Writing between the 'red lines': Morocco's digital media landscape

Abdelfettah Benchenna, Dominique Marchetti

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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

(irrespective of the medium: book, newspaper, etc.) stood at 2 minutes among people aged 15 and above. Paid print titles, which have experienced a sharp decline (250,296 papers in circulation in 2009 compared to 175,760 in 2014) (Source: OJD Morocco), are almost exclusively read by an urban demographic endowed with greater cultural and economic capital and mainly living in the Rabat-Salé-Kenitra and Casablanca-Settat areas.

These patterns in media consumption have been disrupted by the expansion of the Internet in a country where the penetration rate stood at 63.7% in 2017, according to the National Agency for the Regulation of Telecommunications (ANRT). Morocco has actively developed Internet usage, with 21 million Internet users in 2016 according to the International Telecommunication Union. Morocco was ranked third in the category "Arab countries", after Egypt (39 million) and Saudi Arabia (24 million). The "February 20th Movement" of 2011 and the uprisings (*Hirak*) which began in 2016 in the northern Rif region are a sign of the growing influence of online news, which is no longer limited to written articles but increasingly encompasses audio or visual formats. This development has led to a sharp increase in online traffic in a country where the majority of Internet usage occurs on cell phones: 66.5% of Moroccans rely on mobile devices for Internet access and 94% of overall Internet subscriptions are tied to cell phones plans.

This expansion of the audience – a process already well under way with the development of domestic and foreign television networks, private radio stations (Sonay,

2017), and Arabic-language newspapers in the years 2000 – is reflected in the high number of visitors attracted by online media in comparison with the printed press. According to a 2015 study (LMS-CSA, 2016), based on a sample of literate Moroccans aged 15 and above, 67% of respondents said they read the online press, while 17% favoured the printed press and 26% read both. In addition, the demographics of online news readers departs from that of print media readers.: it is at once more female (73% of women visit online news sites, while 8% of them read print titles) and younger (respectively 70% versus 8% of respondents aged 15 to 24). Interestingly, according to *Alexa*'s "one month ranking",[1] ten domestic general news sites were as of mid-October 2018 among the 50 most visited websites, including *Hespress.com* (created in 2007) and *Chouftv.ma* (2012), ranked after *Google.com* and *YouTube.com* but before *Facebook*. Other general news "pure play" outlets (*Le360.ma*, 13th, *Akhbarona.com*, 14th, *Goud.ma*, 21st, *Lesiteinfo.com*, 23rd, and *Barlamane.com*, 26th), all created after 2011, complete the group. Only four websites with ties to print titles – both weeklies (*Alayam24.com*, 58th; *Telquel.ma*, 90th) and dailies (*Lematin.ma*, 70th; *Alyaoum24.com*, 88th) – feature in the 150 most visited websites, before or after other popular Arabic-language pure play outlets (*Aljarida24.ma*, 49th, *Lakome2.com*, 69th, *Febrayer.com*, 102nd, *Alaoual.com*, 138th). Lastly, several websites in the "general sports" category also garner heavy traffic (with the pan-Arab website *Kooora.com*, ranked 10th, and two Moroccan sports sites,

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[1] The statistics in this paragraph are based on data by *Alexa* (accessed October 18, 2018), displaying therefore only broad tendencies.

Elbotola.com and *Hesport*, ranked 19th and 38th), as well as a few regional outlets based in northern Morocco (*Nadorcity.com*, 45th, *Tanja7.com*, 98th, and *Tanja24.com*, 100th), in Marrakech (*Kech24.com*, 46th) or Fes (*Fesnews.net*, 97th). The scope of these media appears considerably broadened by Morocco's status as a country of emigration. Because of this, international traffic, mainly tied to the diaspora, can carry a lot of weight: it makes up over 20% of traffic on many websites, including the most popular (*Chouftv.ma*, *Hespress.com*). France generally comes in 2nd place, with overseas traffic making up a major share of visits on the more Francophone and Francophile websites (10.7% on *Le360.ma*, 15% on *Telquel.ma*, 16.4% on *Desk.ma*, 20.9% on *H24.ma* and 35.9% on *Medias24.com*). For a website originally explicitly addressed to Moroccans expatriates such as *Yabiladi* – which has since evolved towards more generalist news – the share of traffic coming from France exceeds that coming from Morocco (35.8% versus 21%).

As it broadened the scope of its audience, the online media sphere boosted an already thriving news sector in Morocco: by the end of 2017, the Ministry of Culture and Communication had identified 656 authorised news sites, versus 262 in 2015 (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2018a). While these websites are often short-lived, the sector has rapidly become a strategic site for the production and dissemination of news for at least two reasons. First, 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 also 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 (Hidass, 2010; Issiali, 2013), national networks provide very institutionalised news programs. As a result, controlling the images circulated on digital media, especially online videos (which require since 2016 a filming permit issued by the Moroccan Film Centre), has become the authorities' main focus.

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

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

Along with social media, these websites have become a space of political confrontation for the more politically-inclined of readers, including websites in Arabic – a language long held to be "the language of silence", as Anouk Cohen put it (2011). Many of these

media were created by former journalists critical of institutions and at odds with the mainstream newspapers ahead, during or in the wake of the "February 20th Movement" of 2011: such is the case for the Arabic-language websites *Lakome.com* (Aït-Mouss and Ksikes, 2018), *Goud.ma* and *Febrayer.com*. These websites, which have or have had connections with the social movement's core demands – with reporters often being called out as "militant" or "activist" in an effort to discredit them – have faced prosecution. In addition to these media often labelled as left-wing, this category comprises websites with various ties to the Islamist conservative party PJD – also polarising the "partisan field", in an ideological sense (Bennani-Chraibi, 2013: 1181-86), and which became the main ruling party in 2011 – and other websites furthered by senior members of the ruling elite ("the yellow press", as their detractors call them). This surge in various forms of critical news was a key component in a wider international context that led to the 2011 "uprisings" in several predominantly Arabic-speaking countries, driving dominant sections of the ruling elite to seek control over said outlets' influence on the political and journalistic spheres through various means: the creation of new online media; the prosecution of website managers[2]; the legal and political reorganization of the journalistic sphere through the reshaping of the "journalists' code" in 2016 (Loi n°88-13 relative à la presse et à l'édition, 2016), which now

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[2] In 2013, Ali Anouzla, director of the Arabic version of the news website *Lakome,* was incarcerated by the King's Attorney General for "providing material assistance", "promoting" and "inciting terrorist acts" after the website posted a link to a propaganda video by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The website (both French and Arabic versions) was shut down and resurfaced in 2014 under another name, *Lakome 2*, with very little financial resources.

also applies to online media. As Bouziane Zaid has argued (2016), the Internet (and especially the online press) catalyses a "change" – all the while serving as a new "instrument of repression". After briefly describing the historical development of the online press, this paper will present an overview of the contemporary workings of this nascent sphere and the issues at stake.

This paper stems from an ongoing study initiated in 2015 with Driss Ksikes and largely based on interviews (n=31) conducted with him between 2015 and 2017. Interviews were also conducted with heads of the main online and print news titles as well as with journalists having worked in various media, past and present, central to the journalistic sphere since the 1980s and 1990s. They are only briefly mentioned here for reasons of space.

The development of Moroccan online media: from content-reproduction and aggregation to the rise of "pure play" outlets

The early days of the online press in Morocco in the late 1990s were marked by the emergence of two distinct movements, nonspecific to Morocco. The first of the two refers to the creation of websites designed for the sole purpose of showcasing print newspapers or magazines, or what Pierre-Jean Benghozi (2013) called a "pro forma digitality". Certain media outlets, such as *Maroc Hebdo* and the weekly newspaper

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L'Économiste, launched e-formats of their print editions. This first tendency led to the proliferation of websites merely designed to "replicate all or part of a print edition's content in a PDF or Web format, with a day or a week's delay according to frequency" (Naji, 2011: 242). In addition to traditional print outlets, news portals launched by telecommunication operators have been another tendency furthering the emergence of news websites. This second tendency was promoted by two new entrants: *Menara*, launched by Maroc Télécom in 1995 (Menara, 2016), and *Inwi* (formerly *Wanadoo*) in 1999 (traffic on these sites has since plummeted). These portals first focused on aggregating editorial content found on print titles' websites. Content aggregation was also promoted by young IT engineers living abroad, often working outside the field of journalism and engaging with online tools (Scopsi, 2009; Souley, 2010; Guye, 2009). Articles published in newspapers were taken up, often without requesting the consent of beneficiaries, and posted on websites such as *bladi.net* or *Maghress.com*. A typical case is the website *Yabiladi*, created in 2002 by Mohamed Ezzouak, a young French national of Moroccan descent (Author removed, 2014). This tendency is not specific to Morocco, as Hadj Bangali Cissé (2010: 137) and Thomas Guignard (2007) have shown: similar media projects have been launched by Senegalese expatriates (*SénéWeb*, *Xalima*, *Homeview Sénégal*, *Ferloo.com*, *Nettali.net*), by Beninese nationals in France (*Opays.com*), or by Ivorians in the United States (*Abidjan.net*). Aside from content-aggregation, and in the hope of consolidating their business, these outlets also provide

other services, generally positioning themselves as service providers in Web development and Web hosting, domain trading, or new media, Internet and multimedia training.

In 2006, a number of regional online media were launched, most of them based in northern Morocco (Nador, Oujda and Errachidia). These media were not traditional press outlets, but rather experiments launched by small groups of publishers developing a grassroots approach to journalism – one apparently more appealing than the regional sections of Casablanca or Rabat-based national newspapers (Naji, 2011: 244). This second phase also included, in 2007, the gradual transformation of several aggregators into pure play outlets, as was the case for *Yabiladi* or *Hespress* (the latter originally marketed itself as a "participatory platform"). Several advertising agencies specialising in online services, such as *Adweb* and *Pub Online*, were created that same year. A third phase, beginning in 2010/11, saw the emergence of several pure play outlets. Along with a few Arabic-language newspapers, these predominantly Arabic-language outlets became an alternate site for the voicing of political criticism against the power structure. The new Constitution adopted in 2011 in the wake of the uprisings accelerated the boom in online news.

Loose professional and economic structuring

In Morocco, massive traffic on news websites should not hide the fact that online media which are not backed by print publications remain loosely structured in both professional and economic terms. Documentation released by the Ministry of Communication highlights this loose professional structuring. In 2016, in an effort to regulate and control the field, the Ministry set out a number of provisions regarding the registering of news websites as media outlets (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2018b). At the end of 2017, the Ministry numbered 656 authorizations issued for the creation of "325 Arabic-language websites, 27 French-language websites, 168 bilingual (French-Arabic) websites, 15 trilingual (Arabic-French-Amazigh) websites, as well as other multilingual websites" (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2018a). However, other documentation issued by the same source states that in 2016, only 69 news websites employed journalists with a press card (Ministry of Communication, 2016) – one of the necessary conditions for a news website to be registered as an online media outlet. These new outlets only employed 265 journalists[3] (approximatively 10% of the total amount of authorised journalists), with 58% of newsrooms employing only one to three journalists. Of course, the better-endowed among them are tied to the most well-structured companies: *Le360.ma* (n=18) hires roughly sixty employees (Interview with the director, October 21, 2015), and its founders are close to the ruling monarchy; *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.

owned by journalist Taoufik Bouachrine, who has close ties to the PJD and regularly faces prosecution; *Hespress* (n=15), the most popular website in Morocco; and *Medias24* (n=14), an exclusively French-language economic news site. In comparison, media outlets labelled as the most critical of the power structure work with limited staff, as shown by *Lakome2.com*, *Badil.info* (one journalist), *Alaoual.com* and *Febrayer.com* (which produce news with three professionals), or *Goud.ma* (which works with a team of four).

Finally, this loose professional structuring may be noticed in the lack of available data on digital media producers. Most of them have no journalistic training (46% in 2012 according to a survey by ISESCO) and have no social security or work contract. Often dismissed as "opinion journalism" or "rumours", online news media work with limited human resources, even if some of its leading figures have sought to acquire professional credit (sometimes an economic necessity): several major websites have hence tried to create a professional organization designed to represent them when dealing with political institutions (Médias24, 2014). This emerging sphere also lacks reliable financial structuring. General information about media owners in Morocco is often incomplete, as noted in the investigation published by *Reporters Without Borders* and *Le Desk* in 2017 (Le Desk-RSF, 2017), but evidently online news outlets rarely benefit from substantial investment – except when they are part of integrated advertising agencies such as *Géomédia* or *Media Holding*, or corporate groups and institutions

whose actual shareholders may be difficult to identify. Most website owners rely on personal – and often modest – funding during the initial funding stage. With the exception of a few outlets (including *Le360.ma*, *HuffPost* and *Elbotola.com*), initial investments in digital media seldom exceed 100,000 dirhams (less than 10,000 euros) according to the publishers we have interviewed. A lot of websites are "pure-play" businesses, and their founders do not necessarily apply the strategies of a "media outlet" – in the words of a website manager (Interview with the authors, March 22, 2016), such outlets apply the same management methods as those of a "grocery" (*Hanout*). The prevalence of an economic model based on free access also points to the fragility of the sector. Apart from *ledesk.ma*, a media outlet launched in 2015 which relies on paid subscriptions, all other outlets have opted for free access models and rely on advertising or invisible investments. The website's main founder (El Azzaz, 2018) claimed that *ledesk.ma* "raised more than 700,000 euros in funds but did not reach the initial target of 10,000 subscribers after one year in operation". A year and a half after its launch, the website introduced two different pay models: a paywall, and a freemium offer which includes digital advertising (Ledesk.ma, July 25, 2016).

However, online news sites hardly benefit from advertising revenues. According to a 2018 survey conducted by IPSOS for the *Moroccan Group of Advertisers* (GAM), *Google* and *Facebook* get the lion's share of these revenues with 62% of the overall budget allocated to digital media, while domestic websites only receive a 38% share. In

2015, digital advertising allegedly reached 400-450 million dirhams (6.25% to 7% of advertisers' overall budget). For digital companies such as *Telquel.ma* or *HuffPost Maroc*, the development of branded content strategies, whose aim is to promote values that the brand wants to be associated with (Interviews with the owners, April 11 and 14, 2016), is not sufficient to ensure economic growth.

As is the case with print titles, advertising revenues for digital media vary depending on whether the title is published in French or in Arabic. Among the 656 digital titles authorised by the Ministry of Culture and Communication in 2017, Arabic remains the most frequently used language: 49.5% of websites are in Arabic only, 25.6% offer content in two languages (Arabic and French), 2.3% in three languages (Arabic, Amazigh and French), 18.5% are multilingual websites and 4.1% use French only. French-language media may have become a "niche" market (as advertising professionals would say), but in terms of advertising revenues it is the most profitable market because it is directed at an audience with greater economic and cultural capital (Authors removed, 2017: 255-256). There is a paradox here, summarised as follows by the manager of a bilingual online news outlet (published in French and Arabic): "French is the language of economics, but not the consumers' language" (Interview conducted on October 21, 2015). "You know, advertisers are terrible […], they have their own rationale, lobbying agenda, practices […], and most of them cannot read Arabic", he adds. Significantly, according to a 2018 Ipsos survey carried out with executives and digital marketing and communication managers in Morocco, 95% of advertisers use French on websites and social media, while 47% and 44% of them use

standard Arabic on websites and social media, respectively, with *darija*, the Moroccan

Arabic dialect, exceeding the use of standard Arabic on social media (51%).

Economic, political and career opportunities: a few owners' professional trajectories

This new sphere in the production and dissemination of information has developed

because journalists and entrepreneurs in various lines of business saw digital media as

another way of developing their political, journalistic and/or economic activities.

Among these entrants and investors, particularly noticeable are the trajectories of a few

journalists who have always been strongly critical of the regime. But they also show the

limitations imposed upon these new media whenever the basic interests of the ruling

elites are at stake. These middle-aged journalists were the owners of print outlets which

were pushed into bankruptcy; they quickly saw digital media as a new opportunity – a

new place of expression that would be free of censorship (Jamaï, 2012). Ali Anouzla

and Aboubakr Jamaï, who launched the news website *Lakome.com* in Arabic in January

2011 and later added a French version, match this description. In 2004, Ali Anouzla and

Taoufik Bouachrine co-founded a weekly newspaper named *Al-Jarida al-Oukhra* ("The

Other Newspaper"), which was discontinued two years after its launch. It included

editorials from political dissidents, becoming famous for its 2005 "Person of the year"

poll – in which King Mohammed VI slumped to second place (Tuquoi, 2006) – and for

a 2005 report on the daily life of princess Lalla Asma, the King's wife (Tuquoi, 2005). These two issues led to the demise of *Al-Jarida al-Oukhra* at a time when the newspaper had a weekly circulation of over 50,000 copies. Shortly before that, Ali Anouzla joined the founding team of the Arabic-language daily *Al-Massae* ("The Evening Paper"), which he left two years later, in 2008, to launch *Al-Jarida al-Oula* ("The First Newspaper"). This title also ceased to be published in 2010 because of financial difficulties arising from a lack of advertising revenues and a series of fines – including a $120,000 fine following the publication of an editorial lambasting Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi. According to Ali Anouzla, the *Lakome* online news site was "a haven. My newspaper had been shut down […], we had been forced to bury the idea. I can remember the day – I mean, the day when the printing company told me 'Listen, we're not going to print your paper today'… It was a tough blow. We had no other choice – it was a day of mourning at the office" (Interview, October 20, 2015). For his associate Aboubakr Jamaï, digital media was also a "haven" after several experiences in print media. He founded the weekly newspaper *Le Journal* with Ali Amar in 1997, along with its Arabic edition *Assahifa*. Both were banned in 2000 after publishing a report on the involvement of Moroccan left-wing parties and the then Prime Minister in the 1972 coup attempt against King Hassan II. *Le Journal hebdomadaire* and *Assahifa Al Ousbouiya* were discontinued after a 2010 court order,

officially solely for failure to pay off the debt owed to the National Social Security Fund, tax authorities and several banks (Benslimane, 2015).

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

At the same time, online news outlets have logically attracted younger salaried journalists from print titles, who saw online media as an ideal opportunity to launch their own outlets and free themselves from various forms of censorship. Among these journalists is Maria Moukrim, who worked with Noureddine Miftah at the weekly *Assahifa* from 1999 to 2001, then for the weekly *Al Ayam* (Hespress, 2009) for ten years (Tizpress, 2011), where she occupied the position of editor-in-chief; in 2012, following

a disagreement with *Al Ayam*'s owner, she launched *Febrayer.com*. In the same way, Hamid El Mahdaoui started his career at *Al Ayam*, joined *Chouf TV* and *Lakome.com* in 2013, and created *Badil.info* in 2014.

As for the rest of the entrants, the reasons for investing in the sphere of digital media have not yet been clearly identified. We can assume that the presence of IT engineers – such as the founders of the online news outlet *Yabiladi.com* (Mohamed Ezzouak), the sports website *Elbotola.com* (Oussama Benhammou and Akram Benmbarek), *Hibapress* (Mohamed Lakbir), *Hespress* (Amine Guennouni being one of its co-founders) and the actual owner of *Telquel* magazine (Khalid El Hariri) – is to a certain extent related to the operational specificities of digital media, in which technical and commercial dimensions are closely intertwined. It is worth noting that, from a purely economic point of view, the websites they have created seem to be the most viable type. For entrants coming from the distribution sector – particularly free newspapers – such as the founder of the *Géomédia* group and owner of the *H24info.ma* "pure play" outlet, investing in digital outlets is part of a commercial strategy aimed at furthering their activities in the field via other media.

Lastly, the trajectories of a number of entrants seem to be linked to their connections with members of the Moroccan establishment – in a more or less direct and visible way. Among these entrants is Edit Holding group, owner of the French-Arabic news portal *Le360.ma* – the news outlet with the most human and material resources. One person

who contributed to its launch is Aziz Daki: a gallery owner and art critic at the time he invested in this holding company (which controls *Le360.ma*), Daki is very close to the King's private secretary Mounir Majidi, who was recruited as artistic director and spokesperson of the Mawazine Festival – Morocco's major musical event (Michel, Ait Akdim, 2016). Another example is Abdelmalek Alaoui, the son of one of King Hassan II's counsellors and founder of a company which owns *HuffPost Maroc* and also operates in the field of "strategy consulting, specialising in active competitive intelligence all across West Africa" (Guepard Group, 2019). These suspicions are heightened by the lack of certainty as to the actual financial backers of these online news outlets.

Control mechanisms and dependence on political actors

The reaction of the Moroccan establishment to the explosive growth of online news media was to create mechanisms designed to control it – a process that started in 2011. As is the case with print titles, one method of establishing political control through legal mechanisms is to punish non-compliance with the "red lines", as they are called in Morocco (Hidass, 2016). In an "ethical code" posted on the news website *Le360.ma*, these red lines are defined as follows: "While being committed to the main universal values, the editorial board of Le360 complies with the core values of Moroccan society:

tolerant Muslim faith, national unity in a remarkably diverse society, and monarchy as the nation's unifying institution" (Le360.ma, 2019). This kind of notice is extremely frequent in the latest regulations related to the media industry. For instance, Article 179 of the Criminal Law (2016) provides for steep fines and prison sentences for "libel, insult and offense directed at the King's person or Heir to the Throne, as well as any violation of the respect owed to the King" or "any violation of the royals' private life". In the same way, Article 267-5 states that "anyone attacking the Muslim religion or the monarchy or making statements harming the Kingdom's territorial integrity" may incur fines and prison sentences. The 88-16 Regulation on media outlets and publishing companies provides for "suspension" (Article 104), "cancellation of the publication's serial number or removal of its journalistic content", as well as blocking "access" in the case of a digital media (Article 106)

As the two following journalists explain, these "red lines" may also influence an outlet's ability to attract advertisers – albeit in a more subtle fashion.

"It's always the same questions: 'What is your take on the situation in [Western] Sahara? How are you going to report on the monarchy?' People were telling us: 'Okay, we're going to help you, but let's see how things shape up after the launch.'" (Interview conducted on October 20, 2015 with the creator of an online news outlet who detailed the difficulties encountered in raising funds for his company, including through the use of advertisers).

"The only explanation is that they disagree with our editorial content. The director of a major PR firm candidly told me that there are other journalists who 'defend the nation's

interests'. He was very direct in the words he used: 'Those are the real guys, they defend His Majesty. You don't defend His Majesty, so we're not going to provide advertising for you'. His agency defends the interests of major clients, big corporations, etc." (Ali Amar, *Le Monde* Afrique, October 20, 2016)

In order to control access, production conditions and contents, authorities also seek to impose general rules to this normless space by establishing legal regulations applying to the press industry in general – and digital titles in particular since 2016. For example, Article 11 of Decree 89-13, adopted in 2016 in relation to the practice of journalism, stipulates that "it is forbidden for any media outlet to employ journalists for more than three months if the journalist's press card for the ongoing year has not been delivered to or requested by the journalist". Article 35 of Decree 88-13 on media outlets and publishing companies states that every online news outlet shall apply for a "filming permit delivered by the Moroccan Film Centre […], valid for one year and renewable every year, in line with the regulations applying to audio-visual productions in the field of digital media". Lastly, Article 36 specifies that "comments and links posted by Internet users on the website are subject to the principle of freedom" and that "managing editor shall not publish material that would be considered as a crime under applicable regulations, and must remove any comment that is deemed offensive".

These legal provisions can be used to support prosecutions against journalists for issues related to their work – especially when they do not comply with the "red lines" – but also, in a more frequent if not altogether new trend, for matters pertaining to their private lives. In that respect, the recent example of Hicham Mansouri, a project manager within the Moroccan Association of Investigative Journalism, is enlightening: in 2015, he was handed a three-month prison sentence for "public drunkenness" and "assaulting public officials", namely police officers. Taoufik Bouachrine, who runs the daily newspaper *Akhbar El Yaoum* and the *AlYaoum24* website, has been attacked over his private life on two occasions. On February 23, 2018, he was arrested and jailed after being accused of "human trafficking", "abuse of position for sexual purpose" and "rape and attempted rape". The accusations were based on video footage discovered in the journalist's office on the day of his arrest – but the footage has not been made public. Mr. Bouachrine strongly denies these attacks and claims to be the victim of a "political trial" (AFP, 2018).

Since 2016, another way for authorities to maintain their control has been the creation of new and highly selective support mechanisms for digital media. For instance, of the 69 companies with digital media outlets in operation in 2016, only 7 had benefited from government support. Among other methods of controlling journalistic activities, the interviewees have also singled out the ruling elites' control over the police force and intelligence services.

"What kind of pressure did we face today? So, we've had the odd visit from the local intelligence services – actually, it's not that unusual, I think it's part of their job. Other than that, there have been a few hassles: we were trying to create a nice work environment, with some degree of comfort, and then the health and safety inspector came to visit us – *twelve* times. I thought he might be looking for a bribe, but no. On his tenth visit, he told me: 'Look, they asked me to pay you a visit, so I'm paying you a visit. I don't want any money, I don't want anything at all, but I have to write something'. So, he came to our offices, and it was… The first time, it was about the fire extinguisher, another time it was, 'You should have a notice somewhere detailing labour rights for staff members'. No one was working undeclared, every foreign employee had a contract, but he told me: 'I have to find something wrong here, because I need to have that as a precaution'. They need to know your weaknesses. For now, we don't have any, but soon…" (Interview with the manager of a "critical" online news website, April 13, 2016)

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

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

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