The Libya Media Wiki
SNAPSHOT OF A COUNTRY IN TRANSITION

www.libyamediawiki.com
THE LEGATUM INSTITUTE

Based in London, the Legatum Institute (LI) is an independent non-partisan public policy organisation whose research, publications, and programmes advance ideas and policies in support of free and prosperous societies around the world.

LI’s signature annual publication is the Legatum Prosperity Index™, a unique global assessment of national prosperity based on both wealth and wellbeing. LI is the co-publisher of Democracy Lab, a journalistic joint-venture with Foreign Policy Magazine dedicated to covering political and economic transitions around the world.

RASHAD FOUNDATION

The Libya Media Wiki was created with the help of the Rashad Foundation, the non-profit arm of Rashad, which seeks to develop civil society with ambitious, creative innovative programmes.
I. OVERVIEW OF THE LIBYA MEDIA WIKI

The 17 February 2011 Revolution led to an explosion of new media all around Libya—an extraordinary development in a country which has had no independent press to speak of for more than 30 years. Since then, Libyan media has remained in constant motion: broadcasters, newspapers and magazines have launched and folded, decrees have been announced and rescinded, rules have been made and then broken. Keeping track of these changes is not easy. Although many organisations have published assessments of the press and of laws governing speech in Libya, they swiftly become out-dated. The Legatum Institute’s Libya Media Wiki at www.libyamediawiki.com is also an assessment, but one written on an open, collaborative platform. It has been created with the hope that users will continually update, correct, and add to the information presented on the website.

The Libya Media Wiki is intended to provide up-to-date information about the media in Libya: what laws and regulations are being issued, what outlets are being launched, where does their funding come from. We hope this information will be useful to international organisations working in Libya, to donor countries funding media development, and above all to Libyan journalists, broadcasters, publishers, bloggers and editors. In fact, it is vital for all Libyans to monitor closely the developments in their media landscape; the future of public debate, of open discussion and of free speech may well depend on it.

This is necessary, above all, because there is no guarantee that today’s freewheeling Libyan press will remain as open as it is today. In the early 1990s Russia also experienced an explosion of free press, much like Libya today. A decade later it had mostly disappeared. Libyans too must keep a close eye on the laws and regulations on press and speech that will be created in the coming months and years. Although many of the news outlets that mushroomed during the revolution are not financially sustainable, it is imperative that the country continues to hear a diversity of views. For that reason too, Libyans must keep a close eye on ownership of the media—what is being launched, what is folding, and who is paying for all of it.

Many of the problems that plague the Libyan media are not unique in that country. The forces at play in the media sector mirror the opportunities and challenges in almost every other sector of society. For example: although none of the information on the Wiki is confidential, some of it was nevertheless very hard to obtain. In both the private and the public sectors people are reluctant to talk about their plans, their politics, and their funding. The Libya Media Wiki is thus also intended to challenge the endemic lack of transparency—a remnant of the old regime—that still prevails in Libya today.

The Libya Media Wiki is a work in progress. In the weeks following the publication of this report, the Wiki will be open to the public for editing and updating. It will also be translated into Arabic. Eventually, it must be controlled by the Libyans themselves.
II. THE LEGATUM LIBYA MEDIA INITIATIVE

December 2011

The origins of the Libya Media Wiki lie in two trips to Libya sponsored by the Legatum Institute: an exploratory trip in October 2011 (Anne Applebaum), and a longer trip in December 2011 (Chloé de Préneuf and Jerry Timmins). At that time Libya was still in its post-revolutionary honeymoon. In Tripoli people were painting over the green paint on their doors and shouting out revolutionary slogans to each other on the streets. Benghazi—the “spark of the revolution”—felt much safer than Tripoli where militias still roamed the streets with their Kalashnikovs in full view. We were told repeatedly that Benghazi was the cultural capital of Libya, and that the best media outlets were based there.

Certainly in December 2011 the media that had flourished during the revolution was still in existence. Hundreds of newspapers and radio stations, and at least 20 television stations, were still producing the news. Those journalists who had successfully navigated project proposal forms were promised numerous training programmes and workshops by international organisations. But although the new media sector was energetic, optimism was not universal. Over 5,000 employees had worked for the state broadcasters during the Qaddafi era, and they were worried about their jobs. The Ministry of Information had been abolished a month before and state broadcasters had been regrouped into an entity called Libya Radio and Television (LRT). State television had been off the air since the fall of Tripoli in August 2011. Meanwhile, the public had begun to complain about the National Transitional Council’s (NTC) lack of communication, and the employees of LRT wanted guarantees that their jobs still existed. The Ministry of Culture then issued “decision number seven”, took over all state media assets, and announced it would open one TV station, one radio station, and one newspaper. This sparked protests from various corners.

Transitions are messy, fluid environments and chaos is probably a good thing at such an early stage. It would have been alarming to have a powerful, organised state media so soon after the fall of the Qaddafi regime. Nevertheless, important decisions were being taken in this chaos—decisions that would affect the media landscape for the next few years.

For that reason, the Legatum Institute (Chloé de Préneuf) decided to return in 2012 and remain until the first national elections, to keep a presence on the ground for a few months and to bring journalism and media policy experts to speak with various Libyan government officials, journalists, and civil society organisations. The idea was to observe, first-hand, the changes as they occurred in the media environment, to offer expertise and advice if needed, and do enough research to launch the Libya Media Wiki.
April–July 2012

As it turned out, Libya in April 2012 was already quite a different place from Libya in December 2011. The honeymoon was over. Libyans, who still had very high expectations, no longer quietly tolerated the indecisiveness of the NTC and Transitional Government. Many of the young Libyans who had volunteered so enthusiastically to work on free newspapers during or in the immediate aftermath of the revolution were now looking for jobs that paid actual salaries. Many media outlets were improving in quality. Some of the revolution’s self-made journalists had gained experience, had benefitted from training and had improved with practice. Television programming had become more diverse and more interesting. Radio had made the biggest strides of all. Due to the relatively low cost of setting up a station coupled with the huge infrastructure that remained from the Qaddafi era, new radio stations were being launched with regularity. Of course, more effort and training were still required. Libya was, is and will remain for the next few years a fragile transitional state.

In this environment, the rumour mill can easily spin out of control and turn into a dangerous weapon. The media was still not trusted, and perhaps rightly so.

During this period, the Libyan media made two notable efforts to organise itself and to discuss its legal and regulatory framework. The first major conference took place in Benghazi in May 2012, following a smaller conference held a few months before in Tripoli. About 400 journalists and media professionals gathered to discuss the creation of a journalists’ union and to draft a code of ethics.

The second major conference took place in the town of Jadu, in the Nafusa Mountains, in June 2012. In the interim, the NTC had taken media out of the Ministry of Culture’s portfolio and had nominated a High Media Council, a decision that sparked outrage among journalists. Nearly 1,650 people registered for the Jadu conference, although not all were genuinely media professionals nor did all attend. There, in a deserted, half-abandoned hotel complex spruced up with huge breezy tents, Libyans spent four days vigorously debating. Eventually the participants of this conference voted to select the leaders of a new High Media Council and a journalists’ union.

At that time, the policies being debated were often vague, and leaned towards drastic over-regulation. Though most Libyans wanted to see their state television transformed into an independent public broadcaster, few understood what that meant.

Yet equally, the heated arguments at these conferences were encouraging. They helped to foster an atmosphere of open public debate, and along with other public debates and private conversations in Tripoli, Benghazi, Misrata, and elsewhere, helped to clarify some of the most important issues for the media sector in Libya during this phase of the transition.
The Issues

• Control of state media
  In the spring of 2012 the media, and in particular the state media, was the focus of a quarrel between the Ministry of Culture and the NTC. Later, the Ministry of Culture and several High Media Councils fought for control as well. Some hoped to re-form a Media Ministry. Stuck in the middle of these disputes were 5,000 former regime employees who feared for their jobs.

• Islamists versus Liberals
  In the spring of 2012 the Muslim Brotherhood was heavily involved in the media sector. Although Islamists and Liberals both had an interest in fighting for a free media, there were tensions between both groups over the control of institutions and the writing of regulations.

• Old versus young
  Predictably, there was a generational clash in newsrooms between those who had been journalists for decades – of however poor quality—and new, inexperienced, revolutionary journalists, joined by the legions of untrained “Facebook journalists”. This clash sometimes took the form of a debate over which qualifications would be needed to join a journalists’ union.

• “Agendas”
  Wealthy businessmen with close ties to the old regime were investing in the media sector, probably hoping to buy their reputation back. Foreign countries, such as Qatar, were also pouring money into Libyan media. Regardless of the actual content of their newspapers and television stations, the government felt threatened by these news outlets.

• Geographic representation
  In the media, as in every other institution in Libya, policy discussions inevitably lead to the issue of balancing power among the 3 regions of Libya —Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica—and the main cities in each of those regions. Most of the four days leading up to the vote on the High Media Council in Jadu were spent haggling over seats for each region or city, and not debating actual content.

• Security
  As long as Libyans cannot rely upon the rule of law—and upon a neutral police force with a monopoly on guns—journalists will be particularly at risk. Journalists have been threatened and arbitrarily detained after reporting on events that displeased certain militias. One TV station, Libya Al-Hurra, was broken into and vandalised in Benghazi in October 2012. Months before, the head of one of the state TV channels, Qanat Libya, was routinely unable to get into his office because his employees were using the local militia against him. Security issues in Libya are hindering development in every sector, and the media is no exception.

• Lack of transparency
  After 42 years of Qaddafi’s regime of smoke and mirrors, Libya has no culture of transparency and openness. Access to information is still unnecessarily difficult, not because information is necessarily sensitive but because there is a fundamental lack of trust. Decisions that are poorly communicated can lead to wild rumours. Media outlets with obscure funding sources are often the focus of conspiracy theories.
Conclusion

The power vacuum that emerged in the period between the election of the General National Congress in July 2012 and the approval of the government cabinet mid-November has delayed Libya’s transition. Policy decisions were put on hold. The security environment worsened too, culminating in the murder of the US ambassador in Benghazi in October.

But the media in Libya remains vibrant and it is a sector that needs to be supported, now more than ever. Support is required in the newsroom but also in government hallways, because nothing is more important than the regulations and institutions that govern speech. The structure of state broadcasting, the laws on libel, blasphemy and hate speech, and the economics of newspaper ownership will profoundly shape the public debate in Libya. The country will be making decisions critical to the success of its transition over these next few years – such as drafting and approving its constitution—and needs a secure, independent and responsible media to help people understand and debate the issues facing the country. Free media is not a luxury in a post-revolutionary country such as a Libya. On the contrary, it is a central element of a successful transition.

Chloé de Préneuf
November 2012
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