

Chapter 4

Media and Power

A Comparative Analysis of the Situation in Bangladesh, Norway and Tunisia

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How does the media relate to political power? It is an important issue both in well-established democratic countries and countries on the path towards democracy. It is also the key question of this chapter, which compares how current and future journalists consider how the media relate to power in three countries – Bangladesh, Norway and Tunisia.

From their daily practices and contact with those in power, working journalists provide an inside view about the relationship between power and the media. As for the students, their perception is rooted in the journalism education they receive. Since Tunisia is considered to be in the midst of a process of democratization, I have chosen to focus especially on this country.

The theories which inform this work are mainly the comparative research efforts of Thomas Hanitzch (2007, 2010), Larbi Chouikha (2014, 2015), and Rahman (2015). The empirical data consists of the survey and the interviews conducted within the framework of the *Shared Horizons* in 2013 and 2014.

Theoretical points of departure, methodology and material

Media is the space where many political, intellectual and cultural ideas are presented, and it is therefore important that the media reflect the intellectual diversity and the political pluralism of democracies (El Bour 2013a). Schudson stresses that ‘there are various types of journalism and various democracies’ (Schudson 2005:2). This qualification is relevant here, as I am comparing three countries that are at different levels of the democratic process.

I use the concept of the power of the media as defined by Remy Rieffel; media power, thus, is ‘the ability to impose a mode of authority, domination or obedience on others’ (Rieffel 2005:17). For Rieffel, the power of the media is not a statement but a process as the information disseminated by the media is likely to modify our knowledge but

also our preferences, thus producing ‘cognitive and persuasive effects’ (ibid:21). In this perspective the ‘cultural context’, as Hanitzch puts it (Hanitzch 2007:368), is relevant.

The power of the media is perceived as granting it a ‘watchdog’ role. Bennett and Serrin write that ‘the watchdog role of journalism may involve simply documenting the activities of government, business, and other public institutions in ways that expose little-publicized or hidden activities to public scrutiny’ (Bennett & Serrin 2005:169)

I compare perceptions of media power in three countries, Bangladesh, Norway and Tunisia, by analysing the results of a quantitative survey conducted among journalism students in 2013. The main aim of the survey was to explore the core values of the journalism students in the above three countries, and 439 students answered the survey (which implies a response rate of 68 per cent).

In the analyses, I also use the in-depth interviews with journalism students and journalists that were conducted in 2014. The goal of the qualitative interviews was to get deeper thoughts and perceptions about the issues that were raised in the quantitative survey. (For further information about the methodology, see appendices.)

The research group conducted 18 interviews with Bangladeshi students, teachers and journalists, 20 interviews with Tunisian students, teachers and journalists and nine interviews with Norwegian students, teachers and journalists.

Two main themes from the survey and the qualitative interviews are used in this chapter, namely the answers about the functions of the media and the answers about the way the media relates to power.

What is the role of the media?

A comparison between the three professional contexts reveals a common commitment to the audience. A Bangladeshi journalist considers that the main function of the news media, and even the duty of the journalistic profession, is to help people by giving them the right information and ‘leading them to the correct direction’ (Interviewee 13). In the same way, Norwegian journalists speak of a mandate for journalism to strengthen democracy by ‘inviting an engaged and public conversation about important fields that are part of deciding where society is going’ (Interviewee 46). This perception is linked to what some Tunisian journalists call a mission to ‘increase public awareness’ (Interviewee 37).

When I compare the journalists’ perceptions with the results from the survey, I find many similarities, also the students think that the main role of journalism is to inform the public about what is happening in society.

Among the Bangladeshis 86 per cent think so, the corresponding share for the Norwegians is 87 per cent, whereas 71 per cent of the Tunisians stresses this idea.

However, also the watchdog role is stressed, and in order to gain more insights about their perceptions of the watchdog role, we asked the students to make a scale of how important, in their opinion, this role is.

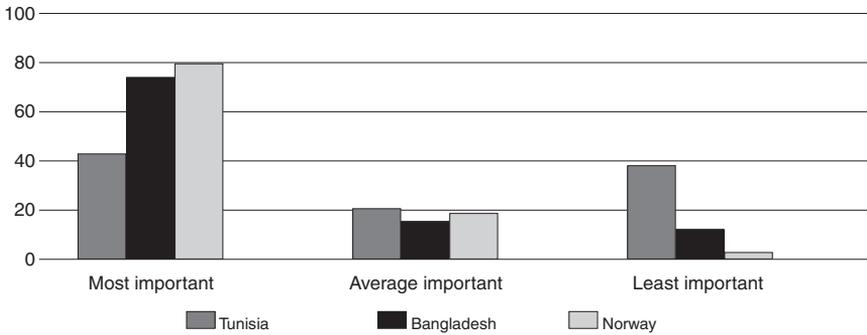


Figure 1. Perseived Importance of the Watchdog Role (per cent)

Comments: The question was posed 'What is the most important role journalism plays in society? Please indicate in a scale of 1 to 6 your opinion.' The number of respondents were 99 (Tunisia), 192 (Bangladesh) and 126 (Norway).

As shown in Figure 1, there are some differences between the Tunisian students and the others. In Bangladesh and Norway, the role of the watchdog is seen as the most important by 74 per cent of the Bangladeshi students and by 80 per cent of the Norwegians.

For the Tunisians, however, respondents are divided between giving the watchdog role a great importance and ranking it as the least important. The differences among the respondents' views in the survey, even when from the same country, reflect the diversity of opinions concerning the watchdog ideal.

For the Norwegian students the watchdog role is a goal and, sometimes, an idealistic hope of a specific kind of practicing journalism. One of the interviewees, for example, looks upon investigate journalism as 'the most rewarding to work with', but, unfortunately, 'there is a declining focus on digging journalism' (Interviewee 40). In the interviewee's view, the reason why investigative journalism is being neglected is the tendency of 'looking for sensational click-journalism'. While this may be the case, the same interviewee still thinks that journalism in Norway is 'very much based on the idea of the media being a fourth power in the state and being a watchdog'.

For the Bangladeshi students, the watchdog role of the media is linked to the ability of journalists to criticize the government. One speaks of the government fearing this kind of journalism – 'the power of writing' and 'the power of criticizing' (Interviewee 1).

As for the Tunisian students, it seems that their answers are linked to their perceptions of the nation's media after the revolution. One of them says 'in our country, what we often see is that the media either create obstacles and polemics, or they hide the failures of the power' (Interviewee 23).

The working journalists from the three countries think that the watchdog notion is integral to a major mission the media should fulfill in society. A Tunisian journalist focuses on its duty to 'combat corruption and fraud' (Interviewee 34), while another characterizes this as a 'critical eye' towards society, politics and 'all sources of infor-

mation’ (Interviewee 37). For the Bangladeshi journalists, especially the print media have the ability to take on the role of watchdog. One interviewee speaks of the ‘fear of print media criticism’ (Interviewee 14).

The fourth estate

The answers from the Tunisian students to the question of how journalism should relate to power, show that more than two-thirds of them answered ‘neutral’. This conflicts with their reflections about the watchdog role of the media, as 42 per cent of them regard the watchdog role as the most important of the media.

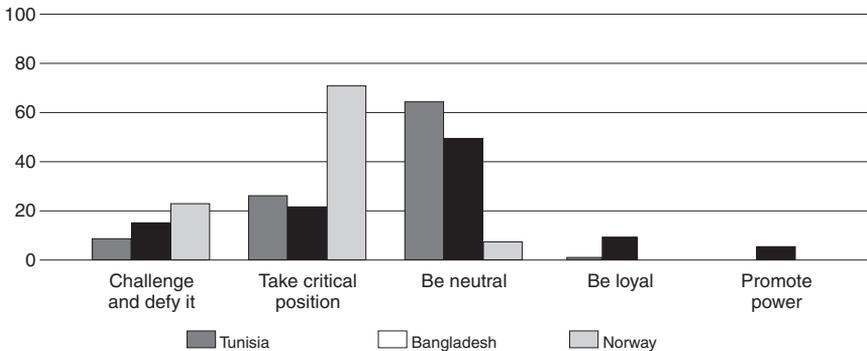
To a degree, their attitude reflects the problems of the media in post-revolutionary Tunisia. After years of the propaganda information system, the need for balanced information is overwhelming.

Mark Deuze has stated that ‘journalists all over the world voice concerns regarding their freedom to work as they please’ (Deuze 2005:456), and, in Deuze’s words, reporters ‘feel that their work can only thrive and flourish in a society that protects its media from censorship’ (ibid:448).

Indeed, freedom and autonomy were the essential objectives that the journalists in Tunisia were seeking to achieve after the revolution – especially an end to the censorship system. For the Tunisian Journalists’ Syndicate, the status of the media can either be a key pillar of the democratic process or ‘a major obstacle to this path and a cause of its failure’ (Syndicat National des Journalistes Tunisiens 2015:5).

How journalists should relate to those in power was one focus of the survey in *Shared Horizons*. The students were asked to choose from a range of suggestions, and their answers are shown in figure 2.

Figure 2. Perceptions of how Journalism Should Relate to Power (per cent)



Comments: The question was posed ‘How do you think journalism should relate to power?’ Only one alternative could be marked. The number of respondents were 99 (Tunisia), 202 (Bangladesh) and 123 (Norway).

A majority of the Tunisian students, 64 per cent, think that journalism should be neutral towards power, and this view is shared by 49 per cent of the Bangladeshi students.

However, for the Norwegian students the corresponding share is only 7 per cent. In contrast, 71 per cent of the Norwegian students think that journalists should take a critical position towards power.

The differences in perceptions are most likely strongly connected to the political situation, as well as the status of press freedom, in the examined countries. In Norway, challenging power is considered one of the main characteristics of journalism.

Notably, among the Tunisian students only 8 per cent state that journalism should challenge and defy power. This answer does not match with what they answered about the watchdog role of the media, a role that 42 per cent of the Tunisian students considered to be the most important of the media.

Almost half of the Bangladeshi students say journalism should be neutral to power. During the year of the survey, 2013, the political situation in Bangladesh was very turbulent, a fact that may explain the attitude of the Bangladeshi students.

Moreover, referring especially to Asia, Hanitzsch writes that in some cultures 'an adversarial understanding of journalism may conflict with a preference for consensus and harmony' (Hanitzsch 2007:373). To Hanitzsch, the position of being loyal to power is very close to a propagandist role (ibid:374).

A challenging political context

In Tunisia, the new atmosphere of freedom of the press raised new perceptions about the relationship with political power, especially for the journalism students who will have the opportunity to work in a context free from the censorship system of the Ben Ali's era.

The power of the media is linked to its ability to prove that its agenda is independent of political power, and the media coverage of the 2011 election is an example of a new situation for Tunisian media: 'Monitoring reports showed that the Tunisian media cut with the practice of propaganda for the regime and tried to achieve the equity principle in covering the election of the constitutional national assembly' (El Bour 2013b:148).

Through the qualitative interviews, the Tunisian students tried to describe the current position of the media towards political power. Whereas 64 per cent of the Tunisian survey respondents thought that the media should be neutral in relation to political power, the interviews show that this stance is not perceived to be the norm in the Tunisian media.

According to one interview subject, 'Tunisian media can take two positions, either they defy power, or they promote it' (Interviewee 30). The same interviewee recalls how before the Tunisian revolution 'all media were loyal to the dictator, [whereas] after the Islamic party Ennahdha came to power, all Tunisian media became opponents'. He

then continues: 'After Beji Caid Essebsi¹ came to power, Tunisian media have obviously returned to their old habits: they are promoting the current authorities.'

Another interviewee says, 'in Tunisia there is no example of neutral media towards power' (Interviewee 24). However, in his opinion 'even in developed countries like the United States there are no neutral media. Every media is created to do a specific role'.

One interviewee sums up the Tunisian situation: 'Tunisian media, they either defy power and create obstacles, or they promote it by hiding corruption and errors. We are calling for a neutral journalism' (Interviewee 23).

A critical stance – as conceived in Tunisia, Bangladesh and Norway

Despite the plea for neutrality, the interviewees stress that the mission of the media is to be critical towards those in power. 'I can define the critical position as an objective position. So, to take a critical position, journalists must meet several criteria such as objectivity and neutrality' (Interviewee 30).

Another interviewee contrasts the period before the revolution – where 'all media obeyed the instructions of a one-party dictatorship' – to the one after the revolution, concluding that 'there is no neutral media in Tunisia' (Interviewee 27). In this interviewee's opinion, 'subjectivity has increased and the influences are becoming numerous'. Moreover, trying to explain the high numbers in the survey advocating neutrality, he claims that 'Tunisian students are tired of subjectivity and the conflict of interests. They dream about neutral media'.

This view is very close to how working journalists explain these answers. One journalist says, 'our media aren't neutral, that's why Tunisian citizens are claiming their right to neutral journalism. That is why 64 per cent of the Tunisian students answered that way' (Interviewee 37).

However, through the interviews, the Tunisian journalists gave their views on what it means to be critical towards power. One says: 'It means to criticize when necessary, to speak of achievements when it is required and to keep quiet when needed' (Interviewee 38).

Another interviewee goes further, saying, 'we should never believe power, we should never believe any source of information. We must always verify the accuracy of facts' (Interviewee 34). He then gives examples about government actions and how journalists must point out the errors, especially concerning strategic issues like terrorism and fighting natural disasters. 'We must no longer try to justify failures. We, therefore, have to criticize and to call into question the government's performance'.

However, there is also a plea for a more balanced position, which could mean 'to criticize when the government makes a mistake, but also to speak of government achievements when necessary' (Interviewee 37). A journalist must maintain a critical eye towards society, power and all sources of information, the interviewee added.

For Bangladeshi students and journalists, ‘neutrality’ has other meanings. A Bangladeshi interviewee says that ‘neutral to power means do not challenge power’ (Interviewee 2). Describing specifically the situation of his country, another interviewee says that ‘if the Bangladeshi media did not support the government the government could not accept it’ (Interviewee 3).

Bangladeshi working journalists think that journalists must be neutral towards power. In the interviewees’ minds, neutral means not being supportive of those who are in power, or backing the opposition parties. That is why they speak about the role of the journalists as criticising without rallying behind any political party. Another says that ‘being neutral towards power must be the most common thing’ (Interviewee 15). He adds: ‘We are journalists, our main work is to be neutral’, linking this position to the political situation of the country.

Through the qualitative interviews they also speak of attempts at controlling the media. One gives the example of a broadcasting regulation the government is preparing: ‘We are saying that the government is influencing freedom of speech or trying to hinder the voice of mass media’ (Interviewee 15). Another interviewee voices the same concerns: ‘Again, now, the government is trying to control the media with the broadcast policy’ (Interviewee 4). The Bangladeshi researcher Rahman comes to the same conclusion about the print media – the so-called ‘press advice’ provided by the government’s Press Information Department (PID), or any kind of public authority, is an attempt to guide media coverage, especially in the newspapers. It provides instructions on what should and should not be published, and even on the forms of the final content and how it must be presented to the readership (Rahman 2012).

In Norway, this kind of struggle does not exist and, for Norwegian journalists, the concept of neutrality is not seen as a suitable attitude towards those in power. One of the Norwegians observes that possibly the Bangladeshis and Tunisians ‘regard neutrality as a giant leap compared to what they have experienced to be possible before’ (Interviewee 46). He adds that, ‘due to their historical situation they will have a different understanding of neutrality than we have’.

Indeed, the Norwegian answers clearly express the view that the main mission of the media is to challenge power. One thinks that journalists are ‘quite good at challenging power in Norway’ (Interviewee 40). Even though this interviewee classifies journalists as frequently on the left side of politics, he claims the media generally has a critical attitude.

Controlling all kinds of power

Power comes in many different ways – to name a few, there is political power, economic power and military power – and, clearly, journalists must relate to other power holders than politicians. Therefore, in the survey we asked the students if the controlling function of the media is meant only towards those with political power.

The question was as follows: 'Journalism is often said to have a controlling function towards power. In your opinion, is it a question regarding political power or all types of power?' How the students answered is shown in figure 3.

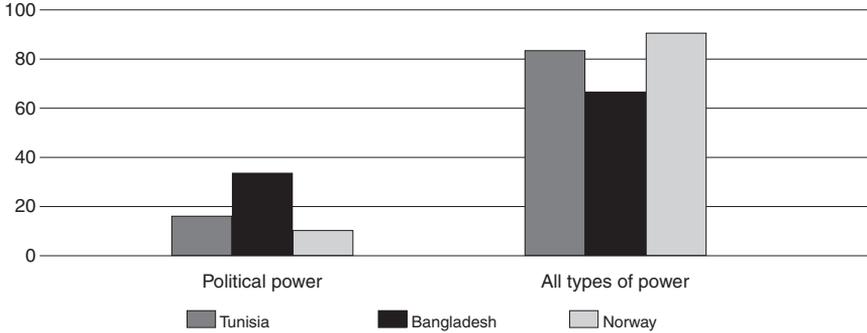


Figure 3. Towards what Power(s) should Journalism be Critical

Comments: The question was posed 'Journalism is often said to have a controlling function towards power. In your opinion, is it a question regarding political power or all types of power? The number of respondents were 97 (Tunisia), 186 (Bangladesh) and 115 (Norway).

Figure 3 shows that the majority of the students in the three countries think that journalists should practice their control mission towards all kinds of power. This is linked to the perception of the media as being a watchdog and a fourth estate, which in turn means that the journalists' beliefs are strongly influenced by the values common in journalism education. If it is obvious in Norway that the media play this role, for Bangladesh and Tunisia the emerging position of the media as a pillar for democracy still needs development.

After the revolution in Tunisia, the media were obliged to change and behave as they are supposed to in a democratic process (El Bour 2013c:165). In Bangladesh, Rahman considers that 'amidst political instability and insecurity, professional journalism has to develop with a commitment to exposing corruptions, irregularities, inequality and injustice prevailing in the society' (Rahman 2015:21).

Conclusion

Dealing with the subject of the media's relation to power, my aim was to compare the perceptions of students and journalists in Bangladesh, Norway and Tunisia. And, indeed, whereas there are similarities between the three countries, there are also certain differences.

Even though a majority of the students think that the watchdog role is the most important, only the Norwegians say that journalists must be critical towards power.

The Tunisian and the Bangladeshi students, in contrast, think that journalists must be neutral.

Despite differences between the three countries, the journalists and the journalism students both take a critical position towards all kinds of power, not only political power. However, in both Tunisia and Bangladesh, being critical is not altogether unproblematic, and some challenges are even found within the newsrooms themselves.

Note

1. Beji Caid Essebsi is the current President of Tunisia (2014 – 2019). Beji Caid Essebsi founded the Nida Tounes party in 2012, and won the Presidential election in 2014.

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