After the Arab uprisings

The prospects for a media that serves the public

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Executive summary

Since national broadcasters were first established in the Arab world in the mid-twentieth century, the media has always been used as a platform for taking or asserting power. Over the last 25 years, however, there has been a gradual opening up of that media space, first through the advent of satellite broadcasting, and subsequently through the explosion of new media. Although this pluralism has undoubtedly had a liberalising effect on the political landscape of the region, it has also fuelled an increasingly polarised political discourse.

With this wider political context as a backdrop, this briefing suggests that national broadcasters may have the potential to help bridge social divides, if they can be reformed to serve the interests of the public rather than the state. In addition to their extensive infrastructure and reach, these institutions also have a cultural standing that enables them to serve diverse audiences with programmes tailored to their needs and interests. But in order to realise that mission, these organisations will need to reorient their programming so that it responds less to government policies and more to the needs of citizens.

Specifically, the briefing suggests that state broadcasters can do this by instilling the twin public service values of universality and diversity into their programming, underpinned by a clear commitment to editorial independence. Formats that enable inclusive dialogue, rational debate and clear and trusted information can, at least in theory, mitigate conflict by facilitating tolerance, mutual understanding and representation.

The fact that infrastructure exists to deliver public service content does not necessarily mean that this infrastructure will be put to good use or that the conditions in a country – political, economic, social or otherwise – will enable those public service values to be realised to their fullest extent. To illustrate this point, the briefing explores four countries undergoing political change – Libya, Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia – to examine the opportunities and constraints conditioning the national broadcasters’ ability to deliver content that enhances universality and diversity.

In Libya, the ability to build an inclusive national broadcaster has failed because of factional control and in-fighting between groups, resulting in a media marked by bias, defamation and incitement on the Libyan airwaves. Until that conflict subsides, this briefing argues that the best one can hope for may be to bring in unbiased public service content from outside the country’s borders and to use that programming to provide basic information for all groups and slowly build tolerance over time.

In the last few years, Egypt has undergone a period of turbulence and political instability, much of which has been played out in a highly polarised media environment. The country benefits from a long-standing national broadcaster with the potential to reach large swathes of the country and a programming heritage that has shaped the collective imagination of generations. However, its bloated bureaucracy, concerns over its editorial independence, inadequate regulation, and a narrowing of media and political freedoms places real limits on the broadcaster’s ability to play a much-needed social cohesion role for its audiences.

Lebanon, which emerged from civil war back in the 1990s, is often held up as having the most vibrant private media sector in the region. The country also boasts a recently reformed national broadcaster with recognised potential to help to bridge the social divides that have lingered long after the civil war subsided. But without deeper economic and political buy-in from the different political actors who make up the Lebanese state, this institution is falling short of being truly innovative in its programming and attracting sustained audiences.

Tunisia – which has an embryonic and fragile democratic system – has made great strides in reforming its media regulation in recent years. The national television station commands significant reach and a substantial loyal audience. Although this broadcaster is undergoing a process of institutional reform, it still lacks the administrative and financial independence that can protect it from government control.

While the political context across these countries varies enormously, all four cases underscore the essential need for institutional reform of the media sector if public service values are to be sustained in the long run. While it is outside the scope of this briefing to address that issue in detail, the briefing concludes with a call for audience research that better understands people’s needs, more programming aimed at the region’s rising young population, more diverse media interventions and greater attention given to the political incentives facing actors in these countries to enable them to embark on serious reform of their media sectors.

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