

Writing between the ‘red lines’: Morocco’s digital media landscape

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► **To cite this version:**

Abdelfettah Benchenna, Dominique Marchetti. Writing between the ‘red lines’: Morocco’s digital media landscape. Media, Culture and Society, SAGE Publications, 2020. halshs-03019612

HAL Id: halshs-03019612

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-03019612>

Submitted on 30 Nov 2020

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Journal of
Media, Culture & Society

Writing between the “red lines”: Morocco’s digital media landscape

Journal:	<i>Media Culture and Society</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Main Article
Keyword:	Censorship, digital press, field, journalism, Maghreb, media freedom, Morocco, political economy
Abstract:	<p>This paper present an overview of the emergence of online news sites, which has radically altered news provision and media consumption patterns in Morocco. This sector has rapidly become a strategic site. Firstly, its precedence over print media and national television networks does not only stem from the high traffic figures of news websites. Along with certain social platforms, these websites are the only place for 24/7 news in a country which currently has just one such news channel and where, in spite of the “liberalization” of media, national networks provide very institutionalised news programs. Secondly, certain domestic Arabic-language news websites have become the main platform for the voicing of political dissent. Based on 31 interviews, the article briefly describes the historical development of the online press, since the “February 20th Movement” of 2011. This case study provides a good example of the new challenges surrounding the control of information: an issue long shaped by the limitation of news provision to duly authorised political and journalistic organizations and by limited “demand” resulting from widespread illiteracy. This paper describes how the Moroccan establishment react to the explosive growth of online news media by creating new mechanisms to control it.</p>

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Writing between the “red lines”

Morocco’s digital media landscape

Abdelfettah Benchenna et Dominique Marchetti

Abstract

This paper present an overview of the emergence of online news sites, which has radically altered news provision and media consumption patterns in Morocco. This sector has rapidly become a strategic site. Firstly, its precedence over print media and national television networks does not only stem from the high traffic figures of news websites. Along with certain social platforms, these websites are the only place for 24/7 news in a country which currently has just one such news channel and where, in spite of the “liberalization” of media, national networks provide very institutionalised news programs. Secondly, certain domestic Arabic-language news websites have become the main platform for the voicing of political dissent. Based on 31 interviews, the article briefly describes the historical development of the online press, since the “February 20th Movement” of 2011. This case study provides a good example of the new challenges surrounding the control of information: an issue long shaped by the limitation of news provision to duly authorised political and journalistic organizations and by limited “demand” resulting from widespread illiteracy. This paper describes how the Moroccan establishment react to the explosive growth of online news media by creating new mechanisms to control it.

Keywords

Censorship, digital press, field, journalism, Maghreb, media freedom, Morocco, political economy

The emergence of online news sites has radically altered news provision and media consumption patterns in Morocco. This case study provides a good example of the new challenges surrounding the control of information within national borders: an issue long shaped by the limitation of news provision to duly authorised political and journalistic organizations and by limited “demand” resulting from widespread illiteracy. After 1956, dominant sections of the Moroccan ruling elite sought to socially contain the readership of the written press. In an extension of colonization, they aimed to further their own social reproduction with educational policies favouring the French-speaking elite. As a result, the illiteracy rate in Morocco, while in steady decline over the past decades, remains massive (32% in 2014 versus 43% in 2004 and 87% in 1960), especially among women (42% compared to 22% among men) and in rural areas (Source: High Commission for Planning of Morocco). By comparison, this rate stood at 18.8% in Tunisia in 2014 (compared to 23.3% in 2004) and at 15% in Algeria. In 2014, 45% of the Moroccan population aged 25 and above was uneducated while in 2011/12, daily reading time

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9 (irrespective of the medium: book, newspaper, etc.) stood at 2 minutes among people
10 aged 15 and above. Paid print titles, which have experienced a sharp decline (250,296
11 papers in circulation in 2009 compared to 175,760 in 2014) (Source: OJD Morocco), are
12 almost exclusively read by an urban demographic endowed with greater cultural and
13 economic capital and mainly living in the Rabat-Salé-Kenitra and Casablanca-Settat
14 areas.
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23 These patterns in media consumption have been disrupted by the expansion of the
24 Internet in a country where the penetration rate stood at 63.7% in 2017, according to the
25 National Agency for the Regulation of Telecommunications (ANRT). Morocco has actively
26 developed Internet usage, with 21 million Internet users in 2016 according to the International
27 Telecommunication Union. Morocco was ranked third in the category “Arab countries”, after
28 Egypt (39 million) and Saudi Arabia (24 million). The “February 20th Movement” of 2011
29 and the uprisings (*Hirak*) which began in 2016 in the northern Rif region are a sign of
30 the growing influence of online news, which is no longer limited to written articles but
31 increasingly encompasses audio or visual formats. This development has led to a sharp
32 increase in online traffic in a country where the majority of Internet usage occurs on cell
33 phones: 66.5% of Moroccans rely on mobile devices for Internet access and 94% of
34 overall Internet subscriptions are tied to cell phones plans.
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50 This expansion of the audience – a process already well under way with the
51 development of domestic and foreign television networks, private radio stations (Sonay,
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9 2017), and Arabic-language newspapers in the years 2000 – is reflected in the high
10 number of visitors attracted by online media in comparison with the printed press.
11 According to a 2015 study (LMS-CSA, 2016), based on a sample of literate Moroccans
12 aged 15 and above, 67% of respondents said they read the online press, while 17%
13 favoured the printed press and 26% read both. In addition, the demographics of online news
14 readers departs from that of print media readers.: it is at once more female (73% of women
15 visit online news sites, while 8% of them read print titles) and younger (respectively
16 70% versus 8% of respondents aged 15 to 24). Interestingly, according to *Alexa*'s “one
17 month ranking”,¹ ten domestic general news sites were as of mid-October 2018 among
18 the 50 most visited websites, including *Hespress.com* (created in 2007) and *Chouftv.ma*
19 (2012), ranked after *Google.com* and *YouTube.com* but before *Facebook*. Other general
20 news “pure play” outlets (*Le360.ma*, 13th, *Akhbarona.com*, 14th, *Goud.ma*, 21st,
21 *Lesiteinfo.com*, 23rd, and *Barlamane.com*, 26th), all created after 2011, complete the
22 group. Only four websites with ties to print titles – both weeklies (*Alayam24.com*, 58th;
23 *Telquel.ma*, 90th) and dailies (*Lematin.ma*, 70th; *Alyaoum24.com*, 88th) – feature in the
24 150 most visited websites, before or after other popular Arabic-language pure play
25 outlets (*Aljarida24.ma*, 49th, *Lakome2.com*, 69th, *Febrayer.com*, 102nd, *Alaoual.com*,
26 138th). Lastly, several websites in the “general sports” category also garner heavy traffic
27 (with the pan-Arab website *Kooora.com*, ranked 10th, and two Moroccan sports sites,
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54 ¹ The statistics in this paragraph are based on data by *Alexa* (accessed October 18, 2018), displaying
55 therefore only broad tendencies.
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9 *Elbotola.com* and *Hesport*, ranked 19th and 38th), as well as a few regional outlets based
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11 in northern Morocco (*Nadorcity.com*, 45th, *Tanja7.com*, 98th, and *Tanja24.com*, 100th),
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13 in Marrakech (*Kech24.com*, 46th) or Fes (*Fesnews.net*, 97th). The scope of these media
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15 appears considerably broadened by Morocco's status as a country of emigration.
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17 Because of this, international traffic, mainly tied to the diaspora, can carry a lot of
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19 weight: it makes up over 20% of traffic on many websites, including the most popular
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21 (*Chouftv.ma*, *Hespress.com*). France generally comes in 2nd place, with overseas traffic
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23 making up a major share of visits on the more Francophone and Francophile websites
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25 (10.7% on *Le360.ma*, 15% on *Telquel.ma*, 16.4% on *Desk.ma*, 20.9% on *H24.ma* and
26
27 35.9% on *Medias24.com*). For a website originally explicitly addressed to Moroccans
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29 expatriates such as *Yabiladi* – which has since evolved towards more generalist news –
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31 the share of traffic coming from France exceeds that coming from Morocco (35.8%
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33 versus 21%).
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39 As it broadened the scope of its audience, the online media sphere boosted an already
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41 thriving news sector in Morocco: by the end of 2017, the Ministry of Culture and
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43 Communication had identified 656 authorised news sites, versus 262 in 2015 (Ministry
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45 of Culture and Communication, 2018a). While these websites are often short-lived, the
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47 sector has rapidly become a strategic site for the production and dissemination of news
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49 for at least two reasons. First, its precedence over print media and national television
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51 networks does not only stem from the high traffic figures of news websites: along with
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9 certain social platforms, these websites are also the only place for 24/7 news in a
10 country which currently has just one such news channel and where, in spite of the
11 “liberalization” of media (Hidass, 2010; Issiali, 2013), national networks provide very
12 “liberalization” of media (Hidass, 2010; Issiali, 2013), national networks provide very
13 institutionalised news programs. As a result, controlling the images circulated on digital
14 media, especially online videos (which require since 2016 a filming permit issued by
15 the Moroccan Film Centre), has become the authorities’ main focus.

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23 The second reason why these outlets have become a strategic site is that certain
24 domestic Arabic-language news websites – with foreign-based media currently drawing
25 in less visitors than their national counterparts (source : Alexa) – have become the main
26 platform for the voicing of political dissent against the power structure.

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34 *Al Jazeera* was ranked behind *Hespress* in terms of traffic according to a study carried out in
35 2010/11 also citing *Alexa* (Zaid and Ibahrine, 2011: 55), but the top foreign general news
36 websites lagged far behind in mid-October 2018: among them were two London-based pan-
37 Arab media, *Arabi21.com* (62nd) and *Alaraby.co.uk* (164th), *Aljazeera.net* (223rd), the English-
38 version website of the transnational Russian TV network Russia Today *Rt.com* (275th). The top
39 French-language website was *nouvelobs.com* (285th).

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48 Along with social media, these websites have become a space of political confrontation
49 for the more politically-inclined of readers, including websites in Arabic – a language
50 long held to be “the language of silence”, as Anouk Cohen put it (2011). Many of these
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9 media were created by former journalists critical of institutions and at odds with the
10 mainstream newspapers ahead, during or in the wake of the “February 20th Movement”
11 of 2011: such is the case for the Arabic-language websites *Lakome.com* (Aït-Mouss and
12 Ksikes, 2018), *Goud.ma* and *Febrayer.com*. These websites, which have or have had
13 connections with the social movement’s core demands – with reporters often being
14 called out as “militant” or “activist” in an effort to discredit them – have faced
15 prosecution. In addition to these media often labelled as left-wing, this category
16 comprises websites with various ties to the Islamist conservative party PJD – also
17 polarising the “partisan field”, in an ideological sense (Bennani-Chraïbi, 2013: 1181-
18 86), and which became the main ruling party in 2011 – and other websites furthered by
19 senior members of the ruling elite (“the yellow press”, as their detractors call them).
20 This surge in various forms of critical news was a key component in a wider
21 international context that led to the 2011 “uprisings” in several predominantly Arabic-
22 speaking countries, driving dominant sections of the ruling elite to seek control over
23 said outlets’ influence on the political and journalistic spheres through various means:
24 the creation of new online media; the prosecution of website managers²; the legal and
25 political reorganization of the journalistic sphere through the reshaping of the
26 “journalists’ code” in 2016 (Loi n°88-13 relative à la presse et à l’édition, 2016), which now
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51 ² In 2013, Ali Anouzla, director of the Arabic version of the news website *Lakome*, was incarcerated by
52 the King’s Attorney General for “providing material assistance”, “promoting” and “inciting terrorist acts”
53 after the website posted a link to a propaganda video by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The website
54 (both French and Arabic versions) was shut down and resurfaced in 2014 under another name, *Lakome 2*,
55 with very little financial resources.
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9 also applies to online media. As Bouziane Zaid has argued (2016), the Internet (and
10 especially the online press) catalyses a “change” – all the while serving as a new
11 “instrument of repression”. After briefly describing the historical development of the
12 online press, this paper will present an overview of the contemporary workings of this
13 nascent sphere and the issues at stake.
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23 This paper stems from an ongoing study initiated in 2015 with Driss Ksikes and largely based
24 on interviews (n=31) conducted with him between 2015 and 2017. Interviews were also
25 conducted with heads of the main online and print news titles as well as with journalists having
26 worked in various media, past and present, central to the journalistic sphere since the 1980s
27 and 1990s. They are only briefly mentioned here for reasons of space.
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37 **The development of Moroccan online media: from content-reproduction and** 38 **aggregation to the rise of “pure play” outlets** 39 40 41 42 43

44 The early days of the online press in Morocco in the late 1990s were marked by the
45 emergence of two distinct movements, nonspecific to Morocco. The first of the two
46 refers to the creation of websites designed for the sole purpose of showcasing print
47 newspapers or magazines, or what Pierre-Jean Benghozi (2013) called a “pro forma
48 digitality”. Certain media outlets, such as *Maroc Hebdo* and the weekly newspaper
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9 *L'Économiste*, launched e-formats of their print editions. This first tendency led to the
10 proliferation of websites merely designed to “replicate all or part of a print edition’s
11 content in a PDF or Web format, with a day or a week’s delay according to frequency”
12 (Naji, 2011: 242). In addition to traditional print outlets, news portals launched by
13 telecommunication operators have been another tendency furthering the emergence of
14 news websites. This second tendency was promoted by two new entrants: *Menara*,
15 launched by Maroc Télécom in 1995 (Menara, 2016), and *Inwi* (formerly *Wanadoo*) in
16 1999 (traffic on these sites has since plummeted). These portals first focused on
17 aggregating editorial content found on print titles’ websites. Content aggregation was
18 also promoted by young IT engineers living abroad, often working outside the field of
19 journalism and engaging with online tools (Scopsi, 2009; Souley, 2010; Guye, 2009).
20 Articles published in newspapers were taken up, often without requesting the consent of
21 beneficiaries, and posted on websites such as *bladi.net* or *Maghress.com*. A typical case
22 is the website *Yabiladi*, created in 2002 by Mohamed Ezzouak, a young French national
23 of Moroccan descent (Author removed, 2014). This tendency is not specific to
24 Morocco, as Hadj Bangali Cissé (2010: 137) and Thomas Guignard (2007) have shown:
25 similar media projects have been launched by Senegalese expatriates (*SénéWeb*, *Xalima*,
26 *Homeview Sénégal*, *Ferloo.com*, *Nettali.net*), by Beninese nationals in France
27 (*Opays.com*), or by Ivorians in the United States (*Abidjan.net*). Aside from content-
28 aggregation, and in the hope of consolidating their business, these outlets also provide
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9 other services, generally positioning themselves as service providers in Web
10 development and Web hosting, domain trading, or new media, Internet and multimedia
11 training.
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16 In 2006, a number of regional online media were launched, most of them based in
17 northern Morocco (Nador, Oujda and Errachidia). These media were not traditional
18 press outlets, but rather experiments launched by small groups of publishers developing
19 a grassroots approach to journalism – one apparently more appealing than the regional
20 sections of Casablanca or Rabat-based national newspapers (Naji, 2011: 244). This
21 second phase also included, in 2007, the gradual transformation of several aggregators
22 into pure play outlets, as was the case for *Yabiladi* or *Hespress* (the latter originally
23 marketed itself as a “participatory platform”). Several advertising agencies specialising
24 in online services, such as *Adweb* and *Pub Online*, were created that same year. A third
25 phase, beginning in 2010/11, saw the emergence of several pure play outlets. Along
26 with a few Arabic-language newspapers, these predominantly Arabic-language outlets
27 became an alternate site for the voicing of political criticism against the power structure.
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The new Constitution adopted in 2011 in the wake of the uprisings accelerated the
boom in online news.

Loose professional and economic structuring

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9 In Morocco, massive traffic on news websites should not hide the fact that online media
10 which are not backed by print publications remain loosely structured in both
11 professional and economic terms. Documentation released by the Ministry of
12 Communication highlights this loose professional structuring. In 2016, in an effort to
13 regulate and control the field, the Ministry set out a number of provisions regarding the
14 registering of news websites as media outlets (Ministry of Culture and Communication,
15 2018b). At the end of 2017, the Ministry numbered 656 authorizations issued for the
16 creation of “325 Arabic-language websites, 27 French-language websites, 168 bilingual
17 (French-Arabic) websites, 15 trilingual (Arabic-French-Amazigh) websites, as well as
18 other multilingual websites” (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2018a). However,
19 other documentation issued by the same source states that in 2016, only 69 news
20 websites employed journalists with a press card (Ministry of Communication, 2016) –
21 one of the necessary conditions for a news website to be registered as an online media
22 outlet. These new outlets only employed 265 journalists³ (approximately 10% of the
23 total amount of authorised journalists), with 58% of newsrooms employing only one to
24 three journalists. Of course, the better-endowed among them are tied to the most well-
25 structured companies: *Le360.ma* (n=18) hires roughly sixty employees (Interview with
26 the director, October 21, 2015), and its founders are close to the ruling monarchy;
27 *Alyaoum24* (n=15) is connected to *Akhbar Al Yaoum*, an Arabic-language newspaper

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³ The data used is that provided in the document “Liste nominative des journalistes détenteurs d’une carte professionnelle” [List of Journalists with a Professional Press Card] released by the Ministry, which stated that it reflected the situation as of August 30, 2016.

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9 owned by journalist Taoufik Bouachrine, who has close ties to the PJD and regularly
10 faces prosecution; *Hespress* (n=15), the most popular website in Morocco; and
11 *Medias24* (n=14), an exclusively French-language economic news site. In comparison,
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13 media outlets labelled as the most critical of the power structure work with limited staff,
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15 as shown by *Lakome2.com*, *Badil.info* (one journalist), *Alaoual.com* and *Febrayer.com*
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17 (which produce news with three professionals), or *Goud.ma* (which works with a team
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19 of four).
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25 Finally, this loose professional structuring may be noticed in the lack of available data
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27 on digital media producers. Most of them have no journalistic training (46% in 2012
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29 according to a survey by ISESCO) and have no social security or work contract. Often
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31 dismissed as “opinion journalism” or “rumours”, online news media work with limited
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33 human resources, even if some of its leading figures have sought to acquire professional
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35 credit (sometimes an economic necessity): several major websites have hence tried to
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37 create a professional organization designed to represent them when dealing with
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39 political institutions (Médias24, 2014). This emerging sphere also lacks reliable
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41 financial structuring. General information about media owners in Morocco is often
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43 incomplete, as noted in the investigation published by *Reporters Without Borders* and
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45 *Le Desk* in 2017 (Le Desk-RSF, 2017), but evidently online news outlets rarely benefit
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47 from substantial investment – except when they are part of integrated advertising
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49 agencies such as *Géomédia* or *Media Holding*, or corporate groups and institutions
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9 whose actual shareholders may be difficult to identify. Most website owners rely on
10 personal – and often modest – funding during the initial funding stage. With the
11 exception of a few outlets (including *Le360.ma*, *HuffPost* and *Elbotola.com*), initial
12 investments in digital media seldom exceed 100,000 dirhams (less than 10,000 euros)
13 according to the publishers we have interviewed. A lot of websites are “pure-play”
14 businesses, and their founders do not necessarily apply the strategies of a “media outlet”
15 – in the words of a website manager (Interview with the authors, March 22, 2016), such
16 outlets apply the same management methods as those of a “grocery” (*Hanout*). The
17 prevalence of an economic model based on free access also points to the fragility of the
18 sector. Apart from *ledesk.ma*, a media outlet launched in 2015 which relies on paid
19 subscriptions, all other outlets have opted for free access models and rely on advertising
20 or invisible investments. The website’s main founder (El Azzaz, 2018) claimed that
21 *ledesk.ma* “raised more than 700,000 euros in funds but did not reach the initial target of
22 10,000 subscribers after one year in operation”. A year and a half after its launch, the
23 website introduced two different pay models: a paywall, and a freemium offer which
24 includes digital advertising (Ledesk.ma, July 25, 2016).

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46 However, online news sites hardly benefit from advertising revenues. According to a
47 2018 survey conducted by IPSOS for the *Moroccan Group of Advertisers* (GAM),
48 *Google* and *Facebook* get the lion’s share of these revenues with 62% of the overall
49 budget allocated to digital media, while domestic websites only receive a 38% share. In
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9 2015, digital advertising allegedly reached 400-450 million dirhams (6.25% to 7% of
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11 advertisers' overall budget). For digital companies such as *Telquel.ma* or *HuffPost*
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13 *Maroc*, the development of branded content strategies, whose aim is to promote values
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15 that the brand wants to be associated with (Interviews with the owners, April 11 and 14,
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17 2016), is not sufficient to ensure economic growth.
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23 As is the case with print titles, advertising revenues for digital media vary depending on
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25 whether the title is published in French or in Arabic. Among the 656 digital titles authorised
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27 by the Ministry of Culture and Communication in 2017, Arabic remains the most frequently
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29 used language: 49.5% of websites are in Arabic only, 25.6% offer content in two languages
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31 (Arabic and French), 2.3% in three languages (Arabic, Amazigh and French), 18.5% are
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33 multilingual websites and 4.1% use French only. French-language media may have become
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35 a “niche” market (as advertising professionals would say), but in terms of advertising
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37 revenues it is the most profitable market because it is directed at an audience with greater
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39 economic and cultural capital (Authors removed, 2017: 255-256). There is a paradox here,
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41 summarised as follows by the manager of a bilingual online news outlet (published in
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43 French and Arabic): “French is the language of economics, but not the consumers’
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45 language” (Interview conducted on October 21, 2015). “You know, advertisers are terrible
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47 [...], they have their own rationale, lobbying agenda, practices [...], and most of them
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49 cannot read Arabic”, he adds. Significantly, according to a 2018 Ipsos survey carried out
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51 with executives and digital marketing and communication managers in Morocco, 95% of
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53 advertisers use French on websites and social media, while 47% and 44% of them use
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9 standard Arabic on websites and social media, respectively, with *darija*, the Moroccan
10 Arabic dialect, exceeding the use of standard Arabic on social media (51%).
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15 **Economic, political and career opportunities: a few owners' professional** 16 **trajectories** 17 18 19 20 21

22 This new sphere in the production and dissemination of information has developed
23 because journalists and entrepreneurs in various lines of business saw digital media as
24 another way of developing their political, journalistic and/or economic activities.
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26 Among these entrants and investors, particularly noticeable are the trajectories of a few
27 journalists who have always been strongly critical of the regime. But they also show the
28 limitations imposed upon these new media whenever the basic interests of the ruling
29 elites are at stake. These middle-aged journalists were the owners of print outlets which
30 were pushed into bankruptcy; they quickly saw digital media as a new opportunity – a
31 new place of expression that would be free of censorship (Jamaï, 2012). Ali Anouzla
32 and Aboubakr Jamaï, who launched the news website *Lakome.com* in Arabic in January
33 2011 and later added a French version, match this description. In 2004, Ali Anouzla and
34 Taoufik Bouachrine co-founded a weekly newspaper named *Al-Jarida al-Oukhra* (“The
35 Other Newspaper”), which was discontinued two years after its launch. It included
36 editorials from political dissidents, becoming famous for its 2005 “Person of the year”
37 poll – in which King Mohammed VI slumped to second place (Tuquoi, 2006) – and for
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9 a 2005 report on the daily life of princess Lalla Asma, the King's wife (Tuquoi, 2005).
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11 These two issues led to the demise of *Al-Jarida al-Oukhra* at a time when the
12 newspaper had a weekly circulation of over 50,000 copies. Shortly before that, Ali
13 Anouzla joined the founding team of the Arabic-language daily *Al-Massae* ("The
14 Evening Paper"), which he left two years later, in 2008, to launch *Al-Jarida al-Oula*
15 ("The First Newspaper"). This title also ceased to be published in 2010 because of
16 financial difficulties arising from a lack of advertising revenues and a series of fines –
17 including a \$120,000 fine following the publication of an editorial lambasting Libyan
18 president Muammar Gaddafi. According to Ali Anouzla, the *Lakome* online news site
19 was "a haven. My newspaper had been shut down [...], we had been forced to bury the
20 idea. I can remember the day – I mean, the day when the printing company told me
21 'Listen, we're not going to print your paper today'... It was a tough blow. We had no
22 other choice – it was a day of mourning at the office" (Interview, October 20, 2015). For
23 his associate Aboubakr Jamaï, digital media was also a "haven" after several
24 experiences in print media. He founded the weekly newspaper *Le Journal* with Ali
25 Amar in 1997, along with its Arabic edition *Assahifa*. Both were banned in 2000 after
26 publishing a report on the involvement of Moroccan left-wing parties and the then
27 Prime Minister in the 1972 coup attempt against King Hassan II. *Le Journal*
28 *hebdomadaire* and *Assahifa Al Ousbouiya* were discontinued after a 2010 court order,
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9 officially solely for failure to pay off the debt owed to the National Social Security
10 Fund, tax authorities and several banks (Benslimane, 2015).

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13 Among these journalists who found a “haven” in digital media following their
14 experiences with print titles, Ali Lmrabet embodies a different type of trajectory. Before
15 founding the online magazine *demainonline.com* in 2011, Lmrabet had already created
16 two weeklies in 2000 – one in French (*Demain Magazine*) and the other in Arabic
17 (*Doumane*) – which ceased to be published in 2003 when he was given a four-year
18 prison sentence for offending King Mohammed VI. He was sentenced a second time in
19 2005 and banned from working as a journalist after stating, in an interview with a
20 Moroccan weekly, that Sahrawi prisoners in Tindouf, Algeria, were “refugees”
21 according to the UN, and not “people who are being held captive by the Polisario Front”
22 (Lmrabet, 2015). Following legal proceedings, the online outlets of these four
23 journalists – who are among the most critical of the regime – have either ceased to exist
24 or been seriously threatened.

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27 At the same time, online news outlets have logically attracted younger salaried
28 journalists from print titles, who saw online media as an ideal opportunity to launch
29 their own outlets and free themselves from various forms of censorship. Among these
30 journalists is Maria Moukrim, who worked with Nouredine Miftah at the weekly
31 *Assahifa* from 1999 to 2001, then for the weekly *Al Ayam* (Hespress, 2009) for ten years
32 (Tizpress, 2011), where she occupied the position of editor-in-chief; in 2012, following
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9 a disagreement with *Al Ayam*'s owner, she launched *Febrayer.com*. In the same way,
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11 Hamid El Mahdaoui started his career at *Al Ayam*, joined *Chouf TV* and *Lakome.com* in
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13 2013, and created *Badil.info* in 2014.

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16 As for the rest of the entrants, the reasons for investing in the sphere of digital media
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18 have not yet been clearly identified. We can assume that the presence of IT engineers –
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20 such as the founders of the online news outlet *Yabiladi.com* (Mohamed Ezzouak), the
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22 sports website *Elbotola.com* (Oussama Benhammou and Akram Benmbarek),
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24 *Hibapress* (Mohamed Lakbir), *Hespress* (Amine Guennouni being one of its co-
25
26 founders) and the actual owner of *Telquel* magazine (Khalid El Hariri) – is to a certain
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28 extent related to the operational specificities of digital media, in which technical and
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30 commercial dimensions are closely intertwined. It is worth noting that, from a purely
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32 economic point of view, the websites they have created seem to be the most viable type.
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34 For entrants coming from the distribution sector – particularly free newspapers – such
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36 as the founder of the *Géomédia* group and owner of the *H24info.ma* “pure play” outlet,
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38 investing in digital outlets is part of a commercial strategy aimed at furthering their
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40 activities in the field via other media.
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46 Lastly, the trajectories of a number of entrants seem to be linked to their connections
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48 with members of the Moroccan establishment – in a more or less direct and visible way.

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50 Among these entrants is Edit Holding group, owner of the French-Arabic news portal
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52 *Le360.ma* – the news outlet with the most human and material resources. One person
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9 who contributed to its launch is Aziz Daki: a gallery owner and art critic at the time he
10 invested in this holding company (which controls *Le360.ma*), Daki is very close to the
11 King's private secretary Mounir Majidi, who was recruited as artistic director and
12 spokesperson of the Mawazine Festival – Morocco's major musical event (Michel, Ait
13 Akdim, 2016). Another example is Abdelmalek Alaoui, the son of one of King Hassan
14 II's counsellors and founder of a company which owns *HuffPost Maroc* and also
15 operates in the field of "strategy consulting, specialising in active competitive
16 intelligence all across West Africa" (Guepard Group, 2019). These suspicions are
17 heightened by the lack of certainty as to the actual financial backers of these online
18 news outlets.
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35 **Control mechanisms and dependence on political actors**

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39 The reaction of the Moroccan establishment to the explosive growth of online news
40 media was to create mechanisms designed to control it – a process that started in 2011.
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42 As is the case with print titles, one method of establishing political control through legal
43 mechanisms is to punish non-compliance with the "red lines", as they are called in
44 Morocco (Hidass, 2016). In an "ethical code" posted on the news website *Le360.ma*,
45 these red lines are defined as follows: "While being committed to the main universal
46 values, the editorial board of Le360 complies with the core values of Moroccan society:
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9 tolerant Muslim faith, national unity in a remarkably diverse society, and monarchy as
10 the nation's unifying institution" (Le360.ma, 2019). This kind of notice is extremely
11 frequent in the latest regulations related to the media industry. For instance, Article 179
12 of the Criminal Law (2016) provides for steep fines and prison sentences for "libel,
13 insult and offense directed at the King's person or Heir to the Throne, as well as any
14 violation of the respect owed to the King" or "any violation of the royals' private life".
15 In the same way, Article 267-5 states that "anyone attacking the Muslim religion or the
16 monarchy or making statements harming the Kingdom's territorial integrity" may incur
17 fines and prison sentences. The 88-16 Regulation on media outlets and publishing
18 companies provides for "suspension" (Article 104), "cancellation of the publication's
19 serial number or removal of its journalistic content", as well as blocking "access" in the
20 case of a digital media (Article 106)
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39 As the two following journalists explain, these "red lines" may also influence an outlet's
40 ability to attract advertisers – albeit in a more subtle fashion.

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42 "It's always the same questions: 'What is your take on the situation in [Western] Sahara?
43 How are you going to report on the monarchy?' People were telling us: 'Okay, we're going
44 to help you, but let's see how things shape up after the launch.'" (Interview conducted on
45 October 20, 2015 with the creator of an online news outlet who detailed the difficulties
46 encountered in raising funds for his company, including through the use of advertisers).
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51 "The only explanation is that they disagree with our editorial content. The director of a
52 major PR firm candidly told me that there are other journalists who 'defend the nation's
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9 interests'. He was very direct in the words he used: 'Those are the real guys, they defend
10 His Majesty. You don't defend His Majesty, so we're not going to provide advertising for
11 you'. His agency defends the interests of major clients, big corporations, etc.'" (Ali Amar,
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14 *Le Monde Afrique*, October 20, 2016)
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21 In order to control access, production conditions and contents, authorities also seek to
22 impose general rules to this normless space by establishing legal regulations applying to
23 the press industry in general – and digital titles in particular since 2016. For example,
24 Article 11 of Decree 89-13, adopted in 2016 in relation to the practice of journalism,
25 stipulates that "it is forbidden for any media outlet to employ journalists for more than
26 three months if the journalist's press card for the ongoing year has not been delivered to
27 or requested by the journalist". Article 35 of Decree 88-13 on media outlets and
28 publishing companies states that every online news outlet shall apply for a "filming
29 permit delivered by the Moroccan Film Centre [...], valid for one year and renewable
30 every year, in line with the regulations applying to audio-visual productions in the field
31 of digital media". Lastly, Article 36 specifies that "comments and links posted by
32 Internet users on the website are subject to the principle of freedom" and that
33 "managing editor shall not publish material that would be considered as a crime under
34 applicable regulations, and must remove any comment that is deemed offensive".
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9 These legal provisions can be used to support prosecutions against journalists for issues
10 related to their work – especially when they do not comply with the “red lines” – but
11 also, in a more frequent if not altogether new trend, for matters pertaining to their
12 private lives. In that respect, the recent example of Hicham Mansouri, a project manager
13 within the Moroccan Association of Investigative Journalism, is enlightening: in 2015,
14 he was handed a three-month prison sentence for “public drunkenness” and “assaulting
15 public officials”, namely police officers. Taoufik Bouachrine, who runs the daily
16 newspaper *Akhbar El Yaoum* and the *AlYaoum24* website, has been attacked over his
17 private life on two occasions. On February 23, 2018, he was arrested and jailed after
18 being accused of “human trafficking”, “abuse of position for sexual purpose” and “rape
19 and attempted rape”. The accusations were based on video footage discovered in the
20 journalist’s office on the day of his arrest – but the footage has not been made public.
21 Mr. Bouachrine strongly denies these attacks and claims to be the victim of a “political
22 trial” (AFP, 2018).
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41 Since 2016, another way for authorities to maintain their control has been the creation
42 of new and highly selective support mechanisms for digital media. For instance, of the
43 69 companies with digital media outlets in operation in 2016, only 7 had benefited from
44 government support. Among other methods of controlling journalistic activities, the
45 interviewees have also singled out the ruling elites’ control over the police force and
46 intelligence services.
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11 “What kind of pressure did we face today? So, we’ve had the odd visit from the local
12 intelligence services – actually, it’s not that unusual, I think it’s part of their job. Other than
13 that, there have been a few hassles: we were trying to create a nice work environment, with
14 some degree of comfort, and then the health and safety inspector came to visit us – *twelve*
15 times. I thought he might be looking for a bribe, but no. On his tenth visit, he told me:
16 ‘Look, they asked me to pay you a visit, so I’m paying you a visit. I don’t want any money,
17 I don’t want anything at all, but I have to write something’. So, he came to our offices, and
18 it was... The first time, it was about the fire extinguisher, another time it was, ‘You should
19 have a notice somewhere detailing labour rights for staff members’. No one was working
20 undeclared, every foreign employee had a contract, but he told me: ‘I have to find
21 something wrong here, because I need to have that as a precaution’. They need to know
22 your weaknesses. For now, we don’t have any, but soon...’ (Interview with the manager of
23 a “critical” online news website, April 13, 2016)
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Lastly, other ways of maintaining surveillance over these outlets include attempts at
controlling the technologies they use – hacking or trying to hack their websites, slowing
down or shutting down their Internet connection or SIM card.

Naturally, such tight control over news outlets has been met with resistance in different
ways. Within domestic borders, the ruling elites’ actions in Morocco have been
criticised by a number of print and digital titles (with the latter struggling to secure

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9 funds). However, the frequent prosecutions, or threats of prosecution, especially when
10 the defendant is accused of breaching the “red lines”, are likely to encourage self-
11 censorship. Social media – *Facebook* in particular (El-Issawi, 2016: 26-27) – operate as
12 a genuine alternate space where people can share comments and political information,
13 for instance by uploading videos during a protest. *Facebook* has not been targeted,
14 which explains the vast discrepancy between the fierce political criticism found on
15 social media and the much more contained criticism expressed in national print and
16 digital media. Foreign national media spaces (especially France and Spain), as well as
17 transnational ones (especially Arabic-language media such as *Al Jazeera* online edition)
18 continue to play this role, even though their correspondents too are subject to strict self-
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