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Medi 1, the first private radio, was launched in 1980 as part of a Moroccan-French partnership comprising associates from banks and major enterprises of the two countries. Medi 1 is a bilingual radio station (French and Arabic) of international news and entertainment. In 1987, Casablanca Radio, a regional and private radio station, went on the air. The station provided mostly music (70 percent), but it also aired news and cultural programs. The broadcasts were mainly for the Casablanca area. In 2003, Radio Sawa began broadcasting in Moroccan soil. Sawa is a service of U.S. International Broadcasting and is publicly funded by the U.S. Congress. It is a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week Arabic-language station. Radio Sawa received an exceptional authorization from the government to broadcast in Morocco. There was at the time no legal framework for such authorization.

In August 2002, The *Haut Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle* (HACA), the High Commission for Audiovisual Communication, was created by royal decree to establish the legal framework for the liberalization of the audio-visual sector. Until the creation of HACA, the broadcasting sector functioned in a legal void. TV and radio stations were established via the use of royal decrees. In September 2002, HACA promulgated a decree<sup>8</sup> that ended the government's monopoly of the national broadcasting system and allowed the licensing of new private television and radio stations. The Moroccan parliament adopted the reform law on 25 November 2004. By virtue of this Audiovisual Communication Law, the number of radio stations increased from six stations in 2006 to 24 in 2008. Of these radio stations, 18 are new private stations,<sup>9</sup> eight are regional, and the others are national. The number of TV channels also increased from three stations in 2004 to eight in 2010.<sup>10</sup>

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The new private radio stations reinvigorated the audiovisual sector especially through their live debate programs and news programs. They introduced the impetus and space to create possibilities for national debates on a variety of issues. In a country as diverse as Morocco, there are a multitude of voices vying for a share of the national conversation. Unlike public radio and TV, private radio news programs tend to focus on local, regional, and national events. They tend to use a language that is accessible to their listeners, somewhere between modern standard Arabic and *Darija*.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3. Television

In 1951, the first TV license was issued for a French private television company, TELMA. It began broadcasting in 1952 and was considered the first Arab and African private television (Bertrand, 1966). It operated for three years and had to stop in May 1955 due to severe financial hardships and to the tense political situation at the time in Morocco. The arrival of radio and television in the post-independence period was part of Morocco's efforts to modernize.

RTM was launched in March 1962. Although self-proclaimed as a public service television, RTM was the mouthpiece of the government and the palace. In terms of newsworthiness, coverage of the royal family and government activities took priority over all other criteria. RTM's role was to promote nationalism, reinforce the sacredness of the monarchy, and discredit communist and anti-monarchy/republican ideologies.

Color television transmission began in 1972. By 1973, television only covered 33 percent of the national territory. Until the late 1970's, the price of a television set was too expensive for the overwhelming majority of Moroccans (Ben Ashour, 1992). There were an

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estimated 3.1 million TV receivers in 1997. Today, virtually every urban Moroccan home has a television set (*Ministry of Communication Report, 2006*).

RTM remained the only TV channel till the creation of 2M in 1989. The station—2M—was Arab world's first terrestrial pay-TV channel. It began transmission from Casablanca. The channel's self-proclaimed function was to entertain. The news bulletins were short in form of news briefs. French Language was predominant with 80 per cent of the programs in French. It was subscription based and needed a decoder to get clear signals till January 1997, when it turned public and its signals only needed a regular aerial antenna to be received. The TV station (2M) was going through financial difficulties due to the fact that an increasing number of its subscribers cancelled their subscriptions in favor of free and often more interesting programs on various satellite television channels.

The takeover by the government was carried out in the name of preserving the freedom of speech that 2M came to symbolize. Politicians from different ideological streams supported the move since 2M was seen as the only national channel open to political debates. The TV channel (2M) brought in a breath of fresh air for most Moroccans who were unsatisfied with the programs of RTM. The station broke some old taboos and tackled controversial issues. The first taboo it broke was manifested in the format of its news bulletin. Contrary to RTM, the format was rather compact and its content was not necessarily focused on the daily engagements of the king or the government. It addressed these issues with brevity and more objectivity than RTM. It also featured programs on what was considered then controversial issues such as poverty, corruption, government ineffectiveness.

In September 2002, HACA promulgated a decree<sup>12</sup> that assigned public service obligations to the two major television stations in Morocco (RTM and 2M). The law also put an end to the Government's monopoly in terms of broadcasting management by transforming Moroccan Radio and Television (RTM) from a subsidiary of the Ministry of Communication into an independent and self-governing body, the *Société Nationale de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision*, SNRT (National Radio and Television Company). The SNRT is a public company that manages both television stations but is no longer subject to the financial control and supervision of the Ministry of Communication. RTM<sup>13</sup> was renamed *Al Oula* (meaning "the first" in Arabic).

*Al Oula* and 2M are the most important sources for news and information. This is due to the low cost, ability of TV to move beyond issues of illiteracy, and universal access. According to the report of Marocmétrie, the official Moroccan TV audience ratings firm,<sup>14</sup> *Al Oula* and 2M have a share of the audience in March 2010 of 40.3 per cent, 27.3 per cent for 2M and 13.0 per cent for *Al Oula*.

The new TV stations are: *Arriyadia* (sports), *Assadissa* (religion), *Arrabia* (education and culture), *Aflam TV* (fiction) and *AmazighTV*. The other stations are *Laayoun* station and *Medi 1 Sat*, which are, respectively, a regional station in the southern province of Morocco and a satellite news channel.

## **2.4 Internet**

Since the early 1990s, research universities led the development of the Internet. In 1993, Mohammadia's School of Engineers in Rabat established the first national Internet connection.

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The general public started having access to Internet services in November 1995. Students and researchers were the first to use it. The diffusion of Internet in Morocco was slow due primarily to the high cost of computers and poor infrastructure.

Internet access has considerably improved and widened. The number of internet users grew by an estimated 60 percent from 2005 to 2010.<sup>15</sup> In 2009, the number of subscribers to the Internet had reached 1.2 million, 4.51 per cent of Morocco's population.<sup>16</sup> Of these internet users, 54 per cent use 3G, more than 566,000 customers, 1.8 per cent of Morocco's population. In 2005, internet users were 3.5 million. The number of cybercafes had reached 8,950. According to the Network Information Centre,<sup>17</sup> the centre in charge of managing the domain "ma", there are 36,024 registered domain names with the extension .ma in 2010.

For a long period of time, reporting was the reserved monopolized domain of professional journalists. Internet users demonstrated intensive use of social media to aggregate and collect user-generated reports of riots and police violence against students, labor unions, and other activists. Posting online videos on websites has contributed to the quality of news and information. The use of mobile cameras made many Moroccans deserve the label of mobile iReporters. These grassroots journalists have on many occasions broken the news of many incidents to Moroccan mainstream media. A case in point that illustrates the contribution of digital media in the quality of reporting is a scandal that involved the Minister of Communication and the spokesperson of the government, Mr. Khalid Naciri. The minister was caught "on tape" while using his status as minister to release his son from police custody. The event was filmed with a mobile phone and posted on YouTube and other websites. The video

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reached 300,000 hits. Many newspapers reported this event in their hard copies and their websites with links to YouTube.

### **3. Legal Environment**

In order to evaluate the nature of the political role of media in democratic transitions, the paper will analyze three major environments: the legal, the economic, and the political environments. The legal environment includes a discussion of the media policy as enacted in the Press Code, the Audiovisual Communication Law, and the regulator, *Haut Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle* HACA (High Commission for Audiovisual Communication). The paper also explores the potential for further policy reforms.

#### **3.1 Media Policy**

Morocco perpetuated a French concept of the freedom of the press that emerged from the authoritarian regimes of the nineteenth century (El Kobbi, 1992). Generally, the Moroccan government accepts mild forms of political criticism but does not tolerate attacks on the monarchy, Islam, or the Western Sahara.<sup>18</sup> Media professionals are considered patriotic citizens who must be mindful of their social responsibility to the public.

##### **3.1.1. Press Code:<sup>19</sup>**

King Mohammed V (1956-1961) instituted the first national Press Code in 1959 on the basis of the French legal framework that had been in force under the French protectorate between 1912 and 1956. King Hassan II (1961-1999) strengthened this repressive press law by instituting the Press Codes of 1963 and 1973. According to these press codes, and in the name of guaranteeing public order and insuring national security, newspapers can be fined, suspended, or banned, and

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journalists freedom be threatened (Hidass, 1992). The regime hardened its position vis-à-vis print media because the latter were too critical of the monarch's actions. The regime stated that a completely free press would undermine the country's security (Hidass, 1992).

Since Mohammed VI's accession to the throne in 1999, and following the reform of the Press Code in 2002, there had been hope that radical reforms of Moroccan press laws would take place, but such aspirations have not been fully realized. Article I states that citizens have the right to information and that freedom to publish is guaranteed by law. These freedoms are practiced in conformity with the constitutional rights. However, the new press code still maintains prison sentences for journalists and gives the government the right to shut down any publication "prejudicial to Islam, the monarchy, territorial integrity, or public order."

For instance, Article 41 states that anybody who offends the king and the royal princes and princesses, in any way ( i.e. in writing, print, audio, video, poster, or speech) will be imprisoned for three to five years and must pay a fine of 10,000 to 100,000 MAD (roughly 800 to 8000 US\$). The same sentence applies to anybody who attacks Islam, the monarchy, and the territorial integrity. The publication can be suspended for up to three months or can be permanently banned.

### **3.1.2. High Authority for Audio-Visual Communication (HACA) and the 2004 Audiovisual Communication Law**

HACA was established in August 31, 2002 as an independent administrative body in charge of regulating the audio-visual communication sector. However, a closer look at this organization sheds doubt on its self-proclaimed independence from government. HACA consists of the Higher Council of the Audio-Visual Communication; it is a nine-member council, five of whom are appointed by the King, including the President. The Prime Minister appoints two members,

and the last two members are named by the presidents of the two Chambers of the Parliament.

The council has three major missions:

- Advice: to the King, the Prime minister and government, and both chambers of the parliament on issues related to audio-visual sector.

- Regulation: authorizes the creation of audio-visual companies, and grants licenses and the use of radio frequencies.

- Control: monitors the compliance to the laws and regulations applicable to audio-visual sector, compliance to the pluralism (in particular in the matter of political parties access), and compliance to advertising legislation and regulation.

HACA also consists of the General Directorate of Audio-Visual Communication (*Direction Général de la Communication Audiovisuelle*-- DGCA). DGCA is run by the HACA's general director, and it represents the HACA's administrative and technical services. The DGCA includes the following services: research and development, program monitoring, technical infrastructure, and the legal department.

HACA receives many bids from private individuals or companies seeking new licenses. HACA oversees the compliance of all TV and radio stations to their Licensing Obligation documents (*Cahier des Charges*). The *Cahier des Charges* constitutes a written agreement between the HACA and broadcast media outlet and the HACA, through its mechanism of monitoring and surveillance, makes sure the media outlets comply with their own obligations.

In the preamble of the Audio-Visual Communication Law, it is stated that the general philosophy is founded on the kingdom's constitutional principles of Islam, monarchy, national unity, and the universal human rights. The objectives of this law are summarized as follows: to reinforce freedom of expression and opinion; to promote democratic ideals and the respect of

human rights and pluralism; to contribute to the socio-economic and cultural development of the nation; to promote public service broadcasting; to enhance audio-visual communication production; to encourage national production and to preserve the national cultural heritage.

### **3. 2. Discussion**

An examination of the legal environment shows that the principles of freedom of expression, diversity and pluralism underlie all the laws and policies. However, the Press Code still maintains prison sentences for journalists and gives the government the right to shut down any publication. Besides, the Moroccan government controls the licensing, production and distribution of broadcast media, considered as the most powerful and influential of all existing media. Given the high rate of illiteracy in Morocco, TV and radio are the main sources of news and information for most Moroccans, and they are considered as the most powerful of all existing media.

HACA granted the first TV and radio licenses exclusively to government-owned TV and radio stations. The second wave of licenses granted by HACA on 23 February 2009 proved to be a disappointment for many observers in terms of enhancing pluralism in broadcast media.<sup>20</sup> Five TV license applications were denied by the HACA. The decision was based on “the deteriorating situation in the advertising market.”<sup>21</sup> The government abused the powers of the regulator and managed to secure licenses for their broadcasters to remain in control of this sector. HACA granted licenses to only four new radio stations that were regional and thematic; bids for news radios and privately owned TV stations were not granted licenses.

News delivery on the Internet and mobile platforms is not yet regulated. The Law that is currently applied to online journalists is the 2002 Press Code. No authorization or licenses are

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required from an organization or an individual to launch a website. But the legal censorship mechanism applied to all media activities has been extended to cover materials in the Internet. As long as the Internet was not directly challenging the government's hegemony, the use of the Internet was generally tolerated.

It is important to note, however, that Internet access in Morocco is, "for the most part, open and unrestricted," according to Open Net Initiative (ONI).<sup>22</sup> ONI testing shows that Morocco no longer blocks a majority of sites that support the independence of the Western Sahara, which is one of the three taboo subjects in Moroccan media. The report states, however, that Morocco occasionally blocks access to a small number of blogging platforms and anonymizers. The regime of filtration is not comprehensive, which means that access to similar contents can be found on other Web sites. Yet, there are instances of prosecution of Internet users and bloggers because of their writing and online activities.

#### **4. Political and Economic Environment**

This section provides a careful and detailed examination of the political and economic environments. It addresses the issues of ownership and degree of political control over the contents of news media and the government's tendency to use the laws and legal institutions to limit the media's ability to operate. The first part addresses the political and economic environments during the "Years of Lead", a metaphor that democracy activists use to describe the oppressive political regime during the period from the independence in 1956 to 1999. The second part addresses the political and economic environments from 1999, the year when King Mohamed V became king, and 2010.

##### **4.1 The Years of Lead 1956-1999**

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#### 4.1.1 The Political Environment

It is important to discuss the role of Driss Basri, a former chief of police, who in 1979 was nominated by late King Hassan II as the Minister of Interior and Minister of Information.<sup>23</sup> Driss Basri was late King Hassan II's notorious minister in charge of domestic security and political repression. Basri is the embodiment of the despotism and the rampant corruption of King Hassan II's era. Basri was known as the "King's Policeman" during his time as Interior Minister under Hassan II. The same man was in charge of the media and the police force, a contradiction that only an authoritarian regime can enforce. In 1999, Basri was removed by King Mohamed VI, a sign that Morocco was heading towards democratic reforms.

Under Basri's media regime, all media outlets were subject to the same censorship. It did not matter whether the media outlet was owned by the government or by private persons. Basri used the 1973 press code fully. It gave the Minister of Interior the power to seize and censor any publication. These measures evoked numerous protests and press strikes but to no avail.

The struggle between the regime and opposition continued through the 1980's. There were few moments of relative openness, but mostly repression in the name of preserving national security was the rule. For instance, *Kalima* was a newsmagazine that lasted for two years, from 1986 – 1987. In April of 1987, the magazine published a report on prostitution in Morocco's tourism cities of Marrakech and Agadir. Two weeks later, it published another report on homosexuality. Basri ordered the magazine to be seized from the newsstands and ordered its editor to shut down the publication. One may wonder how prostitution and homosexuality, as social phenomena, can be threats to national security.

In 1962, the year RTM was launched, late King Hassan II oversaw the writing of the first constitution which defined the role of the king, giving him broad powers including the power to

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appoint ministers, governors, judges; the power to dissolve the parliament, declare a state of emergency, and revise the constitution.

Since its inception, and although self-proclaimed as a public service television, RTM has promoted nationalism, reinforced the sacredness of the monarchy, and discredited socialist and anti-monarchy and republican ideologies. The national prime time news consisted of news related to the king and government activities. The striking things about RTM news bulletin were the countless stories about royal engagements and ministers' activities. The "holiness" of such stories in the running order remains unchallenged till today.

During the time when the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Information were under the supervision of Basri, it was difficult to determine whether television cameras were used for journalistic purposes or for policing purposes. When TV cameras attended public demonstrations, it was not clear whether the footage would end up in an editing room at the TV station or at the secret service offices. The line between providing information to audiences and providing information to police services was blurred for thirty years.

The period from 1956 to 1999 was authoritarian. Media professionals lived in fear. At the time of Driss Basri, RTM journalists, management, and staff considered themselves salaried employees of the ministry of Interior. In an interview with Mr. Mohamed Moudden, a senior news editor and presenter and currently news director, he said that the journalists were assigned to report on specific events and were told the editorial line to follow. Most of the work at RTM and its radio affiliates consisted of writing government press releases. The journalists did not have the right to report, interpret, or investigate news events (Interview, March 10, 2008).

#### **4.1.2 Economic Environment**

The regime owned and controlled directly and indirectly all audiovisual media. One private radio

station (Medi 1) and one private TV station (2M) were launched respectively in 1980 and 1989; they were both initiated by King Hassan II (Lamnadi, 1999). Medi 1 was launched as part of a Moroccan-French partnership comprising associates from banks and major enterprises of the two countries. The radio was an initiative of King Hassan II and French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. The private TV station, 2M, was a creation of the Royal Palace and the *Omnium Nord Afrique* (ONA), Morocco's largest economic conglomerate (Lamnadi, 1999).

Print media were owned by the leading political parties and a few private persons. Print publications of Political parties managed to survive thanks to self-censorship. A political party newspaper (*Al Moharir*) and private magazines such as *Kalima* (1986-1987) and *Lam Alif* (1966-1988) were shut down by the government because they dared discuss issues deemed sensitive.

The next section will cover the main developments in the political and economic environments in Morocco from 1999 to 2010. This period witnessed important improvements in terms of human rights and media ownership policies.

## **4. 2. The Political and economic environment 1999 – 2010**

### **4.2.1 Political environment**

The major improvements that occurred in Morocco are due to the democratic transition initiated by King Mohammed VI. After he succeeded his father Hassan II in July 1999, Mohammed VI instantly became a symbol of hope for a more democratic and free Morocco. Unlike his father, whose 38-year rule was stained by human rights violations, corruption and a discredited political system, Mohammed VI—famed in the Moroccan and foreign media as the "king of the poor"—embodied modesty, social justice and moderation (Maghraoui, 2001). He made the promotion of human rights a priority.

One of the first major pro-human rights measures under his reign was the creation of the Forum for Equity and Reconciliation<sup>24</sup> in 2003 that investigated the human rights violations of the past. Besides establishing the truth about the past violation, the Commission organized public forums in 2004 to allow victims to voice their pains and sufferings under the old regime. These forums were broadcast live on TV, which constituted a very important moment in Moroccan television history. The goal of the Commission was to facilitate the reconciliation of Moroccans with their recent past.

Another major initiative was the new Family Status Law or *Moudawana*. It was decreed in 2003 to protect women's rights. Moroccan women's lived experience does not go hand in hand with their constitutional rights and civil status. Since the Independence in 1956, women have been given the right to vote, the right to own businesses, the right to run for public office, but their status in marital relationships such as divorce, custody of children, inheritance and alimony was far from being equal to men. This has been the focus of continued advocacy and awareness-raising efforts of women's rights activists. A Freedom House's study<sup>25</sup> (2004) on women in Morocco, *Women's Freedom in Focus: Morocco*, praised this initiative and noted the improvements of the status of women and their rights.

Mohamed VI also created the *Institut Royal de la Culture Amazigh* IRCAM (the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture).<sup>26</sup> The role of the Institute is to safeguard and promote Amazigh Language and culture. Amazigh people are the majority ethnic group in Morocco, yet Amazigh culture was undermined for many years. For political reasons, Hassan II regime identified with Arabism hence the predominance of the Arabic culture and identity. Amazigh activists have been

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calling for more equitable representation in the media and more recognition of their contribution in Moroccan history and culture. IRCAM was a response to these calls.

#### **4.2.2 Economic Environment**

The Moroccan government is the only monopoly in terms of media ownership. It has control over radio and television and their online platforms. It also exercises significant influence on newspapers owned by political parties and has a legal arsenal to control and manage the competition. Article 21 of the 2004 Audiovisual Communication law stipulates that any broadcasting company or a shareholder in a broadcasting company can own or control another broadcasting company as long as he/she/it does not exceed 30 per cent of the shares of the new company. In other words, only the government can own and control more than one media outlet. The government clearly abused the powers of the regulator (HACA) and managed to secure licenses for their broadcasters to remain in control of this sector.

Morocco's current media system consists of a mix of public and private ownership. The liberalization of the audiovisual sector allowed new private radio stations and new TV stations to emerge. The print press also became considerably diversified and relatively competitive, and they are gradually developing into a professional press. The newspapers with the highest circulation are private newspapers. Morocco's national papers were predominantly political parties' newspapers, and they lacked aggressiveness in putting forward their political opinions. Unlike the new independent and private newspapers, political parties' newspapers reflect the political views and ideas of their particular parties. The independent press targets a middle class mass market, filling the void left by the party press.

The new political environment also prompted diversity in the magazines industry. The new magazines target different kinds of audiences and specialized topics such as women, health,

sports, films, and business. The democratization process gave these magazines a circulation boost.

### **4.3 Discussion**

The political environment is certainly more open and conducive to more freedom than it was during the years of lead. The Mohamed VI era is more democratic in form and substance. Many taboos are broken, from reporting on the king's salary to reporting on the arrest of high officials close to the palace. Journalists denounce corruption, and some have called for the resignation of many powerful government and army personalities, something that was inconceivable during the reign of Hassan II. The last decade witnessed an unprecedented opening of the political system in Morocco.

Ahmed Benchemsi, the director of *Telquel* magazine, critiqued in one of his editorials the communication skills of King Mohamed VI. In one of his reports in December 2004, he also published the salary and expenses of the king. None of these acts triggered an official reaction from the government. In 2006, many newspapers, magazines and even the public TVs and radios published reports on the arrest of the chief of security of the royal palaces about his alleged connections to a drug lord. No journalist could ever dream or imagine publishing such sensitive information during the reign of Hassan II. However, the government still interferes with the content of the media in ways that do not serve the country's democratic transition and its image abroad.

Instances of government censorship are recurring events in Moroccan journalism. What are more important are instances of auto-censorship. Journalists avoid the three taboo areas: the monarchy, Islam and territorial integrity (southern Sahara provinces). According to the *Reporters*

*Without Borders* (RWB) 2009 report,<sup>27</sup> Morocco ranks 127 out of 177 countries in terms of media freedom. The report states that there are encouraging developments but press freedom seems to have lost its hard-won ground in the past few years. The number of titles has increased in recent years, an indication of a higher degree of pluralism, and the broadcasting liberalization has given way to new audiovisual content providers. However, in the first seven months of 2009, the Moroccan government favored the use of financial penalties, instead of prison terms to keep the most outspoken journalists in line. Excessive fines led to the shutting down of *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, one of the most courageous magazines in Morocco, and one that came to symbolize the opening that began under the reign of Mohamed VI. The government tolerates mild forms of criticism but does not allow anyone to cross the “red lines”: Islam, Monarchy, and Sahara. The RWB report cites Mohammed Erraji who was sentenced to prison in September 2009 for critiquing the social policy of king Mohamed VI. He posted an article on his blog and on Hespress.com entitled: “The king encourages dependency on handouts.” He was later acquitted on appeal. The report also cites Driss Chahtane, editor of *Al Michaal* newspaper who was sentenced to one year in prison in October 2009. The report stated that the Moroccan authorities also ban foreign publications deemed unpleasant. *Le Monde* was banned on 4 August 2009 because it carried an opinion poll on the Mohamed VI’s ten years reign. *Telquel* and *Nichane*, two Moroccan magazines, were the initiators of this opinion poll but they were denied authorization to publish the results.

In terms of digital activism, the Internet has created a dynamic and networked public space where lively debates can take place on many issues considered “off-limits” to mainstream media. It is also a space where support and solidarity can be expressed with regard to each case

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of imprisonment of journalists or censorship of the press online and offline. The government knows well the reach it has especially among Western audiences and the impact it has on international public opinion in particular Western human rights associations.

Social media triggered a revival of the watchdog function of the media and paved the way for it to act as fourth estate in controlling the misconduct of the political regime. In the summer of 2008, Targuist Sniper video, a case in point for online video advocacy, was widely circulated on YouTube. An amateur cameraman filmed traffic police while taking bribes from drivers. This video resulted in a police investigation that led to the arrest of some police officers. With these videos, cyberactivism against daily and mundane corruption entered a new phase by setting a model for followers in other Moroccan cities. Despite the fact that the Youtubization of corruption resulted in the arrests of some police officers, it remained short-termed and limited even if the Moroccan government did not block the access to the video-sharing site—YouTube.

The Moroccan political regime does not tolerate all online activities. Fouad Mourtada, a young engineer, was sentenced to jail for allegedly stealing the identity of Prince MoulayRachid, the king's younger brother, on the social networking website, Facebook. The alleged Facebook royal impostor was sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of US\$ 1,350 for allegedly showing disrespect to the royal family, considered a sacred domain. After one month in custody, Mourtada was released by a royal pardon.

In September 2008, Mohammed Erraji was arrested for criticizing on his blog King Mohammed VI's charitable activities, which he labeled as a source of laziness and fatalist culture. He was given a two-year prison sentence and fined US\$ 630. This stirred protests from



internet users around the world and marred Morocco's international image. Like Mourtada, Erraji was released by a royal pardon.

In 2009, Hassan Barhoun, a journalist and blogger, was sentenced to six months jail-time and a US\$ 600 fine for publishing a memo signed by 60 political and human rights activists and intellectuals. He was known for his investigative reporting and for condemning corruption in Morocco. He also led a press initiative entitled "Journalists without Limits" on You Tube.

Since the relative rise to prominence of the social media in Morocco, the reactions of the government to these new technologies have reflected its political culture of oppressing freedom of speech. The government has not yet learned how to deal with bloggers in a democratic way. The use of the Press Code to sanction and oppress freedom of expression is an indication that the government is committed to keeping this space from becoming a nucleus for new political progressive discourse.

#### **4. Media, Democracy and Access to Media Contents**

Another important dimension of the function of media in democracy is the extent to which audiences have access to media contents. Norris (2002) argues that an independent media with a watchdog function is a necessary but not sufficient means of strengthening good governance. An independent media is only efficient for democracy if all sectors of society, especially those who are most disadvantaged or marginalized, can access media contents to function as an educated citizenry and contribute constructively to civic discourse.

A 2010 study<sup>28</sup> was conducted to examine the manifest contents of Al Oula and 2M programming, being Moroccans' major sources of news and information. The quantitative content analysis addressed the issues of access to and participation in public service television. Access and participation refer to, among other things, the gender of the TV hosts and guests of

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the television shows and the languages used. The sample consisted of all locally produced shows in both public stations over the span of one year, from January 2007 to January 2008.

With regard to gender, the results indicate that women are misrepresented in Moroccan public service television. The television shows of both stations featured more men than women, with 70.7 per cent of men and 29.3 per cent of women. For Al Oula, the percentage of female participants is 23.3 per cent compared to 76.6 per cent for male participants. For 2M, the percentage of female participants is relatively higher with 33.4 per cent compared to 66.7 per cent for male participants. Though women make up more than half of Morocco's population (*Haut Commissariat au Plan*--Moroccan Census Bureau's statistics of 2004), less than one third of the hosts and guests featured on television are women.

With regard to language, the results indicate that 33.3 per cent of the shows use Arabic or French and only 15.4 per cent use *Darija*. The use of a mix of *Darija* and Arabic has the highest percentage with 35 per cent and 10.3 per cent use a mix of *Darija* and French. What is even more striking is that the number of shows that use French alone is higher than the number of shows that use *Darija* alone or Arabic alone. Seven shows use French, while six use Arabic and only two use *Darija* alone.

The study concluded that the choice of language restricts access to and participation in public television for a large portion of Moroccan society. The choice of language allows access for only the wealthy and highly educated classes of Morocco. Moroccans speak *Darija* in their everyday life, but both public service television stations mainly use formal Arabic and French. In 2004, 43 per cent of the Moroccan population aged ten and above were illiterate. Half the literate population, 28.5 per cent of the Moroccan population aged ten and above, knew how to read

Arabic and French. About 19 per cent or one third of the literate population knew how to read and write Arabic alone.<sup>29</sup>

Using Arabic and French projects an undemocratic social order in the sense that it limits the possibilities of access to the media for participation in public discourse. The question of access and the relationship it entails between contents and audiences show that the potential of Moroccan media to have any positive impact on the democratic transition does not depend only on the existence of an independent and free media.

## **6. Conclusion**

Western understandings of the media's roles as agents of change, restraint, and stability do not translate well to the media's function in Morocco's democratic transition. These assumptions overlook the plural and diverse character of media and the internal cultural dynamics of the country. Based on the findings of this study, it is obvious that the Moroccan government either does not possess a clear vision for the role of media in democratic society, or lacks the willpower to make such use possible. Government interference has eased during the democratic transition, but it is still there. It is still unpredictable and inconsistent.

The nation's democratic transition does not depend only on the existence of an independent and free media but also on the extent to which its media policies promote pluralism and diversity, and the extent to which its media offer the possibilities of access to the majority of Moroccan audiences. Understanding the political role of Moroccan media in the country's democratic transitions requires a nuanced approach, based on uncovering multiple layers of ambiguity that address the legal, economic, and political environments as well as the relationship between content and audiences.

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The ubiquity of Facebook, Twitter, blogs and news websites in the unfolding of the Arab Spring makes the study of Arab media in general and of digital media in particular crucially important. On February 20, 2011, a group of online Moroccan activists, inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, swayed tens of thousands of their countrymen and women to take to the streets to call for democracy, dignity, and political reforms. Many banners carried slogans castigating state media and demanding freedom of the press. In response, King Mohammed VI gave an historical address to the nation on March 9, vowing to relinquish parts of his executive prerogatives and to propose a new constitution that guarantees more individual liberties and media freedom.

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## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> I borrow these three concepts from Freedom House, a non-profit organization that promotes democracy and freedom around the world.
- <sup>2</sup> Mindshare. *Media Scene in Morocco 2008*. Unpublished Document.
- <sup>3</sup> Ministry of Communication. *Rapport annuel sur l'état de la presse écrite et la communication audiovisuelle publique 2006*. <http://www.mincom.gov.ma/NR/rdonlyres/319E32BD-570D-4490-834D-319FB5344BE5/0/RapportdelapresseVF2006.pdf> (accessed 1 June 2010)
- <sup>4</sup> In 2004, 43 per cent of the Moroccan population aged ten and above are illiterate. The illiteracy rate is at 60.5 per cent in rural areas and 29.4 in urban areas, 54.7 per cent among women and 30.8 per cent among men.
- <sup>5</sup> The official representative and head of the French colonial power in Morocco
- <sup>6</sup> Based in Cairo, Egypt, this station was an international service, which in the 1950's and 1960's became the pulpit of revolution across the Arab world.
- <sup>7</sup> Called Ministry of Communication since February 1995.
- <sup>8</sup> Haut Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle. *Loi relative à la communication audiovisuelle*. Dahir n° 1-04-257, Loi n° 77-03. Retrieved April 15, 2010 from <http://www.haca.ma/pdf/commaudiovisuelle.pdf>.
- <sup>9</sup> HACA. List of private radio stations. Retrieved May 12, 2010 from <http://www.haca.ma/indexFr.jsp?id=65>.
- <sup>10</sup> HACA. List of TV stations. Retrieved May 12, 2010 from <http://www.haca.ma/indexFr.jsp?id=64>
- <sup>11</sup> *Darija* is the spoken language of Moroccans. It is a variation of Arabic; it refers to the dialect spoken in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. The official languages are modern standard Arabic and French.
- <sup>12</sup> HACA. *Loi relative à la communication audiovisuelle* (Audiovisual Communication Law). Dahir n° 1-04-257, Loi n° 77-03, available online at <http://www.haca.ma/pdf/commaudiovisuelle.pdf>
- <sup>13</sup> The nomination "Al Oula" will be henceforth used to refer to this television channel.
- <sup>14</sup> Faïçal Faquih. « 2M Capte plus de téléspectateur qu'Al Oula. » *L'Economiste*, 23 April 2010. p. 12.
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- <sup>16</sup> ANRT. *Tableau de bord trimestriel du marché Internet Décembre 2009*. 25 February 2010. Retrieved June 2, 2010 from [http://www.anrt.ma/fr/admin/download/upload/file\\_fr1874.pdf](http://www.anrt.ma/fr/admin/download/upload/file_fr1874.pdf)
- <sup>17</sup> Network Information Centre. *Statistiques*. Retrieved June 4, 2010 from <http://www.nic.ma/statistiques.asp>
- <sup>18</sup> The Western Sahara refers to the southern province in Morocco. The legal status of the territory and the question of its sovereignty remain unresolved; the territory is contested between Morocco, Algeria and the Polisario.
- <sup>19</sup> A Code suggests self-regulation, but this is a legal instrument imposed on the press as a law.
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