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Beehive

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New Media, Same Libya?

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Just a little over 10 years ago, when a wave of mass protests started to spread through the Middle East, the world observed intrigued the role played by the modern information and communication technologies (ICT): the “Arab Spring” has shown how social media networks facilitated the development of popular protests within a region, and the spread of revolutionary ideas from one country to another.

The rage and shock of some of the Arab leaders suddenly facing the unleashed power of social media can only be imagined. In Libya, Colonel Gaddafi had worked for 30 years in the effort to keep a total control over the media, by nationalizing all the press and seizing possession of theatres and television channels. As Gaddafi stated in his Green Book: *“The press is a means of expression for society: it is not a means of expression for private individuals or corporate bodies. Therefore,*

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logically and democratically, it should not belong to either one of them."¹ Accordingly, Gaddafi decided that the media should belong only to the Libya's leader and serve solely for enforcing the regime's ideologies. Until the end of the country's international isolation in 2004, the rate of Internet penetration in the country was just over 3 percent.² At this time, Colonel Gaddafi's son Saif Al-Islam emerged as a more liberal leader, and new satellite channels and newspapers were launched. Although Internet access slowly increased, on the eve of the February Revolution in 2011, just 14 percent of Libyans were using the Internet.³

Notwithstanding Libya's limited diffusion of Internet and social media, as the first uprising began, Gaddafi undertook a range of measures, from a total Internet shutdown to electronic attacks against the Libyan opposition. On February 18, 2011, the regime cut down all communications, thus making mobile phone networks and Internet inaccessible.⁴ Nevertheless, many inside and outside Libya managed to upload news and videos from the country, which were spread all over the Internet and made it to the news. After 40-years of authoritarian rule and cruel dictatorship with no freedom of expression, Libya could not remain immune to the impact of new information and communication technologies, and although Gaddafi could probably not believe it himself, he too, fell down.

Ten years after and Libya has not yet seen the end of its Revolution, while hopes and expectations that followed the end of the Gaddafi era gave way to a protracted and violent civil war. In Libya, the persistence of the hostilities has curbed the initial enthusiasm of the early days of the uprisings, when many activists used Facebook and Twitter to organize and amplify their voice. The idea that "social media made the Arab Spring" has been replaced by demoralization and distrust among Libyans, who find increasingly difficult to identify the truth in this ongoing conflict.

This is because for four decades, the Qaddafi regime was the only source of information in Libya, and, although this information was inadequate and biased,

¹ Muammar al-Gaddafi, *The Green Book*, (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), p. 35.

² The World Bank, "[Individuals Using the Internet \(% Of Population\) - Libya](#)," *DataBank*; accessed 13 April 2021.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ John Scott-Railton, "[Revolutionary Risks: Cyber Technology and Threats in The 2011 Libyan Revolution](#)," *CIWAG Irregular Warfare Studies*, (2013), p. 24.

people accepted the only one they had. When things started to change in 2011, the country was left with no institutions conducting reliable fact-checking, and with a multitude of authorities claiming accountability over the media, the distinction between legitimate and fake soon became irrelevant. In this context, the political and economic situation of insecurity has further affected the media, which started to split, reflecting regional, ideological, and even ethnically-based alliances and rivalries. As a result, disinformation campaigns have spread and both the Libyan society and the narrative on the conflict have increasingly polarized.⁵

One might look at Libya's recent statistics and believe that every cloud has a silver lining. While figures vary,⁶ Internet penetration has steadily increased through the country, reaching approximately 75 percent of the population. Moreover, in the attempt to improve the level of communication and information services, a decree cutting Internet package prices from state-owned telecommunication companies by 50 percent was issued in 2020.⁷ In addition, 4G and even 5G mobile services have been launched in Libya's major cities, and the cost of accessing Internet services has dropped: today, some providers offer mobile internet packages for as low as 1 Libyan dinar (US \$0.70) per week for 50MB of data.⁸

Numbers do not lie, but as for the Libyan case, they unfortunately do not tell the whole story. According to a report by the Institute for Security Studies, the conflict in Libya has not only been dominated by military power but also by propaganda and disinformation.⁹ Over the past few years, both the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj, and the Eastern-based Libyan National Army (LN) led by Khalifa Haftar have spared no effort in maliciously shaping public opinion to their advantage, largely through social media.¹⁰ Furthermore, over the last 10 years, while the country has been lacking a central authority, most of its TV stations and newspapers have become tied to armed groups

⁵ Declan Walsh and Ali Zway Suliman, "[A Facebook War: Libyans Battle on the Streets And on Screens](#)," *The New York Times*, 4 September 2018.

⁶ The rate of internet penetration in Libya has been reported to be between 60 to 75 percent. See, Rami Musa, "[Libya](#)," *Media Landscape*, 2021, accessed 13 April 2021; Simon Kemp, "[Digital 2020: Libya](#)," *Datareportal – Global Digital Insights*, 18 February 2020.

⁷ Sami Zaptia, "[Libya Internet Prices Reduced by 50 Percent](#)," *Libya Herald*, 23 February 2020.

⁸ The Freedom House, "[Libya: Country Report](#)," *Freedom On The Net*, 2020.

⁹ Matt Herbert, "[Libya's War Becomes a Tech Battleground](#)," *ISS Today*, 8 October 2019.

¹⁰ "[A Light In Libya's Fog of Disinformation](#)," *Africa Center For Strategic Studies, Spotlights*, 9 October 2020.

and foreign powers. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia¹¹ have all been sponsoring online news media outlets, fake websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter trolls, using them as propaganda tools in favour of certain political factions.¹² In other words, with an ongoing civil war and a fragmented society, the increased Internet and social media access has been used to mislead people for the interest of a certain side of conflict.



Reposting on Twitter of the article from the Stanford Internet Observatory investigating how the ongoing conflict in Libya has made its way to online spaces, where all sides spread disinformation. @MouradTeyeb, Twitter, 20 April 2020.

Today, the Libyan people are attempting to rebuild their country. Small but serious steps have been taken, such as the cease-fire issued in October 2020, followed by the appointment in February of a Libyan *interim* unity government that should lead a unified country toward elections in December 2021. The latest developments are

¹¹ Shelby Grossman, Khadeja Ramali, and Renee DiResta, “[Blurring The Lines Of Media Authenticity: Prigozhin-Linked Group Funding Libyan Broadcast Media](#),” *Freeman Spogli Institute News*, 20 March 2020.

¹² Moutaz Ali, “[The Civil War in Libya is Exacerbated by Hate Speech and Propaganda](#),” *D+C Development and Cooperation*, 29 April 2019.

a sign of hope, but it is important to remember that an independent media environment will play a fundamental role in enabling the Libyan people to successfully cast their vote at the end of the year. This is to say, that over the next months, Libya faces the additional challenge of rehabilitating the proper functioning of its media and of deciding whether it will be used for effectively empowering society or rather as a tool to increasing the country's volatility.

In the effort of growing the legitimacy and accountability of its media, the newly appointed Libyan Government has announced the decision to start working toward the merge of the country's public and private media and the newly appointed head of the Libyan Media Foundation, Mohammed Baayo has commented: "*Let our media be the media of peace, reconciliation, unity, development and stability.*"¹³ Ironically, Mr. Baayo belongs to the old guard of the regime, and like many others in Libya, he has been able to navigate the tumultuous waters of the civil war and to survive the storm without even getting wet.¹⁴ His words are well spoken; however, who will believe and trust the corrupted former Director General of the Gaddafi Press Foundation?

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¹³ "[Libya to Work on Unification of Media, Ending Incitement](#)," *Arab Weekly*, 8 February 2021.

¹⁴ Hamad Farhat, "[It's Time of Impishness, Extortion and Baiyou](#)," *The Libya Observer*, 11 September 2020.