Alternative Public Spaces in Hybrid Media Environments: Dissent in High Uncertainty

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Abstract

Independent news websites and press played a vital role in creating spaces of contention in the context of the Moroccan pro-democracy movement of 2011. This article looks at the role of this press in disseminating alternative narratives in the hybrid media and political environment that followed the pro-democracy movement. Based on extensive interviews with journalists, this article examines journalists' practices in countering hegemonic media and political discourse, to understand how they contribute to—or hinder—the formation of counter publics under tough repression. The article uses the critical frameworks of dominant and counter-publics and Judith Butler's concept of silencing.

The Moroccan media and political landscape witnessed sporadic phases of openness, largely controlled by the regime, which did not build a lasting legacy, nor did it survive traditional restrictions on media freedoms and the public sphere. The demands of the protest movement of February 2011 were answered by a series of constitutional reforms overwhelmingly voted in by the public in a referendum held in July 2011. These reforms were largely perceived as nothing but an attempt to

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co-opt the street movement by responding to a few popular demands while preserving the main features of the authoritarian regime (Errazzouki, 2012; Maghraoui, 2011; Molina, 2011).

This article looks at the experiences of journalists working in media platforms that disseminate dissenting content in the conservative kingdom challenging the dominant media discourse, to understand their agency as enablers of change in a hybrid environment where reporting on socially sensitive topics is largely tolerated while investigating sensitive political and economic issues remains restricted. The article argues that the survival tactics employed by critical journalists to avoid harsh retaliation are leading to consolidating the dominant discourse rather than weakening it. By exercising self-restraint, critical journalists and their media indirectly engage with the regime's tactics to limit counter narratives to a cyclical expression which impact can be mitigated and ultimately eliminated. Journalists' perception that their influence on mainstream media and politics cannot survive beyond "the momentum of openness" undermines their ability to create lasting change, with lack of bonds of solidarity among them.

Through semistructured interviews, the article investigates journalists' processes of self-restraint as well as the everyday acts of resistance against restrictions to unpack their understanding of their role as providers of dissenting narratives. Through practical examples of coverage of sensitive topics/events, the article attempts to make sense of forms of collaboration these journalists develop with the power and the implications this has on the formation of sustained counter narratives able to challenge the dominant discourse. The dynamics of this alternative and marginal space are examined through the analytical framework of dominant and counter publics, as well as the notion of silencing as a subtle yet powerful tool of censorship.

While the experiences of this critical press are traditionally examined through a historical lens, with a focus on their interplay with the political and economic structures of repression (see Benchenna et al., 2017; El Ayadi & Naji, 2006; El Kadoussi, 2018; Zaid, 2017), this article focuses on their practices as journalists, in an attempt to understand how they contribute to—or hinder—the formation of counter publics under tough repression. In other words, instead of considering this press a victim of the regime's repression, this article investigates the press' influence as an active player in—potentially—propagating counter narratives, and how the silencing tactics used by the regime are contributing to limiting their emancipatory effect.

The article's contributions are relevant especially since the regime has recently put increasing pressure on all expressions of dissent in traditional as well as new media, repudiating their previous relative tolerance toward voices of dissent. According to Human Rights Watch (2020), the Moroccan authorities have arrested and prosecuted at least 10 activists, artists, or other citizens who expressed critical opinions via social media platforms or arts since September 2019. Most journalists currently behind bars have been charged with unlawful conduct in their personal lives and sentenced to serve time in prison based on flawed trials; there are concerns that these trials are retaliation against these journalists for their political opinions or affiliations (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The Moroccan "Spring" and the Media Landscape: Between Cycles

The reforms Mohammed VI introduced mandated a change for Morocco from the previous "executive monarchy" model to a "constitutional, democratic, parliamentary and social monarchy" as per Article 1 of the Moroccan Constitution of 1 July 2011.[1] According to Article 47 of the new constitution, the king must appoint a candidate from the party that has won most seats in parliamentary elections. However, the king's exclusive power to decide matters in the three key domains of religion, security issues, and major strategic policy was preserved, allowing him to maintain his strong influence over the country's religious, socio-cultural, and political domains. The king's power also surpasses any elected bodies on all topics that he deems as "strategic," which has rendered these political reforms largely ineffective in practice (Ottaway, 2011).

The 2011 pro-democracy protests injected a new energy into Morocco's communication landscape, encouraging journalists to debate and challenge historical taboos. Moroccan media, traditionally reverential in dealing with the "sacred" topics of the monarchy, Islam, and territorial integrity, rapidly diversified content and operations, allowing greater representation of citizens' everyday problems (El Issawi, 2016a). The constitutional reforms of 2011 expanded media pluralism. The partial liberalization of the audio-visual sector with the expansion of commercial radio in the last decade has widened the scope of debate on social issues that used to be considered "untouchable" (Sonay, 2017). Television remains largely state owned; private licenses for television are very limited and the process for getting one lacks transparency (Issiali, 2013).

The revolutionary zeal of 2011 has faded in the shadow of the regime's harsh stance toward any expression of dissent or protest. The regime's harsh response to the grassroots movement *Al-Hirak al-Shaabi*, or "Popular Movement," in the ethnically Berber Rif region exemplifies this regression. Hundreds of activists arrested, with many facing tough prison sentences—some up to 20 years—encapsulates the regime's new policy of zero tolerance toward street protest (Eljechtimi, 2019).

The continuous prosecution of libel cases against journalists and media institutions, under the penal code, often including the sentencing of prison terms, is frequently used to muzzle critical reporting, despite the 2016 press code's elimination of prison sentences for professional offenses. In addition to punitive measures embedded in the press and penal codes, other laws are often used as restrictions against journalists, such as the antiterrorism law which employs a broad definition of terrorism (El-Rifae, 2016; Hidass, 2000; Zaid, 2017).

Legal prosecution has become such a major feature of the journalistic environment in Morocco that it amounts to judicial harassment. One of the most notorious cases is the conviction of journalist Ali Anouzla for publishing an article containing a link to a video by Al-Qaeda (Reporters Without Borders, 2013). Another prominent case is that of leading critical journalist Toufik Bouachrine: the columnist and publisher of the independent daily newspaper *Akhbar al-Yaom* was sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of sexual assault and rape in a prosecution largely viewed as extraordinary and

politicized, being a retaliation to his criticism to the regime (Ifex, 2019). Bouachrine isn't the only journalist with *Akhbar al-Yaom* to find themselves in court; journalist Hajar Raissouni from the same paper was sentenced to a year in prison for extramarital sex and abortion before being pardoned by the king following the public outcry (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In May 2020, the editor in chief of the same paper, Soulaiman Raissouni (Hajar's uncle) was arrested, accused of attempting to rape a gay man. The detention of journalist and outspoken critic Omar Radi in December 2019 and July 2020, on charges including undermining state security, receiving foreign funding, and rape, is indicative of a growing trend of silencing critics via flawed trials backed by scant evidence (Bernani, 2020; El Azouzi & Moussaoui, 2020).

The Moroccan Critical Press: A Trajectory of Uncertainty

The Moroccan independent press has evolved and thrived during brief sporadic periods of political openness. One prominent period, often referred to as the "democratic margin," was triggered by the political *alternance*, a process of dialogue with the opposition launched by the late King Hassan II; the *alternance* lead to the formation of a political government following the 1997 parliamentary elections, with the aim of preparing a peaceful transition to the throne for the king's son (Monjib, 2011). This unprecedented political dynamism encouraged the flourishing of a bolder press. One prominent platform, the French-language weekly *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, launched in 1997, pioneered investigative journalistic practices in Morocco. Another important outlet, the news magazine *Tel Quel*, launched in 2000, adopted a liberal editorial line examining and challenging topics that were socially taboo. In 2006, the magazine launched a sister publication, Nichane, which uses the Moroccan colloquial Arabic (Darija) and rapidly became the leading Arabic investigative platform (Douai, 2009; El Kadoussi, 2018; Tayebi, 2015).

However, these publications soon faced retaliation for their reporting; *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* was banned in 2000 after it published an interview with the head of the separatist Polisario Front. By 2003, the openness of the "democratic margin" was coming to an end. In 2007, Nichane was suspended for two months after it published an article on "how Moroccans joke about religion, politics, and sex." In 2010, Moroccan authorities closed down *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* after the publication was fined $360,000 (USD) as part of the outcome of a defamation suit (Tayebi, 2015). With the development of an Arabic-speaking press that has surpassed its more elite, French-speaking counterpart in popularity in recent years, the Moroccan critical press is opening up to new players, some of whom reported extensively on the pro-democracy movement of 2011. Central to this scene was the news website Lakom.com, founded and edited by the leading journalist Ali Anouzla; the news website *Hespress*, which extensively covered the protest demonstrations in several Moroccan cities using reports from protesters; and the aforementioned newspaper *Akbar al Yaom*, considered friendly to the Islamic ruling party PJD.

This article evolves through multiple steps: I will first present the theoretical frames and the methodology used in the data collection from the fieldwork. Second, I will delve into their relevance to the case study and what the data informs about these frames and conclusions that can be drawn.

Dissent as a Daily Practice

The Moroccan spaces of contention in old and new media is an example of an anti-discipline movement rebelling against entrenched capture by the regime and its network of alliances in politics and the economy. According to Habermas's (1998) notion of the public sphere, media is necessary as a space of rational deliberation that should naturally lead to the formation of a consensus among the public regarding the "common good." In his account, this elitist public sphere was undermined by state control and the power of interest groups transforming it into "a more passive cultural consumption and an apolitical sociability" (Calhoun, 1993, p. 44). The concept of the public sphere was hotly debated; many have criticized Habermas's notion for its many exclusions, as it does not recognize social inequalities and inaccessibility as barriers to democratic deliberation.

Foucault presents a different approach to understanding power relations between the weak and the dominant. In his account, power lays more in persuasion than domination, as deliberation "must be enacted through multiple paths of connection and dependency, enabled or impeded at different levels and by a host of agencies," thus leading to the formation of multiple public spheres interacting within the power flows and dynamics beyond the nation-state unit (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013, p. 91). Discipline and the techniques used to enforce it necessarily induce forms of resistance, as "there is no relationship of power without the means of escape" (Foucault, 1982, p. 794). In the same vein, de Certeau (1984) contends that ordinary citizens can develop "counter dynamics," through engaging in what he calls "networks of an anti-discipline," leading to the establishment of "counter publics." These spaces of contention are driven by "clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already in the nets of discipline" (p. xiv-xv).

Inspired by Gramsci's legacy, Fraser's (1990) critique of Habermas's public sphere is one of its most prominent analyses, published in her seminal article "Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy." Fraser's critique challenges the singularity of the public sphere, arguing for multiple subaltern public spheres and allowing for the formation of counter publics that can coexist with the dominant publics and even influence them. As per Fraser's (1990, pp. 122–123) concept, counter publics are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs."

Although it shares many commonalities with Habermas's public sphere, the notion of the civil sphere proposed by Alexander (2006) provides a more inclusive space, as it highlights the importance of networks of solidarity arising from a sense of social justice, giving more attention to "shared feelings and symbolic commitments" (p.43). This solidarity, fuelled by human rights' abuses and injustice, leads to a deep sense of indignation and responsibility, to try to repair the damage caused by these injustices. These networks of solidarity and indignation, when they find a media platform, can share information on the abuses they are suffering in a public way that, one hopes, will insulate them from threats and more subtle forms of pressure. The stories these networks share can function

this way even if they are triggered, developed, or disseminated by fairly marginal media outposts, as these smaller enterprises can, at times, force larger media companies to follow suit, by building cultural awareness of an issue. While the notion of the civil sphere shares some features of Habermas's public sphere, such as associational life and solidary group relationships, it is distinct in its focus on the cultural generation of solidarity and the perception of the society as a whole, to the extent of being blamed for obscuring the differences between the civil and the public (Friedland, 2007). This notion is another useful frame for this study to reflect on the importance of these bonds of solidarity, allowing marginal dissent to spread and perhaps influence mainstream media that is generally loyal to the regime.

Self-Censorship or Self-Restraint as Survival Tactics

Self-restraint is a necessity for journalists in Morocco. Applied as a conscious response to anticipated pressure, a culture of self-censorship in newsrooms manifests as journalists avoid topics that could lead to retaliation, and this avoidance can easily escalate into outright bias, omission, falsified information, and distortion. This culture is understood by journalists and absorbed into their practices without direct intervention or dictate from those in power. It is a conscious activity journalists practice under pressure from the interconnected system of political and legal interests, but also from their peers, who are often willing to use their own agency in delegitimizing a professional rival (Gans, 1979). Journalists interviewed mainly justify this practice of self-restraint by citing the urgency of "specific conditions" and the primacy of national security or national interests over freedom of expression and pluralism. The ability of journalists to co-exist with these limitations leads to the normalization of these practices, transforming them into a feature of the newsrooms' traditions and their ideology of news production.

The conflicting messaging by hybrid regimes—tolerating criticism in some cases and applying harsh punishment against critics in others—prompts an editorial docility in newsrooms (Lee and Chan, 2008) whereby dissenting content is limited and its impact is balanced by the dissemination of counter-messaging (such as praising the regime or giving excuses for repression). While fear remains a major driving force in self-censorship practices, there are other factors that are more influential. The nature of the media ownership and the models of media funding limit the sustainability of those independent media projects (Sturges, 2006). According to the Media Ownership Monitor indicators developed by Reporters Without Borders, the Moroccan media sector is directly linked to the government, the state, or the royal family through large media groups. Large investments in media from leading business figures are questionable, as some of these media outlets make limited or no financial profit. The nature of the media sector ownership, largely under the control of the royal family or powerful businessmen and government ministers, makes it quite difficult for critical media projects to gain economic viability.[2] With the regime applying a system of rewards and punishments in dealing with media, the motives behind self-censorship among journalists are a blend of fear and nepotism.

However, economic sustainability or fear from legal retaliation are not the most prominent motives behind the practice of self-restraint among journalists. My research reveals that many journalists self-muzzle to avoid social isolation and moral denigration, as well as to pursue symbolic alignment and recognition from the political powers that be (Windrich, 2001); challenging social norms would inevitably warrant social retaliation. Here, the work of Judith Butler on the "domain of the sayable" is key to understanding the practices of journalists implementing self-restraint as a necessary, although despised, survival tactic. In her seminal work on silencing, Butler (1997) contends that the dominant discourse constructed by the media "produces the domain of the sayable with which [one] begin[s] to speak at all." (p.133). Stepping away from the parameters delimited by the unsayable, Butler argues, will inevitably be considered as "deviations" from what can be said, thus leading to the imposition of sanctions by exclusion or punishment. This harsh retaliation is necessary for the powers that be to mark the space of transgression, or, the domains of the "speakable" and the "unspeakable":

> If the subject speaks impossibly, speaks in ways that cannot be regarded as speech or the speech of a subject, then that speech is discounted, and the viability of the subject called into question. The consequences of such an eruption of the unspeakable may range from a sense that one is "falling apart" to the intervention of the state to secure criminal or psychiatric incarceration. (p.136)

By venturing into the domain of the "unspeakable," those journalists who commit such acts of rebellion are considered deserving of punishment by their peers as well as members of the society. The definition of this domain produces the "speaking subjects" in opposition to those who don't have such privilege and, as a result, "makes certain kinds of citizens possible and others impossible" (p.132). However, what is important in Butler's approach to censorship is her concept of silencing: censorship not administrated by direct intervention by the state, but rather by peers in the aim to denigrate and ultimately silence the rebellious subject. The subjects of speech can "wield the power to deprive each other of the freedom of speech" to protect the domain of "speakability" from any attempt at subversion without the need for direct intervention by the state: "It is the subject who now is said to wield such power, and not the state or some other centralized institution, although institutional powers presupposed and invoked by the one who delivered the words that silence" (p.137).

In the following sections, I will present the methodology used in the data collection and discuss the major themes that emerged from the interviews: practices and coping mechanisms employed by journalists to evade censorship and retaliation in the aim of creating counter narratives, their experiences of being silenced and how they respond to it. The analysis will cover the contributions of online journalism in empowering dissenting voices.

Methodology

This article examines data collected in interviews with Moroccan journalists conducted in two phases: the first in Rabat in July 2015, and the second in Casablanca

in February 2019. The two phases did not witness crucial differences in the relationship between the regime and critical media. Civil liberties and media freedoms were under attack in the aftermath of the pro-democracy protests and throughout the adoption of reforms. However, the ongoing crackdown on expressions of dissent, including on social media, has recently reached tough levels, abandoning the relative tolerance to criticism the regime had adopted in the final years of Hassan II.

This study is part of a larger research project examining the interplay between news media and democratization following the Arab uprisings in three countries in North Africa. For the larger study, I interviewed more than 100 professional journalists working in traditional media, including news websites, as well as media stakeholders such as media owners, unions' representatives, and activists/bloggers in Tunisia, Morroco, and Egypt. This article uses a part of the data collected from our fieldwork in Morocco, based on semi-structured interviews with 14 professional Moroccan journalists working in a variety of critical media (50 journalists have been interviewed so far in Morocco). The sampling process was based on lists of journalists developed by carefully monitoring current media outlets and studying the structure of the Moroccan media industry both historically and recently. Thus, the sample of journalists represents experiences from most of the print press and news websites that still run dissenting narratives to some degree, such as Zaman and Tel Quel maganizes, Akhbar al-Yoam newspaper, Lakom.com and Hesspress news websites. The sample includes most of the leading journalists known for being outspoken against the regime—some are currently in prison.

The sample is not as broad as we had hoped for. For instance, we tried to achieve a balanced representation in terms of gender, but the limited number of women journalists in this sector did not allow for such balance. In the sampling process, we reached out to several journalists in each media outlet on our lists; some journalists I contacted were reluctant to take part, and others withdrew after confirming participation due to fear of retaliation or being monitored. Most interviewees chose to remain anonymous, to allow them to discuss their practices as honestly and safely as possible; only a few leading journalists asked to be named. The data were analyzed thematically to identify common themes—topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning—through monitoring reoccurring topics/ideas throughout the collected data (Kvale, 2007).

In conducting these face-to-face interviews, I followed a bottom-up method, starting with personal experience and then segueing into perceptions of the industry at large. The interviews were conducted in Arabic or French, and then were transcribed and translated by the author into English. Each interview, which took approximately an hour and a half, focused on the subject's professional practices in covering sensitive topics while avoiding legal, financial, and social retaliation. The interviews' protocol investigated journalists' processes of self-censorship or self-restraint, as well as the implications of these practices for their sense of themselves as providers of dissenting narratives. Special focus was given to the everyday acts of resistance against the restrictions imposed on media, and forms of collaboration they develop within this environment through practical examples of their practice.

Table 1. Journalists Participants.

Ali Anouzla	Founder and editor in chief of Lakom. com and a leading critical journalist	Above 40 years old, male.
Toufic Bouachrine	Founder and editor in chief of *Akhbar al Yaom*, currently in prison	Above 40 years old, male
Abdallah Tourabi	Former director of *Tel Quel* magazine	Above 40 years old, male
Fatima Ifriqi	Journalist in the state broadcaster	Above 40, female
Journalist 1	Reporter/writer in a magazine	Between 20–40 years old, male
Journalist 2	Reporter/writer in a magazine	Between 20–40 years old, male
Journalist 3	Reporter at a news website	Between 20–40, male
Journalist 4	Reporter at a news website	Between 20–40, male
Journalist 5	Editor in chief of a news website	Above 40, male
Journalist 6	Leading journalist in a newspaper	Above 40, male
Journalist 7	Freelance journalist	Between 20–40, female.
Journalist 8	Reporter in a magazine	Between 20–40, male
Journalist 9	Reporters in a news website	Between 20–40, female
Journalist 10	Freelance journalist	Above 40, male

Table 1 presents our sample of journalists interviewed, a brief description of their career, and their age. Most are men; there is a healthy balance between those who are mid-career or leading journalists, and younger journalists new to the profession.

The choice of the critical frameworks of dominant and counter-publics, as well as Judith Butler's concept of silencing, is informed by the themes that emerged from the journalists' interview responses. When describing their daily processes reporting on public affairs, journalists' testimonies often pointed to a struggle between adaptation and confrontation in dealing with restrictions. Most of the interview subjects considered moral denigration, primarily by their peers working in the government friendly media outlets, the most dangerous threat to their ability to survive in this uncertain environment, and thus a powerful tool the government and its supporters could use to silence them. Butler's notion of silencing by peer reflects the limitations of these journalists' influence; journalists who become influential face fierce campaigns of silencing in the aim of discrediting them in the eyes of the society, and thus curbing their impact in creating counter-narratives.

It is important to clarify that, for the purposes of this study, the term "critical" journalists refers to journalists working for publications or media outlets disseminating critical content in tackling the traditional taboos presented above, or disseminating such content in their production as freelancers. It is not realistic to consider them "watchdog" journalists—this form of journalism cannot exist under the current restrictions (including prison sentences, judicial harassment, limitations on access to information, and closure of media outlets). Given the conditions under which they practice journalism, it is unrealistic to expect these print press outlets presses to function as a check on the state by monitoring its institutions and exposing abuses of state power, as would be necessary to consider them watchdog journalists (Curran, 2005).

Challenging Taboos: The Dangerous Game

Most journalists interviewed believe their practices contribute to challenging the dominant media discourse, especially when their stories are picked up by international media outlets or are able to create a sense of outrage among their audience. However, their ability to influence the dominant public debate is directly linked to their understanding of timing, when to dare and when to keep a low profile, which invariably requires self-restraint, a tactic that will not necessarily protect them from potential retaliation. This impact remains sporadic and precarious.

"Flirting" with established taboos is a common practice for Moroccan critical journalists—in this instance, flirting is understood to mean challenging expectations in some circumstances while keeping a low profile in others. Those mastering this mixed practice of dissent and self-restraint—especially those making editorial decisions—need first to understand the regime's "mood" by learning to decode messages—both direct and indirect—sent by the Palace and related spheres of power. These journalists must sense the right timing to raise their voices or keep quiet, according to the editor of a news website (journalist 5):

> I need to understand the public mood to be able to work. Is "el-Makhzan" in the current circumstances adopting an aggressive policy in targeting critics, or is the ceiling of tolerance is higher than usual, so it is safe for us to express dissent? Answering this question correctly is crucial for me to be able to do my job.
> (Personal interview, Rabat, February 2019)

Like his colleague, a leading journalist in a newspaper (journalist 6) reflected on this tricky gamble journalists must make in the absence of clear directives by the system:

> A journalist is more important than a lawyer in understanding how to deal with red lines. We, journalists, are guided mainly by the political mood. For instance, the Moroccan press talks every day about what we call "the king's anger" which means the king's dissatisfaction from the work of this or that official or institution. (Personal interview, Casablanca, February 2019).

However, a major barrier against holding the powerful accountable is the limited ability of journalists to access information that is crucial for any investigative activity, even if they are willing to take a risk to do so. Although a law protecting freedom of expression, referred to as the Draft Law Regarding the Right to Access Information or Draft ATI law, was adopted in 2017, it requires significant revisions to meet the standards set by international law, especially concerning its applicability and potentially conflicting interpretation of other legislations (Article 19, 2017). Key pieces of information—the business activity of the king, his entourage, and security services—are largely unattainable for journalists, putting them at a distinct disadvantage. Some institutions, such as the army, are essentially a black box. In 2015, Abdallah Tourabi,

former director of Tel Quel magazine, described the regime's continuously changing stance on media access to information thusly:

> There is more information in the press today about the palace. But it all depends on the decision to open or close this window. The day they decide they want to go after a journalist or a media institution, they will not be short of means to do so. (Personal interview, Casablanca, July 2015)

Sporadic access to this "untouchable" information, as it is often referred to, is limited by the regime for achieving targeted purposes, which explains the precarious nature of these phases of relative tolerance. According to leading critical journalist Ali Anouzla:

> The sources of information on topics related to the military, the intelligence, and the Palace cannot be accessed by journalists. Officials in these institutions will call the journalist to provide him with information with the aim of directing him to what he should write; it is not the other way around. (Personal interview, Casablanca, July 2015)

The regime's culture of secrecy has been exacerbated by the reluctance of key players in the political and economic scene to communicate with journalists, even on topics largely considered non sensitive. Speaking about the effects these limitations have on his ability to report on current affairs, journalist (2) told me:

> Public institutions are reluctant to communicate with journalists; it is not possible to call their press people over the phone to ask for information. This includes institutions that are not considered strategic or sensitive. They usually pick "their" journalists: those who don't cause trouble or ask difficult questions. Some journalists who attempted to conduct investigations on these institutions were stopped after their management received angry phone calls. (Personal interview, Casablanca, February 2019)

Tactics of self-restraint subject the treatment of sensitive topics to a complicated process, allowing some features of the news to be tackled and others to be neglected. Journalists I interviewed talked about tricks to evade retaliation when reporting on prominent personalities close to the Palace or major financial institutions run or owned by them. Some mentioned using intentionally vague language; others expressed dissent by interviewing public personalities who usually express such narratives. The plural new political sphere, largely dominated by conservative Islamic or royalist factions, is not creating a geniune dynamism in media; sensitive topics related to the real center of power, the Palace, are still strictly avoided. Discussing his own survival tactics for such an environment, leading critical journalist Toufik Bouachrine—currently in prison said:

> We sometimes impose self-censor. The important issue for us is to survive. We can talk easily about topics such as government policies and ministers' behavior; topics related to the king, the security services, and the army are very difficult to tackle. (Personal interview, Rabat, July 2015)

A female reporter (journalist 7) identified the lack of information on issues that matter as a major obstacle impeding her ability to practice serious journalism:

> The political life is static. Those who have information on important issues decide how much they want to give, how and to whom. Our politicians are unable to create news, they can only create conflicts about superficial issues. We can cover these conflicts, but if we want to follow the real players, we get ourselves in trouble. (Personal interview, Rabat, February 2019)

The influence of this critical journalism is also limited by the changes in the media ownership. In some cases, the appointment of a new editor in chief or changes in the media ownership are sufficient to significantly shift a publication's editorial line. A journalist who left one of these critical media outlets, believing it is less inclined to challenge the powers that be than it once was, recounted his experience:

> I left this platform because it is not anymore reflective of the ideals we believed it. The new editor considers journalism as an act of public relations. For instance, if we were to publish a special investigation on the Ministry of Interiors, the editor can stop the publication after a phone call from the minister requesting to do so. (Personal Interview, Casablanca, February 2019)

Given the lack of clarity on the applicability of these red lines, media coverage that deals with sensitive topics still amounts to an act of gambling. Tough retaliation toward one media outlet will indirectly push other media outlets, including vocal journalists, to retreat and keep a low profile to avoid similar treatement. In the absence of chains of solidarity among the voices of dissent, and the imbalance of power between these voices and the regime, dissent remains an isolated act. Yet if they acquire influence to the extent of impacting the dominant discourse, the threat of retaliation against them becomes greater.

Moral Denigration: Isolation as a Punishment

In my interviews, journalists confirmed that one of the major challenges they face is being silenced by the threat of their peers delegitimizing their attempts to question the regime's policies through defamatory reporting. Legal cases based on non professional offenses, such as adultery or drug use, are a prominent tool, not only to intimidate critical journalists, but also to isolate them by delegitimizing them in the eyes of their community, given the crucial place of morality and religion in the conservative Moroccan society.

Using the courts to retaliate against critical journalists isn't new in Morocco. However, after the 2011 protests, actual prison sentences implying immoral or criminal action became more prevalent (New York Times, 2015). The recent sentencing of leading critical journalist Toufic Bouachrine to 15 years in prison on a variety of charges including prostitution and human trafficking sent a chilling message to journalists—including those who are not active in political reporting. Moral denigration is

a powerful deterrent because it is orchestrated by the press, some of which is used as a platform to disseminate state-sanctioned narratives, and at times to conduct defamatory campaigns against specific persons. These campaigns by the regime-friendly press delegitimize critical journalists as respected members of the community, and in doing so, weaken these journalists' ability to effectively challenge the regime and their policies. Journalist (1) commenting specifically on Bouachrine's case said:

> I read this case carefully to take the temperature (of the regime's mood). This is very important. When we accuse a leading journalist of such awful crimes, I feel intimidated. Because I identify myself with him, although I am in a different situation. When I see what happened to him, I feel scared. (Personal interview, Casablanca, February 2019)

Journalists have a strong sense of the impact that retaliation, primarily the defamatory legal cases the government has been fond of using, could have on them, especially in terms of job security. A young journalist who covered the 2011 movement (journalist 4) told me:

> I am now very careful. Most of the journalists attacked in these cases are pursued for their personal opinions. I fear the idea that they can be looking to fabricate moral cases against me. Professionalism is not enough to protect me. (Personal interview, Rabat, July 2015)

The moral, as opposed to professional, nature of these charges, is intentional and strategic on the regime's part. Fatima Ifriqui, one of very few journalists working for state media who vocally supported the pro-democracy movement of 2011, spoke about the retaliation she faced for her opinions, saying:

> Independent journalists have no real personal life. They cannot meet friends in bars, they cannot live their life normally, we are obliged to retreat socially; we are not only scared of the regime but even more of the society, which can be violent. (Personal interview, Rabat, July 2015)

Per Butler's notion of silencing, crossing into the domain of the "unspeakable" will inevitably bring retaliation. By inflicting punishment on "troublemakers," the domain of "speakability" is protected from any attempt at subversion without the need for direct intervention by the state, as those committing these acts are transformed into "an example" for their peers. The damage to one's reputation that can result from such moral denigration is a strong tool to intimidate journalists, leading them to socially retreat not only for fear of the regime, but also to avoid potential social retaliation. It turns them effectively into subjects who are not able to enjoy the "speaking" privilege, as per Butler's understanding of silencing. One powerful example is a campaign launched by an online TV station against journalist Omar Radi; the station published leaked documents pertaining to Radi's charges before he himself was even notified of them, and asked a cameraman to follow him and film his private life in hopes of portraying him as someone "at odds of the values of his society" (Reporters Without Borders, 2020a). Reporters Without Borders (2020b) has issued an urgent appeal to

the United Nations to publicly condemn the misuse of sex charges against journalists who criticize the Moroccan authorities.

Dissent in News Websites

While mainstream Moroccan media remained largely indifferent to the 2011 protests, counter narratives challenging the dominant discourse on the movement were disseminated by a few news websites, mainly led by professional critical journalists. One such website, lakom.com, rapidly became a key platform for conveying the message of the pro-democracy movement through a mixture of professional reporting and Facebook activism. "The ceiling of freedom of expression was very high at that time, and we benefitted from it in a professional manner," founding journalist Anouzla said (Personal interview, Rabat, July 2015).

The hybrid journalist/activist practices of the website managed to convince ordinary citizens to take to the street, even after the 2011 protests had come to an end. In 2013, Anouzla published an article on lakom.com in conjunction with the Spanish-language newspaper *el Pais*, in which he uncovered a deal between King Mohammed VI and the Spanish king, Juan Carlos I, granting pardons to, among other, serial pedophile Daniel Galvan—who was serving a 30-year prison sentence after being convicted of raping 11 Moroccan children between the ages of 4 and 15 (Le Monde, 2013). This became popularly known in Morocco as the "Danielgate" incident; protests across the country and on Twitter and Facebook forced the regime to scramble for an explanation and, within days, rescind the pardon. Anouzla explains:

> A huge number of people went to the streets. Those were not the people of the 20 February movement. For the first time, what we call the silent institution, the Palace, issued four communiqués in hours in which the king declared finally that a mistake was committed and that he is sorry. (Personal interview, Rabat, July 2015)

Of course, wielding this power brought retaliation; the first edition of Lakom.com was shut down by Moroccan authorities soon after the Danielgate incident as part of the legal pursuits against Anouzla. This led in 2015 to the launch of a new version of the site, *lakome2*, aimed at Moroccan youth and the Arab world (Reporters Without Borders, 2013). The website suffers from limited financial resources and publicity, and had trouble holding its audience as competitive news websites supported by the regime with solid financial backing proliferated.

Although limited, this activism empowered by social media platforms encouraged the public to be bold in claiming their rights—even those living at the margins, as a journalist working in a news website (journalist 3) explained:

> There is an emerging spirit among large communities, including those living in suburbs and in deprived regions, calling for rights, such as the movement on social media launched by those forced to vacate their homes in shanty towns in one of Casablanca's poor suburbs. (Personal interview, Casablanca, February 2019)

The impact of these news websites gives weight to Chadwick's (2017) notion of hybrid media systems, whereby the interdependency between new and old technologies creates new and innovative models and practices that bring journalists and activists together. If these few online platforms of dissent were enabled to reach out to larger publics during particular important events, such as the pro-democracy movement of 2011, they were not able to sustain such reach beyond these circumstances, when the crackdown on dissent intensified. Moreover, while the dynamic collaboration between professional journalism and cyber activism helped strengthen and expand dissenting narratives, it did not empower new practices in reporting on dissent or meaningfully impact mainstream media narratives (El Issawi, 2016b). Rather, this alternative journalism remained at the margins of mainstream media and politics and was further weakened by the swell of many pro-regime websites that use their platform to advocate for the continuity of the status quo. Some of these platforms of dissent—such as the award-winning citizen media project *mamfakinch.com*—were victims of a mass hacking campaign aiming to intercept their team's communications, leading finally to their closure (Errazzouki, 2017).

Discussion

A complex set of barriers limits the agency available to critical journalists and activists in Morocco seeking to challenge the dominant narratives spread by traditional Moroccan media. Frequent prosecutions, heavy fines, and prison sentences exemplify the struggles of this small journalistic community. This system of structural limitations is enhanced by effective practices of moral denigration against dissenting voices, leading ultimately to their silence and preserving the "domain of speakability" from any questioning. This silencing, per Judith Butler's notion of it, encourages or forces critical journalists to self-censor to avoid delegitimization, with implications for their reputations and even their physical safety.

Despite these barriers, journalists and outlets have succeeded at times in developing counter publics at the margins of everyday life in Morocco, indicating that the disenfranchised are willing to exercise their agency to challenge the dominant discourse. Following Foucault's notion of power relations, these spaces of contention, empowered by social media platforms, managed to create alternative narratives. These narratives were successful in convincing hundreds of ordinary citizens to take to the streets through a combination of online campaigns and professional investigations within the context of the 2011 pro-democracy movement and after. These empowered counter publics are a testament of the power of these spaces of contention. In the aftermath of the movement, these spaces enjoyed an important momentum that helped challenge their marginal status, bringing them to the center of mainstream politics and media (as per Fraser's notion of marginal publics gaining recognition from dominant publics). These counter publics not only thrived at the margins of the dominant public, but also impacted it directly, thus generating critical debate. However, the long-term tangible impact of these spaces on policymaking remains way below its imagined legacy.

This dual nature is the main feature of this space of contention in the media landscape, being both influential and irrelevant, powerful and weak.

The struggle of critical journalists to defend the ideals of democratic change did not garner support within their larger community of journalists, nor did it impact newsrooms' practices. Most of the news websites that flourished after the protests have lost their influence or simply changed their editorial lines along with their ownership. By adapting to the limitations imposed on expressions of dissent, under the guise of surviving this pressure, many journalists in this community have ultimately contributed to reinforcing the media's status quo. Importantly, the lack of collective solidarity among producers of counter narratives restricts their ability to create a genuine counter power. Their inability to create bonds of solidarity as a community exacerbates the fragility of their condition. As demonstrated in this research, the remaining voices of dissent mainly resorted to self-censorship to sustain operations or avoid retaliation. These journalistic experiences and their limitations confirm the importance of the notion of solidarity addressed by Alexander's civil sphere, while raising questions on the conditions under which these chains of solidarity can develop and thrive and why, in the case of Morocco, these chains did not sustain influence, despite a growing pattern of repression.

In describing their practices, journalists I interviewed seemed convinced that the cyclical nature of the Moroccan public sphere, shifting continually from openness to closure, is a reality they cannot challenge. The media-orchestrated campaigns of denigration against critical journalists are a strong tool in the regime's hands to deter dissent in media and politics without exerting direct censorship by painting dissenters as traitors to society. As Murphy (2011) puts it:

> Pluralism and tolerance of pluralism have too often been sacrificed in order to create an official, national cultural code which endorses the interventionist role of the state on the grounds that national and cultural security are both in jeopardy and in need of the state's protection. (p.977)

Most of journalists interviewed in this research believe that the cyclical nature of the Moroccan public sphere will witness new openness in the future, when circumstances once again allow such change; however, they also believe that this change will take place without them necessarily having an input on such a development. In line with Fraser's notion of counter publics, to gain recognition, pro-democracy communities both on- and off-line must exercise influence over the dominant public sphere. Marginalized and quite often demeaned by peers in media loyal to the regime, critical journalists and their media projects are not able to influence media or political practices beyond "the momentum of openness" allowed by circumstances or changes in the regime's policies.

The influence these few remaining voices of dissent have in creating counter narratives and publics is limited, and often manipulated by the powers that be, thus failing to create a lasting legacy beyond the momentum. The experiences of journalists interviewed confirm the power of silencing on restricting their practices.

However, these experiences show a weak agency in attempting to break the cycle of silencing, mainly through bonds of collective solidarity and indignation. In adapting to self-restraint by fear of prosecution and moral denigration, journalists and their media outlets reinforce these restrictions instead of challenging them. Their survival can be seen as irrelevant as long as they relinquish their main identity as producers of counter narratives.

Conclusion

The recent zero tolerance policy implemented by the regime in dealing with expressions of dissent, in old and new media alike, is challenging the image of a hybrid media and political system in the process of modernizing that the regime likes to promote. The experiences of disseminating dissenting narratives through a few print outlets and websites cannot be considered an extension of the legacy of watchdog journalism that relatively thrived during short episodes of political and media openness in Morocco. The ongoing muzzling of critical expressions by the regime and its loyal media is exacerbating growing popular disillusionment with deeply rooted socioeconomic and political challenges that are yet to be addressed (Abouzzohour, 2020).

The practices and coping mechanisms developed by journalists working for these outlets can be described as survival tactics, rather than strategies for creating lasting and influential counter-narratives. Faced with draconian restrictions including economic pressure, judicial harassment, and moral denigration, amid stagnating political dynamics and a lack of effective opposition, their testimony tells a story of co-existing with the red lines imposed on the public debate, rather than challenging them; they are more or less waiting for genuine change to take place.

This study is an attempt to understand the agency deployed by this critical journalism, filling the gap of knowledge in this field and shifting the debate from a traditional focus on structures to one of journalistic practices, unpacking the dynamics of a hybrid media and political environment that is steadily embracing stronger features of authoritarianism. The study demonstrates that instead of challenging the dominant discourse, this agency, weakened by various barriers and threats, asserts the dominant discourse by shying away from a strategic approach in maneuvering political boundaries and by failing to build chains of solidarity. Furthermore, it is important and revealing to observe the passive approach of interviewed journalists to the notion of change: they believe it will come from a change in global conditions affecting the national political sphere and that they have little ability to influence it.

However, it is worth noting that the recent detentions of journalists have triggered a movement of support among journalists, leading to greater exposure of the dire situation in the country at national, regional, and international levels, through significant media coverage in leading Western outlets. This new movement culminated with a letter signed by 110 Moroccan journalists denouncing the so-called "media of defamation"—campaigns of defamation against critical voices aiming to silence them on behalf of the regime (Le Figaro, 2020). It is therefore important to continue to monitor these emerging dynamics among the Moroccan community of journalists, in the hope

that they can develop a genuine professional solidarity capable of producing effective counter-narratives challenging the dominant discourse.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. See a link to the Moroccan Constitution, in English https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Morocco_2011.pdf
2. See the landscape of media ownership in Morocco: http://www.mom-rsf.org/en/countries/morocco/

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