

Challenges for Independent Media in a Post-Gaddafi Libya

On October 6, 2011, the Center for International Media Assistance and the Middle East and North Africa Program hosted a roundtable discussion at the National Endowment for Democracy on the challenges for independent media in post-Gaddafi Libya. More than 60 people participated in the event. The discussion focused on an assessment of the media environment in Libya and the role the international media assistance community could play in helping to build free and independent media there. This report summarizes that event, which took place before the capture and death of deposed Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi.

SUMMARY

The uprising in Libya has created a major shift in Libyan politics and society, including a proliferation of news outlets in print, broadcast, and digital media. These initiatives are nascent, fluid, and operate in a high-pressure environment. The National Transitional Council (NTC) has granted a large number of licenses for media outlets, and the media environment is generally free, although criticism of the NTC is avoided. This is justified as necessary to hold the spirit of the revolution together while a new government is formed. Free speech and free media are central rebel demands, but it remains to be seen if jockeying for power in the new government will restrict these freedoms.

Panelists generally agreed that in assessing the media environment and the prospects for democratic governance, one should examine what transitional structures have taken shape in rebel-held areas, how they are laying the foundation for institutional frameworks for media, and what are the greatest limitations and gaps in capacity. Libyan journalists could benefit from basic training in ethics, safety, and the role of the media in a democratic society. These skills will help them investigate and report on the transition process, which will aid in the development of new media and a regulatory environment in post-Gaddafi Libya.



BACKGROUND

Presenting at the discussion were Fadel Lamén, president of the American-Libyan Council; Jamal Dajani, vice president of Middle East, North Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean at Internews Network; Torben Brandt, media advisor with International Media Support; and Adam Kaplan, senior media advisor and senior field advisor with the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives, whose comments reflected his own opinions and experiences and did not represent the opinions or policies of USAID.

This report outlines the presentations and discussion in the order in which they occurred.

PRESENTATIONS

Fadel Lamén, president of the American-Libyan Council

Lamén told participants:

- Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, which have long established institutions, Libya is building a country from scratch. As part of a means to maintain a grip on power, Gaddafi did not develop any institutions or allow a civil society to grow that could challenge his authority. Under the Gaddafi regime, unelected local councils governed the country. The lack of institutions could be an opportunity for Libya, as there is no need for reform of authoritarian entities, and electing local councils could be a first step to democracy.
- The Libyan resistance suffers from a lack of leadership and no effective press office to communicate with citizens on the transition process.
- The lack of a “culture of democracy” presents a challenge. While Libyans say they want freedom and democracy, they have no background in these and therefore lack a basic understanding of how to build a democratic system.
- Media outlets are flourishing, especially in Benghazi and the eastern part of the country. The NTC has approved the establishment of many new media organizations. These outlets are largely staffed with volunteers who have little journalism experience and who need training in how to cover various issues. Because of market limitations, some nascent media outlets will succeed, while others will disappear, so international media development organizations should be flexible when working with these start-up media outlets.
- The demilitarization of cities is a major issue. The eastern part of Libya is more stable than other parts of the country. Tripoli increasingly is more stable, but armed militias still roam the streets. Disarming and breaking up militias will be difficult. Militias are populated by students and unemployed citizens rather than professional soldiers, who are returning to civilian life with a 50 to 60 percent unemployment rate.

Jamal Dajani, vice president of Middle East, North Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean at Internews Network

Dajani told participants:

- An Internews assessment of the Libyan media environment found in areas controlled by rebels an unprecedented number of media outlets—120 publications, 5 radio stations, and 3-5 television stations.
- Student volunteers have joined the newly established media outlets despite their lack of experience in journalism.
- Some journalists under the former regime are still reporting for various news outlets, while the NTC has prevented others from continuing in the profession.
- Barely five percent of Libyans have an Internet connection, while nearly all have access to television and radio. Media development organizations should recognize this when working in Libya.
- No distinction between reporting and advocacy exists in the Libyan media. New players lack journalism skills as well as an understanding of professional ethics and the role the media plays in a democratic society.
- Structural and technical issues remain a challenge. Media outlets need equipment, since much was destroyed or looted during the fighting. The power supply is also problematic.
- Censorship has not disappeared. Self-censorship is practiced, as the NTC has stated that now is not the right time for criticism while it is trying to build the country.
- The NTC will not set up laws and institutions until the conflict is over.

Torben Brandt, media advisor with International Media Support

Brandt told participants:

- A collective spirit persists among Libyans.
- The Gaddafi regime often used the term “democracy,” which has tainted the word in the minds of many Libyans. Instead, concepts such as fairness and anti-corruption are more frequently used when describing what they want.
- Many young people have joined the newly founded journalism outlets, however, the market is too small to sustain them long term. Most of those working in the new outlets will return to their former positions.

- Basic knowledge of the role of media as watchdog over government and journalism ethics is lacking. Media assistance organizations should take a bottom-up training approach and work with grassroots organizations and local journalists rather than focus on national outlets.
- International media organizations need to coordinate their efforts to avoid duplication and wasted resources.

At the start of the fighting, the rebels kept local media out of war coverage contending they were not trained sufficiently, yet they gave access to international media.

Adam Kaplan, senior media advisor and senior field advisor with the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Office of Transition Initiatives*

Kaplan told participants:

- The level of volunteerism among Libyans is “mindboggling.” This extends into the media field, where newly created media outlets are staffed by volunteers with little or no journalism experience but who want to play a role in the revolution.
- How does the Libyan vision of freedom intersect with democracy? Libyans’ past exposure to government was opaque and enigmatic—no one could be trusted and no one knew who was in charge. When asked what kind of state they want to create, they often answer “Dubai.”
- There is little sense of how an institution is structured. Tunisia and Egypt are not good models for Libya, as they had strong institutional structures.
- An emerging civil society is taking on many of the roles of government.
- Libyans have no experience with diversity of opinion. The state was arbiter of what was truthful. Now, the revolution fills that role. Any suggestion of retaining something from the past is met with objection. The absence of the right to hold differing opinions presents a major hurdle for democracy.
- While there is a great need for media regulatory reform and building institutions, Libyans should first reach consensus on what the media regulatory space will look like. The international community needs to help build the capacity of the media to disseminate information about the democratic transition process.

**Note: Adam Kaplan’s comments reflect his own opinions and experiences. They do not represent the opinions or policies of USAID.*

DISCUSSION

Participants wondered how media could play a role in overcoming fractionalization and tribalism in post-Gaddafi Libya. Lamén said the claims of tribalism are exaggerated and the real issue is conflicting agendas, such as liberals' versus Islamists'. Kaplan added that tribalism does not have a massive organizational structure, but Libyan society has never dealt with competition for power, and just like in any post-conflict state, a power struggle could break out.

Media professionalism and a conducive legal media environment are key priorities for Libyan journalism. Addressing public broadcasting now, however, could be premature. Dajani argued that turning state televisions into a BBC model is years away and that current media reform efforts should focus on simple training for journalists, such as in ethics. Attention should be paid to outside influence in media, especially from the Saudis, who own significant shares in media outlets across the region.

International media development organizations should closely coordinate their efforts. Donors in Benghazi are well-coordinated, and a similar level of cooperation is emerging in Tripoli. According to Dajani, Western donors are not coordinating enough; with limited resources available for media development, donor communication is key to success. Participants agreed that international organizations should remember that they are supposed to be helping Libyans with what they need rather than dictating based on what they would like to see develop.

An audience member from the oil industry asked the panel when reliable information about oil production would be forthcoming. Lamén replied that the NTC is fractionalized and lacks an effective press office. Dajani compared the Internews experience in training Iraqi journalists on covering energy issues in the post-Saddam era. In Iraq, like Libya, journalists had little experience in covering energy topics and were unable to write about such issues as corruption in the oil industry. He emphasized the importance of training Libyan journalists to cover energy issues so they could serve as watchdogs as the new government takes shape. Kaplan said he expects the competing interests of the new government and the need to get the oil flowing quickly will conflict with transparency.

GOING FORWARD

International media development organizations should be flexible in their approach. They should not be locked into a limited number of relationships with newly formed media organizations, and they should recognize events may not unfold as they expect them to happen

Media support should be coordinated. Communication among international donors and media assistance organizations can eliminate duplication of efforts.

The NTC should establish an effective press office to communicate information about the transition process to citizens. This should be an immediate priority. Donors could help the NTC build the infrastructure and expertise about communication with citizens.

International donors should recognize that Libya's lack of experience with democracy and freedom leaves a vast knowledge gap. Training in basic journalism skills is necessary. However, this is Libya's revolution and international organizations should be cautious about dictating to Libyans how they should build their country.

*Summary by: Cathie Glover
CIMA Staff*

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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