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Local associative media in Tunisia and the value of voice

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Abstract
Since 2011, tens of new small-scale associative media organisations have sprung up in different towns and regions of Tunisia. Their proliferation has allowed for new voices to emerge both on a local and a national (collective) level. They have also come to represent a coherent third sector in the Tunisian media sphere alongside public and private media. This paper aims to investigate how these new actors position themselves within Tunisia's changing media landscape. What roles do they espouse for themselves, and what practices and values structure their work? By using Nick Couldry's notion of voice (2010), as both a value and a concrete process, we analyse how these roles and practices are performed in the Tunisian context. Firstly, by mapping the openings and closures in the Tunisian system that are straddled and negotiated by these actors, namely: regulatory reform, changes in the structure of the media and regional inequalities. Secondly, by analysing their practices and strategies, including their limitations, at both a national and local level. We argue that associative media's collective work at the national level, through sectoral-representative associations, aims at stabilising and entrenching this emerging sector by lobbying and pressuring state organs, organising collective responses to its structural weaknesses, and creating ad-hoc networks of solidarity and mobilisation with other civil society actors. While at a local level, associative media actors attempt to grapple more directly with the challenges of recognising, facilitating, and extending marginalised voices from their communities.

Keywords: Tunisia, associative media, alternative and community media, local media, voice, regional marginalisation

Introduction

One of the most concrete and enduring achievements of the 2010–2011 revolution in Tunisia was to lift the state's stranglehold on freedom of expression and media freedoms in the country. Even though the ambitious regulatory reform programme that started in 2011 has stalled in recent years due to the broader political stalemate in the country, the Tunisian media scene

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remains one of the most open in the region (Webb 2016; Brumberg and Ben Salem 2020).

Expanding the realm of recognised legitimate media actors to spheres of community and local media is considered an important aspect of media democratisation (Peissl and Tremetzberger 2010; Klinger 2011). Indeed, Decree Law 116/2011 was the first media law in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to recognise associative media as a legitimate actor in the media sector alongside public and commercial media actors (Buckley, Chaabi, and Ouarda 2013). The proliferation, entrenchment and institutionalisation of local associative media in Tunisia remains a rare exception in the Arab region. Since 2011, tens of new small-scale associative media organisations[1] have sprung up in different towns and regions of Tunisia. Their proliferation has allowed for new voices to emerge both on a local and a national (collective) level. They have also come to represent a coherent third sector in the Tunisian media sphere. By focusing on local issues and marginalised communities (often, but not exclusively, defined along regional lines) these actors have also contributed to re-centring issues of (regional) inequality in the country.

This paper aims to investigate how these new actors position themselves within Tunisia's changing media landscape. What roles do they espouse for themselves, and what practices and values structure their work? By using Nick Couldry's notion of voice (2010), as both a value and a concrete process, we analyse how these roles and practices are performed in the Tunisian context.

Research context

It has been a long decade since Tunisia first emerged from the dictatorship of the Ben Ali regime into a period of deep political and institutional transformation (and instability) (Zemni 2015; Brumberg and Ben Salem 2020). Important regulatory reform in the shape of decree laws 88/2011 (associations law), 115/2011 (freedom of press, printing and publishing) and 116/2011 (freedom of broadcasting) have significantly changed the opportunity structure for new civil society and media actors in the country. On the other hand, the early zeal of the reform process has largely run out of steam in the face of parliamentary paralysis and political polarisation (El-Issawi 2016, 14–23; Richter 2017). The monopolies that Ben Ali, and his extended family, had established over the private media sector were abolished. But the emerging private media also show strong signs of political parallelism in their links to political actors and parties (Richter 2017). And the state's control over public media and the main Tunisian news agency remains strong, despite earnest attempts to inject a public service mandate into them (Joffé 2014; El-Issawi 2016, 101–103).

More broadly, political paralysis has also meant that efforts to revive the economy have been hampered by political infighting and parliamentary fragmentation. Successive elected governments have found it difficult to tackle the issues of unemployment, inequality and corruption that led to the 2010–2011 revolution in the first place (Diwan 2019). In particular, the issue of acute regional marginalisation seems to have received little serious attention from post-2011 Tunisian governments. The multiple levels of structural marginalisation of Tunisia's southern and interior regions can be traced back to the colonial period and the policy logics of post-independence regimes in Tunis that still favour the capital Tunis and the eastern coastal regions of the country (Chomiak 2017; Sadiki 2019).

The emergence of local associative media in Tunisia straddles these different areas of change and stasis, of progress and crisis. A typical such media organisation would include 5–20 workers between journalists, presenters and technicians – most of whom are volunteers or trainees. It would be based in a refashioned apartment or office that included at least one separate room for broadcasts and recordings (see example in Figure 1 from Radio Mouja, Zarzis). Any income would come from meagre local advertisement, microgrants or project funding from local authorities and international media development organisations as well as private funds from association members. The equipment is almost exclusively acquired through donations from international media development organisations.

We argue that these local associative media actors – whether FM or web radios – emerge to take advantage of openings in the Tunisian media sphere, but also as one possible response to its closures. The associative media's claim to autonomy is a response to the perceived political bias of private and public media. Likewise, their focus on regional identity and deep embeddedness in their marginalised provinces and regions is directly linked to the rampant regional inequality in the country. This makes them a remarkably interesting site to investigate how these new media practices are entangled in the broader democratic transformation in Tunisia.

Associative media and the issue of voice

Anchoring and advancing a democratic transformation go beyond 'achieving regular, and genuine elections' (Carothers 2012, 15). It involves a commitment to deepening and expanding political participation for the citizenry more broadly. This article takes up the notion of voice as a useful metaphor for the variety of ways in which human subjects participate in public life from speech to protest (Couldry 2010; Macnamara 2013). Voice, in Couldry's account, is understood as both a process involving the 'capacity to make, and be recognized as making, narratives about one's life', (2010, 7) and as a value that privileges 'those frameworks for organizing human life and

Figure 1. Recording studio of Radio Mouja, Zarzis.

resources that *themselves* value voice' (2010, 2, emphasis in original). Voice only emerges through its exchange and is thus firmly embedded in the social world. A concern with voice means centring the issues of access, opportunity and means of making and sharing voice (Dreher 2009). However, as a number of authors have noted, the mere inclusion of voice(s) does not always imply recognition (Dreher 2010; Georgiou 2018). If voice is to remain socially grounded, rather than becoming atomised, then we should also re-centre a 'politics of listening' in addition to that of 'speaking up', according to Dreher (2010). A politics of listening involves examining 'the hierarchies of value and esteem accorded different identities and cultural production' (Dreher 2010, 454). Indeed, this is where Couldry's emphasis on voice as value becomes crucial for a more robust understanding of voice:

> Treating voice as a value means discriminating *in favour* of ways of organizing human life and resources that, through their choices, put the value of voice into

> practice, by respecting the multiple interlinked processes of voice and sustaining them, not undermining or denying them. (Couldry 2010, 2, emphasis in original)

Centring voice as a value allows our understanding of voice to go beyond the mere inclusion of opinion, to how these voices are extended and empowered to demand a response from powerful actors, as well as to how they can be sustained. Such a discussion over how different frameworks of governance may allow a flourishing or denial of voice is important in any number of contexts. But it is especially and acutely relevant in societies, such as Tunisia's, that are undergoing the difficult and messy process of democratisation (Zemni 2015). Moving away from autocratic governance and incorporating democratic norms and processes involves, at its utmost fundamental level, a rewiring of the frameworks of governance, especially with relation to voice. The fluidity of the political system at these extraordinary periods, and the prevailing ethos of antipathy towards the exclusionary politics of the ancien regime, can help foster participatory politics (Prata 2010). Nevertheless, the process of articulating and embedding new values, such as voice, into the emerging configuration is neither linear nor certain, as Carothers famously argued (2002). A variety of actors will attempt to take advantage of the new openings in the system, and they will have to contend with old and new constraints as well, leading to multi-sided struggles over the design, provision and hierarchy of values in any new infrastructure of voice.

Emerging media spheres, including alternative and community media, prove to be particularly relevant sites to study this shifting landscape of voice. The potential, and limitations, of community media as an extender of voice for marginalised groups has been investigated by a number of authors (Rodríguez and El Gazi 2007; Dreher 2012; Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015; Fox 2019). As has been their role in accompanying processes of democratisation (Gazali 2003; Bresnahan 2007; Brooten 2016). The emergent sphere of associative media in Tunisia has thus far attracted only limited scholarly attention. Groth's exploratory study of Radio 6 Tunis in the first years after the revolution found that 'citizen radios' have a pivotal role to play at the local level in the democratisation process in Tunisia. In particular, they have the potential to be important sites for engaging in participatory politics as well as contributing to the democratisation of the media landscape and promoting freedom of expression (2013, 14). Groth emphasised that this potential is directly linked to a participatory and community-centred media practice and vision. Mezghanni (2014) also highlighted the important role that 'community radio' has in the processes of local democracy and rebuilding active citizenship in post-authoritarian Tunisia. Mezghanni, however, foregrounded the productive entanglement of associative radios and the broader civil society as the locus of this potential. Mezghanni envisions a hybridised space where civil society organisations and associative

media amalgamate functions such as lobbying, advocacy and information dissemination, and in the process speak (collectively) with a louder voice (2014, 683).

Building on these exploratory accounts, this study analyses how the emerging sphere of associative media has attempted to negotiate and influence the politics of voice in the country since the 2010–2011 revolution. Firstly, by mapping the openings and closures in the Tunisian system that are straddled and negotiated by these actors, namely: regulatory reform, changes in the structure of the media, and regional inequalities. Secondly, by analysing their practices and strategies, including their limitations, at both a national and local level.

A note on methodology

As part of a larger project on emerging media organisations after the 2010–2011 uprisings in Syria and Tunisia (see also, Badran 2020), this study is based on 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives and journalists from 11 Tunisian associative media organisations as well as two interviews with representatives from two sectoral umbrella organisations (see Table 1 for an overview of the organisations surveyed). The choice of interviews and field-visits to associative media actors as primary methods is underpinned by our own commitment as researchers to the value of voice (Couldry 2010). The interviews and field visits were conducted as part of on-site fieldwork in Tunisia in August-September 2019. Most of the interviews were held individually, but some included the input of other team members, and one interview was a group interview with four team members at the same time. All together the interviews involved 26 individuals including journalists and managers of associative radios, as well as two representatives from sectoral associations. The interviews were conducted

Table 1. List of organisations surveyed for this study.

Organisation, city	Type	Number of interviews	Number of people interviewed	Date(s)
Capsa FM, Gafsa	Web radio	2	2	27 August 2019
Mines FM, Gafsa	FM radio	1	2	27 August 2019
Nefzawa FM, Kebili	FM radio	2	2	28–29 August 2019
Radio 6, Tunis	FM radio	3	3	5 September 2019
Radio ML, Tunis	FM radio	1	1	9 September 2019
Sicca FM, El Kef	Web radio	1	4	10 September 2019
Cillium FM, Kasserine	FM radio	1	1	11 September 2019
Mahdia 1, Mahdia	Web radio	3	3	12 September 2019
Mouja FM, Zarzis	Web radio	4	4	16 September 2019
Radio 8, Menzel Bourguiba	Web radio	1	2	24 September 2019
Radio Sawt, Menzel Bourguiba	Web radio	1	2	24 September 2019
ATMA, Tunis	Sectoral	1	1	25 September 2019
UTMA, Tunis	Sectoral	1	1	20 August 2019

in Arabic and transcribed and translated by the authors. The data was further enriched through the field notes taken by the researcher during field visits to the radios. Finally, a process of desk research, informed by our fieldwork data, was used to analyse how associative media position themselves within the changing Tunisian context.

The interview protocol focused on three main areas. Firstly, the background and approach of the media outlet, which inquired about the history of the association and its members, the main aims and motivation behind the radio, and its position within the broader media sector in the region and the country. Secondly, internal organisation and production practices, where we inquired about the journalistic and production practices, content genres, audience participation and the main functions and tasks of team members. Thirdly, the relationship with outside actors especially with regard to local authorities and civil society, sectoral organisations and international media development actors.

Associative media in the Tunisian context

Legislative reform

A number of legislative reforms soon after the 2010–2011 revolution contributed to providing a new opportunity structure for a diverse set of small-scale media organisations, and in particular associative radios, to emerge.

On 2 November 2011, the Tunisian interim government approved Decree Law 115/2011 and 116/2011 to completely overhaul the press and broadcast regulatory framework in the country (Mir 2012; El-Issawi 2016, 14–23). The laws were prepared by the Tunisian high commission (HC) tasked with urgent legislative reform of the Tunisian state in preparation for the constituent assembly elections in October 2011.[2] INRIC, the consultative independent authority tasked with media reform, with the support of a number of international organisations involved in issues of media reform and freedom of expression[3], endorsed the new legislation (Mir 2012). The implementation of the laws, and INRIC's role as an independent body, faced immediate resistance by the Ennahda-led troika government of 2011–2012, which culminated with INRIC's decision to dissolve itself in protest (INRIC 2012). The government argued that the laws were promulgated in collaboration with the unelected transitional government of Essebsi (Gobe and Chouikha 2013, 178). However, mounting political crises as well as pressure from rights groups and journalist and labour unions forced the government to relent and accept the laws. This was marked by the official establishment of HAICA as an independent audiovisual regulator on 3 May 2013 (RSF 2013).

The first law was aimed at overhauling and replacing the extant press law of 1975 which curtailed press freedom through complicated conditions and requirements for any type of publication (Mir 2012, 4). The scope of the

law covers publications, artistic works, books and periodicals (in digital or physical forms). Decree Law 116/2011 dealt with reforming the regulation in the field of audiovisual communication. The bulk of the law focused on the establishment of a strong independent regulatory authority for the audiovisual sector and on setting a number of principles for its functioning (Mir 2012). The law is notable in being the first such law in the region that explicitly establishes 'associative audiovisual institutions' as a specific category of media organisations in a three-tiered broadcasting model (public, private and associative) (Buckley, Chaabi, and Ouarda 2013). Associative media according to the law are defined as institutions owned or operated by non-profit associations or organisations that target specific segments and respond to their problems and needs (OECD 2019, 89–90).

This brings into view another important legislation promulgated in the same period, Decree Law 88/2011 passed on 24 September 2011 on the establishment of associations. The law significantly opened up the terrain for a resurgence in new civil society organisations by lifting the burdensome restrictions on their establishment and granting them a more extensive political and legal remit for their activities and funding (Fortier 2019).

The special recognition of associative broadcast media through Decree Law 116/2011 granted them an equal status and right to operate in the country as mainstream media. Decree Law 88/2011, on the other hand, made the establishment of the umbrella legal entity of an association – a prerequisite for this type of media according to Decree Law 116/2011 – far more open and accessible to a larger number of actors. Indeed, the law on associations opened up the space of associative radios further still by enabling associations to establish associative web-radios that are not strictly under the mandate of HAICA (which concerns specifically associative radios or television stations that broadcast on the airwaves).

Changes in the structures of the media

The structure of the media landscape also changed dramatically following the 2010–2011 revolution. Private media outlets owned directly or indirectly by Ben Ali and his family were effectively nationalised by the interim government in 2011, while the official newspapers of the former ruling party RCD were closed altogether. Private media outlets that were owned by businessmen loyal to the former regime retained their licenses but lost the generous public subsidies they used to receive from the state (Richter 2017). Moreover, some effort went into reforming the national television and radio and transitioning them to function as public service broadcasters (El-Issawi 2016, 101–103).

The state never fully relinquished its aim to keep some form of control over the media, according to Joffé (2014). However, this control has become the

object of a multi-sided, and more balanced, competition between the executive – itself a competitive field for different political actors – and the independent regulator, HAICA, often supported by civil society organisations and rights groups. For instance, the differences between the executive and HAICA over government-appointees to the directorship of the public broadcasters has already led to a number of successive crises (Joffé 2014).

HAICA's regulatory powers have also been challenged, and at times completely ignored, by private media interests (Farmanfarmaian 2014; Labidi 2017). Private media ownership, and instrumentalisation, by political actors, despite it being banned outright by HAICA's charters, remains common (Farmanfarmaian 2014; Richter 2017). A study conducted by Reporters without Borders and Tunisian civil society initiative al-Khatt, on media ownership in Tunisia, found that 6 out of 10 television channels had a 'direct or indirect link with a party or a politician' (Al-Khatt and RSF 2016).[4]

It is within this context that emerging local associative media in Tunisia situate themselves. A national media that is in the midst of a painful and contested transition from state-controlled to a public service mandate and control over which is constantly contested between different ideological and political factions. And a private media that is intricately linked to the political or economic interests of their owners. As one interviewee remarked:

> I worked with a [public regional] radio. Even though we have more freedom in the media since 2011, and despite that margin, you do not feel completely free in public media. […] you know that you cannot be as free as you want. The same at the private radio […], the editor-in-chief would not force me on anything, but you always have to think of the owners because they deal with certain people for advertisement. […] Here, I am comfortable. Because we do not have advertising interests. (Personal communication, 16 September 2019).

Associative media thus position themselves as autonomous media actors that are not constrained by the interests of wealthy owners or the policies of the government of the day.

Regional inequalities

The identity and the emergence of local associative radios should also be understood, above all, as a reflection of the profound regional inequalities that bisect the Tunisian polity. A crucial interlocking factor in the emergence and the structuring of associative media in Tunisia is their link to the deep and endemic marginalisation of the interior regions of Tunisia. This marginalisation traces its roots to colonial policies that advantaged the capital Tunis, and the eastern coastal regions (Sfax and Sousse, in particular) to the detriment of the larger swathes of the country in the West, Centre and South (Chomiak 2017). These policies were carried over, and in many cases deepened, in the post-independence regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali

(Boughzala and Hamdi 2014; Jemmali and Amara 2015; Sadiki 2019). And while there has been more research and attention paid to this issue since the 2010–2011 revolution, successive Tunisian governments have failed to significantly tackle these inequalities (Yerkes and Ben Yahmed 2018).

By 2014, according to the World Bank, 92% of all industrial firms, 85% of the country's GDP and 54% of its population were concentrated in and around Tunis, Sfax and Sousse (World Bank 2015). This concentration of wealth and opportunity leads to – and is the product of – a form of 'multiple marginalization', according to Larbi Sadiki (2019). The disparity in the levels of poverty and unemployment between these advantaged regions and the rest of the country is striking. The level of poverty in the Centre-west was three times that of Tunis and the Centre-east region in 2010. This disparity is further exacerbated by the economic dynamics whereby important natural resources in disadvantaged regions (e.g. date crops in the South, phosphates in the Gafsa region, and water in the Northwest), and much of the revenue accrued from them, are 'siphoned off to support socioeconomic renewal in flush and well-to-do regions of the country's North and coast' (Sadiki 2019, 4). This, in turn, leaves in its wake a disproportionate destruction of the environmental conditions of the periphery in the shape of air, water and soil pollution. Coupled with a lack of investment in healthcare provision in these regions, this leads to significantly higher rates of infant mortality, cancer and a 7-year lower life expectancy in comparison to Tunis and the coast (Sadiki 2019).

The multiple layers of exclusion and marginalisation have had a negative effect on the regions' alienation from the formal politics and economy of the country. Along Tunisia's borders with Algeria and, especially, with Libya, an informal market based on trafficking and smuggling (of goods, drugs, arms and people) substitutes for the dysfunctional formal economy in the regions. This palpable sense of socio-economic and political exclusion has also been linked with the growing problem of jihadist radicalisation in these marginalised regions (Cimini 2018). The discontent is also channelled through political and social upheaval such as the frequent protests, strikes and confrontations with the state at the phosphate mines in Gafsa and the wider region. Indeed, the spark for the 2010–2011 revolution came from one of these impoverished regions, Sidi Bouzid (Meddeb 2020).

The overarching sentiment that underlines the motivation and impetus behind most of the associative radio projects in Tunisia is a shared sense that the invisibility of the interior regions of the country is not simply a symptom of broader marginalisations (economic, social, political) but indeed, part and parcel of them. As one interviewee remarked:

> Our province is invisible in the media. We only appear in the news when there are problems. Nothing on events or issues specific to our region.

> Even when there is an opportunity for someone from Kebili to appear on national media, they would have to travel for 7–8 h to appear in a one-hour programme. So, it is better to not even go. (Personal communication, 28 August 2019).

This is not to say that other interlocking layers of marginalisation are not present in the self-narrative of associative media. Indeed, there is also an explicit commitment to the voices of other marginalised segments such as women (Radio Mouja in Zarzis), farmers and rural communities (Radio Vitaa in Beni Khalled), youth (Radio Sicca in El Kef, Radio Mahdia), people with special needs (Radio ML in Tunis) and LGBTQ communities (Shams Rad in Tunis). The foregrounding of other layers of marginalisation becomes more palpable as we move closer to the more affluent regions such as Tunis in the North and Mahdia on the eastern coast. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of associative radios in Tunisia is one that is most commonly expressed as an attempt at representing the voice of a marginalised *region*. Underlying this characteristic is the shared conviction, amongst most of those interviewed for this study, that the overpowering logic of marginalisation in Tunisia is, first and foremost, regional.

Collective work on the national level

At the national level, the efforts of associative media actors are mostly carried out by sectoral associations that lobby and press for the interests of their members. Two such organisations have emerged over the past decade: the Syndicat Tunisien des Radio Associatives (STRA)[5] and the larger Union Tunisienne des Médias Associatifs (UTMA).[6] The two bodies, which are led by elected representatives from member radios, function as umbrella organisations that coordinate between members in their responses to government policies that affect the field of associative media and attempt to find collective solutions to the issues facing the sector. Another important actor in this regard is the Association Tunisienne des Médias Alternatifs (ATMA) which is an independent civil society organisation that organises training and support to associative media actors. These organisations are supported by, and collaborate closely with, international media assistance actors involved in the associative media sector, namely: Community Media Solutions (CMS), IREX-Europe, DW Akademie, AMARC and UNESCO. The main areas these sectoral organisations focus on are: ensuring the financial sustainability of the sector, supporting journalistic professionalisation and internal governance, supporting the growth of the sector and coordinating with broader civil society on issues of freedom of expression and media law reform in the country.

The largest, and most potentially consequential, of these efforts is the *Dotation d'appui aux associations médiatiques* (DAAM) proposal. The proposed framework was designed in collaboration between STRA, AMARC and CMS with

the aim of guaranteeing the long-term viability, sustainability and equal development of the sector through a public support fund (OECD 2019). The fund, according to the proposal, would generate revenue through a tax on advertising on private television and radio and profits of private telecom operators, among other sources. The fund would be jointly managed by representatives from the Ministry of Finance, HAICA, STRA, UTMA, the SNJT and the Tunisian Labour Union (GTT). Its eligibility criteria would include:

> Minimum programmation time, diversification of funding sources, providing employment guarantees, organising efforts towards local development. (Personal communication, 5 September 2019).

The proposal is modelled on a similar mechanism successfully promulgated in Decree 5183/2013 to provide public support to civil society associations (Mansri 2016). Sectoral organisations representing associative media have been advocating for the project since 2015 (Ben Naser 2015). According to a representative from STRA, they have been able to secure HAICA's support to certain elements of the project, and efforts are underway to lobby the new Tunisian parliament of 2019 to implement the proposal (personal communication, 5 September 2019).

More traditional capacity building programmes are also implemented and coordinated by sectoral organisations, with financial support from international partners. One such example is the JAMIL.net project, which aims to build up internal capacities at the radios particularly with regard to both community outreach and engagement, and financial management and sustainability, according to ATMA:

> We will accompany radios for three years to create an economic manual based on real possibilities, and to train a responsible person that will follow up with advertisement and revenues. We also aim to create a collective platform for advertisement, that they can share. Because sustainability is important. (Personal communication, 25 September 2019).

Another important area that UTMA and STRA have been working on is to help their members from web radios to move to FM broadcasting, which requires a license from HAICA. HAICA has not granted any new licenses for FM associative radios since 2014, but it announced a new round of licensing in May 2019. Moving to FM broadcasting was considered by most interviewees as an important step towards developing the work of the radio. Broadcasting over FM would allow the radios to reach a much wider segment of the population (e.g. drivers) and open up further avenues for local advertising to become a stable revenue source:

> There are a number of [local] businesses that signalled that if we can get an FM license, then they might advertise here—we have promises dependent on getting the license. (Personal communication, 12 September 2019)

Stable revenue streams, whether through the proposed DAAM framework, the possibility of local advertisement or the development of a collective revenue model for the sector, is seen as essential to ensuring the economic independence and political efficacy of these associative media. Four out of six associative web radios interviewed for this study had submitted their dossier to HAICA for an FM license, with the support of the UTMA. In August 2020, HAICA granted 15 new FM broadcast licenses to associative radios – including two that had been surveyed in this research.

The umbrella organisations also help to build up loose networks and coalitions with other civil society actors working in the broader fields of freedom of expression, press freedom and human rights.[7] These ad-hoc networks, while mostly dormant, can be activated quickly to respond to certain issues or political developments. An example of this is the mobilisation against a proposed law in 2017 meant to replace Decree Law 116/2011, which was shelved by the government after attracting significant opposition (Article 19 2017). A more recent example is the mobilisation against proposed revisions of the Tunisian criminal code to criminalise 'fake or doubtful content' online (Kapitalis 2020).

These diverse interventions at the national level attempt to secure the position of the associative media sector, and address some of the limitations and structural weaknesses of its local actors. They are underpinned by both an explicit commitment to embedding the value of voice in the social and political restructuring of Tunisian society after the revolution, and an implicit assumption that local associative media are effective channels for voice in the Tunisian context. The practices of associative media at a local level that underlie this assumption are explored in detail in the next sections.

Community work on the local level

At the local level, associative media have to directly engage with their communities and to provide certain answers to the deficit of voice in their regions. To understand the practices of associative media with relation to voice, in a context of 'multiple marginalization' (Sadiki 2019), we have to grapple with the complex nature of voice as a *process*. According to Couldry, 'giving an account of oneself for exchange in the world in which one acts *is* a basic feature of what we do as humans, and so a *possible* starting-point for recognising someone as a political subject' (2010, 109, emphasis in original). This notion of voice as a process can be deconstructed into a number of interlinked layers. Firstly, the recognition of the basic act of voice-making; secondly, facilitating its embedding in social relations of sharing and exchange; and finally, its extension into a form of agency. In the following sections we will explore how these interlinked layers of recognising, facilitating and extending voice, are elaborated in the practices of associative media actors.

Recognising voice: the community talks about itself

> Once, a poet came and said I wrote poems about the region and I would like to record them. We recorded and broadcast them. (Personal communication, 29 August 2019)

At the elemental level, what these actors seek to provide is an open platform to allow the region, through its people, to 'give an account of oneself' (Butler 2005). In one programme on Radio Mouja in Zarzis, *Homa wa Hikaya* [A neighbourhood and a story], the presenter goes out into a different neighbourhood in the city to explore the architecture, the local histories and stories of the people who live there by soliciting interviews with the residents (personal communication, 16 September 2019). Indeed, after many decades of the articulation of political repression and regional marginalisation these basic acts of voice-making, of narrating and hearing that narration back on the airwaves or the internet, are naturally top of mind. As the opening quote of this section suggests, this narration could be anything from poetry in the local dialect, to reflections on the collective memories of the place, or specific complaints about its quotidian challenges. The diversity of these accounts, dialects, and participants alludes to what Rodríguez and El Gazi termed the 'poetics of indigenous radio' (2007).

On the one hand, there is a tendency to emphasise *good* accounts of oneself as a way to counter what is perceived as the essentialising narratives of the regions in mainstream media (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015). As one journalist protested: '"kill, beat up, rape, steal, kidnap," I do not want to work on this. The mainstream media is doing more than enough to cover that' (personal communication, 24 September 2019). Thus, spaces are made for local creative talents, artists and sportspeople to speak about their work. Successful locals, often working abroad and seen as overcoming local difficulties, are also sought out for their accounts. Coverage of local cultural events, festivals and activities, showing a more vivid, and complex, account of life in the region is an important staple of this type of programming too. On the other hand, these accounts remain inadequate without being complemented by the chance to talk about one's difficulties and needs. Thus, the second hour of the *Homa wa Hikaya* broadcast focuses on the issues faced by the neighbourhood – still through the voices of the residents (personal communication, 16 September 2019). The importance of these basic (and by themselves, largely atomised) acts of voice-making is beyond the simple valuing of individual experience. Indeed, as they become embedded in the social world, they constitute an essential element to the interpellation of a political subject (Couldry 2010).

Facilitating voice: the community talks amongst itself

The exchange of these individual accounts in the social world is what makes them poignant and eventually confers recognition upon them. Many of the

interviewees stressed the importance of actively engaging with the audience and encouraging the audience to interact amongst themselves. Typically, these interactions are facilitated through phone-in live shows, and through social media networks. As one interviewee insisted:

> The debate is what really delivers. Reports, as a concept, are less important than the debate. People like the discussion. The debate is open to everybody who wants to make an intervention. Our role is to deliver the voice, people can come to the radio, or can contact us by telephone, or through messages to our Facebook page. (Personal communication, 27 September 2019)

Exchanges can also be on an ad-hoc basis such as in the examples given by one radio presenter:

> People like to call sometimes just to say good morning, some want to request a song, or to say thank you. Some want to ask for help because their street is dirty, or because they need help in financing the return to school. Some people call to try and help some of the callers. (Personal communication, 29 August 2019)

This level of associative media practice also includes actively attempting to bring in an internally diverse range of voices to the debate, and accounting for some of the diversity within the region. One journalist recounted their effort to bring in voices from peripheral villages: 'I take a cameraman, and I go to all distant villages even on the Algerian border, and I ask people for issues in their region, and we broadcast it live' (personal communication, 29 August 2019). Another radio, in a region with a substantial emigrant community (especially based in France), targets some of its programming and content towards connecting the local and diasporic segments and allowing for translocal publics to emerge: 'The Zarzis diaspora in Paris, for example, held protests there about the problems of the regional hospital here in the city' (personal communication, 16 September 2019). Several radios also attempt to function as a node between the array of civil society actors in the region, either through designated coverage, or by organising regular meetings to discuss content and programming (personal communication, 10 September 2019). Associative media thus become important platforms for the aggregation, exchange and organisation of different voices from their region and contribute to the amplification and extension of these voices.

Extending voice: the community demands a response

> We need to deliver our voice, the voice of the region, to the other—not only talk to each other and share between ourselves. (Personal communication, 11 September 2019).

One of the main roles that associative media actors identify in their self-narrative is that of mediating local issues with local authorities, as an important step towards addressing them. As one journalist remarked, 'If the public and

private media tell the people what the authorities say, then the role of associative radios is to tell the officials what the people want' (personal communication, 5 September 2019). Acting as the extender of voice, these actors attempt to translate these voices into tangible political influence (Waller, Dreher, and McCallum 2015).

This element of associative media practice is explicitly linked to the issue of decentralisation and shifting power to the regions:

> We are in a context of decentralization. It used to be that decisions are made in the centre and the regions had to execute. But the needs and specifics in each region are different from others. Thus, these priorities are known by the locals and political and civil-society actors from each region. They need to specify these priorities and methods. (Personal communication, 24 September 2019)

The municipal elections of 2018 and parliamentary elections of 2019 were an important opportunity for the radios in this regard as local candidates and party representatives were interviewed and pressed about their plans for the region and how they would respond to particular grievances:

> We always asked very local questions to the candidates. We are not asking about the party's national positions, or regional or international positions. We are focusing on the local. What are they going to do for the people of Gafsa. (Personal communication, 27 August 2019).

They also attempt to monitor the work of local officials and authorities and pressure them to act and respond to these concerns with the threat of shaming them in public:

> The radio almost became an authority of its own. When a citizen goes into a public administration, or a hospital, and does not get the help they need, he tells them: "I will go to the radio". So, the radio became the people's threat. (Personal communication, 28 August 2019)

Their impact, beyond the mere transmission of opinion and grievances, thus is to encourage their audience to participate more proactively in public political life as well as sensitising them about avenues for demanding accountability and redress – whether through the electoral process, or by direct participation in local municipal meetings:

> A number of these municipalities were announcing their meetings only in the small area where the municipality is located. Everytime we heard of it, we announced it on the radio: "there is a public meeting at this or that municipality." So a lot of people would go and make them accountable over the budget, or the streets that need fixing, or the services they have not delivered. (Personal communication, 5 September 2019).

Tensions between these new actors and local authorities that are not used to such close scrutiny were palpable in the early years according to all

interviewees. But these tensions have given way to a more complex relationship that involves both, the aforementioned antagonistic dynamic, but also a collaborative one:

> We monitor public projects and we use access to information laws. We also work with the anti-corruption agency and with iWatch. Our main role is to monitor and follow-up on projects with public bodies. This helps sometimes and does not help at others. Sometimes a person comes from a public body to give a clarification, and never comes back, because we ask difficult questions. Some people are more cooperative than others. (Personal communication, 10 September 2019)

Local authorities have also realised that local associative media provide an important platform for them to speak back to the community either to explain their side of an issue, or to spread public service announcements. When the date farmers of the region of Kebili, for example, had a dust-mite infestation that was threatening the valuable date harvest, the farmers called on the local radio to plead their case:

> The farmers called us to ask for help. We brought the agriculture director in the region, who talked about the pest, and about how high temperatures were to blame, and that insecticides were not available as of yet. They made insecticides available, and we announced it to the farmers. We also had an agricultural engineer on the program who explained details about the pest, their lifecycle, and how to deal with them. (Personal communication, 29 August 2019)

The complex nature of the mediating role of these local actors is delicately revealed in this example. They extend and press the voice and concerns of the local community, demand and follow up on answers from competent authorities, and attempt to translate it back to the local community. The examples also show how associative media were able to fill important local mediation gaps in their regions. And, perhaps more significantly, how they have been able to leverage the openings in the Tunisian system following the 2011 uprising (e.g., access to information laws, free municipal and parliamentary elections) to fashion a more adversarial and equal relationship with local authorities and representatives.

Bringing the threads together

It is important to note that these different levels of voice-making are not disconnected. They are interlayered and threaded throughout the content and practice of these associative media, albeit at different intensities. By concentrating these different layers, moments of crisis can help illustrate how they interact together. One poignant example is recalled by a journalist from Radio Nefzawa when heavy rains in the region led to landslides and claimed the lives of five people from the same family from Kebili. The radio's response

was to devote its whole programming to covering the tragedy, and to open up the lines for people to call and express their condolences:

> We thought we would do a sort of public call-in program for condolences for two hours, and the rest we would put verses from the Quran. But we received for the first time around 500 calls in the two hours. Both from the province and the diaspora. So, we could not cut the broadcast after two hours. We had a pause at midday, and then we continued until 6pm, and then I went in and continued until 10pm, and we still could not finish with the callers. We decided the next day to continue receiving the calls. (Personal communication, 28 August 2019)

The authorities' slow response to the catastrophe forced local civil society actors, such as the local branch of the GTT, to organise search and recovery efforts on their own. The radio became a central node in this effort by helping mobilise locals to join the search and coordinating resources: 'We became coordinators for donations, food and water for the people searching at the site. Our offices became a central drop-off point' (personal communication, 28 August 2019). The radio also used its position to criticise and attack local authorities for their lack of response.

The radio thus became a platform for the stricken region to *offer*, *exchange* and *recognise* its grief and anger. It was also a platform for the locals to *organise*, *mobilise* and *demand* action. As the journalist keenly recalled: 'When you think of the role of a community media? This is our role. If the state does not try to help [the region], your role is to step in' (personal communication, 28 August 2019).

Limitations and weaknesses

'Stepping in', however, is not always straightforward as many of these interventions are limited in their scope and efficacy due to a variety of constraints. The lack of financial resources at associative media means they are overly dependent on the commitment of their volunteers:

> Sometimes you have people who live in distant towns. They have other commitments, and they are volunteers so you cannot ask of them more than they can give. You do not have a solution, sometimes you start late, sometimes your guest does not show up. The program is then either cancelled, or you try with a plan B. It happens. (Personal communication, 16 September 2019)

Many of these associative media attempt to alleviate this by partnering with local unemployment offices to provide training opportunities for unemployed youth, funded by small grants from the state; or through offering internships and training opportunities for fresh journalism graduates or students. However, this also means that there is a substantial staff turnover in these organisations, and a significant amount of effort has to go into training new members.

The structural weaknesses also extend to the resources the radios can rely on to expand their participatory model. Indeed, the channels for participation for members of the community reach, in most cases, only as far as the contributions they make to the content or the debate. There are no mechanisms for including community members in the management, decision making, or production at the radios.[8] This is especially pertinent in a context where local journalism can also invite friction with the community (in covering taboo subjects, for example) as noted by several interviewees. The difficulty in articulating deeper participatory models is also linked to the internal hierarchy and organisation of these media outlets. Many of the radios, as associations, are heavily dependent on the leadership of one or two central people (often the founders) who coordinate resources, address shortages and function as the stabilising weight of the organisation. Charismatic leadership can be beneficial in ensuring the short- and mid-term survival of small-scale organisations like the associative radios in Tunisia. But it carries significant dangers in the shape of fragmentation within the organisation over personal or professional choices[9] and limiting the participatory potential of these media (Carpentier 2011). In a context where resources are already scarce such a fragmentation can weaken the sector as a whole.

Finally, the 'trans-hegemonic' position of associative media in their ambiguous relationship with local authorities allows them some flexibility in carrying out their functions while at the same time withstanding pressures from the state and the market (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2008). But it is also an unstable position and requires being constantly vigilant of co-optation as one journalist recounts:

> [The municipal authorities] wanted to create a partnership with us whereby they would give us the information they wanted to share and to co-opt us in a sense. So that we are not free in our framing of the news. So, I asked for modifications to the agreement to make sure it is in our advantage or in the advantage of our listeners and the residents, so that any news related to the municipality is announced publicly - not only the news chosen by the municipality. That agreement is still not signed. We are ready to work with the municipalities, but they must understand that even within these agreements, we remain free in shaping our news and in how we see the good and bad in municipal work. (Personal communication, 5 September 2019)

Redressing some of these weaknesses and imbalances in the associative media environment will be crucial to their survival and their efficacy as extenders of marginalised voices.

Discussion and conclusion

Post-revolutionary Tunisia provides interesting insights into the emergence of new media actors in the MENA region following the 2010–2011 uprisings.

In particular, the phenomenon of associative media in Tunisia provides us with an excellent case study of how the practices of such new media actors can grapple with the broader democratic transformation in the country. Associative media in Tunisia, we argue, emerge as a specific response to certain openings and closures in the Tunisian context. The legislative reforms of 2011, for example, provided a different opportunity structure for these actors to establish a new form of media organisation, and thus can be seen as a catalyst for their proliferation (see Rodríguez and El Gazi (2007) for a similar example in Colombia). However, the coherence of the field of associative media, beyond the strict boundaries enshrined in the legislation, is a result of the work of the radios to articulate their identity with relation to issues of multiple marginalisation (often, if not exclusively, operating along regional lines) and their productive entanglement with the broader politics of voice in a Tunisian polity in the process of reconstituting itself (Zemni 2015).

Couldry's notion of voice as both a *value* and a *process* (2010) allows us to conceptualise this entanglement along two levels. A collective effort at the national level, through sectoral-representative associations, with the aim of stabilising and entrenching this emerging sector by lobbying and pressuring state organs, organising collective responses to its structural weaknesses, and creating ad-hoc networks of solidarity and mobilisation with other civil society actors. While at a local level, engaging more directly with the challenges of *recognising*, *facilitating*, and *extending* marginalised voices from their communities. These two levels of action can be seen as a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Associative media actors have to reckon with a number of limitations, however. Some of these are internal structural weaknesses such as their organisational and leadership models, and their financial sustainability. Others are external constraints linked to the instability and polarisation of Tunisian national politics and the power imbalances they have in terms of access and influence on national decision-makers.

This study, we believe, can offer at least three main lessons to both scholars of emerging media as well as scholars interested in the aftermath of the 2010–2011 MENA uprisings. We argue that local associative media in Tunisia have come to offer important channels of voice to marginalised (regional) communities in the country. Strengthening this role, however, requires collective efforts, and political will, to embed, and to discriminate *in favour of* (to borrow Couldry's words) the value of voice in the different policy frameworks at both a national and local level. The Tunisian example shows that there is indeed some scope to sustain these efforts especially as the structure of the transformed Tunisian state is still fluid. The trans-hegemonic position of associative media, while unstable, allows them to participate more effectively in this process. Finally, these efforts should also take place within the organisations themselves by engaging more with the challenging 'politics of

listening'. More specifically, this entails a commitment to deepening and broadening their participatory models and their embeddedness in their communities.

Notes

1. There are currently only nine associative radios with an FM broadcast license, the others broadcast on the internet. The Union Tunisienne des Médias Associatifs (UTMA), one of two sectoral organisations, counts 20 radios as members.
2. Notably, the Islamist party Ennahda, decided not to participate in the HC (Mir 2011).
3. Including: Article 19, Open Society Foundation, BBC Media Action, International Media Support (IMS), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), IFEX-Tunisia Monitoring Group, World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Organisation internationale de la francophonie, European Broadcasting Union, and UNESCO (INRIC 2012).
4. The most egregious example of this is Nabil Karoui, a businessman and media mogul who reached the final run-off in the 2019 presidential election and was often referred to as 'Tunisia's Berlusconi' (Beaumont 2019).
5. STRA, (previously, Syndicat Tunisien des Radio Libres), traces its roots to the pirate radios established briefly by opponents of the Ben Ali regime in the mid-2000s (e.g. Salah Fourty). It has links to the syndicalist movements in the country and its members are connected by their participation in political mobilisation against the Ben Ali regime prior to 2010. The STRA's current president is Nozha ben Mohamed of Radio 6.
6. UTMA, established in 2015, and is larger and more heterogenous in terms of its membership than the STRA. The UTMA's current president is Fahmi Blidaoui of Radio Nefzawa.
7. Such as Article 19, Tunisian Human Rights League, and Tunis Center for Press Freedom, among others.
8. Only one association regularly organises listener's club meetings that offer input into the programming on the radio.
9. Two of the studied associative radios had split up from a different radio in their region.

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