

On crisis journalism in post-Gaddafi Libya

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Abstract

The article analyzes the state of journalism in Libya, at the intersection between two phenomena: its transformations due to digitization and the specific role of information in unstable areas – so to speak, the encounter between the *crisis of journalism* and the *crisis journalism*. Given the amplitude of the argument, we will focus on this specific case, post-Gaddafi Libya, aiming at detecting the merging between professional and networked journalism, and the role information and media literacy can play in the rebuilding of the country. The specific issue of citizen journalism has been analyzed also by means of a consultation with twenty experts in the field.

Keywords: Crisis Journalism, Libya, Political Parallelism, Networked Journalism.

The research has been funded by the European Commission in the Erasmus+ CBHE Framework – Project PAgES- Post-Crisis Journalism in Post-crisis Libya. A Bottom-up Approach to the Development of a Cross-Media Journalism Master Program (project number PP-1-2018-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP). As to the definition, present Libyan situation has been variously referred to as post-crisis; post-revolutionary [Richter 2021]; transitional [El-Issawi 2013b; 2016]; postwar transition [Quinn 2013]; post-conflict [Orgeret & Layeebwa 2016]. For the sake of simplicity, we will use the definition of «post-Gaddafi» [see Sawani 2012], which would basically serve as a chronological marker.

Our friend and colleague Ali Farfar, from the University of Tripoli, tragically passed away after the drawing of this article. All the members of the PAgES consortium preserve the memory of his humanity and intellectual wisdom.

1. Unpacking the Crisis

The issue we are dealing with can be divided into some sub-topics: the credibility of journalism as an institutional source, and its connections with political power; the widespread use of social media for getting news; the combination between professional and user-generated contents, allegedly giving shape to an emergent social agency of a new kind (Castells 2012); the unstable landscape defined by the encounter between traditional and citizen journalism. All these processes are folded in the same pattern, and will prove to be the more relevant in such a complex scenario as the Libyan.

As to the decrease in credibility of the news outlets, it is a trend already measured in all Western countries, paralleled by the fading authority of political parties (Castells 2009, 281-300). James Curran (2018) notoriously labeled this process as a «triple crisis of journalism», due to fast-growing governmental censorship, dependence upon elite sources, and economic decline. Curran is probably right, while stating that journalism is somehow shifting off-center, due to the academic focus on social media and on-line misinformation, while its crisis is likely to engender negative effects on society at large. In particular economic difficulties and the dependence on the State as an elite gatekeeper, following Curran, both push in the same direction, moving journalism away from the audiences and preventing it from playing a role in the shaping of public opinion. This is the more so, in all likelihood, in world regions where the late development of liberal institutions and internal conflict reduced journalism to a low circulation and to a mostly elite dimension, as in Latin America, in some former Socialist East European countries, and by definition in the Mediterranean basin (Hallin, Papathanassopoulos 2002; Hallin, Mancini 2012).

As it is always the case with Western concepts, the application of the comparative media systems model to the Libyan situation is not simple. Wollenberg and Richter's work on «political parallelism» – which is one of the four dimensions defined by Mancini and Hallin – actually allows to identify some similarities between the Libyan market and the Mediterranean or «polarized pluralist» pattern. According to their analysis of 172 Libyan media outlets, three main clusters would emerge, showing a certain parallelism between three main political fronts, on the one hand – Government of National Accord; Libyan National Army; Muslim Brotherhood – and the available news sources, on the other hand (2020, 1181). The relative

importance of radio channels (Elareshi e Gunter 2012), in its turn, seems to associate the Libyan market to the broader case of Mediterranean media system. On the very contrary, the relevance of regional news channels notoriously stands as a main difference with respect to European markets, with Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya having replaced the traditional local sources, due to higher production standards and more modern presentation style (Elareshi, Matthews 2003, 110).

The impact of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya in Libya somehow confirms a broader tendency of Arab world, with State channels being perceived as less authoritative than regional networks, and the more so in the case of educated watchers (Miladi 2006, 952-953). The ability of Gulf-based networks of questioning some taboos – related to both sexual life and politics – is supposed to have played a significant part in their success (El-Nawawy 2003). As to Libya, a survey realized on 400 undergraduate students provides an empirical assessment, with Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya widely being credited with a stronger reputation than local channels, and namely Al Jamahiriya Tv and Al Libiya Tv (Elareshi, Gunter 2012). One may notice that in the historical perspective, though, neither regional media neither satellite Tv were properly new for Libyan audiences. As to the first aspect, since the mid-1950s Libya was part of the Arab States Broadcasting Union, with Egypt, Jordan and Syria being the other founding partners (Della Ratta 2005, 32). On the technological side, Libya had experimented with satellite Tv already in the Gaddafi era, unlike other Arab countries, probably in the name of the «alleged liberalization» formally promoted by the dictatorship. While using the temporary license of installing satellite dishes as a promotional strategy, the Libyan regime made no real investments in media contents, with Al Jamahiriya satellite channel broadcasting the same contents of terrestrial channels (Richter 2013, 156). With a few exceptions, news and television industry in Libya has been therefore affected by a low degree of professionalism, with media outlets being more characterized by their political affiliation, than by their contract with the audience (Elareshi 2021). A partial confirmation is provided in survey conducted on 134 members of Libyan «elite», which shows a very low credibility attributed by the respondents to eighteen national Tv channels, also due to their biased and unprofessional covering of war and crisis periods (Ziani, Elareshi, Al Jaber 2017, 335-336). Far from being a simple consequence of technological innovation, the success of Al Jazeera is due to the proposal of an international, highly-qualified journalistic style, radically different from the national one,

and even resulting in the network taking a stance against internal repressions in Libya (Figenschou 2014, 165).

While the Al Jazeera effect is deeply rooted the transnational tradition of «pan-Arab» broadcasting (Kraidy 2012), the separation between the regional and the national pattern would not come without consequences. The crisis of national journalism, on the other hand, took the shape of a disorganized process, due to a delay in the updating of professional skills; the conflict between Gaddafi and post-Gaddafi generations of reporters; the difficult funding of private media outlets; and the control exercised by a variety of factions, ranging from government militias, Islamic extremist groups, to local lords and armed paramilitary forces (El-Issawi 2013a). This tension between the regional pattern of Gulf-based networks and the polarization of internal public discourse will be discussed again in section 2.

While trying to avoid any plain exportation of Western concepts, though, we would also pay attention not to frame the Libyan case in the conventional pattern of Arab regional media. Such a solution – with Pan-Arab broadcasting being opposed to national broadcasting of the Atlantic world – would even reproduce a sort of *orientalist* bias, as it considers the East as a negative version of the West. As Adel Iskander put it, the insistence on the «Pan-Arabist discourse» can lead to overlook the specificities and «distinctive features of various Arab media and press environments» (2007, 31-35). So as not to consider «the Arab world as a whole» (Della Ratta 2005, 31-32), therefore, we will recall three particular aspects of the Libyan media system, which deserve to be considered. Generally speaking, these characteristics can probably be traced back to the weak position that Libya has held in the region, in a media market traditionally ruled by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon (Zayani, Saharoui 2017).

The first aspect has to do with Libya historically being a «laggard» in the evolution of the press industry (Richter 2021). The low level of literacy, the lack of economic investments and the pressure of colonial hegemonies have cooperated in causing the late development of printed journalism (Rugh 204, 44). As a possible consequence, the circulation and impact of newspapers is actually limited, in Libya, when compared to the Arab region (Elareshi, Gunter 2012) – a feature that brings its media system quite close to the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist pattern, which is affected by definition by a strong role of television and a weak role of the press. On-line newspapers, as far as available research goes, seems unable to fill the gap between journalism and audiences, in terms of quality and participation

(Suau, Masip 2014, 680) As difficult as it may be to apply Western-biased concepts, this seems to confirm the relation between the historical consolidation of the press and the overall level autonomy and professionalization of journalism (Hallin, Mancini 2004).

State control over journalism, secondly, has been exercised in a peculiar way in Libyan society, as it has affected all possible media fields. Private newspapers were closed in 1972, in such a way that only those controlled or owned by the government – among which *al-Fajr*, *al-Jihad*, *al-Jadid* - were allowed to publish (Rugh 2004, 55). According to Gaddafi's statements, a proper «democratic press» was expected to serve the interests of the people and that of the community, rather than those of private groups or individuals, revealing a totalitarian approach to mass communication (Rampal 1996). The regime had a somehow more ambiguous relationship with the Tv, as shown by the above-cited alleged liberalization of satellite reception, or by the formal liberalization of private broadcasting in 2006 (Sakr 2007, 27). Rigid State control on Tv contents is widely documented, though, and even Al-Jazeera has been forced to take some particular precautions (Abdelmoula 2015, 152), due to a diplomatic struggle also resulting in governmental task forces deliberately providing the broadcaster with false information (El-Issawi 2013b, 15), and with the Libyan ambassador being recalled from Doha, as a protest for the network coverage of events (Rinnawi 2005, 86).

Finally, and simultaneously with the fall of Gaddafi's regime, Libyan society has recently undergone a huge transformation, due to the sudden acceleration in the diffusion of Web-based communication. At the times of the so-called Arab Spring, Libya was one of the less digitized countries in the region, making it unlikely any comparison between the role of social media in Libyan uprisings and in Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions (El-Naway, Khamis 2012, 16-17). In the last years, though, Libya has witnessed a relevant diffusion of the new devices, and even taken the lead in the Arab Region for what concerns mobile 3G communication (Internet Society 2020). As a matter of fact, in crisis and post-crisis transition the regime had tried to extend its control on the new ecosystem, as Libya was certified by Reporters Without Borders as being one of the four more invasive Arab States, along with Tunisia, Syria and Saudi Arabia (Lahali 2011, 43), and generally held as one of the «fully-closed media systems», along with Syria, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia (Arafa 2013, 108). During the protests, Gaddafi's regime even tried to «cut off the population from the rest of the world», by shutting down

mobile phone and Internet communication (Ali, Fahmy 2013, 64). In a very particular version of the so-called «balkanization» process (Sunstein 2017), the fall of the regime and the spread of digital connections, in the last decade, have been shaping a highly polarized political and journalistic environment, which will be addressed in section 2.

To some extent, the three tendencies outlined by Curran fit the Libyan case, where they though assume a specific feature: the growing censorship takes the appearances of multipolar control; the dependence on elite sources, explains the rise in popularity of influential Gulf-based networks; and finally the economic decline, which is visible in the sharp contrast between the blooming of news sources and their actual economic viability. As a matter fact, it has been noted, the «few qualified» Libyan journalists have been recently asking for «ever-increasing salaries», thus becoming too expensive for national and public media outlets (Altai Consulting 2013, 71).

In its turn, the news-making function of social media is a global phenomenon. In the United States, where this story began, 67% of people collect news from social platforms, and around 63% from Facebook (Newman, Levy, Nielsen 2016) – with the percentage lowering to 55% among the population older than fifty, and raising to 78% in the 18-49 years cohort (Shearer, Gottfried 2017). In proportion Italy shows a similar pattern, with 48% of young people and 18% of oldest people getting news on Twitter and Facebook (Censis 2017). In all western countries, we basically witness the same phenomenon, with youth leading the trend towards a social media-based information diet, and commercial platforms – Facebook, followed by Snapchat, YouTube, and Twitter - getting the lion's share (Bergström, Belfrage 2018). Even though we do not have disaggregated data, in Libya the informational use of social media has been growing too since 2012, in correspondence with the end of the Gaddafi regime (Elareshi, Gunter 2012), and it is the more relevant for young users, as attested by a qualitative research on 181 bachelor students (Gharssalla 2018, 181-182).

Once again, the combination between top-down and bottom-up communication, we know as networked journalism, results in complex and irregular outcomes, rather than in an accomplished adaptation. As to the hybrid information market, it is not a matter of interpreting it along an axis of professionalism versus amateurism, but rather of considering its effects on the overall social structure (van Der Haak, Parks, Castells 2012). The final, and most ambitious aspect deals with the ability of networked journalism to open up a new space for civic engagement and public discussion. In

Manuel Castells' well-known interpretation (2012), social media played a main role, making it possible the organization of demonstrations, and shaping Libyan transition, from the uprisings in twelve cities in February 2011, to the deposition of Gaddafi. It remains unclear, however, whether social media have a real affordance for political participation, as in Castells' idea, or they are vested with this function only upon specific conditions (Jamali 2015, 12-13; Margetts, al. 2016, 114-118), and in which direction the balance needle is pointing – between engagement and disengagement; activism and slacktivism; grassroots participation and digital control (Morozov 2011, 15-17, 179-203).

If we dig into the Libyan case by considering material local conditions – which is what is missing in Castells' general theory – two evidences arise, respectively related to professional journalism and bottom-up communication. As to conventional news-making, Castells basically equals it to a unique manipulation strategy (2009, 257-303) while a closer analysis reveals a more nuanced situation. A research on Libyan newspapers – with a focus on Al-Marsad and Al-Mutawaset – shows how they actually mirrors territorial and political divisions, and how reporting can't be reduced to a single framing operation (Eshteivi 2018, 59-78).

As we saw, Wollenberg and Richter applied to the Libyan case Mancini and Hallin's comparative model, revealing a growing rate of «political parallelism», with a high level of politicization likely, if anything, to «deepen existing rifts in society» (2020, 189). Four decades after the «ideological criticism on the mass media» launched by Gaddafi, news outlets seem to engender new divisions, due to the political divisions among different broadcasters (Bebawi 2015) – with the possible exception of local radio stations, less involved in political issues and usually driven by audience choices (Wollenberg, Richter 2020: 1179). Geographical divisions also come to play, with its patterns affecting both the presentation of news on the part of newspapers (Ejaja 2015), and the choices of contents on the part of the audiences (Elareshi, Gunter 2012), somehow confirming Hallin and Mancini's category of «external pluralism», that is, the «existence of a range of media» players which reflect the «point of view of different groups in society» (2004, 29).

On the other hand, the use of social media for getting news is well-documented on the part of the elite, and it played a small part during the Libyan uprisings (Ali, Fahmy 2013) – so that, not accidentally, in 2011 the government even tried to shut-down Internet connections and to block

international phone calls (Taha 2020, 54). This being said, the actual impact of social media on the overall news environment is hard to assess, as their main uses have to do with different contents, and many information websites operate from abroad (Wollenberg, Richter 2020: 1188). In all likelihood, Western-biased interpretations of the Arab Spring and North-African revolts fall short in understanding the deep connections between social media activism and the national context, which, in the Libyan case, also pays the price of infrastructural limits and weakness in advocacy by the civil society (US Agency for International Development 2019). As Christian Fuchs once pointed out, there is no cause-effect relation between «the technical availability of political information and the change of collective consciousness» (2012, 781), and even the more so in critical situations. With this precautions in mind, one may observe a rising importance of networked journalism in the Libyan context.

In one way, the control exercised on media outlets has been making citizen journalism the more necessary (Ali, Fahmy 2013, 57-59). Spaces for the expression of dissent and outrage were provided by informal actors, activists and engaged citizens (El-Nawawy, Khamis 2012, 17). In the other way, though, any enthusiasm for the new media environment was probably due to the aftermaths for the revolution, and part of the «chaotic openness» of Libyan society after the fall of the regime (El-Issawi 2016, 74). As observed in an international report, the spread of citizen journalism was related to the «atmosphere of newly released freedom» of post-2011 Libya. More recently, though, the adoption of social media on the part of all players – political institutions, «old journalists accustomed to Gaddafi era practices», radicalized youth, and outlets funded by foreign countries – actually exacerbated the debate, preventing Libya from developing a high-level independent information sector (Fitzgerald 2020, 10-11). For delving into the complexity of Libyan networked journalism, we have realized some interviews with experts. Before that, continuity and discontinuity between Gaddafi and post-Gaddafi era require a deeper consideration.

2. Libya: Crisis Journalism and Journalism Crisis

Although the overwhelming literature in the context of crisis journalism and crisis communication deals with the ways and means in which the media could be effectively used as a remedy to actual or potential crisis situations

which may arise at any level of human organisation, the Libyan crisis requires paying special attention to the effects of this ongoing crisis on the landscape and functioning of the Libyan media. With respect to this crisis, one needs to take into consideration the multiplicity of variables involved and their impact on the Libyan crisis as such and the Libyan media in particular.

This part of this article aims to discuss the implications and consequences of the interaction between crisis journalism and journalism crisis as applies to the Libyan case in order to attain a better understanding of the encounter between crisis and journalism as a first step toward envisioning post-crisis journalism in post-crisis Libya.

The 2020 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders (RSF.org) ranks Libya in the position 164 among 180 countries analysed. This poor status of the Libyan press, however, does not seem to result from the crisis situation that erupted after the ouster of Gaddafi in 2011 and the turbulent years that followed. Over the 18 years that included data about the freedom of the press in Libya (2002-2020), the Libyan freedom of the press index ranged from 129 in 2002 to 164 in 2020 with some fluctuations in-between. The overall average index for the freedom of the Libyan press during this 18-year period is 154. The previously-indicated period covers nine years (2002-2010) of the Gaddafi era and nine years of the post-Gaddafi period (2012-2020) as shown in the following table.

TAB. 1. *Libya in the Free Press Index*

Gaddafi Era									
Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Index	129	153	154	162	152	155	160	156	160

Average: 153.4

Post-Gaddafi years									
Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Index	154	131	137	154	164	163	162	162	164

Average: 154.5

If we compare the index scores during the nine years before the anti-Gaddafi uprising with the nine years after the ouster of Gaddafi, the mean index score is 153.4 and 154.5 respectively. This results in just about one-score difference between the degree of press freedom in both

periods. The relatively more positive index of the freedom of the press in 2002 (ranking 129) came about in a stage, during which Gaddafi sought to mend relations with the outside world- a process that in the subsequent year culminated in paying compensations to families of the Lockerbie victims, abandoning programs to develop weapons of mass destruction, lifting the UN Security Council sanctions against Libya, and electing Libya to chair the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva.

In its turn, free press indexes may be somehow biased towards Western standards, according to a quite common pattern – that of media in liberal countries being usually biased toward anti-government factions (Baum, Zhukov 2015, 2). In any case, voices from the field report some critical aspects, and namely frequent attacks and killing of Libyan journalists (Al-Ashry, El-Ibiary, Kassem 2019, 26-27), in a situation which is the more dangerous in that several conflict lines overlap, and many different conflicts occur at the same time (Committee to Protect Journalists 2015, 43). Self-censorship of reporters is also an observed consequence of this situation (El-Issawi 2013b), in such a way to make it clear the potential importance of grassroots, independent journalism. Hence, the right approach should not be to abandon these measurements because of some possible deficiencies, but to keep using them with the intent to refine and further develop them so that one could get the best possible approximation to reality. Due to the lack of press freedom data that are produced by national or regional institutions, one has to rely in the particular case of Libya on the reports of the existing international institutions to get a general overview of journalism in Libya. This approximation, however, could be looked at in the light of other available sources of information on the topic.

Data on the freedom of the press in Libya by Freedom House, the oldest global media assessment institution, reveal similar tendency to the one shown above by Reporters Without Borders, although the scoring system differs¹. Reports of the Media Sustainability Index by the International Research, Exchange Board (IREX) show data on Libyan press for the years 2005- 2013 and they describe Libyan press as anti-free². The African Media Barometer by Friedrich- Ebert Stiftung does not include systematic data on press freedom in Libya. Media Development Indicators by UNESCO did publish a detailed report in 2015 on Libya, but it was only for this particular year and it was based on just two out of the five categories used as indica-

¹ Retrieved at Libya- Press Freedom Index, khoema.com.

² Media Freedom Navigator, retrieved at akademie.dw.de.

tors for media development, namely safety of journalists and professional capacity building (UNESCO 2015).

On the other hand, the relatively more positive index of the freedom of the press in post-Gaddafi Libya came in 2013, i.e., the year prior to the outbreak of the armed conflict among rival forces and militias which previously fought together against Gaddafi. This distinguished period witnessed publishing almost 400 periodicals, including 341 newspapers and 46 magazines (Gulam 2015, 39). This came in addition to hundreds of radio stations and 16 television channels. Such exceptional state of media diversity came to a halt with the resumption of belligerent acts among rival armed groups starting in 2014 and lasting until the warring factions agreed to permanent truce in October 2020. After 2014, most periodicals ceased to appear and most television channels had to close permanently or resume transmission outside Libya.

A very similar situation was documented in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in April 2003 (Abdulmajeed 2009, 73-77). Taking advantage of the absence of any regulatory restrictions, Iraqi media in 2003 and Libyan media in 2013 expanded vertically and horizontally. More than 200 periodicals were established in Iraq during the six-month period that followed the collapse of the old regime. However, this rich and chaotic period in both countries had to cease relatively quick, as most of those who run the new media projects were not professional journalists and the owners did not know much about media economy because they thought they could somehow easily and rapidly regain the capital they spent on establishing their media projects and get a margin of profit. As this calculation proved not valid and the security situation in both countries worsened, this was the moment of tragic death of many media institutions and a considerable number of journalists as well. The Libyan Center for Freedom of the Press (lcfp.org.ly) revealed in May 2020 that attacks on professional journalists in 2020 included 33 men and 17 women in 20 media outlets. In addition, more Libyan journalists continued to flee Libya to escape violence and reprisals that usually go unpunished.

In an attempt to initiate a new process in Libya where Libyan media could play a more positive role vis-a-vis the Libyan crisis, UNESCO in cooperation with the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the generous support of the Finnish government held a panel discussion on the role and responsibility of the Libyan media in times of conflict. After four days of discussions, this event, which was hosted by the Arab House in Madrid

starting 27 July 2015 and attended by ten managers and owners of media outlets inside and outside Libya, came up with the «Madrid Declaration: Towards Professional Media: The Role of Libyan Media and Responsibility in Times of Crisis».³

Unfortunately, despite the good intent of the organisers, the implementation of such a declaration did not seem to come about. There has been virtually no unifying vision for the media, nor consensus-building or reconciliation efforts, nor conflict-sensitive reporting by the Libyan media since then. Furthermore, some of the Libyan media institutions taking part in that event either ceased to exist or went online. This unfortunate result was a natural product of the fact that when media outlets constitute part of the crisis situation, they could do little to maintain peace or care for the moral imperatives of journalistic reporting.

Although the market-economy based media institutions allow for a separation of ownership and management, the Libyan crisis situation caused convergence that puts ownership and management in alignment. Journalists are mostly recruited in a partisan manner to serve the special interests of the owners regardless of the nature of the media enterprise. The end result of such a polarised and crisis-ridden media setting would most likely be a society that is more oriented toward splintering and antagonism than inclusiveness or consensus-building.

The most discussed issue about Libyan media is, therefore, that of *polarization*, which results from the combination between the new technological landscape and the ideological fragmentation of civic society (Edheed, Bates, Cox 2018). The end result of such a polarized and crisis-ridden media setting would most likely contribute more to societal splintering and antagonism than inclusiveness or consensus building. The existing crisis situation in Libya cannot be reduced to one particular factor as a multitude of interactive causes could be responsible for the ongoing Libyan crisis. The low credibility of national media, the balkanization brought by digital platforms and the parallelism between news outlets and ideological factions, all seem to join into one effect of fragmentation and radicalization (Lynch 2015, 90-92). A practice of systematic «mutual accusation» among competitor Tv channels, representing different interest groups, has been also reported (Richter 2021). As observed by Ziani, Elareshi and Al-Jaber (2017, 332), «the media landscape in Libya mirrors the division and factionalism

³ Retrieved at unsmil.unmissions.org.

seen in the current conflict, also reflecting the struggle between pro- and anti-Islamist lines». The complexity of the post-Gaddafi scenario is due to the competition between several players, and namely (Wollenberg, Pack 2013):

- Influential regional networks and satellite Tv;
- National media outlets, showing a high level of conflict, polarization, and political parallelism;
- Independent sources, journals and websites released by dissidents abroad, and experiments in citizen journalism (among which the well-known cases of Mohammed Nabbous' Libya Al-Hurra YouTube and Tv channel; the Freedom Group Tv in Misrata; and Radio Shabab, founded by a bunch of students in Benghazi).

The actual media landscape would result from both the conflict and the intersection between these levels. Since its endorsement of the Arab Spring protests, Al-Jazeera has been increasingly using footage and contents produced by citizen journalists; and according to some scholars this abuse, along with the rising competition of national channels and the association of its brand with Qatari power, may explain its moments of fading popularity in Libya (Wollenberg, Pack 2013, 197).

Pluralism shrinks within each media outlet and across media institutions. Public sphere in the words of Habermas turns into mini antagonistic spheres that are difficult to reconcile or reintegrate (Bushow 2017). A study conducted during the armed conflict in Libya in 2015 showed that the Libyan television channels were evenly divided (eight channels for each side) between the two rival forces and governments in the east and west of Libya. As a result, the Libyan audiences tended to rely more on social media, other Arab television channels and foreign television channels broadcasting in Arabic language like France 24 and BBC, in order to receive more objective news on the Libyan crisis (Al Asfar 2015, 9-12).

The rise of the digital media in Libya might seem very promising from the quantitative point of view. Datareportal.com documents that the number of internet users in Libya increased by 600,000 (+13%) between 2019 and 2020 raising their total number to 5.10 million. Social media users have also increased by 778,000 (+18%) between 2019 and 2020 raising their total number to 5.10 million with a penetration rate of 75%. In addition, the number of mobile connections increased by 173,000 (+1.5%) between 2019 and 2020 raising mobile connections to 167% of the total population. Among different types of social media, Facebook has the highest percent-

age of penetration in Libya. As documented in 2017, most users were men (64.4%) within the age group (15-29 years) (Salem 2017, 38-40).

This relatively high penetration rate in the digital media in Libya has to be validated qualitatively. It remains an open question whether the digital revolution has added more to consensus- building or to rift and fragmentation in Libya especially when one takes into account that the traditional media are strongly active players in the digital space.

Social media could add more fuel to the crisis fire especially in times of filter bubbles, echo chambers and post-truth. In this sense, social media could be the place where like-minded people tend to be communicatively isolated from other groups and segments of the society by walls of self-interest and suspicion or apathy vis-a-vis the outside world. Such digital parties in times of crisis may tend to orient themselves not according to the available facts, but according to opinions and points of views that are mostly detached from whatever reality but , nevertheless , get circulated and amplified by fragmented and distrusted media. Furthermore, the establishment of a fact- checking platform in Libya in 2020 (falso.ly) seems hard to evaluate, as this task which deals with the traditional media outlets, operates in an environment of disorder, insecurity and lack of transparency and accountability. For the time being, it seems that the most this new agency could aspire to, is showing to the public some examples of professional breaches for the record.

In order to address the entanglement between crisis journalism and journalism crisis, it does not seem advisable to work on one aspect of the matter and neglect or delay working on the other. One needs to tackle multiple aspects together as any improvement at the one front would be expected to positively affect the other .Since crisis is usually perceived as anything that hinders organisation from doing its functions, crisis communication has to prevail despite all symptoms of communication crisis. One cannot postpone crisis communication until the crisis situation affecting different aspects of societal life is over. Communication policy striving to emphasise peace journalism at all levels should proceed during all phases of the crisis. Jean Monnet once said, «people only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognise necessity when a crisis is upon them» (azquotes.com). Thereupon, despite all its negative aspects, crisis could be an opportunity for creativity and seeking alternative paths and methods.

Three main issues seem to be especially relevant in this regard: First, Libyans need to find the right path that guarantees the end of authori-

tarian control of the media by different kinds of power structures as has been the case throughout the Libyan history. The first major Libyan newspaper (Tripoli West) was established in 1866 by the Ottoman ruler of Libya Mahmoud Pasha to serve consolidating the Turkish control of Libya. The early editions of that newspaper consisted of two pages: the first was published in Turkish and the second in Arabic devoted to convey officially controlled content to the readers (Jeheder 2012). The same authoritarian control applies to Libyan newspapers during the Italian occupation as well as to the British and French administration powers after the Second World War.

Despite the fact that about 65% of the Libyan print media were supposedly independent during the monarchy period (1951-1969), this independence did not guarantee the absence of the influence of foreign capital and foreign political agendas as political parties were banned in Libya shortly after independence and lasting until 2011. Broadcast media and the national news agency were owned by the state while the print media were subject to laws that were carefully crafted to ensure government control over them. During the Gaddafi era (1969-2011) media were nationalised with no place for independent outlets, as the ruling party used to own or indirectly control Tv channels and newspapers (Nunnari 2009, 67). The only possible exception might be the establishment of Al Ghad Media Corporation between 2007 and 2009 by the son of Muammar Gaddafi, Saif Al Islam. It is a well-known fact, however, that the founder of Al Ghad Media Corporation was not a businessman like Silvio Berlusconi, Leo Kirch or Rupert Murdoch who wanted to invest part of his capital in media projects. From the very beginning, Saif Al Islam Gaddafi declared on 20/8/2007 that he wanted Al Ghad Corporation to be like the Norwegian, British and Singapore broadcasting corporations. So the pursued media project was limited to semi-independent outlets modeled after public service broadcasting systems. «Nevertheless, this experiment only gave Libya the illusion of a period of limited pluralization ended two years later, after the regime nationalized the Al Ghad Corporation and shut down the media outlets created during this period» (UNESCO 2015, 7).

The authoritarian structure of the media remained after 2011, as the previously enacted media laws remained intact and new official bodies have been re-established by both rival governments in the eastern and western parts of Libya to run and/or supervise newly established media institutions. Second, Libyans would need to seek alternative versions of media economy, where media could come out of the monopoly of public or

business finance. For instance, a certain form of an independent fund could be established, to which public institutions, business and individual citizens would contribute financially in order to support media projects that fulfil basic standards, ethics and responsibilities that are the corner stone of free and professional journalism.

Third, education in journalism in Libya has to be re-evaluated and restructured in the light of national needs, requirements and aspirations. Since 1975 when the first department of journalism in Libya was established at the University of Benghazi, there has been a mushroom growth of university-level institutions that offer undergraduate and some offer post-graduate programs in various parts of the country. The major emphasis of those programs has been on media studies with little, if any, attention paid to practical training. The newly established media outlets after 2011 relied heavily on providing crash courses to their teams, some of which were made possible by foreign media like Deutsche Welle (DW) and the BBC.

In times of crisis, journalism education needs urgently to re-orient itself toward providing professional knowledge and skills to Libyan students in addition to media studies that promote nation-building, peace and progress. In order to resolve the entanglement of crisis and journalism in Libya, major policy decisions have to be taken in order to unchain Libyan journalism from the shackles of hegemonic power structures, financial dependency and obsolete methods of education in journalism. Although this is not an easy task to attain, steps need to be taken in order to establish strong union of journalists, provide for new generations of journalists the best possible programs of teaching and training and allow civil society organisations to have a more active role to penetrate and positively influence power structures in politics and the economy. Thus, reconstruction in Libya should not be confined to buildings, roads and material infrastructure. Rather, priority has to be given to end the unholy alliance between power, wealth and media. This might be a necessary step toward envisioning and planning post- crisis journalism in post-crisis Libya.

3. A bottom-up investigation on citizen journalism in Libya

Given its very nature, and the specific situation of post-Gaddafi Libya, citizen journalism is the hardest to investigate. For this reason, we realized an ad-hoc consultation with twenty experts – journalists, media professors,

war correspondents – all having on-site experience and knowledge of the Libyan case.

Tab. 2. *Experts Consultation*

Name	Role	Where
Abo Baker, Mostafa	Journalist	Misrata, Libya
Alfughi, Mohammed Ali	Head of Media Department, Sirte University	Sirte, Libya
Al-Omrani, Milood	Media Researcher, University of Zawia	Al-Zawia, Libya
Al-Wafi, Abdulla Ismail	Media Professor, University of Zawia	Al-Zawia, Libya
Belied, Muftah Mohammed	Media Professor, University of Misrata	Misrata, Libya
Bin Taher, Mohammed Jibril	Media Professor, University of Misrata	Misrata, Libya
Cremonesi, Lorenzo	War Correspondent at <i>Corriere della Sera</i>	Milan, Italy
Elsherif, Mustafa Ali	Director of Postgraduate Studies, Misrata University	Misrata, Libya
Emmahima, Fathi	Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Media, Misrata University	Misrata, Libya
Faek, Rasha	Editor, Al-Fanar Media	Amman, Jordan
Gharbawy, Mohamed Abdalhamid	Free-lance photographer and university lecturer	Al-Zawia, Libya
Gulam, Khaled	Journalist and Media Professor, University of Tripoli	Tripoli, Libya
Jampaglia, Claudio	Journalist and War Documentarist	Milan, Italy
Lopes Buarque, Beatriz	Journalist and Founder of Words Heal the World	London, UK
Omar, Yusuf	Mobile Journalist and founder of Hashtag Our Stories	London, UK
Ricucci, Amedeo	Journalist and former Middle East Correspondent, RAI	Rome, Italy
Sánchez-Mesa Martínez, Domingo	Coordinator of the Master in New Interactive Media and Multimedia Journalism, University of Granada	Granada, Spain
Sawalem, Mohamed	Vice-president, Misrata University	Misrata, Libya
Tarmal, Ali	Professor of Political Science, University of Zawia	Al-Zawia, Libya
Zambelli, Francesca	Journalist at <i>InPrimis</i>	Rome, Italy

As we saw, citizen journalism in Libya is at the same time made necessary by the political control on national media outlets, and highly requested by regional networks for the on-site covering of the events. All in all, professional journalism and citizen journalism have been recognized to be two different approaches to journalism, with the latter representing a huge opportunity for the former. Professional journalists, according to Milood

al-Omrani, must approach citizen journalism with an open mindset. If not citizen journalism will appear as a direct competitor instead of being a resource. How to manage this resource in a reliable way is the real question. On the other side, we was not the only one to refer about the to the fierce competition between the press and the media in the age of the Internet. Also Mohammed Jibril bin Taher distinguished between the citizen's press or the amateur press and the journalist's professionalism in conveying, writing, transmitting and abiding by the ethics of the profession. The latter must be able to understand citizen journalism and use it in a correct, proper, ethic way. In this sense, according to Zambelli, the Syrian case can represent a good example to get inspiration from it. Citizen-journalism, in the case of Syria, has been a very useful «tool». Many citizen-journalists have been recruited by big newspapers in order to arrive to places totally isolated by the rest of the world. In line with Libyan colleagues, Zambelli underlined how the real challenge has been to put in a journalistic view the news coming from a citizen who in theory is not only not prepared for this job, but also (most probably) directly involved in a conflict. This was the reason why, for example, some big press companies decided to create a dedicated team in order to check all the information coming from Syrian citizen-journalists and evaluate technically (checking for example the metadata inside their camera and the point of view of the contents) the reliability of these information. A dedicated training on this aspect (e.g. social community management) seems to be very welcomed by Libyan colleagues.

Three main issues emerged from our consultation, which are respectively related to visual and textual strategies for building a shared memory; proximity with citizens and their involvements; overall risks and ethical aspect of non-professional journalism.

As to the first point, we can state that the growing importance of video-journalism would require a deeper understanding of the nature of the *image* as such, or, in other words, a proper visual media literacy (see Mitchell 2015). This is the more relevant, when one considers that the success of Al-Jazeera in the Arab World is also due to a wide appreciation of its visual communication strategies and graphic presentation of events (Fahmy, Johnson 2007).

To which extent the visual representation – and namely, the *images of war* – can help elaborating the crisis and building a new common imagery, is then a very complex issue, we often refer to as «peace journalism». For sure, as many pointed out, the end of the Gaddafi era opened up new

possibilities for journalists, while also bringing the risk of a new polarization, due to the political fragmentation of the country (in particular, al-Omrani and Sánchez-Mesa). For what concerns video-journalism, we found two different positions, respectively based on the centrality or the *content*, or on that of the *form*. In the first case, the focus is on journalism and journalism schools having to include human rights programs and advocacy (Al-Wafi, bin Taher); in the second, the representation of war itself – rather than its removal in post-crisis information campaign – is actually necessary to its understanding and to the sedimentation of a shared, even though painful, visual memory (in particular, Jampaglia; see also Sturken 1997).

The second aspect is one with the main risk, according to the experts, of «getting lost», even not voluntarily, in the ideological balkanization of contemporary Libya – a statement which actually confirms some previously considered analysis (Wollenberg, Richter 2020). In name of this very same risk, all interviews agreed on the main ethical principles of peace journalism (in particular Alfughi, Abo Baker, Tarmal, Gharbawy), and namely:

- Answering to citizens and to their interests and requests;
- Revealing the backstage of decision-making processes;
- Debunking propaganda contents;
- Fighting any explicit or implicit contraposition among social or ethnical groups, on which all kinds of extremism are based;
- Giving more space to alternative and independent media outlets;
- Training journalists to avoid self-censorship, which is nowadays perceived as a main obstacle towards a high-level professionalization of the sector.

In all cases, the mobile journalism is perceived as offering the advantage of directness, a quasi-intimate connection between the reporter and the audience, not far from what has been labeled as «lifestyle journalism» (Perreault, Stenfield 2019). This being said, how to train the oldest journalists to mobile communication, or make them familiar with high-tech solutions, is a problem highlighted by many Libyan experts, reminding us of the generational fracture already taken into account (El-Issawi 2013a). The centrality of mobile journalism, in its turn, has to be considered at two different levels. Upstream, it is a necessary tool for contemporary reporting, obviously requiring specific skills and expertise. As Yusuf Omar states, «mobile journalism is a way of living, his phone works for him as a «weapon»

always ready to shoot. He never knows when and where a good story is going to happen. It can take place on holidays, in the streets, anywhere an injustice can happen. Mobile journalism can be represented as «glasses» he is using during the interview with the camera attached. Downstream, what is more interesting, it has to do with people no longer «finding the news», in Rasha Faek's words, but rather being reached by them. For this purpose, according to Faek, news outlets has to come out with a mobile-first strategy, becoming able to design tailored information for the smartphone – whether it is a text, a video, or a podcasts.

Finally, all interviews show a clear understanding of the ambivalence of citizen journalism, with its opportunities counter-balanced by some evident risks. While journalists are encouraged to approach the new field with an «open mindset» (al Omrani), the real issue is no longer whether or not to deal with amateur journalism - but *how* to do that. The problem has not simply to do with common people's ability in news-making, but also with the difficulty of making audiences aware of their ideological bias – and the more so, in a highly polarized country as post-war Libya. Tools for checking the reliability and the accountability of citizen reporters have been proposed, such as the obligation of providing all meta-data concerning the news released (bin Taher, Zambelli). For what concerns the overall role of citizen journalism, finally, Syrian case has been widely cited as the most relevant historical case – and a deeper analysis of the Damascus scene actually gives strength to this interpretation, showing how vital and advanced the visual culture was also in the pre-war era (Della Ratta 2020).

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