

A ready channel for lies and half-truths

By CHRISTOPHER WALKER
& ROBERT W. ORTUNG

FACEBOOK, Twitter and other social media have revolutionized the global press landscape, helping to dislodge dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, and foment protests in Bahrain and Syria.

But another revolution is taking shape simultaneously in old media institutions — one that could break the stranglehold that the state news media hold over unfree societies.

Dictators make controlling the news media a priority for a reason. For most authoritarian states, state news media, especially television, have helped leaders stay in power by creating a parallel reality for their populations and depriving dissenters of a wider audience. Tunisia's news media environment was routinely ranked among the world's most stifling in Freedom House's annual assessment of press freedom before this year's revolution. In

Egypt, state television stood steadfastly behind President Hosni Mubarak, deceptively playing old video of an empty Tahrir Square rather than broadcasting images of the millions protesting there.

Autocratic governments spare no effort to ensure that their state news media provide their audiences a steady diet of regime-friendly news and information. In Mr. Mubarak's Egypt, some 46,000 people worked at the government's news media complex, and the government-controlled Egyptian Radio and Television Union still owns all non-satellite television broadcasters.

While growing numbers of viewers have turned to Al Jazeera and other private channels, significant segments of Egypt's population continue to rely on the state news media. A 2007 study found that 72 per cent of Egyptians turned to state television as their main source of political news.

In addition, the state still owns 99 per cent of newspaper publishers and news-

stands. In recent years, independent newspapers have made significant strides, but their numbers are still dwarfed by official news outlets: The government-run daily Al-Ahram claims a circulation of roughly one million while the country's entire independent press prints fewer than 200,000 copies a day.

State news media remain dominant today, although reformers are working hard to change that. In response to protesters' demands, Egypt's interim military government eliminated the position of minister of information in February and earlier this month fired three top officials from state television and radio.

Meanwhile, the upheaval in Libya has laid bare the deprivations of state media. Still in Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's grip, Libyan state television continues to feed its audience a warped mix of conspiracy and sham. For instance, it has shamelessly vilified Ms. Eman al-Obedy, the Libyan who said she was raped by Col. Gaddafi's security forces and desperately sought to

tell her story to foreign reporters, alleging that she is a prostitute and clinically insane.

In Syria, state television operates as if growing protests and a government crackdown are not taking place: viewers are instead fed images of pro-government demonstrations and told of conspiracies against the regime. But cracks have begun to emerge.

Last week, the prominent state television journalist Maher Deeb quit in protest, writing on his Facebook page: "I am no longer able to bear the failed approach of the official Syrian press... as well as its failure to cover the practices of some security branches and popular committees that torture, arrest and attack protesters."

Revolutions occur when enough people decide to ignore state media warnings, take to the streets and join other protesters, as they did in Tahrir Square. But Egypt was an encouraging exception. Where their roots are deep, state news

media create an almost insurmountable obstacle for civil society and political opposition groups by barring them from communicating with mass audiences. Although social media have been a critical tool for creating political openings, opposition groups need national outlets if durable institutional reforms are to take place in societies that have endured extraordinary manipulation and repression.

The gains achieved by Egyptian and Tunisian protesters in reshaping their state-controlled news media in the weeks since their revolutions should not be taken for granted.

Transforming politically dominated television and radio networks into more transparent and democratic institutions is a long and difficult process, and the vast majority of citizens in authoritarian states across the world — from Libya and Syria to Russia and China — continue to consume a twisted version of reality through the looking glass of state television.

The former is the director of studies at Freedom House, while the latter is an assistant director of the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

K

Review of Freedom
OT Apr 1 2011