

Chapter 7

Social Media Economy and Newsroom Convergence in Egyptian Media: The Case of *Al-Ahram*

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ABSTRACT

In Egypt, for the past 20 years, several news organizations began to diffuse ICT resources in the news-making processes to attract a larger audience. Soon, the utilization of new technologies has altered the traditional newsgathering and production formats changing the nature of journalism practices and routines. The success of newsrooms, especially in post-Egyptian revolution era is measured in their ability to adopt, integrate, and utilize ICTs in all processes of production to satisfy their readers. This study focuses on the diffusion and implementation of social media in Al Ahram newsroom. Further, the study examines if/and to what extent and in what ways did Al Ahram newsroom incorporate ICTs in their daily routine. Other questions are as follows: What are the ICTs components that are diffused and adopted in the Egyptian print media?, What are the form(s) of networking among journalists and their networking strategy –if any– with their sources, editors and audience?, Is there a convergence strategy or strategies within the Egyptian newsrooms? And if so, what is it/are they?

INTRODUCTION

News has always been influenced by the utilization of technological innovations in the workplace. In Egypt, during the past 20 years, several news organizations began to diffuse ICTs especially social media resources in the news making processes to accommodate for their audience need for news, especially post 2011 Egyptian revolution. Soon, the utilization of new technologies has altered the traditional

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newsgathering and production formats changing the nature of journalism practices and routines (El Gody, 2018; McNair, 2008).

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) is an overarching term covering all technical means for processing and communicating information. This term has gained popularity due to the convergence of ICTs in journalism production. ICTs in newsrooms, hence, defines a broad range of integration and utilization of such technologies as computer hardware and software, the Internet and netCTs, networks, databases, multimedia, social media platforms, fixed and mobile telephones and mobile apps in daily journalism routine (Grossman and Helpman, 2005; Singer, 2006; Westlund and Lewis, 2014).

Newsroom convergence, hence, is the blending of ICTs especially social media components in news production process (Quandt and Singer, 2009). In the field of journalism studies, convergence is seen as a concept to document the development of newsrooms in terms of changes in work routines and organization structure connected to these new production arrangements, the (re)development of news format as a result of introducing new media technologies (cf. Deuze, 2003; Singer, 2004; Quinn, 2005; Alves and Carvajl, 2008; Vobic, 2009).

This study sees convergence in relation to changes in work routines, focusing on the utilization of technological aspect in connection to the production of news content. The fusion of ICTs convergence should not be seen as a result of simple technological determinism, but because of the institution, newsroom and staff decision to develop the workplace (Cottle, 1999; Deuze, 2009; Westlund and Lewis, 2014; Wu 2018). Technological convergence hence is seen as the basic interlinking of computing and other Information Technologies, content development, changing staff to multimedia reporters, and communication networks that has arisen as the result of the evolution and popularization of the ICTs that have emerged in the digital media space; an open process that challenges traditional aspect of journalism work in order to increase productivity, alternativeness, efficiency, and interactivity (Singer, 2006; Quandt and Singer, 2009).

The Egyptian print media ecology for the past 60 years has been shaped by loyalty to the political regime. The government through direct ownership and strict laws and regulations controls Egyptian media system. The purpose of newspapers is to steer the main political, social, and economic programs of the government. The government steers the media agenda and direction of news to filter what receivers hear and see. Egyptian journalists did not explore beyond the limits of a traditional system of a relationship between the political class and the rest of the population (Rugh, 2004).

Internet technology was introduced in Egyptian newsrooms in 1996 as a government aid to media organizations to develop their telephony infrastructure. Dar Al Tahrir publication *Al Gomhuria* was the first among Egyptian print newspaper to go online. In five years, all major news organizations joined the cyber world. Currently, (February 2019) 77 publications, representing 61.4 percent of Egyptian print media industry have their own websites (Egyptian Supreme Press Council, 2019). Although, superficially, this trend implies development, the question, however, of whether ICTs have been realized and used in the daily routine of Egyptian newsrooms needs further examination.

In transitional societies – moving towards democracy like Egypt - political development is a central topic which journalists ‘mediate with their audience.’ Indeed, journalists inform the citizenry, and facilitate informed choice as ‘gate-watchers’ not as watchdog ‘gatekeepers’ in the power struggle between audience, media and politics. Egyptian journalists have been criticized for not being ‘connected’ with their local audiences, for losing their ability to help citizens connect their everyday life with politics, as well as for failing in their capacity to encourage local people to participate in political debates, or even to provide them with the skills needed for this participation (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 210; El Gody, 2016).

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