

Book Review: Transformations in Egyptian Journalism by Naomi Sakr

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Egypt's revolutionary uprising in 2011 raised important questions about the kind of journalism that would be viable in the country's changing political dynamics. As different interest groups struggle over the country's future, Naomi Sakr considers emerging visions of journalism in Egypt, charting recent transformations in Egyptian journalism and exploring diverse approaches to converged media. Recommended reading for those interested in media, censorship and Egypt, finds Nizar Manek.



Transformations in Egyptian Journalism. Naomi Sakr. I.B. Tauris. January 2013.

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Conversations in my Cairo living room with friends who have been routinely followed by state security services and had their apartments raided by police have woven their way into the tales I have heard about reporting from the Egyptian capital. After the ejection of Egypt's first civilian president Mohamed Mursi on 30 June 2013 – variously labelled a 'second revolution', 'coup d'état', or 'counter-revolution' depending on allegiances – experiences such as these have become the norm for journalists perceived to be reporting on sensitive matters in post-revolutionary Egypt. Stringer copy from the restive Sinai Peninsula returns to editorial in Cairo, laden with semi-obligatory military cheerleading and information attributed to anonymous security sources, according to a translator at one of Cairo's English-language newspapers.

All this is a far cry from the proclamations of the state-run press after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011. For instance, Ahmad Moussa, managing editor of Egypt's longest-surviving newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly*, had said the ceiling of freedom for the press and other media would "never be lowered again." His optimistic opinion: "We are all free now."



In *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism*, Naomi Sakr provides a timely and important study of the journalistic atmosphere prior to the overthrowing of Mubarak, the day Mubarak stepped down, and afterwards. If the revolution reflected a grassroots struggle for 'real' political agency, Sakr explains that this study is justified because 'the struggle for real agency' is as evident in the sphere of news-gathering and dissemination as in other fields of Egyptian life. Sakr observes the arena of increased willingness to challenge such issues as government corruption, election rigging, police brutality, unemployment, and so forth, and as the integration of online and offline sources has advanced in the post-Mubarak media landscape, she writes of an 'expanding spectrum of reporters who braved bullets and intimidation to gather news'.

A restriction of this monograph, however, is that, if the ejection of Mursi and subsequent caretaker military government will be a turning point for the journalistic atmosphere, Sakr's analysis has to an extent been surpassed by events. As Walter Armbrust, University Lecturer in Modern Middle Eastern Studies at Oxford, noted at the [the launch of Sakr's book at London's Frontline Club](#), "Writing a book about Egypt's revolution at this stage is like fixing a bicycle while you're trying to ride it." Still, and though Sakr's study would have significantly benefitted from original

first-hand interviews, Sakr's monograph should be recommended reading for Egypt watchers. For while the tide has moved onward, there has been little to no structural change.

Al-Ahram Weekly, a fine and informative publication, is still state-run, whatever aspect of 'freedom' that implies. It is under the control of the Higher Press Council, appointed by the upper house of Parliament, the Shura Council, which is two-thirds elected and one-third appointed. The Shura Council speaker heads the Higher Press Council. And Article 216 of the December 2012 Constitution, as Sakr notes, though suspended after Mursi's removal, still envisaged preserving state-owned publishing houses. The constitutional process is again underway. Obstacles to a consensus on journalistic professionalism are, as Sakr writes, a legacy of the 1960 nationalisation under the one-party rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's second president. After President Nasser died, in the period shortly before President Anwar El Sadat's assassination in 1981, Sadat imprisoned some 1,500-1,600 writers and politicians, writes Sakr, but nevertheless, in 1977, the third president reintroduced political parties and allowed them to publish partisan newspapers; this dichotomy contributed to the development of 'opposition' news against news media that necessarily serves state interests. The monograph does little, however, to extend this historical analysis, though the historical relation between the 18-year Nasser, 11-year Sadat, and 30-year Mubarak periods and post-Mubarak situation would have been a useful analytical thread to develop.

Post-Mubarak, misinformation and censorship is still present, and many in Cairo are quick to caution against the veracity of all information except for those facts one has seen with one's own eyes. For a prominent example after the publication of Sakr's monograph in January, see the divergence in reported statistics of those killed in the August clash between the two perceived titans of Egyptian political life. Another battle ensued after corpses lined the *Raba'a al-Adawiya* encampment in Cairo's Nasr City. Both General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's transitional regime and the Muslim Brotherhood had incentives to inflate the numbers of their own dead and downplay the death toll of the opposition; numbers of civilian deaths ranged from the official 638 dead (among them 43 police officers) against some 2,600. For many of the dismayed revolutionaries who mulled the issues at home on social media during the succeeding curfew blues, trust in the public information flow was not at an all-time high.

Alongside her tracking of the web of influences in Egyptian journalism, Sakr provides a number of carefully selected case studies showing different varieties and tenors of media repression. They range from Hamdi Kandil, hauled before a court in 2010 for an article he wrote in *Al-Shorouk*, to Mahmoud Saad, one of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union journalists who came out against regime propaganda during the 25 January uprising, 'distinguishing himself from those regime mouthpieces who only changed their tune after Mubarak fell'. Government ministers obscured the reason why Saad quit his show, *Masr El-Naharada (Egypt Today)*, writes Sakr, but according to Saad himself, he had come under significant pressure to interview the then new prime minister, Ahmad Shafik, in place of his own chosen interviewee, opposition politician Osama Ghazali Harb.

Sakr might have extended her analysis of the experience of *Al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr*, the Doha-based broadcaster's Cairo affiliate, which, she writes, further demonstrates the continuity in media repression before and after Mubarak. *The Wall Street Journal* recently reported Egypt's government stands by its decision to shut-down the channel because it "violated the law" by operating without a proper permit; *Al-Jazeera* has decided to seek international arbitration. Sakr helpfully charts how the state of emergency law, in force since 1981, remained on the statute books through 2011, and empowered the Interior Ministry to detain people indefinitely, and that SCAF, or the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, had recourse to the emergency law in April 2011 to reinforce a ban on strikes and sit-ins. In September 2011, it renewed the law until the end of May 2012, using it as 'the default framework for a crackdown on the press,' writes Sakr. And on 11 September, police raided the office of *Al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr*, and the channel was taken off air until it could shift transmission from Egypt to Qatar. The alleged trigger that *Al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr* was operating without a licence, 'was more or less a repeat of what had happened to the channel on 30 January, during the last days of Mubarak.'

As Sakr notes, 'Having deepened over the decades, the rifts will not be quick to heal.' That said, the author cites the seven years from 2005 to 2012 as having seen a 'particularly rapid transformation in styles and uses of journalism,

which helped expose the rifts as a prelude to resolving them,' and proposes a list of recommendation as Egypt's constitutional process gathers steam. Among those nuts and bolts for a new deal, Sakr argues that Egypt's new constitution should feed into media law reform to end control over journalism by the executive branch of government, ruling party, state intelligence, and security forces; end criminal sanctions for journalists and bloggers whose work criticises the actions and policies of public figures and officials; and split huge media operations into 'coherent, manageable, independent units run by journalists who command public respect,' with core production units being put into public ownership with a public service mandate.

Nizar Manek is an [independent reporter and writer](#) and will shortly begin Modern Standard Arabic & Egyptian Colloquial Arabic studies at Cairo University. He recently graduated in law and journalism respectively, from the London School of Economics and Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. [Read more reviews by Nizar.](#)

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