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The media in Morocco: a highly political economy

The case of the paper and on-line press since the early 1990s

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In spite of (and perhaps because of) the importance of what is at stake, scientific research on news media in Morocco, and in particular the changes they have been going through since the 1990s, remains very limited. In fact, although the history of the Moroccan press has been the subject of several studies (for example Miège, 1954; Aouchar, 1990; Baida, 1996) as has television (Zaid, 2009; Campaiola, 2014), contemporary debates have been poorly studied apart from: the participants themselves through personal testimonies (Daoud, 2007; Alaoui, 2012; Bensmaïn, 2015); reports of international organisations, or debates which are sometimes stimulating but not based on investigations (El Ayadi, 2009)¹. This explains a certain normativity of this literature, often limited to measuring the level of “democratisation” of the Moroccan media. Furthermore, other dominant theoretical approaches do not help us to describe the complexity of press businesses, their operational methods, and the issues at stake vis-à-vis the powers in place. For example, works on transitology tend to be evolutionist, believing in possible “progress” and in changes which accompany any unavoidable “democratic transition”. The notion of hybridity is equally promoted by certain analysts (Belghazi, 2005; Chadwick, 2013) as an alternative, as it could enable us to study the way various national political systems work in countries such as Morocco.

Far from relying on these far too often excessively normative, general, or ethnocentric interpretation frameworks, this research² intends to analyse the Moroccan journalistic field since the 1990s using a relational sociology looking at its news businesses and showing their strong dependence on the economic and political fields. This relational perspective makes reference, on the one hand, to the works on the theory of fields, initiated by Pierre Bourdieu (for the media, see Benson and Neveu 2004 in particular) and, on the other hand, those focusing on the political economy of the media (for example Wasko, Murdock and Sousa, 2011 ; Palmer and Tumber 1991). To summarise briefly, the first are useful when considering a structural frame in order to, first, sketch out the relative positions of agents and institutions

¹ Among the rare exceptions, we can mention several works : Hidass, 2007 et 2016 ; El-Issawi, 2016 ; Benslimane, 2015 ; Benchenna, 2014 ; Miller, 2011 ; Cohen, 2011 ; Marley, 2010 ; Iddins, 2015. See also series published by History monthly *Zamane* in 2012 and entirely dedicated to the “Moroccan press saga” (<http://zamane.ma/fr/?s=%22La+saga+de+la+presse+marocaine%22>).

² This article is only the first stage of an on-going research, partly via interviews, and for formatting reasons, this material is practically unused directly in this text. The interviews (n=31) in 2015 and 2016 with directors of the major press and electronic press publications as well as with journalists and the documentary research relate to a representative sample of various contemporary strands of the private Moroccan paper and electronic press sector, while considering several parameters: the distribution, the type of support, the connections with the authorities and the economic model. This ongoing research has been financed as part of a project with Labex ICCA (Paris) and CESEM, research centre of HEM (Rabat). We want also to thank Roxane Farmanfarmanian and Ali Sonay for their suggestions and remarks.

in the journalistic field in Morocco, and, second, to reproduce the close relationship existing between this professional space and the social, political, and economic universes. The second are also a source of inspiration when trying to understand the economic and political logic at work as regards the way the “Press companies” operate in Morocco, within their own unique features (Benchenna, 2016, 45-49). This work also relies on the theory expressed by the economist Albert Otto Hirschman in his book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970), as it enables us to question the supposedly rational behaviour of the various stakeholders concerning their interaction with the economic players, the powers involved and the marketplace.

This initial analysis of the paper and electronic non-specialised press³ (and its managers) is based on five main issues. The first issue summarises the history of the nonpartisan press and the social, political protest issues within it since independence. The second shows how the explosive multiplication of the volume of news supplied by the paper press since the 1990s, and by the electronic press (notably since 2011) should not hide the historical features of this universe. The third issue is trying to describe the market where the press companies operate and which occupies a positional *continuum* located between two poles: the *hanout* (The grocery store) and the press group (and the careers of their senior executives). This also explains that the sustainability of publications depends on a balance based on political and economic parameters and certain uncrossable “red lines” (Monarchy, Sahara, and Islam). The fourth issue describes the very direct impact which the advertising oligopoly, connected to the main powers in place, has on the working of the press companies. Lastly, the Moroccan social space transformations enable us to understand better why the Moroccan press is facing difficulties when trying to increase its audience.

1. Genesis of the nonpartisan press: the “critic” news paths

In Morocco, the subservience of the journalistic sphere to the powers remains very strong but has changed considerably since the 1990s, i.e. since the end of the Cold War and at the end of the reign of Hassan II. After independence (1956), the press structure has been moulded, mainly, on the only authorised political parties, and, up to 1971, on the French group Mas (*Le Petit Marocain* and *La Vigie Marocaine*) authorised by the monarchy (Tiers and Ruf, 1975; El Ayadi, 2009). The Maroc Soir group continued with this “official” press system represented since then by the daily *Le Matin*. The national press agency Maghreb Arabe Presse (MAP), created in 1959, (Mouhtadi, 2008, 76sq) as well as the radio stations and the television channels, remains institutional press. Furthermore, up to the 1990s, censorship was not only very direct but the information from various entities were considered, in the main, very unreliable, closely monitored, and favouring commentaries, in the tradition of a literary and opinion press (Hidass, 2016).

³ To help with reading this text, from now on the word “press” will be used to describe, mostly, the news press, on paper and electronic.

However, this subservience of the news world to the political and state powers in Morocco has varied wildly, depending on the periods and the media types (Ksikes, 2014). After independence, dissent was present in cultural and intellectual Arabic and French language publications and these magazines played a significant role during public debates up to the early 1970s (as mentioned by Daoud, 2007; Sefrioui, 2013; Fernández Parilla, 2014): *Lamalif* (1966-1988), *Souffles* (1966-1971), *Al Asas* (1977-1995), *Kalima* (1986-1989). Other nonpartisan publications (very few in number) have also been censored by the authorities, such as the daily *Maroc Informations* (1960-1966) focusing mostly on economics; the left-leaning weekly *Al Balagh Al Maghribi* (1981-1984) or some satirical publications (*Akhbar Souk*, 1975-1981 and *Al Houdhoud*, 1981-1982). Mustafa Alaoui, journalist and founder of *Al Ousboue* (1965) is the exception which proves the rule, as he managed to last by changing, after each ban or censorship, the title of the paper publication registered by using his name (Alaoui, 2012).

From the late 1980s⁴, because of increased international requirements linked, among others, to human rights and, most of all, a more liberal economy in Morocco, the Moroccan political leaders began to gradually realise (Bennani-Chraïbi, 1997) that they needed to develop the image of a country progressing towards a “liberal modernity”. We could also mention the fall of the Soviet bloc, the Franco-African summit in La Baule which marked the end of the support offered by the French diplomacy to dictatorships and required that Morocco improves its “democratic shop window”, the Gulf War marked, in Morocco, by the support given by Hassan II to a foreign intervention (perceived in Morocco as a “sign of weakness”); the general strike of December 1990 organised by CDT and UGTM, and also by the release in 1990 of Gilles Perrault’s book *Notre Ami le roi* (Our friend the King), which had a tremendous impact. The “Democratic transition” intended to attract foreign investments and tourists (Hibou and Tozy, 2002), and the “Freedom of the press” were all elements of this debate. At the onset of the 1990s, a new generation of nonpartisan press titles, notably focusing on public affairs, emerges; two new weeklies *L’Économiste* and *Maroc Hebdo International* (1991) were created, whereas *La Vie Éco* was acquired, during the same period, by a French press baron, Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber, the head of the L’Expansion group. This last publication, which will in fact be sold again in 1997, employed several figureheads of the so-called future “independents” (as opposed to the categories used in Morocco to refer to the “partisan press”): Ali Amar, Ahmed Benchemsi, Aboubakr Jamaï, Ali Lmrabet, etc. This experience was not only one of the first testing beds for political and economic reportages in Morocco but reveals also the first signs of a press designed and run on entrepreneurial principles : "The good news was economic information, that's why everyone turned to the economy, because politically you cannot say anything, it was not possible", explains a former journalist of *La Nouvelle Tribune*.

But it is between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, in particular with the creation of political weeklies *Le Journal-Assahifa* (Benslimane, 2015), respectively in 1997 and 2000, then

TelQuel in 2001, that a press challenging the institutional and political context and the monarchy resurfaced. In some ways, it seemed as if political liberation followed economic liberation. According to several persons questioned (interviews with former managers of *Journal* and *TelQuel*, October 2015 and April 2016), this momentum had in fact been encouraged by several counsellors and/or advisers at the Royal Palace, which led some newspapers editors to give themselves more freedom, notably to transform the “reputation of Morocco abroad” marked by “years of lead” (dark years) and to prepare the succession of King Hassan II. This phase was an opportunity for a new generation of journalists who gained freedom from the tutelage of partisan newspapers. They were actively involved in both iconic enterprises as well as in the daily *Al Ahdath Al Maghribia* (1998-...), the weekly *Al Ayam* (2001-...) and, later, in *Al Jarida Al Oukhra* (2004-2006). However, their wish to change the professional practices had no legal status, as shown by an upsurge in the number of trials and an increase in economic pressure on their companies since 2003. The new Arab language dailies famous for being “professional” and politically “liberal” (*Al Massae* launched in 2007, *Akhbar Al Yaoum* in 2009) have been also subjected to repression by the authorities, worried by their increasing readership and, hence, influence (Cohen, 2011, 261).

This judgemental political speech moved gradually towards web news sites. In fact, some riots in several countries with a majority of Arabic speaking people, such as Morocco where a new constitution was promulgated in 2011, accelerated an explosion in the supply of digital news: “Here in Morocco, the reader of information on the internet was not a newspaper reader, because we had that 300,000 readers a day, for all titles, now we have almost 9 million, 8 million readers”, summarizes the director of a weekly magazine. Many digital sites have been created by former journalists of the written press, during or in the months preceding the “Movement of February 20th”. This was the case, for instance, of several Arabic platforms such as Lakome (Ali Anouzla of *Al Jarida Al Oukhra*, *Al Jarida Al Aoula* and *al Massae*, and then Aboubakr Jamaï, cofounder of *Journal*), Goud (Ahmed Najim of *Nichane*) and Febrayer (Maria Moukrim of *Al Ayam*). Those are some of the most visited and quoted within the dominant factions of the social media. This growth in judgmental information takes different shapes and led very quickly to the erection of numerous firewalls: launching of web platforms by different factions linked to the authorities who realised what is really at stake inside and outside the country; legal proceedings against several webmasters; a political and legal reshuffle of the news coverage via a complete overhaul of the “Press Code” in 2016, and a strengthening of monitoring measures. In 2013, Ali Anouzla, editor of the Arabic edition of the news site Lakome was jailed by the Royal Prosecutor for “material support”, “advocating” and “inciting others to carry out terrorist acts”, after publishing on this news site a link to a propaganda video from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. This site (French and Arabic versions) was then closed before reappearing in 2014 under a new name, Lakome 2, with very limited resources⁵.

⁵ See, on this topic, Samia Errazzouki’s contribution on this issue.

2. Structuring of the Moroccan news media: a huge increase in supply or “trompe-l’œil”?

Struggling publications and a limited news world

You only have to look at what the newsstands offer in Moroccan major cities or to visit news websites to realise that there are many publications on offer and that there is some apparent political pluralism, notwithstanding the un-crossable “red lines”. In fact, in 2014, the Minister for Communication identified 488 newspapers (including 15 partisan publications, 171 “independent” regional newspapers, and 500 national, regional and local news websites). However, these raw data tend, first, to hide the considerable financial difficulties the Moroccan press is facing, as shown by the publications’ high “mortality rate”, a drastic decline in the paper press distributed which was already very weak in a struggling advertising market (Naji, 2011). The readership (for all media: books, newspapers, etc.), in 2011/2012, did not exceed 2 minutes per day for the population aged 15 and over⁶. The audit company KPMG (KPMG, 2011) added that, in 2008, the distribution accounted for only 10 copies per 1,000 inhabitants. Morocco is often depicted as one of the mainly Arab-speaking countries with the smallest press readership (Zaid and Ibahrine, 2011, 29). The total paying readership for the 36 newspapers publications in Morocco⁷, as recorded by the OJD (l’Office de Justification de la Diffusion), an organisation auditing distribution, declined, in constant terms⁸ from 87.4 million copies to 61.9 million copies (from 99.9 million to 89.9 million copies in current terms) between 2009 and 2014. The 2004-2008 period has been very fruitful: a strong increase in the number of news weeklies (from 5 to 18), news magazines (6 to 19) and paying readership (+160.13% for the weeklies and +72.5% for the magazines). There are similar trends in the daily newspaper sector: the overall daily total readership has been reduced, from 250,296 copies in 2009 to 175,760 in 2014, whereas the number of paid copies had nearly tripled since the early 2000s: 116,358 copies in 2004 as opposed to 300,871 in 2008, and during the same period, the number of publications has increased five-fold. This period is remembered for its large readership during the first few years of Arabic dailies (*Al Massae* and *Akhbar El Yaoum*) and by the fact that they were not yet challenged by the electronic data sites.

The data on Moroccan news websites demonstrate, on the one hand, that these platforms are indisputably so much more successful (by number of visits) than the paper news platforms in a country where the percentage of Internet users reached 56.8% in 2014⁹. For instance, a survey carried out in 2015¹⁰ on a specific sample of the national literate population aged 15

⁶ Source: Haut-commissariat au Plan, *National Inquiry on timetables in Morocco*, 2011/2012. <http://www.hcp.ma/region-drda/attachment/534458/>

⁷ All data in this section come from this organisation, unless otherwise specified.

⁸ This constant perimeter only takes into account the publications existing during both of these periods, while ignoring all new publications or transfers.

⁹ Source: Agence nationale Agence nationale de réglementation des télécommunications (ANRT).

¹⁰ LMS-CSA pour la Fédération marocaine Fédération marocaine des éditeurs de journaux (FMEJ).

and older confirmed that 67% of respondents state that they read the digital press *versus* only 17% for the paper press and 26% reading both types of platforms. As of August 30th 2016, Alexa states that the most widely visited were Moroccan Arabic news websites (such as *Hespress*, with 2.5 million visitors per day, and ranking fourth, after *Google*, *Facebook* and *Youtube*), *Chouftv* (5th), as well as two football websites (*elbotola.com* and *khooora.com* (9th and 11th respectively)). Other general websites have become popular, such as, for instance, the bilingual site *le360* (13th) and several Arabic sites *Goud* (14th), *Alyaoum24* (19th), *Febrayer* (31st) or *Hibapress* (34th).

Notwithstanding this exponential increase in paper and digital platforms, we should not forget that journalism in Morocco remains a poorly trained and very limited microcosm (with 2,130 journalists accredited by the Minister of Communication in 2012) and closely structured around the most official national media. Indeed, nearly half (46.9%) of the accredited professionals work for audiovisual state media companies – either the public audiovisual, or MAP (10.28%)¹¹.

Domination of the Arabic language and the general national daily press

But it is mainly the structure of the Moroccan news sector, closely related to the unique characteristics of the social national landscape, that enables us to move away from this *trompe-l'œil*. In fact, it reveals, initially, a paradox related to the national political history: Arabic, although it is the mostly read, remains the least commercially profitable; conversely, the press written in French attracts the major share of commercial investment. Arabic took a long time before emerging because it was very severely sanctioned by the French protectorate (5% of newspapers in 1951, as stated by Baida, 1996, 18) and by the authorities and for several decades after independence. This opposition between these two languages is mostly due to the structure of the social space. The paper publications were only designed for a very limited fraction of the social space, the richer as regards the cultural capital and the economic capital, i.e. for a very long time French-speaking. The Moroccan peculiarity is that standard Arabic and French, the two main languages taught at school and used by the paper or electronic press, are not the mother-tongues of the Moroccan students. The domination of the standard Arabic language was very gradual: in 2014, of the 488 national publications 70.9% were in Arabic (57.4% in 1985) and 19% in French (42.6% in 1985)¹², 6.6% are in Arabic and French, 2.5% in another language and only 1% in Amazigh. This domination of the Arabic language is also obvious on electronic platforms.

The paper and electronic press in Arabic has recorded an unprecedented expansion from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. For instance, if we consider the dailies, two of them are the

¹¹ Source: Minister for Communication of the Kingdom of Morocco, *Efforts to promote the freedom of the press: annual report*, p. 36. URL: http://mincom.gov.ma/landing/demo/template/wordpress/media/k2/attachments/Liberte_de_la_presse_VF_07_03_13.pdf

¹² These figures were published by the Minister for Information and mentioned by Mouhtadi, 2008, 79.

embodiment of the popular (both meanings of this word) press development, even if their readership, according to an interview with a former senior executive of *Al Massae* (who now works at *Al Akhbar*, October 2015), is found in higher social classes. The daily *Al Massae* is founded by two widely read Arabic-speaking journalists (Taoufik Bouachrine and Rachid Niny) and a former banker with a new career in journalism (Samir Chaouki) and mostly financed by the cinema director-producer Mohamed Asli. The daily *Al Akhbar* is created by Rachid Niny after leaving *Al Massae*, managed to build very quickly a considerable readership (114,458 paid copies in 2008 for the first daily and 60,000 in 2014 for the second one), barely two years after their creation. This success is in part due to the many readers of the daily column “*Chouft’chouf*” (“Who knows”) written by Rachid Niny in a mix of standard and Moroccan arabic which increased sales of the daily *Assabah*, and which continued in other publications whose development he contributed to, *Al Massae* and *Al Akhbar*¹³. Using his column to denounce corruption, social injustices, including within government circles, and several “scoops”, he acquired a high profile. However, the biggest dailies in French, the “official” general daily *Le Matin* and the specialised *L’Économiste* have been relatively stable since the early 2000s with about 20,000 copies for the former, and 16,000-18,000 for the latter.

Another structural principle of the Moroccan newspaper world is related to the importance of the national press. There are regional publications (23.7% of the paper publications in 2005) with a problematic durability and this sector is highly concentrated in the economic capital (Casablanca) and, to a lesser degree, the political capital (Rabat): only 5.4% of the journalists holding a current professional press card were working for the regional press (Annual report on the written press and the public audiovisual media, Minister for Communication, 2005). Similarly, the Moroccan press sector is largely based on dailies and the distribution of magazines is relatively limited¹⁴. Two publications are icons of the “independent press” in French but never had a significant readership: *Le Journal* has only sold more than 20,000 copies in 1999 and 2000, whereas *TelQuel* sold a weekly average of 20,435 copies in 2005, but is in gradual decline since 2009, with only 10,376 copies per week in 2014.

3. Configuration of a market located between economy and politics: from the “grocery store” to the press group

For a researcher, one of the challenges to fully understand the press sector in Morocco is linked to the identification of the shareholders of a given publication being the first obstacle: either because the publishing company has no legal entity (as is the case of several news websites), or because a publication is suspected of having been created by the “authorities” or of being discreetly supported by a politician, a senior official or a businessman. The second

¹³ See, among others, Aïcha Akalay, “Le phénomène Niny” (The Niny phenomenon), *TelQuel*, May 8th 2012 (http://telquel.ma/2012/05/08/enquete-le-phenomene-niny_352_2649).

¹⁴ <http://www.ojd.ma/>

problem is when trying to identify the professional career of some investors. While not pretending to be exhaustive, the field investigations in progress were able to identify several main profiles of press investors.

Portraits of investors

Most of them are journalists and media professionals. Obviously, their role is not limited to the financial investment aspect, as they also have, quite often, the title of Publication Director and/or Editing Director. Because of economic problems encountered by their backers, of criminal convictions they have or of disagreements with their associates, some of them have started several publications in succession. Such is the case of Ali Anouzla, Taoufiq Bouachrine or Rachid Niny.

An academic is the other main figurehead in the press, especially the economic press. For instance, Abdelmounaïm Dilami, has been president and chief executive officer since 1991 of the *Éco-Médias* group, consisting of the biggest French daily (*L'Économiste*), the third Arabic daily (*Assabah*), based on the number of copies published, and of Radio Atlantic, a Graduate School of Journalism and Communication, as well as the printing company Eco-print. Fahd Yata, founder of the business weekly *La Nouvelle Tribune* in 1995 had a similar career. The first one is a professor at the School of Law and Political Science of the Mohammed V University, Rabat, and also give lectures at the Centre d'études stratégiques (Centre for strategic studies). The second one has a doctorate in international relations from the Paris 1 University and has been lecturing at the Hassan II University since 1979. They started investing in the business press during a period of unprecedented economic liberalisation.

Fahd Yata illustrates also the third type of figurehead, the heir, as do also Aboubakr Jamaï and Abdelmalek Alaoui. All three of them are sons of journalists and politicians. Abdelmalek Alaoui is the son of Ahmed Alaoui, former minister, grand-vizir of Hassan II and president of the *Maroc Soir* group. Fahd Yata's father, Ali Yata, was director of *Al Bayane* (mouthpiece for the Progrès et Socialisme party). Aboubakr Jamaï is the son of Khalid Jamaï, journalist and former member of the Istiqlal party political bureau. Graduate of a Moroccan business school (ISCAE), he also holds an MBA from the Oxford University as well as a Master's degree in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School and, in 1997, became one of the founders of the weekly *Le Journal*.

The fourth figurehead is a company director and/or a businessman/minister. This is the case of Moulay Hafid El Alamy, founder of the *Saham Assurance* group and Minister for Industry, Commerce, Investment, and Digital economy since 2013, or of Aziz Akhannouch, president of the *Akwa* group, specialised in energy and real estate, Minister for Fisheries and Agriculture since 2007. The former is one of the richest men in Africa and the main shareholder of the business daily *Les Inspirations éco* (founded end of 2009) and of the

monthly specialising in contemporary history *Zamane*¹⁵. He is also a shareholder of the *Éco Médias* group. The latter manages the *Caractères* group, producing, among others, the weekly *La Vie éco* and the monthly *Femmes du Maroc*. Their cases illustrate the “economisation of politics”, to quote Myriam Catusse (2008, p. 37). In fact, for these businessmen, investing in the press sector is intended to protect their own commercial interests, to support a stable political world by using their many titles in support of political communication, and to add business competence as part of the qualities required to become an established politician.

To these two businessmen/ministers should be added two more important figureheads: Khalid El Hariry, former MP for the USPF (Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires) party and company manager; Karim Tazi, manager of the *Richbond* group (furniture, chemical industry, real estate, etc.), both of them becoming joint shareholders, in 2013, of *TelQuel Media*, the new trade name of the company publishing the first French news magazine *TelQuel*, launched in 2001 by Ahmed Réda Benchemsi and about ten other shareholders of *Presse directe*. Since the end of 2013, Khalid El Hariry has been the sole shareholder of *TelQuel Media*, after the withdrawal of Karim Tazi. The case of Khalid El Hariry is representative of the arrival, since the late 2000s, in the electronic press sector, of investors using their technical know-how, while surrounding themselves with collaborators editorially competent and able to manage the publication content. Mhamed Lakbir (*Hibapress*), the brothers Hassan and Amine Guennouni (*Hespress*) and Mohamed Ezzouak (*Yabiladi*) (Benchenna, 2014), had initially designed their sites as content aggregators but are in fact-managing today three of the most visited Moroccan news sites, from Morocco and from several European countries.

Another type of professional career path is that of the professional coming from the artistic world. Thus, Aziz Daki, joint shareholder of the *Edit Holding* group, manages the French and Arabic information portal, *360*, the richest in human and material resources and is joint founder of the *L’atelier 21* art gallery. Aziz Daki is also the artistic director of the international festival *Mawazine*, started in 2001 by Mounir Majidi, private secretary of Mohamed VI and senior executive of *First Contact Communication*, the company specialising in advertising boards across Morocco. This casts a serious doubt, in this profession, as to the real identity of the shareholder of the *Edit Holding* group.

Advertisers and communication professionals also invest in general or thematic news press. Unlike journalists, they successfully build media groups consisting of newspapers, magazines, *pureplayers*, and even some private radios. Here are several examples: Kamal Lahlou, founder of the *New Publicity* group, organised around three poles: press (*VH Magazine*, *Challenge* and *Lalla Fatéma*), radio (MFM Radio and the regional network MFM) and urban billboards; Ahmed Charaï owns the *Global Media-Holding* group consisting of the weekly *L’Observateur du Maroc et d’Afrique*, the daily *Al Ahdath Al Maghribia* (bought from former stakeholders) the quarterly *Pouvoirs d’Afrique* as well as the radio Med Radio and the

¹⁵ Moulay Hafid Elalamy takes over the *Zamane* magazine, *La Vie Éco*, April 30th, 2012. <http://lavieeco.com/news/economie/moulay-hafid-elalamy-prend-le-contrôle-du-magazine-zamane-21964.html>.

information website [Kifache.com](http://www.kifache.com)¹⁶; Mohamed Laraki manages the *Geomédia* group¹⁷; the advertiser Karim Bennani, a close associate of a royal counsellor, who manages the digital communication agency Marshmallow Digital and, is the majority shareholder of the *Akhir Saâ* group, started by Ilyas El Omari, general secretary of the Authenticité et Modernité party (PAM) created in 2008 by Fouad Ali El Himma, a friend of King Mohamed VI and his counsellor since 2011.^{8th}2015

Ilyas El Omari represents very precisely the return of this more traditional image, in the press, of a politician and head of a political party. Apart from the partisan publications managed by party leaders, his case is probably the more iconic. At the end of 2015, he launched the press group *Akhir Saâ*, with a capital of 40 million dirhams and a printing company, Prestigia Print. It has six Arabic, French and Amazigh publications: one Arabic daily (*Akhir Saâ*), one French weekly (*La Dépêche*), one website (*qoushk.ma*) and three monthlies (*Likouli Nissae*, *Afkar*, *Tafoukt*). According to *ledesk.ma* (October 18th, 2016), Karim Bennani, the main shareholder for the *Akhir Saâ* group, intends to restructure this group by separating the editorial activities from manufacturing operations.

Requirements for durability: respect of the “red lines” and managerial competencies

The press sector is very political in Morocco, as shown also by the editorial lines of the various publications. The managerial competencies of the publication leadership teams are the determining factors for their durability. This is the conclusion reached after interviewing the top management of several companies. Since the 2000s, control is exerted less and less by direct censure but increasingly via an economic suffocation of publications following an editorial line displeasing to the political authorities. The advertisers (state or private companies close to the authorities) are requested to boycott them and not to carry their publicity campaigns. Three newspapers are convinced they disappeared because of this type of economic control: the *Journal Hebdomadaire* in January 2010, *Al Jarida Al Oulain* May 2010 and *Nichane* in October 2010. Some newspapers are also targeted by shareholders close to the authorities, in order to exert pressure on the editorial line. This is illustrated by the taking over of the *Caractères* group, in 1997, by the businessman Abdelaziz Akhannouch.

The press company management dimension is another significant repressive tool. In fact, the authorities sometimes attack this weak link of the press sector to terminate a publication. In this particular case, *Média Trust* and the *Trimédia* group, which respectively published *Le Journal* and the *Journal Hebdomadaire*, were officially found guilty in 2010, of non-payment of debts owed to the Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale (CNSS), the tax administration services and several banks. If editorial choices are not unrelated to the disappearance of these two publications, the “poor management” of these publishing entities is the excuse used to legally terminate a famous weekly, stated their founders: “to give nightmares, on a weekly

¹⁶ <http://www.globalmediaholding.ma/>

¹⁷ <http://www.geomedia.ma/>

basis, to the Alaouite regime” (Amar, 2009, 15). *Le Journal* was seized in April 2000, after publishing an interview of the leader of the Front Polisario. Several months later, it was banned by a decree issued by the socialist Prime Minister Abderrahman Youssoufi for revealing that the left was involved in the regicide attempt against Hassan II led by General Oufkir in 1972.

This explains that the practical evolution in the press sector has been marked, in the last ten years, by a strengthening of self-censorship and by sophistication of this practice. Endeavouring to develop their companies in a shrinking environment, the press senior executives manage their relationship with the current authorities by various methods: the first consists of searching for, in a quasi-systematic way, “sponsors”, “guarantors” and other allies in order to obtain easier access to the markets and protect themselves from unexpected or miscalculated political blows; the second is linked to international alliances; the third tries to identify a large audience to counter political power and as an economic guarantee.

A very poorly structured sector dominated by small entities

This very close dependency on economic and political constraints partly explains the domination of the press sector by small enterprises (small number of employees and low assets). In 2008, a survey of 42 companies revealed that the assets of 23 of them is less than 10 million dirhams and only 4 companies have assets exceeding 50 million dirhams (KPMG, 2011). The politician Ilyas El Omari successfully and very quickly created a press group at the end of 2015, the university professor Abdelmounaïm Dilami developed the *Éco Médias* group and the media professional Ahmed Charaï launched the *Global Media Holding* group, formerly called *Med Éditions*, but all this is partly due to the fact that all three are close to various entities in power and that the editorial line followed by their publications is centred on economic topics, as it is supposed to try to promote and is considered as not jeopardising the economic, political and social order. Other attempts to create press groups failed for opposite reasons. Ahmed Réda Benchemsi, who started *Presse Directe (TelQuel, Nichane)*, and Aboubakr Jamaï, director of *Media Trust (Journal and Assahifa)* decided to become exiles.

The press sector is also poorly structured. Some companies have legally existed for some ten years. A great number of them, mostly the *pure players*, wait for recognition by the relevant minister and the joint committee. Of the 488 newspapers listed by the Minister for Communication, in 2014, only 10 non-partisan national dailies (7 in Arabic and 3 in French), 22 weeklies (10 in Arabic and 12 in French) and 25 monthlies (12 in French and 13 in Arabic) employ journalists¹⁸. There is a similar situation with the news websites: only 23 of the 5000 listed employ journalists. Up to the mid-2000s, some newspapers owners thought about this sector organisation in terms of publication and very rarely as businesses, although this notion duly appears in the 1958 Press Code, (articles 5, 13 and 15)¹⁹.

¹⁸ <http://adala.justice.gov.ma/production/html/Fr/liens/..%5C44731.htm>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The political will to structure this sector?

In 2004, the King invited the government to work at “promoting the emergence of professional media companies”²⁰. This decision resulted, for the written press, in the creation of the joint committee and two quadrennial contracts-programmes (in 2005, with an amendment in 2009 and in 2013). Co-signed by the FMEJ (Fédération Marocaine des Éditeurs de Journaux) and the relevant minister, the stated objective was “the promotion and modernisation of the written press” and “helping it to upgrade”.

These two texts resulted in grants given to a whole raft of newspaper publishing companies: 46.4 million dirhams shared between 40 titles as opposed to 54 in 2011 and 71 in 2012, with grants totalling 56 million dirhams (Minister for Communication, 2012). However, the beneficiaries of this help had to meet very specific requirements, which drastically reduced the number of applicants: to obtain a registration number from the joint committee; to satisfy the requirements of the tax authorities; to regularise the situation vis à vis the Caisse Nationale de la Sécurité Sociale; to pay at least the minimum wages required; to be transparent as regards the number of printed copies distributed to publish the annual balance sheet; to supply evidence for expenses; to make sure the company employs at least the minimum number of salaried journalists. This contract-programme states that the “publication or the written press company must employ, as a minimum, 1 chief editor, 7 professional journalists, and 7 employees for the dailies; 1 chief editor, 4 professional journalists, and 5 employees for the weeklies”.

These requirements are subject to discussions, at regular intervals.

The financial help given by the State to the non-partisan paper press and web press since 2015 has become an issue for publishing companies which face financial difficulties and ever diminishing sales figures. This is even more serious for Arabic publications as their advertising income is less than that of the French publications, although the latter are not as widely read.

Where does the money come from (or the game of mutual accusations)?

The press sector is also very political, as shown by the permanent game of mutual accusations. Professionals in this field, as well as politicians, ask frequent questions about the true shareholders of some publications. They make some accusations, most of them discreet, by stating that one publication or another is in fact “acting” on behalf of a political party or a politician, or even the secret services. Some even deny that there is such a thing as an “independent press”.

²⁰ King’s speech, July 30th, 2004.

Sometimes, these accusations even question the legality of the money invested in the press. The current Prime Minister has asked the secretary general of the PAM (Parti Authenticité et Modernité) party, Ilyas El Omari, to reveal the origin of the 60 million dirhams invested in the media group Akhir Saâ created at the end of 2015.

The different financing modes

To better understand the issues of these discussions about finances, it is necessary to re-examine the way the paper and web newspapers were launched. Several economic models can be identified. The first strand consists of tabloids, newspapers, and *pure players*, with a biased line, without being partisan, and financed by discreet and unverifiable money (the people investigated mention the intelligence services, some personalities asking to remain anonymous, etc.). These structures specialise in smear campaigns and in biased information, without being subjected to any judicial or political pressure.

Another strand is occupied by the very few publications that have communicated, right from the beginning, the names of their shareholders, of which there were often very many. This is what has been done, for instance, by *Al Ahdath Al Maghribia* (1998), *TelQuel*, when they launched *Presse directe* (2001) and when the new company *TelQuel Media* was taken over and launched (2013), or when *Al Jarida Al Oula* started, with a participatory model (2008). However, this model, relying on the personality of a journalist-businessman wishing to rally around himself the support required to ensure a possible “independence” and the public listing of influential shareholders with a reputation for being “non-manipulable” as a guarantee of respectability, is very uncommon.

Between these two poles for this *continuum* of possible positions, the most common initial path is that of careful journalists-businessmen, who choose self-financing and, if required, more informal financing solutions. These choices seem precarious, but often rely on: extended payment deadlines, term loans from distributors (Sapress, mostly under its previous formula²¹) and, with two possible versions (on paper and online), long-term exclusive advertising contracts, by editorial affinity. From *Maroc Hebdo* (with, for a long time, the support of the Office National des Aéroports) to *Goud* (based on number of clicks and partial contracts), and *Al Ousboue*, *Al Ayam*, *Febrayer* or *Quid*, there was always a journalist eager to become self-reliant in order to build a project viable in the long term, and sustainable by setting up an inexpensive (resource-wise) production system.

Facing this “artisanal” option, more industrial strategies have been appearing, for a long time. They rely partially on self-financing and involve, from the onset, several allies closely connected to dominating factions in the political or economic arena. *La Vie Éco* (Caractères group), *L'Économiste* (Éco-Médias), the monthly *Din Wa Dunia*, or the *Médias 24* website:

²¹ Sapress (Société Arabo-Africaine de Distribution, d'Édition et de Presse) was created in 1977 by 3 political parties (Istiqlal, Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires, and Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme), with the intention of developing a national press in a country where foreign publications held a significant share of the market.

wishing to protect and improve their reputation and influence, at various levels, these press companies have been designed by professional journalists with strong support from highly qualified managers.

Finally, during the last five years, new models appear where the founders quite often have know-how in distribution, strategy or economic intelligence, and build companies intending to do business via media and by creating a framework where journalists can work within limits agreed locally. In this category, one can find several heirs, as mentioned before.

4. Publicity oligopoly

The advertisements is a another key links which contributes significantly to the economic and political balance exerted by the press companies. Before the early 2000s, the advertising content of newspapers was still very limited, given the small number of platforms with a commercial bias. Furthermore, the distribution sector was shared between the dominant French-speaking classes, via Sochepress²², and the senior leaders of the opposition parties, owning Sapress shares. As soon as the advertising market started growing and the newspapers reached the critical mass required to take advantage of this growth, the need for a “rationalisation” of practices became compelling. Jean-Louis Servan Schreiber, discreet but influent shareholder of Presse directe, which, at the time, owned the weekly *TelQuel*, encouraged the publication of sales figures as a protest against the cronyism regulating the relationship between advertisers and newspapers, and the unfair granting of adverts (interview with the authors, December 2015). After the creation of the Fédération Marocaine des Éditeurs de Journaux and of the l’Office de Justification de la diffusion, based on the French model during the 2000s, and the publication of sales figures, some press directors hoped that the selection of advertisers and companies to receive money from the State would be more “transparent” and “fair”. However, several investigations revealed the gap between the wishes of these young institutions, the will expressed by the current stakeholders to protect their market share, whatever their actual sales figures, and the economic practices.

The advertising market: the respective weights of the French-speaking population and of the Connection Capital with the authorities

²² Sochepress (Société Chérifienne de Distribution et de Presse), in the 1950s, succeeds Messageries Hachette as press distributor in Morocco. After independence and as per “moroccanising” of companies, it is managed by the State and the Hachette group. In 1975, it becomes a 100% company with all shares held by the Moroccan state, before privatisation, 20 years later, for the profit of the Lahrizi family and Nouvelles Messagerie de la Presse Parisienne, since then Presstalis. Since 2008, Sochepress is the wholly-owned subsidiary of this French company.

It should be said that the press share in advertisement revenues is not only very small in Morocco but has also significantly decreased (19.5% end of May 2014 against 22.6% in 2012), faces stiff competition from television (27.8% in May 2014) and billboards (27.7%), ranked before radio which is progressing rapidly (23.6% against 16.5%) (Imperium 2014). Another feature of this market is the fact it is totally controlled by an oligopoly with ramifications: five big advertising companies share most of the publicity campaigns paid for by large public and private companies and several foundations: Shem's, founded and led by the businessman Nouredine Ayouch since 1972; Klem, created in 1976 becomes Klem Euro RSCG in the late 1980s and is owned equally by its founder, Kadiri Abdelhamid, who used to work for the Havas group, and the French group Euro RSCG; Saga Communication was founded in 1993 as a result of the efforts of Chakir Fassi Fihri, former central director of Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur; DDB Zone Bleue was created in 1995 and is a subsidiary of the biggest advertising group in the world, Publicis-Omnicom; Mozaïk was started, the same year, by Monique Elgrichi, former employee of the Klem Euro RSCG agency. The subtle difference, very recent, is that, according to several people interviewed, most of the publicity buying advertisements choose, more and more frequently, to use the services of consulting agencies, rather than those of purchasing organisations, to reduce the brokerage costs. This trend is mostly present for the web press as well.

One must recognise the historical predominance of the French-speaking faction close to the authorities, thus continuing the unbalanced distribution of the advertising manna between the Arabic publications and the French publications. For instance, in 2008, according to the Group of Moroccan advertisers (mentioned by Naji, 2008, 265-266), the biggest advertising revenues were recorded by French publications such as *L'Économiste* (125.3 million dirhams), *Le Matin* (88.6), *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc* (34.4) although its overall audience is small (respectively 19,556, 25,439 and 5432 copies, daily), by comparison to their Arabic equivalents: *Al Massae* (turnover of 66 million dirhams, with 114,784 copies per day), *Assabah* (42.9 million and 69,545 copies) and *Al Ahdath Al Maghribia* (17.1 million and 22,536 copies). According to the same survey, 77% of advertising investments went to the French press (KPMG, 2011, 34). Interviews have confirmed that the personal networks of publication directors and managers remain very important when trying to open up new markets.

5. Full reconstruction of audiences, with specific consumption modes

To understand the political economy of the Moroccan press sector, the characteristics of the national social sphere should be described, even roughly. The demographic indicators might suggest the *a priori* existence of a large press audience. On the one hand, the demographic growth has been explosive –the Moroccan population has almost tripled in over fifty years (11.6 million inhabitants in 1960; 33.8 million in 2014) – as well as the urbanisation (almost two-thirds of the population now lives in cities, but it was less than a third in 1960). Morocco

is also a very young country (28.8% of the population is less than 15 years old). This social space still has limited audiences, not only because of the above-mentioned reasons about information supply, but also because, after independence and for several decades, the national education policy tried explicitly to reproduce the social conditions enabling a very limited power circle to thrive, essentially French-speaking, as an extension of colonisation. This is why, although it has been steadily decreasing in the last few decades, the illiteracy rate is still very high: 32% in 2014, 43% in 2004, 55% in 1994, 65% in 1982 and 87% in 1960²³. In comparison, this rate was 18.8% in Tunisia in 2014 (23.3% in 2004²⁴) and 15% in Algeria (Office National d'Alphabétisation et d'Enseignement pour Adultes)²⁵. Some 45% of the Moroccan population aged 25 or over more has had no education.

The reading of the press is restricted to some demographic sections: those with the highest economic and cultural capital, and living in towns. Several of the persons interviewed have stated that most of the readers of the Moroccan national press are in the Rabat-Salé-Kénitra region and in the Greater Grand Casablanca-Settat area: “We have an audience between 5 and 30 000 dirhams per month, so it is more than 70% [of our readership], so they are economic owners simply because they have access to the language, that's just concentrated to 90% between Casa And Rabat”, explains a manager of a big group.

Another characteristic of the audience structure is linked to very important gender inequalities²⁶. For instance, the illiteracy rate for women (41.9%) is almost twice that of men (22.1%), although this gap is narrowing (19.8 percentage points in 2014, 23.9 in 2004). Very little data is available about visits to online information sites but it would seem that women are starting to close the current gaps. The social and linguistic structure of the Moroccan national landscape reveals the increasing importance of the Arabic language as a publishing language, whereas the French language becomes a “niche”, as often stated by advertisers. The latest census states that 99.4% of literate people aged 10 and over can read and write in Arabic, against 66% for French, and 18.3% for English.

There is one last feature of these audiences: a certain percentage of Moroccans do not work or live within the national territory because of high emigration levels. Besides the Yabiladi website explicitly designed for Moroccans living abroad (Benchenna, 2014), visits to the electronic press from outside the national geographical borders are at a high level. Sometimes, the Paris region comes third, after Rabat and Casablanca, for the number of visits, according to figures published by Google Analytics. In several interviews, we were shown live figures by electronic website leaders.

²³ Source: Haut-Commissariat au Plan (HCP). This figure was calculated for the population aged 10 and over.

²⁴ Source: Institut National de la Statistique (INS), In *Direct Info*, April 14th, 2015, “Illiteracy reduced to 18.8% in Tunisia” <http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2015/04/14/baisse-a-188-du-taux-danalphabetisme-en-tunisie/>

²⁵ Office National d'Alphabétisation et d'Enseignement pour Adultes (ONAEA), In *Impact24 Info* “Literacy: Algeria should do more” <http://impact24.info/alphabetisation-lalgerie-doit-fournir-plus-defforts/>

²⁶ on this topic, see article written by Kenza Oumlil on this issue.

Exit, voice and loyalty

This work has revealed that most of the media structures suffer from high precariousness and a weakening of their autonomy. The holders of political and economic powers, in a social context where the potential press audience remains relatively limited and where the mediation structures hold almost no sway, generate economic, political, technical, and social conditions making it practically impossible for embodiment of new media designed to call into question the political and social order.

By identifying three discontent modalities (exit, voice, loyalty) when facing the way organisations operate, the Albert Otto Hirschman model (1970) can be useful to summarise, roughly, the positions used and taken by the main executives-managers of the press companies in Morocco. Although statistically rare, exit had some important repercussions in the foreign press. This “choice” has been made by those who, like Ahmed Réda Benchemsi and Aboubakr Jamaï, left the national territory as well as any journalistic activity. In fact, the former is in charge of communication at Human Rights Watch whereas the latter is dean of the Business and International Relations school at the American Institute of Universities (IAU College) in Aix-en-Provence (France). Others stayed in Morocco, but changed careers or returned to their first profession. Voice consists of creating online websites with very modest means, very fragile economically, as shown by the two versions of the *Lakome* site. Third, loyalty is the dominant factor, since many executives-managers, as shown above, continue to produce news by relying on various economic groups and by not crossing the “red lines”, one of the requirements to carry on working in this field in the country they originate from.

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