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Citizens' Radio in North Africa and the Middle East: Meaningful Change through Citizen Empowerment? – An Experience from Tunis

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Abstract: Fostering a participatory political culture is a crucial part of the on-going transformation processes which we witness across North African and Middle Eastern countries since 2011. This paper considers which role participatory communication plays in these processes, by examining the potential of citizens' radios to accompany Tunisia's transition at a grassroots level. Analysing the case of *Radio 6* Tunis – a local, non-commercial Internet-radio founded by Tunisian journalists under the rule of Ben Ali in 2007 – citizens' radios are discussed as sites of political contestation and cultivation of critical consciousness. While they empower citizens to reclaim both their voice and public space, their influence is however limited. The manifold challenges which citizens' radios face in the transitional context of post-autocratic Tunisia, may well impede nascent democratisation dynamics.

Keywords: citizens' radio, citizenship, transformation, democratisation, Tunisia, MENA

Introduction

More than two years after Tunisia's revolution in January 2011, the country is still in a continuing process of transition, which makes it both an interesting, yet complex, because dynamic field to study. While trying to make sense of the events that recently unfold across North African and Middle Eastern countries (hereafter: MENA-region) one main issue prevails. Asef Bayat put it straightforward: "However one characterizes the process (...) the crucial question is how to ensure a fundamental shift from the old, authoritarian order to inaugurate meaningful democratic change (...)" (Bayat 2013: 7). This transitional struggle is well reflected in the dynamics evolving in and around the reform of Tunisian media.

In the course of the 2011 revolutionary events Tunisia's media landscape has been constantly contested and diversified, making way for a phenomenon that is so far highly understudied with regards to the whole MENA-region: the emergence of independent citizens' radio stations. Considering participatory communication as a

crucial component in the on-going transformation processes across the MENA-region, this paper examines the potential of citizens' radios to accompany Tunisia's transition at a grassroots level by fostering a participatory political culture. Citizens' radios are discussed as sites of political contestation and cultivation of critical consciousness which empower citizens to reclaim both their voice and public space. Analysing the case of *Radio 6 Tunis* – a local, non-commercial Internet-radio founded by Tunisian journalists under the rule of Ben Ali in 2007 – the paper comprehends the complex developments occurring during the reform of Tunisia's media landscape. This leads to the conclusion that citizens' radios' influence is still limited. The manifold challenges which they face due to operating in the transitional context of post-autocratic Tunisia, may well impede nascent democratisation dynamics.

Radio and participatory communication in the MENA-region

A lot has been written about the media's role in transformation processes in the MENA-region, yet, radio has not drawn too much attention within these works. One reason might be that compared to television, radio as a medium in general and community radio broadcasting in particular often fell prey to "the marginalisation of sound and radio within [media and cultural studies]" (Lewis 2002: 47). Another reason is the long-time absence of both private and independent radio broadcasting in the region. Political conditions of autocratic rule and, thus, controlled state media and censorship sought to stifle critical thinking. Hence, audiences tuned in to Arabic broadcasting services from abroad to obtain news. Furthermore, an underground cassette culture that spread across the region in the mid-1970s, enabled cultural production by disseminating poetry, music and lectures on religion and politics (Khalafallah 1982). The power of such 'small scale media' was to provide political public spaces which were otherwise not available under repressive government control (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994). Albeit clandestine radio, too, had its moments as subversive medium in the MENA-region, it generated only limited scholarly attention (e.g. Boyd 1999). Frantz Fanon pointed out the pivotal role of radio in regional liberation struggles. Studying the Algerian Revolution, his work 'A Dying Colonialism' (1959) describes how the Algerian people adopted radio as a new attitude to resist French colonialism, thereby shaping the politics of decolonization and transforming radio from a means of French cultural domination to their own unifying voice of a free Algeria to come.

Apart from these historical episodes, radio as a means for social change in the MENA-region remains understudied. With the toppling of autocratic control in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011 new media outlets flourished, yet, it is important to note, that some independent radio stations were already launched years before,

using the relatively unrestricted space provided by the Internet.¹ Among those meanwhile established radio stations are the pioneer *AmmanNet*² in Jordan, *Radio Horytna*³ in Egypt, *Radio Kalima* and *Radio 64* in Tunisia. While these were challenging the governments' control of media well before the Arab uprisings in 2011, it is now that they become increasingly significant: with the transitional processes and corresponding needs to reform the media landscape, hopes are arising for community media to prosper in order to “enhance media pluralism and the inclusion of marginalized communities in policy- and decision-making processes” (UNESCO 2012). This expectation builds on the concept of participatory communication. Citizens' participation in communication processes has been regarded as a central issue for development and democratisation ever since the late 1970s. The debate for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO)⁵ emphasised the need to redistribute communicative power by balancing the flow of and enhancing equal access to information. NWICO extended the right to be informed to the right to communicate and framed the individual not as a passive consumer of information but as an active agent in a two-way process of communication that should be responsive to the needs of the audience. (MacBride-Report 1980: 166ff.) Accordingly, media which enable dialogue and participation of ordinary citizens are thought of as “machinery through which participation in the socio-political sphere is achieved” (Berrigan 1979: 9).

As for the MENA-region, social change and democratisation effects have been discussed in great detail in terms of mass media (e.g. Hafez 2008, 2001; Rugh 2004; Kamalipour and Mowlana 1994). Academic attention especially focused on satellite television (e.g. Sakr 2007, 2001; Zayani 2005; Hafez 2005; el-Nawawy and Iskandar 2003), international radio broadcasting (e.g. Richter 2008; Ibahrine 2006; Zöllner 2006), and recently social media (Alqudsi-ghabrai 2012; Armbrust 2012; Breuer 2012, 2011; Axford 2011; Kaiser 2011; Miladi 2011). Yet, the question how processes of communication themselves might be democratised has been rather omitted. However, both are conducive to social change: While the diversification of accessible information brought about by satellite TV and social media enhanced the “pressure for a more open public sphere [and] political democracy” (Sreberny 2001: 117), media which facilitate participatory communication are “critical for the building of participatory societies” (Hochheimer 2002: 328).

1 Independent in the sense of being alternative, non-state media, whereas they are often equipped and financed through support by international organisations.

2 The name was meanwhile changed into Al-Balad Radio. The station focuses on local and domestic issues in its programming. Webpage at: <http://ar.ammannet.net/>.

3 Egypt's first online radio station established in 2007, aims to be an independent cultural and news radio station. Webpage at: <http://horytna.net/Home.aspx>.

4 For analysis see p.8 ff.

5 Initiated by UNESCO, the debate asserted the existing information inequalities between 'North' and 'South' caused by the media market's domination through Western media outlets which resulted in commercialised and homogenised media contents. (MacBride-Report 1980) Despite its valuable contributions the NWICO debate lacked binding character and assertiveness.

As Hafez suggests, a “participatory political culture [started] to evolve in many Arab countries even before the achievement of systemic change” (Hafez 2008: 336) due to the impact of mass media on “the political (...) values, attitudes and political cultures of Arab populations” (Hafez 2008: 333). Moreover, the people in North Africa and the Middle East have a strong history of contesting the limits of autocratic control by adopting creative strategies and creating spaces of relative freedom through cultural production (Sabry 2011, 2010; Maasri 2009; Hammond 2007; Dabashi 2001; Armbrust 2000, 1996; Wedeen 1999) and civil society engagement (Zubaida 2001; Salamé 2001[1994]; Norton 1995). Yet, as Asef Bayat highlighted in ‘Life as Politics’ (2010), agents of political struggle against autocratic restrictions do not automatically equal agents of political and social change. Only when they think and act politically they may become agents of democratisation dynamics. Otherwise, as Bayat argues: “their preoccupation with their own narrow (...) claims may bear little impetus for engaging on broader societal concerns.” (Bayat 2010: 19)

The question is then, which role participatory communication, in the concrete form of citizens’ radios, may play in fostering such a participatory political culture across the MENA-region to account for “meaningful democratic change” (Bayat 2013: 7).

The potential of *citizens’ radio* in the MENA-region

The literature knows a plethora of concepts with different approaches to participatory communication⁶. To approach it in context of the above mentioned question *citizens’ media* (Rodríguez 2001) is a promising concept since it focuses on the transformative processes media participation initiates among participants and respective communities. It attempts to overcome essential categories of power and binary frameworks which tend to restrict the potential of alternative media simply to their ability to resist mainstream media. Rodríguez however argues this would be too narrow to encompass the lived experience of those involved with alternative media which are enabled to “actively participate in actions that reshape their own identities (...) and their social environments” (Rodríguez 2001: 18f.). The approach shifts the focus towards the participant as political subject, a thought essentially inspired by Mouffe’s thoughts on the multilayered power-dimensions behind everyday political struggles (Mouffe 2005, 2000a, 1992b, 1992c).

Mouffe conceives individuals as social agents who are “constituted by an ensemble of subject positions that can never be totally fixed” (Mouffe 1992c: 28). These heterogeneous and multiple identities are constructed by a diversity of discourses which form the individual as a multiple and contradictory subject whose identity is thus always contingent. In Mouffe’s conception, this process of identity formation

6 E.g. ‘community media’, ‘radical media’ (Downing 1984, 2001), ‘small media’ (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994), ‘alternative media’ (e.g. Atton 2002) or ‘grassroots media’ (e.g. Gillmor 2004).

correlates with the enactment of citizenship which then again is understood as “a form of identification, a type of political identity: something to be constructed, not empirically given” (Mouffe 1992b: 231). It is therefore not conceived as a legal status granted by the state, but something to be achieved and constantly re-negotiated. From this perspective, a citizen is an active agent of society who performs his citizenship through ‘quotidian politics’, i.e. everyday life practises which are seen as potential sites for political contestation.

Accordingly, Rodríguez’ concept of citizens’ media implies a collective enactment of citizenship “by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape” (Rodríguez 2001: 30). She argues, that the contestation of “social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalised social relations” (Rodríguez 2001: 30) through communication results in empowerment, *conscientisation* and fragmentation of power. Citizens’ media as a concept hence articulates the metamorphic transformation of alternative media’s participants into active citizens. Drawing on Mouffe and Rodríguez, this paper conceptualises *citizens’ radios* as institutionalised entities that represent open communicative spaces in the MENA-region. In making use of these spaces, citizens exert agency by reclaiming both their voice and public space, considering the decades-long suppression of free speech and association. Active participation in processes of communication is a distinct political act, especially in societies that (have) experience(d) state surveillance.

In a post-revolutionary setting of competing interest groups that seek political influence, “agonistic confrontation” - a necessary democratic practice in Mouffe’s sense - seems all the more necessary, as it brings traces of power “visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation” (Mouffe 2000a: 34). Ideally, any media - private, public or alternative - would thrive to provide this space for conflict and public negotiation to appear through their programming. They could be thought of then as public arenas of political contest and pluralism. Yet, citizens’ radio’s asset, compared to private and public radio stations, is its potential to empower citizens by enabling them to become active agents in a two-way process of communication. Rodríguez speaks in these terms of participants’ ability to “encode their own realities in their own terms” (Rodríguez 2000: 150), for example, by communicating in their own language on issues of their interest. Cornwall and Coelho remark, “[f]or people to be able to exercise their political agency, they need first to recognize themselves as citizens” (Cornwall and Coelho 2007: 8). This is achieved through the process of “conscientisation” coined by Freire (1970), which strengthens participants’ critical reception of and reflection on their environment. Freire’s understanding of education focuses on dialogue and literacy as means not to conform to society but to change it, by developing an independent and critical consciousness which is capable of perceiving and illuminating political and social contradictions.

Besides transforming alternative media's participants into active citizens, citizens' radios potential to foster democratisation dynamics on a grassroots level, grounds on five elements which Downing summarised for what he calls "radical media" (Downing 2001: 43-45): first, expanding the media landscape as new actors whose programming widens the range of available information, and furthermore, challenges the established practises of media production; second, being responsive to the voices and aspirations of the excluded; third, being ideally independent from state, economic or other external interests and thus enhancing political and social accountability; fourth, promoting freedom of expression and; fifth being internally democratic through a non-hierarchical organisation.

However, as Jankowski notes, it is not only the construction of technological infrastructure that is necessary to allow such communicative spaces to emerge, but also a "degree of willingness among people to act and speak on their behalf" (Jankowski 2002: 3). The assumption that ownership by the people equals automatically in the people's voice would miss the complexity of social structures and power relations within communities, and within citizens' radios itself. After years of centrally controlled state media, people might not participate in citizens' radio out of general suspicion and lacking trust in media. Even enthusiastic volunteers in citizens' radios might experience some disillusion if their engagement does not lead to the expected impact. It is thus often a struggle for citizens' radios to live up to their own standards. Especially, as their capacity is significantly affected by the prevalent political landscape and media environment, economic conditions as well as legislative premises in which it operates.

After a rather short excursion into the history of Tunisia's media landscape, a closer examination of *Radio 6 Tunis*, a Tunisian citizens' radio, indicates how their aim to empower citizens is challenged by the transitional context of post-autocratic Tunisia. The analysis is based on five documented qualitative in-depth interviews, conducted in Tunis in May 2012 with Tunisian journalists and media experts.⁷ Significant insights evolved furthermore from informal interviews during a UNESCO conference on 'Media Development in Tunisia' from 23rd to 25th May 2012 with key Tunisian media figures.⁸ Observations at *Radio 6 Tunis*, including studio visits, conversations with participants and live-broadcast observations were complemented by examinations of their program and Facebook webpage contents.

⁷ For a list of interviewees see Appendix.

⁸ Final report (Buckley, et.al. 2012) of the conference was at disposal for this work, too, however confidential.

Citizens' radio in Tunisia - the experience of *Radio 6 Tunis*

'(...) technology was far enough advanced to produce radio while society was not sufficiently advanced to take it up. It was not the public that waited for radio but radio that waited for a public (...)'
(Brecht 1930: 169)

Brecht's critique describes quite well the environment citizens' radios in Tunisia have to operate in: The technological means which offer the strengthening of participatory communication often exist. However, these independent communicative spaces will only rise to their full potential through people's active participation, and in a social setting which facilitates and values their existence. Although radio is still the most accessible medium for the majority of the Tunisian population, the country's media landscape clearly is not an easy environment to operate in.

Before January 14 2011, little space existed for alternative media to emerge. Ever since the Tunisian independence from French rule in 1956, all national-based audiovisual media were under direct government control and subject to its influence. With print media being mainly relevant to the elite, Tunisian "mass media (...) conditioned the people to expect and desire stability and to see progress in evolutionary, rather than revolutionary terms" (Browne 1999: 262), as Browne notes. However, as the influence of international broadcasting and satellite TV increased in Tunisia, Ben Ali decided to launch new private broadcasting channels in 2003. While this altered Tunisia's media landscape, it was eventually conducted under firm state control. New radio stations like *Mosaique FM*, *Shems FM* and *Express FM* built unprecedented extension in addition to the four national and five local radio stations that were organised under the national umbrella organisation *Radio Tunis*. Yet, the allocation of broadcast licenses was not a transparent process and the new radio stations were still concentrated in a few hands of cronies linked to Ben Ali. Consequently, Tunisians did and do lack trust in their country's media which were "among the most monotone and heavily censored in the Arab world" (el-Issawi 2012).

However, as Haugbølle and Cavatorta (2012) highlight, the private media launch, while "upgrading authoritarianism through reforms that are liberal in name, but not in practice" (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012: 105) and not directly leading to political pluralism on the airwaves, nonetheless it opened up alternative publics. Their analysis shows how private stations like *Mosaique FM* created new arenas of public debate through their programming, which "lead to a questioning of both policies and attitudes that the regime [was] not necessarily comfortable with" (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012: 106). Hence, private radio stations offered first entries to agonistic confrontation - however flawed, as still only government-approved stations were granted FM licenses.

The struggle for radio independence started when two radio stations used the Internet to bypass government restrictions and attempted to establish a critical

and independent news coverage: *Radio 6 Tunis*⁹, initiated as Tunisia's first 'radio libre' in 2007 by a small group of young journalists, and *Radio Kalima*¹⁰, founded in 2008 by journalist Sihem Bensedrine. Both, the participants of *Radio Kalima* and of *Radio 6*, faced prosecution, arrest and harassment by police forces which shut the radio stations down several times. *Radio Kalima* continued to broadcast from French exile in 2009. *Radio 6* managed to illegally import broadcast equipment unavailable on the Tunisian market and maintain broadcasting as an underground radio station from small secret private premises in Tunis. *Radio 6*' name was meant to decry the centralised state media with only five local radio stations. Its self-image was to be a '*radio militante*' (French), strictly opposed to the regime and the aim to transmit the voices that were stifled by state censorship: "We gave voice to those who otherwise could not speak, like civil society agents and human rights activists", explains Salah Fourti, co-founder of *Radio 6* and General Secretary of the Free Tunisian Radios Syndicate (STRL) (Interview with Salah Fourti, 2012).

During the revolution in January 2011, *Radio 6* and *Radio Kalima* transmitted daily updates online via proxy websites. Ever since the revolution in 2011 the media landscape is in flux and citizens' radio activities in Tunisia have heavily increased. While an assessment conducted by International Media Support (IMS) and the international organisation of community-based broadcasters (AMARC) in 2011, found about eight media projects with a participatory approach, a follow-up assessment¹¹ in December 2012 already registered over 30 of such local radio activities on FM band or the internet¹², e.g. *Radio Femme*¹³ on FM in Tunis, the web radio *Tunisia Gays*¹⁴, *Radio Sawt Al Menajem* in Gafsa and *Chaambi FM* in Kasserine. The two latter were officially licensed in summer of 2011, just as were *Radio Kalima*, *Radio 6* and eight other radio stations.¹⁵

Hence, four years after *Radio 6* started broadcasting illegally as the first independent radio in Tunisia it became one of twelve officially licensed radio stations in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Since then, it aims to prevent a return to the media landscape under Ben Ali, supporting a network of local radios through training journalists to create future web radios, and establishing links to international organisations to assure funding and provide equipment – all resulting from the belief that "multiple independent radios across the country strengthen the basis of a hopefully pluralist and decentralised country" (*Radio 6*, Editorial Line). While *Radio 6* presented itself as a 'radio militante' under Ben Ali,

9 Webpage: <http://www.radio6tunis.net/> .

10 Webpage: <http://kalima.tn/web/> . Radio Kalima is a private radio station with a commercial approach and hence, not eligible for further analysis here.

11 See Online report: <http://mena.amarc.org/?q=en/node/809>.

12 There also is a non-governmental association of Tunisian Radio Amateurs (ASTRA), since December 2011. <http://www.astra.tn/> .

13 See AMARC statement: <http://www2.amarc.org/?q=node/1435>.

14 See <https://www.facebook.com/Tunisia.Gays.Radio>.

15 Radio 6, Radio Kalima, Kif FM and Ibtissama FM in Tunis, Oxygène FM in Bizerte, Cap Fm in Nabeul, Sabra FM in Kairouan, Chaambi FM in Kasserine, Sawt el Manajem in Gafsa, Al Karama in Sidi Bouzid, Oasis FM in Gabès and Ulysse FM in Medenine.

during the interview in May 2012, Salah Fourti emphasised *Radio 6* to be a ‘radio libre’, a place that is formed by the shared aims, ideas and objectives of its participants. Its Editorial Line reads “our programming wants to contribute towards the development of civic, economic, social, and intellectual knowledge by initiating debates of interest for all people”. Thus, *Radio 6* has no single target group and participants conceive it rather as a generalist than a thematic radio. Its program is designed as a multifaceted mixture of call-in live-shows, accompanied by all genres of music, with the final aim to “give the maximum of airtime to the audience without taboos or self-censorship” (*Radio 6*, Editorial Line). One can deduce from *Radio 6*’s conceptual outline its ambition to contribute to a transparent transition in Tunisia, aiming at giving voice to the audience and priority to their interests. Topics come up in daily editorial meetings as well as through listener input via calls or *Radio 6*’s Facebook page. People are invited to participate in discussions online as well as through call-ins. Usually, controversial topics of current political relevance or general social interest are chosen, Fourti explains:

In the morning programmes we discuss what happened the day before but we also have special interest programmes on everyday issues (...) but in our work we always seek to maintain the revolution. If there is a sit-in or a labour dispute we try to cover it, we try to understand the underlying reasons to explain them to the people and give listeners the possibility to express their opinions. (Interview with Salah Fourti, 2012)

Abdelkarim Hizaoui, Director of The African Centre for Training of Journalists and Communicators (CAPJC) also highlights the benefits of citizens’ radios like *Radio 6* regarding their ability to enable all citizens to participate by “shaping a spirit of curiosity among citizens [for] public affairs [and] to promote human and cultural development”, which he considers as “something commercial radios do not necessarily do” (Interview with Abdelkarim Hizaoui, 2012).

All interviewees emphasised that citizens’ radios in Tunisia have a pivotal role to play in being responsive to the needs of all marginalised groups, especially to the people living in the politically and economically neglected peripheral regions of Tunisia, who are still underserved, not only by the national media. These regions are suffering from the autocratic state’s legacy, that consolidated “a predatory economy favoring politically connected elites while the wider population, particularly in working class areas and disadvantaged rural regions, suffered from rapidly declining living standards” (Merone and Cavatorta 2012: 2). Addressing their demands and giving them the opportunity to express their views, is key to Tunisia’s transition.¹⁶ Although it is an urban citizens’ radio, *Radio 6* plays a key role in addressing the periphery, since they obtain the knowledge to train other people and the network to support new associative radios, which is one of their declared objectives, Fourti says:

¹⁶ Anyways, the doubtlessly valid role citizens’ radio obtain in being responsive to peripheral audiences, does not release the state media to put more effort in addressing and serving them.

People come here to *Radio 6* to get trained. We try to get them some equipment (...) Thus it requires only Internet and electricity et voilà there is a radio (...) It is an important challenge to establish a network of local, pluralist radios which talk about the respective needs of local people in different regions. (Interview with Salah Fourti, 2012)

Following Rodríguez argumentation, *Radio 6* hereby enacts collective citizenship by trying to establish an independent radio network to expand the media landscape and widen the range of available information, because they actively intervene and aim to transform the established mediascape. Furthermore, *Radio 6* meets the characteristic of a citizens' radio in terms of aiming at being responsive to all people including marginalised groups; promoting freedom of expression and being internally democratic through a non-hierarchical organisation that is open to individuals to participate. Additionally, their programming approach may potentially lead to enhanced social accountability and political responsiveness. For example, when *Radio 6* aired a programme that discussed nuclear energy in Tunisia and its consequences for the population, it "forced the government to conduct a survey about it" (Interview with Salah Fourti, 2012). Moreover, their programming facilitates the audiences "participation as an equal in the exchange of opinions and collective deliberations" (Cohen 1999: 63). Thereby, *Radio 6* empowers its participants to make sense of their environment in their own language, challenge and develop their own presuppositions and subjectivities. As a result, they may become active citizens in Bayat's sense: "[reclaiming] their societies and [asserting] themselves" (Bayat 2013: 3) - providing that people actually listen to *Radio 6*.

From the field work done for this paper, no assumptions about the audience and how it perceives *Radio 6* can be made here. However, what can be said, is that *Radio 6*' broadcasting capacity was not very efficient in May 2012, since only their direct neighbourhood district received a clear signal which got worse with increasing geographical distance, causing a presumably limited audience.¹⁷ Associated with this, is the unbalanced struggle of *Radio 6* with commercial broadcasters for an anyway weak advertising market, and as a result an immense gap in terms of funding and resources. Although international media development organisations offer local training and equipment, "to ensure [radios'] continuity is another thing because there are other fixed expenses like salaries" (interview), as Taoufik Yacoub, Director of The Press and Information Sciences Institute (IPSI), Manouba University notes (Interview with Taoufik Yacoub, 2012). "There have been experiences with radio associative in Tunisia which did not survive for more than 2 or 3 months", Yacoub reports. *Radio 6* premises were rented by Fourti himself, the equipment has been obtained by subsidies, and their production is based on volunteering, although they try to pay expenses to their participants. Fourti explains:

¹⁷ However, the radio-station moved by the end of 2012 to a new place, which is Fourti's private property, from where, by now, they should be capable of reaching all people in the area of greater Tunis with their FM-frequency.

I hope this situation will improve if we start some promotions, but for the moment nothing is certain. In fact, our struggle is to exist and not to disappear. There are other commercial radio stations which obtained their official licence last months [April 2012] which are already off-air now or facing enormous problems, for example, even if they managed to include advertisements they did not get paid for it. (Interview with Salah Fourti, 2012)

Radio 6' experience shows, how hard it is to maintain broadcasting and at the same time stay independent from state, economic or other external interests, e.g. advertisers or international support. Hence, citizens' radios mandatory self-management which Servaes describes as "most developed form of participation" (Servaes 2003: 21), seems to go along with causing them a constantly vague *status quo*.

Especially, as Tunisia's transitional context confronts the newly developed media outlets with precarious working conditions due to prevailing legal uncertainty. After promising steps towards legal and institutional reforms in the media sector were initiated in 2011 by the National Authority to Reform Information and Communication (INRIC), the coalition government led by *Ennahda*, Tunisia's leading Islamist party, repeatedly postponed the implementation of Decree 115 and 116.¹⁸ In addition, citizens' radios are given no priority in the media reform, as Yacoub puts it:

In any case the current government is not primarily preoccupied with the regulation and issues of 'radio associative' [which] have a limited influence due to their limited audience. They are more concerned about the big national media. (Interview with Taoufik Yacoub, 2012)

INRIC suspended its activities in July 2012, claiming the government's hesitance to reform the media sector. Media professionals, accordingly, were left in an uncertain judicial environment and new radio stations threatened with closure or prosecution. As Reporters without Borders report, radio stations who rented transmitters and broadcast equipment now "find it impossible to pay the exorbitant sums demanded by the National Broadcasting Office (ONT) – an average of 100,000 Dinars (48,460 Euros) from each radio station (...) [while those] that chose to reject the ONT monopoly of broadcasting equipment and operate independently are now illegal" (RWB 2013). While Decree 116 provides for the idea of non-commercial radios, as long as it is not implemented, all radio stations are considered to be commercial and thus, to pay the ONT. *Radio 6* is also confronted with this problem, as Nozha Ben Mohammed, head of the radio station, sums up:

The transmission fees demanded by the ONT are outrageous. We're asked to pay 100,000 to 120,000 dinars per year, with a deadline for payment falling every six months. We're an [associative radio] which is not supposed to pay these types of fees. (Sbouai 2012)

¹⁸ Decree 115/2011 on the Press, Printing and Publishing and Decree 116/2011 on the Freedom of Audiovisual Communication and the Supreme Independent Body of Audiovisual Communication.

Clearly, if participatory spaces are to function at all, state support and recognition are needed. However, for more than two years now, Tunisia's media are left subject to political seesaw changes. As a result, Tunisia dropped four points in the Press Freedom Index for 2013 to rank 138. So far, media freedom remains elusive and distrust in the media sector is likely to run deep (IFEX-TMG 2012: 6).

On May 3, 2013 the government announced the composition of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (HAICA), a self-regulatory body that now supervises the reform of Tunisian media. Since then, HAICA has criticised the government's controversial practise of appointing people to run broadcast media outlets that it says are biased in favor of the ruling *Ennahda* party. Especially, as it did so without prior consultation of relevant bodies such as the National Union for Tunisian Journalists (SNJT). Severe tensions between the government and the SNJT have also been caused due to repeated attacks against journalists over the past two years¹⁹ which the government does not manage to prevent. SNJT therefore, organised a number of protests against what journalist Hichem Senoussi called "a war against freedom of press and expression led by *Ennahda*" (Ghribi 2012). While it can be considered as a positive development that Tunisian journalists protest for the implementation of an overdue media reform and stand up for impartial and neutral media, the vacuum in terms of the media regulation is quite worrying. Positively, it makes it very easy to set up new media outlets and thus, alters and diversifies the media landscape. However, negatively, it does not necessarily work out for the better if anyone can set up broadcasting stations and broadcast whatever they like. In fact, this might even undermine the political process. Achieving freedom of speech requires a process in which citizens and journalists have to learn how to handle this newfound freedom with responsibility. Tunisia's journalists' lack of professionalism and inexperience in critical use of freedom of expression due to the decade long state censorship is therefore a main issue. Furthermore, it is ambiguous if new media projects have to be financed privately and/or partly through undisclosed foreign funding as in the case of Telvza TV (Slama 2013). Telvza TV was recently formed by a group of 70 journalists and bloggers, with many of them withdrawing from other stations over conflicts over their editorial lines and managements which they accuse of "telling them to withhold information and make their broadcasts more friendly to the Islamist *Ennahda* party" (Slama 2013).

These episodes are quite telling: Tunisia's mainstream media are already caught up "in the political struggle between the main opposing camps of conservative Islamists and secular elitists" (el-Issawi 2012). A development which does not go by unrecognised by *Radio 6*. Fourti states:

Currently, there is a war between those who want to get their hands on the media to control them (...) and we will not let this happen. We want to assure a huge and diverse media scene. (Interview with Salah Fourti, 2012)

¹⁹ See reports of the Tunis Centre for Press Freedom: <http://ctlj.org/index.php/en/reports> .

Despite its doubtlessly honest ambitions to be a game changer, *Radio 6* has hardly a neutral position in this ‘war’, but is rather to be found on the side of the secular elites. Without questioning their aim to be an open and pluralistic space, its founders’ ideologies and convictions can be localised in a modern, educated, secular and democratic mindset and thus, *Radio 6* seems likely to attract like-minded people to participate, too. Therefore, it is questionable if they really can be responsive to the majority of Tunisian people who politically seem to find themselves echoed best in *Ennahda*’s conservative Islamist perspective. Although, this is what *Radio 6* would want to achieve, Fourti states:

Local radios have to encourage the Tunisian people to express themselves. They are not used to it, (...) or know how to find support for projects to express and realise their ideas. And finally, they have also to stand up to the extremists [which] do express themselves (...) with their campaign in mosques and on demonstrations, while the majority rests silent. (Interview with Salah Fourti, 2012)

With ‘extremists’, Fourti is referring to Salafists, which is over-simplified. In the Tunisian context one has to clearly differentiate between Salafism’s scientific component, a type of Islamism that promotes immersion in sacred texts, and its jihadi component, which advocates armed struggle to achieve political objectives, following a report of the International Crisis Group (2013). Just as other secular parties, which, according to Merone and Cavatorta, tend to see Salafists “as ideological rivals and as anti-democratic, and therefore, mobilise strongly against them” (Merone and Cavatorta 2012: 4), *Radio 6*, too, seems to miss the fact that one cannot simply oppose Salafism. It is “a product of the domestic Tunisian reality” (Merone and Cavatorta 2012: 1). Hence, if it really is citizen’s radios strength to be responsive to the needs of all marginalised groups, especially to the people living in the politically and economically neglected peripheral regions of Tunisia, as mentioned before, than, consequently, that would have to include Salafists, too. However, it seems to be perceived rather as a threat that limits citizens’ radios potential than a challenge that has to be addressed:

In an environment with religious groups that threaten expressions different from their conviction – and unfortunately, that is already the case in Tunisia – associative radios cannot live up to their role as... I do not say ‘counter-power’ but a voice different from the others (...) if there is an invisible, societal censorship that exercises symbolic violence (...). (Interview with Abdelkrim Hizaoui, 2012)

Salafism is a phenomenon in the middle of Tunisian society which often attracts young people who under Ben Ali felt not only economically disillusioned, but also spiritually. Instead of echoing the ‘Salafist danger’ which the francophone press both in Tunisia and France are framing in their coverage (Merone and Cavatorta 2012: 1), it would be up to citizens’ radios like *Radio 6* to contest the deadlocked “social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalised social relations” (Rodríguez 2001: 30) in the country. Theoretically, *Radio 6*’s agency is based on advocating a pluralism that gives a “positive status to differences and questions the objective of homogeneity” (Mouffe 2000a: 19). If they approached individuals with

more conservative and Salafist ideologies to participate in *Radio 6*, they would probably exceed binary notions of power (Rodríguez 2001) and create “spaces of possibility” (Cornwall and Cohen 2007). A space “kept open for possible confrontations of ideas and where power relations are always put into question so that no victory can be final”, as Mouffe (2000a: 15) argues. Making effort like this to democratically educate and integrate the Salafis into the political system might be the more efficient way towards achieving a pluralistic society, than opposing and demonising.

From that perspective, it would be citizens’ radios essential role in the on-going Tunisian developments to build the missing link between mainstream media and civil society (Hafez 2008), since they are at the interface of both.

Conclusion

The analysis of the experience of *Radio 6* in post-revolutionary Tunisia revealed the pivotal role of citizens’ radios in accompanying Tunisia’s transition at a local, grassroots level, by diversifying the media landscape, promoting freedom of expression and fostering a participatory political culture among its participants. At the same time, citizens’ radios struggle to accommodate to the manifold challenges they are confronted with and which might impede nascent democratisation dynamics. Their potential to inaugurate meaningful change can only be judged against the background of the specific social setting in which they operate. In the end, “media can be no more democratic than the society within which they exist” (Jakubowicz in Hochheimer 2002: 321). Summed up, the question is not whether citizens’ radios have a future in Tunisia. The question rather is if their mission will remain militant resistance as in Ben Ali times – or if citizens’ radios will finally be able to unfold their transformative potential and sustain Tunisia’s social, political and cultural development.

Therefore, the government would have to make a real effort to support independent communicative spaces, as they will only rise to their full potential in a social setting which facilitates and values their existence. Moreover, people’s active participation is required, meaning participation from all social and political levels. Here, citizens’ radios like *Radio 6* have to question themselves, if they want to be an open space to anyone and giving voice to a plurality of voiceless people, or if they want to replicate a particular mindset through their programming. The latter seems unlikely to be of great help, if they really seek to be responsive to the marginalised people in Tunisia’s peripheral areas.

Future research will have to investigate citizens’ radios activities in Tunisia’s periphery to bring in the regional dimensions, where different values and perspectives of identity exist than in Tunis. It will furthermore have to put participants’ experiences in the centre of analysis. Also, further research would have to reveal citizens’ radios external validity beyond the Tunisian case.

Finally, the experience of citizens' radio in Tunisia suggests to move beyond the prevailing focus on mass and social media in order to make sense of the complexity of the currently on-going transformation processes in the MENA-region. Thus, researching potential complementarities between different forms of media and their interdependent influence on transitional processes seems to be an interesting approach.

Appendix

List of Interviewees

Name	Position	Date	Place
Mehdi Benchelah	manager of UNESCO's project-office, Tunis	23 May 2012	Tunis
Elisabeth Braune	office-manager of the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation Tunis	21 May 2012	La Marsa
Salah Fourti	co-founder of Radio 6 Tunis, General Secretary of the Free Tunisian Radios Syndicate (STRL)	30 May 2012	Tunis
Abdelkrim Hizaoui	Director of The African Centre for Training of Journalists and Communicators (CAPJC), Tunis	28 May 2012	Tunis
Taoufik Yacoub	Director of The Press and Information Sciences Institute (IPSI), Manouba University, Tunis	28 May 2012	La Manouba

All other interviewees and interlocutors wish to remain anonymous.

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