Overview of the online media in 8 Arab countries: how these media accompany the rising power of civil societies

Revelations of corruption scandals, society’s burning issues, reports letting citizens air their opinions... the news covered by the online press in the Arab World has never been read and discussed to such a great extent as it is today. The dramatic increase in power of online news is revitalising the ways in which news is accessed and interpreted. Today, from Casablanca to Beirut, via Ramallah and Alexandria, a large proportion of the population is both providing and obtaining information via the Internet; blogs, pure player news sites, websites backed by traditional media are all a part of this. In the past, citizens were passive bystanders fed information by institutional media, but in the last few years they have become the people producing and distributing the news.

CFI, the French media cooperation agency, is today publishing a detailed overview of the online media in 8 countries in the Arab World (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia) where online news and social networks have turned the traditional media scene upside down. This overview provides an overall analysis of the complex, multi-faceted and fluid landscape of online media, demonstrating their dynamism, but also the massive differences between these media in terms of their individual situations and the environments in which they are developing.

The topics studied include:

- The level of Internet penetration which is increasing ineluctably and which currently ranges from 17 to 71%, depending on the country studied;
- The game-changing rapid development of mobile Internet access which is revolutionising the way in which the population consumes information;
- The finding that there has been a decline in freedom of information almost everywhere, only partially made up for by the presence of new online citizen media;
- The explosion in the number of pure players committed to providing news and offering journalistic content that has been revamped in terms of form and content;
- A slow transformation of traditional media;
- The boom in social networks which are redefining the way in which information is consumed and shared;
- The lack of training of online journalists, and indeed of all journalists in the region, in relation to good journalistic practices, codes of professional conduct, and ethics.

This survey, conducted by Laurent Giacobino* between July 2014 and January 2015, is based on more than 45 in-depth interviews, 130 applications received by CFI in the context of the EBTICAR-Média project and an analysis of numerous reports, articles and essays.

“Since 2011, CFI, the French media cooperation agency, has been following the movement to develop a range of online news services in the Arab World. This initiative, launched in the wake of the Tunisian revolution, has allowed hundreds of journalists, developers and bloggers to participate in forums and conferences or to attend training courses. Thanks to all of these projects, CFI is now truly capable of observing the evolution of online media in the Arab World and has forged a network of strong partners. These “assets” have enabled us to produce this overview, which we want to share mainly in order to illustrate the dynamism of these new stakeholders in the media and news sector in the Arab World,” says Etienne Fiatte, Managing Director of CFI.
Laurent Giacobino has worked in the field of online media development and freedom of expression for ten years. He is the lead author of “Whither Blogestan: Evaluating Shifts in Persian Cyberspace” (2014, UPENN) and co-author of both editions of “How to Bypass Internet Censorship” (2008 and 2011, FLOSS Manuals).