Writing between the ‘red lines’: Morocco’s digital media landscape

Abdelfettah Benchenna
University of Sorbonne Paris-Nord, France; Information and communication sciences laboratory (LabSic), France

Dominique Marchetti
National Centre of Scientific Research, France; European Centre for Sociology and Political Science (CESSP), France

Abstract
This article presents an overview of the emergence of online news sites, which has radically altered news provision and media consumption patterns in Morocco. This sector has rapidly become a strategic site. Firstly, its precedence over print media and national television networks does not only stem from the high traffic figures of news websites. Along with certain social platforms, these websites are the only vehicles for 24/7 news in a country which currently has just one such news channel and where, in spite of the ‘liberalisation’ of media, national networks provide very institutionalised news programs based on the activities of the state official institutions and of the monarchy. Secondly, certain domestic Arabic-language news websites have become the main platform for the voicing of political dissent. Based on 31 interviews, the article briefly describes the historical development of the online press, since the ‘February 20th Movement’ of 2011. This case study provides a good example of the new challenges surrounding the control of information: an issue long shaped by the limitation of news provision to duly authorised political and journalistic organisations and by limited ‘demand’ resulting from

Corresponding authors:
Abdelfettah Benchenna, LabSic - University of Paris 13, Campus Condorcet, 5, Cours Des Humanités 93322 Aubervilliers cedex, France.
Email: benchenna@univ-paris13.fr

Dominique Marchetti, National Centre of Scientific Research, European Center for Sociology and Political Science, 54 Boulevard Raspail, Bureau A05-31, Paris 75006, France.
Email: dominique.marchetti@cnrs.fr
widespread illiteracy. This article describes how the Moroccan establishment react to the explosive growth of online news media by creating new mechanisms to control it.

**Keywords**
censorship, digital press, field, journalism, Maghreb, media freedom, Morocco, political economy

The emergence of online news sites has radically altered news provision and media consumption patterns in Morocco. This case study provides a good example of the new challenges surrounding the control of information within national borders: an issue long shaped by the limitation of news provision to duly authorised political and journalistic organisations and by limited ‘demand’ resulting from widespread illiteracy. After 1956, dominant sections of the Moroccan ruling elite sought to socially contain the readership of the written press. In an extension of colonisation, they aimed to further their own social reproduction with educational policies favouring the French-speaking elite. As a result, the illiteracy rate in Morocco, while in steady decline over the past decades, remains massive (32% in 2014 vs 43% in 2004 and 87% in 1960), especially among women (42% compared to 22% among men) and in rural areas (Source: High Commission for Planning of Morocco). By comparison, this rate stood at 18.8% in Tunisia in 2014 (compared to 23.3% in 2004) and at 15% in Algeria. In 2014, 45% of the Moroccan population aged 25 and above was uneducated while in 2011/12, daily reading time (irrespective of the medium: book, newspaper, etc.) stood at 2 minutes among people aged 15 and above. Paid print titles, which have experienced a sharp decline (250,296 papers in circulation in 2009 compared to 175,760 in 2014) (Source: OJD Morocco), are almost exclusively read by an urban demographic endowed with greater cultural and economic capital and mainly living in the Rabat-Salé-Kenitra and Casablanca-Settat areas.

These patterns in media consumption have been disrupted by the expansion of the Internet in a country where the penetration rate stood at 63.7% in 2017, according to the National Agency for the Regulation of Telecommunications (ANRT). Morocco has actively developed Internet usage, with 21 million Internet users in 2016 according to the International Telecommunication Union. Morocco was ranked third in the category ‘Arab countries’, after Egypt (39 million) and Saudi Arabia (24 million). The ‘February 20th Movement’ of 20111 and the uprisings (Hirak)2 which began in 2016 in the northern Rif region are a sign of the growing influence of online news, which is no longer limited to written articles but increasingly encompasses audio or visual formats. This development has led to a sharp increase in online traffic in a country where the majority of Internet usage occurs on cell phones: 66.5% of Moroccans rely on mobile devices for Internet access and 94% of overall Internet subscriptions are tied to cell phones plans.

This expansion of the audience – a process already well under way with the development of domestic and foreign television networks, private radio stations (Sonay, 2017), and Arabic-language newspapers in the years 2000 – is reflected in the high number of visitors attracted by online media in comparison with the printed press. According to a 2015 study (LMS-CSA, Fédération Marocaine des Éditeurs de Journaux, 2016), based
on a sample of literate Moroccans aged 15 and above, 67% of respondents said they read the online press, while 17% favoured the printed press and 26% read both. In addition, the demographics of online news readers departs from that of print media readers: it is at once more female (73% of women visit online news sites, while 8% of them read print titles) and younger (respectively, 70% vs 8% of respondents aged 15–24 years). Interestingly, according to Alexa’s ‘one month ranking’, 3 10 domestic general news sites were as of mid-October 2018 among the 50 most visited websites, including Hespresse.com (created in 2007) and Chouftv.ma (2012), ranked after Google.com and YouTube.com but before Facebook. Other general news ‘pure play’ outlets (Le360.ma, 13th, Akhbarona.com, 14th, Goud.ma, 21st, Lesiteinfo.com, 23rd, and Barlamane.com, 26th), all created after 2011, complete the group. Only four websites with ties to print titles – both weeklies (Alayam24.com, 58th; Telquel.ma, 90th) and dailies (Lematin.ma, 70th; Alyaoum24.com, 88th) – feature in the 150 most visited websites, before or after other popular Arabic-language pure play outlets (Aljarida24.ma, 49th, Lakome2.com, 69th, Febrayer.com, 102nd, Alaoual.com, 138th). Lastly, several websites in the ‘general sports’ category also garner heavy traffic (with the pan-Arab website Kooora.com, ranked 10th, and two Moroccan sports sites, Elbotola.com and Hesport, ranked 19th and 38th), as well as a few regional outlets based in northern Morocco (Nadorcity.com, 45th, Tanja7.com, 98th, and Tanja24.com, 100th), in Marrakech (Kech24.com, 46th) or Fes (Fesnews.net, 97th). The scope of these media appears considerably broadened by Morocco’s status as a country of emigration. Because of this, international traffic, mainly tied to the diaspora, can carry a lot of weight: it makes up over 20% of traffic on many websites, including the most popular (Chouftv.ma, Hespresse.com). France generally comes in 2nd place, with overseas traffic making up a major share of visits on the more Francophone and Francophile websites (10.7% on Le360.ma, 15% on Telquel.ma, 16.4% on Desk.ma, 20.9% on H24.ma and 35.9% on Medias24.com). For a website originally explicitly addressed to Moroccans expatriates such as Yabiladi – which has since evolved towards more generalist news – the share of traffic coming from France exceeds that coming from Morocco (35.8% vs 21%).

As it broadened the scope of its audience, the online media sphere boosted an already thriving news sector in Morocco: by the end of 2017, the Ministry of Culture and Communication had identified 656 authorised news sites, versus 262 in 2015 (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2018a). While these websites are often short-lived, the sector has rapidly become a strategic site for the production and dissemination of news for at least two reasons. First, its precedence over print media and national television networks does not only stem from the high traffic figures of news websites: along with certain social platforms, these websites are also the only place for 24/7 news in a country which currently has just one such news channel and where, in spite of the ‘liberalisation’ of media (Hidass, 2010; Issiali, 2013), national networks provide very institutionalised news programs, based on the activities of the state official institutions and of the monarchy. The official agency Maghreb Arab Press (MAP) is also the voice of the official authorities. Through the dissemination of press releases, It covers official ‘events’ and news from the state (Mouhtadi, 2008: 76 and following). As a result, controlling the images circulated on digital media, especially online videos (which require since 2016 a filming permit issued by the Moroccan Film Centre), has become the authorities’ main focus.
The second reason why these outlets have become a strategic site is that certain domestic Arabic-language news websites – with foreign-based media currently drawing in less visitors than their national counterparts (source: Alexa, https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/MA, accessed October 18, 2018) – have become the main platform for the voicing of political dissent against the power structure.4

Along with social media, these websites have become a space of political confrontation for the more politically-inclined of readers, including websites in Arabic – a language long held to be ‘the language of silence’, as Anouk Cohen (2011) put it. Many of these media were created by former journalists critical of institutions, especially of the monarchical state, and at odds with the mainstream newspapers ahead, during or in the wake of the ‘February 20th Movement’ of 2011: such is the case for the Arabic-language websites Lakome.com (Aït Mous and Ksikes, 2018), Goud.ma and Febrayer.com. These websites, which have or have had connections with the social movement’s core demands – with reporters often being called out as ‘militant’ or ‘activist’ in an effort to discredit them – have faced prosecution. In addition to these media often labelled as left-wing, this category comprises websites with various ties to the Islamist conservative party PJD (Justice and Development Party in English) – also polarising the ‘partisan field’, in an ideological sense (Bennani-Chraïbi, 2013: 1181–1186), and which became the main ruling party in 2011. However, despite its electoral legitimacy, its weight remains very relative in the decision-making process as shown by the difficulties of Abdelilah Benkirane, Prime Minister between 2011 and 2017, to form a new government despite the fact that the PJD he led won the elections. After a few months, he had to give way to Saâdeddine El Othmani, another member of his party, appointed head of government by the King Mohammed VI and who was soon able to form a new coalition. This position dominated by the established political authorities refers to the fact that ‘access to the established political scene remains conditioned by the renunciation of any position of frontal opposition to the king’ even if ‘pockets of resistance to the monarchy survive even in parties whose leaderships have repeatedly staged their reconciliation with the royalty,’ as Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi (2013: 1178) explains. Finally, other websites have furthered by senior members of the ruling elite (‘the yellow press’, as their detractors call them). This surge in various forms of critical news was a key component in a wider international context that led to the 2011 ‘uprisings’ in several predominantly Arabic-speaking countries, driving dominant sections of the ruling elite to seek control over said outlets’ influence on the political and journalistic spheres through various means: the creation of new online media; the prosecution of website managers5; the legal and political reorganisation of the journalistic sphere through the reshaping of the ‘journalists’ code’ in 2016 (Loi n°88-13 relative à la presse et à l’édition, 2016) (Journal Officiel, 2016), which now also applies to online media. As Bouziane Zaid (2016) has argued, the Internet (and especially the online press) catalyses a ‘change’ – all the while serving as a new ‘instrument of repression’. After a brief description of the political context in Morocco and of the historical development of the online press, this text will present an overview of the contemporary workings of this nascent sphere and the issues at stake. This article stems from an ongoing study initiated in 2015 with Driss Ksikes and largely based on 31 interviews conducted with him between 2015 and 2017. Interviews were also conducted with heads of the main online and print news titles as well as with journalists having worked in
various media, past and present, central to the journalistic sphere since the 1980s and 1990s. They are only briefly mentioned here for reasons of space.

**The relative closure of the Moroccan political field**

As Pierre Bourdieu (1981: 4) explains, the political field ‘in fact exerts a censoring effect by limiting the universe of political discourse and, by that token, the universe of what is politically thinkable’. This logic of closure is all the more visible in Morocco and is being described by Mohamed Tozy (1989) as a ‘field of defused politics’. On the one hand its first property refersto the very specific and central position of the king, the main incarnation of an ‘executive monarchy’ which is both political and religious insofar as the legitimacy of the monarch is based on the fact that he is the commander of the believers. As Mohamed Tozy (1999: 20) also mentions, ‘the form of the regime has the same status as religion, it belongs to the order of the undisputed’. This explains why, to use the explicit expression used by Hassan II, the ‘red lines’ that are intimately linked (the monarchy, Islam and national integrity) very strongly limit the universe of the thinkable and the dicible in the political and journalistic fields in Morocco. These ‘red lines’, very often constitutionalised (Hidass, 2016) are very often at the origin of the expulsion of foreign journalists or the problems encountered, especially judicial problems, by Moroccan journalists.

On the other hand, to sum up schematically, the functioning of the national economic field is very much linked to that of the political field, particularly because of the central position of financial groups linked to the monarchy: ‘60% of the capitalisation of the Casablanca Stock Exchange belonged at the time to two royal holdings’, explains Abdellatif Zeroual (2014: 42) for example. This logic of closure is redoubled by the way Mohammed VI occupies this position after succeeding his father Hassan II in 1999. His almost absolute media silence and the absence of direct relations with journalists strongly constrains their practices. If his father Hassan II was used to receive and give interviews exclusively to foreign journalists or to hold press conferences for the international media, especially in France where he participated in television or radio interviews, his son was not very good at the first exercise and never at the second. To discover the official word of the sovereign, the media must therefore be satisfied with press releases disseminated by the national Maghreb Arab Press (MAP) or solemn declarations without vis-à-vis disseminated by the Moroccan media.

The second property of the Moroccan political field, which also very strongly constrains journalistic work, relates to the very dominated position of the other major authorities of the established political space. First of all, this instituted political space refers in particular to the members of parliament of the House of Representatives elected by direct universal suffrage and those of the House of Councillors elected by indirect suffrage by the representatives of professional chambers, employees and local authorities. Secondly, there is a de facto multi-party system, even if it remains highly regulated. Thus, for example, left-wing and/or Islamist political movements contesting the functioning of the monarchy have been neutralised. Finally, the government was formed on the basis of the respective results of the different partisan organisations in the elections. It is summed up in this excerpt from an interview with a young Moroccan journalist: ‘In Morocco, all that goes wrong is the government. All that is going well is the king. That’s
how people read things’ (interview with D. Marchetti, May 30, 2014). This closure of the political field has long been reflected in the structuring of the national journalistic field, insofar as it is in a position of strong ‘structural subordination to the political field’ (Darras, 1995: 198; Gaxie, 1996: 72). Indeed, ‘journalists’ are all the more ‘agents of the political field’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 37) in Morocco, since this professional space was characterised until the 1990s by a quasi-monopoly of the ‘official and unofficial’ or even partisan press (El Ayadi, 2006: 5). For example, there was no direct aid to the press, but it was paid directly to the parties that printed their daily newspapers on their printing presses. The journalists were members of the political party that ran the newspaper.

The development of Moroccan online media: From content-reproduction and aggregation to the rise of ‘pure play’ outlets

In a first phase, the electronic media were not perceived as a danger by the Moroccan authorities and the political field. Indeed, the early days of the online press in Morocco in the late 1990s were marked by the emergence of two distinct movements, nonspecific to this country. The first of the two refers to the creation of websites designed for the sole purpose of showcasing print newspapers or magazines, or what Pierre-Jean Benghozi and Lyubareva (2013) called a ‘pro forma digitality’. Certain media outlets, such as Maroc Hebdo and the weekly newspaper L’Économiste, launched e-formats of their print editions. This first tendency led to the proliferation of websites merely designed to ‘replicate all or part of a print edition’s content in a PDF or Web format, with a day or a week’s delay according to frequency’ (Naji, 2011: 242). In addition to traditional print outlets, news portals launched by telecommunication operators have been another tendency furthering the emergence of news websites. This second tendency was promoted by two new entrants: Menara, launched by Maroc Télécom in 1995 (Menara, 2020), and Inwi (formerly Wanadoo) in 1999 (traffic on these sites has since plummeted). These portals first focused on aggregating editorial content found on print titles’ websites. Content aggregation was also promoted by young IT engineers living abroad, often working outside the field of journalism and engaging with online tools (Gueye, 2009; Scopsi, 2009; Souley, 2010). Articles published in newspapers were taken up, often without requesting the consent of beneficiaries, and posted on websites such as bladi.net or Maghress.com. A typical case is the website Yabiladi, created in 2002 by Mohamed Ezzouak, a young French national of Moroccan descent (Benchenna, 2014). This tendency is not specific to Morocco, as Hadj Bangali Cissé (2010: 137) and Thomas Guignard (2007) have shown: similar media projects have been launched by Senegalese expatriates (SénéWeb, Xalima, Homeview Sénégal, Ferloo.com, Nettali.net), by Beninese nationals in France (Opays.com), or by Ivorians in the United States (Abidjan.net). Aside from content-aggregation, and in the hope of consolidating their business, these outlets also provide other services, generally positioning themselves as service providers in Web development and Web hosting, domain trading, or new media, Internet and multimedia training.

In 2006, a number of regional online media were launched, most of them based in northern Morocco (Nador, Oujda and Errachidia). These media were not traditional press
Loose professional and economic structuring

In Morocco, massive traffic on news websites should not hide the fact that online media which are not backed by print publications remain loosely structured in both professional and economic terms. Documentation released by the Ministry of Communication highlights this loose professional structuring and economic weaknesses. In 2016, in an effort to regulate and control the field, the Ministry set out a number of provisions regarding the registering of news websites as media outlets (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2018b). At the end of 2017, the Ministry numbered 656 authorisations issued for the creation of ‘325 Arabic-language websites, 27 French-language websites, 168 bilingual (French-Arabic) websites, 15 trilingual (Arabic-French-Amazigh) websites, as well as other multilingual websites’ (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2018a). However, other documentation issued by the same source states that in 2016, only 69 news websites employed journalists with a press card (Ministry of Culture and Communication, 2016) – one of the necessary conditions for a news website to be registered as an online media outlet. These new outlets only employed 265 journalists (approximatively 10% of the total amount of authorised journalists), with 58% of newsrooms employing only one to three journalists. Of course, the better-endowed among them are tied to the most well-structured companies: *Le360.ma* (n=18) hires roughly sixty employees (Interview with the director, October 21, 2015), and its founders are close to the ruling monarchy; *Alyoum24* (n=15) is connected to *Akhbar Al Yaoum*, an Arabic-language newspaper owned by journalist Taoufik Bouachrine, who has close ties to the PJD and regularly faces prosecution; *Hespress* (n=15), the most popular website in Morocco; and *Medias24* (n=14), an exclusively French-language economic news site. In comparison, media outlets labelled as the most critical of the power structure work with limited staff, as shown by *Lakome2.com*, *Badil.info* (one journalist), *Alaoual.com* and *Febrayer.com* (which produce news with three professionals), or *Goud.ma* (which works with a team of four).

Finally, this loose professional structuring may be noticed in the lack of available data on digital media producers. Most of them have no journalistic training (46% in 2012 according to a survey by Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) (ICESCO, AMPE, 2012) and have no social security or work contract. Often dismissed as ‘opinion journalism’ or ‘rumours’, online news media work with limited human resources, even if some of its leading figures have sought to acquire professional credit...
(sometimes an economic necessity): several major websites have hence tried to create a professional organisation designed to represent them when dealing with political institutions ( Médias24, 2014). This emerging sphere also lacks reliable financial structuring. General information about media owners in Morocco is often incomplete, as noted in the investigation published by Reporters Without Borders and Le Desk in 2017 (Le Desk and Reporters without Borders, 2017), but evidently online news outlets rarely benefit from substantial investment – except when they are part of integrated advertising agencies such as Géomédia or Media Holding, or corporate groups and institutions whose actual shareholders may be difficult to identify. Most website owners rely on personal – and often modest – funding during the initial funding stage. With the exception of a few outlets (including Le360.ma, HuffPost and Elbotola.com), initial investments in digital media seldom exceed 100,000 dirhams (less than 10,000 euros) according to the publishers we have interviewed. A lot of websites are ‘pure-play’ businesses, and their founders do not necessarily apply the strategies of a ‘media outlet’ – in the words of a website manager (Interview with the authors, March 22, 2016), such outlets apply the same management methods as those of a ‘grocery’ (Hanout). The prevalence of an economic model based on free access also points to the fragility of the sector. Apart from ledesk.ma, a media outlet launched in 2015 which relies on paid subscriptions, all other outlets have opted for free access models and rely on advertising or invisible investments. The website’s main founder (El Azzaz, 2018) claimed that ledesk.ma ‘raised more than 700,000 euros in funds but did not reach the initial target of 10,000 subscribers after 1 year in operation’. A year and a half after its launch, the website introduced two different pay models: a paywall, and a freemium offer which includes digital advertising (Le Desk, 2016).

However, online news sites hardly benefit from advertising revenues. According to a 2018 survey conducted by IPSOS for the Moroccan Group of Advertisers (GAM), Google and Facebook get the lion’s share of these revenues with 62% of the overall budget allocated to digital media, while domestic websites only receive a 38% share. In 2015, digital advertising allegedly reached 400-450 million dirhams (6.25%–7% of advertisers’ overall budget). For digital companies such as Telquel.ma or HuffPost Maroc, the development of branded content strategies, whose aim is to promote values that the brand wants to be associated with (Interviews with the owners, April 11 and 14, 2016), is not sufficient to ensure economic growth.

As is the case with print titles, advertising revenues for digital media vary depending on whether the title is published in French or in Arabic. Among the 656 digital titles authorised by the Ministry of Culture and Communication in 2017, Arabic remains the most frequently used language: 49.5% of websites are in Arabic only, 25.6% offer content in two languages (Arabic and French), 2.3% in three languages (Arabic, Amazigh and French), 18.5% are multilingual websites and 4.1% use French only. French-language media may have become a ‘niche’ market (as advertising professionals would say), but in terms of advertising revenues it is the most profitable market because it is directed at an audience with greater economic and cultural capital (Benchenna et al., 2017: 255–256). There is a paradox here, summarised as follows by the manager of a bilingual online news outlet (published in French and Arabic): ‘French is the language of economics, but not the consumers’ language’ (Interview conducted on October 21, 2015). ‘You
know, advertisers are terrible [. . .], they have their own rationale, lobbying agenda, practices [. . .], and most of them cannot read Arabic’, he adds. Significantly, according to a 2018 Ipsos survey carried out with executives and digital marketing and communication managers in Morocco, 95% of advertisers use French on websites and social media, while 47% and 44% of them use standard Arabic on websites and social media, respectively, with darija, the Moroccan Arabic dialect, exceeding the use of standard Arabic on social media (51%) (see also Miller, 2012 ; Caubet and Miller, 2017).

**Economic, political and career opportunities: Some owners’ professional trajectories**

This new sphere in the production and dissemination of information has developed because journalists and entrepreneurs in various lines of business saw digital media as another way of developing their political, journalistic and/or economic activities. Among these entrants and investors, particularly noticeable are the trajectories of a few journalists who have always been strongly critical of the regime. But they also show the limitations imposed upon these new media whenever the basic interests of the ruling elites are at stake. These middle-aged journalists were the owners of print outlets which were pushed into bankruptcy; they quickly saw digital media as a new opportunity – a new place of expression that would be free of censorship (Jamaï, 2012). Ali Anouzla and Aboubakr Jamaï, who launched the news website Lakome.com in Arabic in January 2011 and later added a French version, match this description. In 2004, Ali Anouzla and Taoufik Bouachrine co-founded a weekly newspaper named Al-Jarida al-Oukhra (‘The Other Newspaper’), which was discontinued 2 years after its launch. It included editorials from political dissidents, becoming famous for its 2005 ‘Person of the year’ poll – in which King Mohammed VI slumped to second place (Tuquoi, 2006) – and for a 2005 report on the daily life of princess Lalla Asma, the King’s wife (Tuquoi, 2005). These two issues led to the demise of Al-Jarida al-Oukhra at a time when the newspaper had a weekly circulation of over 50,000 copies. Shortly before that, Ali Anouzla joined the founding team of the Arabic-language daily Al-Massae (‘The Evening Paper’), which he left 2 years later, in 2008, to launch Al-Jarida al-Oula (‘The First Newspaper’). This title also ceased to be published in 2010 because of financial difficulties arising from a lack of advertising revenues and a series of fines – including a $120,000 fine following the publication of an editorial lambasting Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi. According to Ali Anouzla, the Lakome online news site was ‘a haven. My newspaper had been shut down [. . .], we had been forced to bury the idea. I can remember the day – I mean, the day when the printing company told me ‘Listen, we’re not going to print your paper today’. . . It was a tough blow. We had no other choice – it was a day of mourning at the office’ (Interview, October 20, 2015). For his associate Aboubakr Jamaï, digital media was also a ‘haven’ after several experiences in print media. He founded the weekly newspaper Le Journal with Ali Amar in 1997, along with its Arabic edition Assahifa. Both were banned in 2000 after publishing a report on the involvement of Moroccan left-wing parties and the then Prime Minister in the 1972 coup attempt against King Hassan II. Le Journal hebdomadaire and Assahifa Al Ousbouiya were discontinued after a 2010 court
order, officially solely for failure to pay off the debt owed to the National Social Security Fund, tax authorities and several banks (Benslimane, 2015).

Among these journalists who found a ‘haven’ in digital media following their experiences with print titles, Ali Lmrabet embodies a different type of trajectory. Before founding the online magazine demainonline.com in 2011, Lmrabet had already created two weeklies in 2000 – one in French (Demain Magazine) and the other in Arabic (Doumane) – which ceased to be published in 2003 when he was given a 4-year prison sentence for offending King Mohammed VI. He was sentenced a second time in 2005 and banned from working as a journalist after stating, in an interview with a Moroccan weekly, that Sahrawi prisoners in Tindouf, Algeria, were ‘refugees’ according to the UN, and not ‘people who are being held captive by the Polisario Front’ (Lmrabet, 2015). Following legal proceedings, the online outlets of these four journalists – who are among the most critical of the regime – have either ceased to exist or been seriously threatened.

At the same time, online news outlets have logically attracted younger salaried journalists from print titles, who saw online media as an ideal opportunity to launch their own outlets and free themselves from various forms of censorship. Among these journalists is Maria Moukrim, who worked with Noureddine Miftah at the weekly Assahifa from 1999 to 2001, then for the weekly Al Ayam (Hespress, 2009) for 10 years (Tizpress, 2011), where she occupied the position of editor-in-chief; in 2012, following a disagreement with Al Ayam’s owner, she launched Febrayer.com. In the same way, Hamid El Mahdaoui started his career at Al Ayam, joined Chouf TV and Lakome.com in 2013, and created Badil.info in 2014.

As for the rest of the entrants, the reasons for investing in the sphere of digital media have not yet been clearly identified. We can assume that the presence of IT engineers – such as the founders of the online news outlet Yabiladi.com (Mohamed Ezzouak), the sports website Elbotola.com (Oussama Benhammou and Akram Benmbarek), Hibapress (Mohamed Lakbir), Hespress (Amine Guennouni being one of its co-founders) and the actual owner of Telquel magazine (Khalid El Hariri) – is to a certain extent related to the operational specificities of digital media, in which technical and commercial dimensions are closely intertwined. It is worth noting that, from a purely economic point of view, the websites they have created seem to be the most viable type. For entrants coming from the distribution sector – particularly free newspapers – such as the founder of the Géomédia group and owner of the H24info.ma ‘pure play’ outlet, investing in digital outlets is part of a commercial strategy aimed at furthering their activities in the field via other media.

Lastly, the trajectories of a number of entrants seem to be linked to their connections with members of the Moroccan establishment – in a more or less direct and visible way. Among these entrants is Edit Holding group, owner of the French-Arabic news portal Le360.ma – the news outlet with the most human and material resources. One person who contributed to its launch is Aziz Daki: a gallery owner and art critic at the time he invested in this holding company (which controls Le360.ma), Daki is very close to the King’s private secretary Mounir Majidi, who was recruited as artistic director and spokesperson of the Mawazine Festival – Morocco’s major musical event (Michel and Ait Akdim, 2016). Another example is Abdelmalek Alaoui, the son of one of King Hassan II’s counsellors and founder of a company which owned HuffPost.
Maroc and also operates in the field of ‘strategy consulting, specialising in active competitive intelligence all across West Africa’ (Guepard Group, 2019). These suspicions are heightened by the lack of certainty as to the actual financial backers of these online news outlets.

Control mechanisms and dependence on political actors

The reaction of the Moroccan establishment to the explosive growth of online news media was to create mechanisms designed to control it – a process that started in 2011 during the 20th February movement. As is the case with print titles, one method of establishing political control through legal mechanisms is to punish non-compliance with the ‘red lines’, as they are called in Morocco (Hidass, 2016). In an ‘ethical code’ posted on the news website Le360.ma, these red lines are defined as follows: ‘While being committed to the main universal values, the editorial board of Le360 complies with the core values of Moroccan society: tolerant Muslim faith, national unity in a remarkably diverse society, and monarchy as the nation’s unifying institution’ (Le360.ma, 2019). This kind of notice is extremely frequent in the latest regulations related to the media industry. For instance, Article 179 of the Criminal Law (2016) provides for steep fines and prison sentences for ‘libel, insult and offense directed at the King’s person or Heir to the Throne, as well as any violation of the respect owed to the King’ or ‘any violation of the royals’ private life’. In the same way, Article 267-5 states that ‘anyone attacking the Muslim religion or the monarchy or making statements harming the Kingdom’s territorial integrity’ may incur fines and prison sentences. The 88-16 Regulation on media outlets and publishing companies provides for ‘suspension’ (Article 104), ‘cancellation of the publication’s serial number or removal of its journalistic content’, as well as blocking ‘access’ in the case of a digital media (Article 106)

As the two following journalists explain, these ‘red lines’ may also influence an outlet’s ability to attract advertisers – albeit in a more subtle fashion. The creator of an online news outlet (Interview conducted on October 20, 2015) detailed the difficulties encountered in raising funds for his company, including through advertisement:

It’s always the same questions: ‘What is your take on the situation in [Western] Sahara? How are you going to report on the monarchy?’ People were telling us: ‘Okay, we’re going to help you, but let’s see how things shape up after the launch.’

In an interview in Le Monde Afrique (Ait Akdim, 2016) Ali Amar, an experienced journalist, founder of the investigative website Le Desk, also highlights these political constraints:

The only explanation is that they disagree with our editorial content. The director of a major PR firm candidly told me that there are other journalists who ‘defend the nation’s interests’. He was very direct in the words he used: ‘Those are the real guys, they defend His Majesty. You don’t defend His Majesty, so we’re not going to provide advertising for you’. His agency defends the interests of major clients, big corporations, etc.
In order to control access, production conditions and contents, authorities also seek to impose general rules to this normless space by establishing legal regulations applying to the press industry in general – and digital titles in particular since 2016. For example, Article 11 of Decree 89-13, adopted in 2016 in relation to the practice of journalism, stipulates that ‘it is forbidden for any media outlet to employ journalists for more than 3 months if the journalist’s press card for the ongoing year has not been delivered to or requested by the journalist’. Article 35 of Decree 88-13 on media outlets and publishing companies states that every online news outlet shall apply for a ‘filming permit delivered by the Moroccan Film Centre [. . .], valid for 1 year and renewable every year, in line with the regulations applying to audio-visual productions in the field of digital media’. Lastly, Article 36 specifies that ‘comments and links posted by Internet users on the website are subject to the principle of freedom’ and that ‘managing editor shall not publish material that would be considered as a crime under applicable regulations, and must remove any comment that is deemed offensive’.

These legal provisions can be used to support prosecutions against journalists for issues related to their work – especially when they do not comply with the ‘red lines’ – but also, in a more frequent if not altogether new trend, for matters pertaining to their private lives. In that respect, the recent example of Hicham Mansouri, a project manager within the Moroccan Association of Investigative Journalism, is enlightening: in 2015, he was handed a 3-month prison sentence for ‘public drunkenness’ and ‘assaulting public officials’, namely police officers. Taoufik Bouachrine, who runs the daily newspaper Akhbar El Yaoum and the AlYaoum24 website, has been attacked over his private life on two occasions. On February 23, 2018, he was arrested and jailed after being accused of ‘human trafficking’, ‘abuse of position for sexual purpose’ and ‘rape and attempted rape’. The accusations were based on video footage discovered in the journalist’s office on the day of his arrest – but the footage has not been made public. Mr. Bouachrine strongly denies these attacks and claims to be the victim of a ‘political trial’ (Agence France Presse (AFP), 2018).

Since 2016, another way for authorities to maintain their control has been the creation of new and highly selective support mechanisms for digital media. For instance, of the 69 companies with digital media outlets in operation in 2016, only 7 had benefited from government support. Among other methods of controlling journalistic activities, the interviewees have also singled out the ruling elites’ control over the police force and intelligence services. In an interview (April 13, 2016), (he manager of a ‘critical’ online news website relates the intervention of the intelligence services in its premises.

What kind of pressure did we face today? So, we’ve had the odd visit from the local intelligence services – actually, it’s not that unusual, I think it’s part of their job. Other than that, there have been a few hassles: we were trying to create a nice work environment, with some degree of comfort, and then the health and safety inspector came to visit us – twelve times. I thought he might be looking for a bribe, but no. On his tenth visit, he told me: ‘Look, they asked me to pay you a visit, so I’m paying you a visit. I don’t want any money, I don’t want anything at all, but I have to write something’. So, he came to our offices, and it was. . . The first time, it was about the fire extinguisher, another time it was, ‘You should have a notice somewhere detailing labour rights for staff members’. No one was working undeclared, every foreign employee had a
contract, but he told me: ‘I have to find something wrong here, because I need to have that as a precaution’. They need to know your weaknesses. For now, we don’t have any, but soon.

Lastly, other ways of maintaining surveillance over these outlets include attempts at controlling the technologies they use – hacking or trying to hack their websites, slowing down or shutting down their Internet connection or SIM card. For example, according to Amnesty International, since 2018, Omar Radi, an investigative journalist working for the website Le Desk, has been the target of spyware developed by the Israeli company NSO Group. Following this ‘revelation’, he became the centre of a ‘scandal’ relayed by the foreign press. Indeed, he was imprisoned for ‘rape’ and ‘receiving foreign funds with the aim of undermining the internal security of the state’. The defenders see this as a response by the Moroccan authorities to his critical work on the Hirak protest movement in the Rif in northern Morocco in 2017 and to his investigations into ‘cases’ affecting many senior state officials.

**Conclusion**

This article shows the withdrawal of formal censorship in favour of its ‘euphemism’ through indirect mechanisms, particularly economic ones, and the rise of implicit (self-)censorship, which is part of a diffuse system in which pressure from social structures and ‘lay’ actors take over from formalised instruments and specific institutions explicitly responsible for the control of public expression. In other words, in Morocco, as in other highly controlled national spaces, the highly repressive and direct modes of political control (here from Morocco’s independence in 1956 to the early 1990s) were gradually replaced by other, more invisible mechanisms. In the period of strong censorship, the Moroccan authorities controlled the political and therefore journalistic offer and the public space, socially restricting the potential audience of the written press. This strong political control was loosened during the relative economic and political liberalisation in the early 1990s, when the dominant fractions of the field of power authorised the publication of a new generation of non-partisan press titles, and when, under the effect of the development of education, the press audience grew. The Arabic-language print press emerged at this time. As we have seen, the second, more contemporary period of rupture corresponds, to the acceleration in the development of information websites following the ‘uprisings’ in several predominantly Arabic-speaking countries from 2011 onwards. Under the effect of the development of the Internet, the gradual transformations in media consumption practices are at the origin of this explosion of digital supply.

As a result, the forms of control of the Moroccan press space have first of all been transformed since the early 2000s firstly via economic instruments (advertising in particular), which are in Morocco as in other countries (Kryzhanouski, 2017) one of the ways of exerting political influence on the structuring of this place in a less visible way.

Secondly, there is a less visible political use of legal tools. These dominant fractions of the field of power have adapted to the mutations that the media have undergone since the beginning of the 1990s (internationalisation, digitalisation, etc.) to maintain their hold. The recurrent legal proceedings against website managers bear witness to this, as does the legal and political reorganisation of the journalistic field through the overhaul
of the ‘press code’ in 2016. One of the main ways in which the state can influence journalistic activity is through the legal framework of the professional space itself. The regulation of the conditions of entry and practice in the profession are historically an important instrument. However, the most binding legal instruments are, above all, linked to the national ‘red lines’ that strongly delimit the space of the thinkable, i.e. public discourse allowed in the journalistic space. One of the ‘competencies’ of journalists on the spot is to ‘play’ if they want to continue working on the national territory. Criminal cases seem to be another newer way of influencing the activity of journalists. Indeed, the uses of legal texts no longer refer only to complaints against journalists in the exercise of their profession, but now concern their private life. Since 2018, four critical journalists (Taoufik Bouachrine, Hajar and Souleiman Raissouni, Omar Radi) have been arrested and imprisoned, notably for matters of morality.

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**ORCID iD**
Dominique Marchetti https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0406-8945

**Notes**
1. The February 20 Movement (M20F) was born in the wake of the social movements that shook the region of North Africa and the Middle East in early 2011. Its demands put social issues under the political prism. This new paradigm distinguishes it from the collective actions that Morocco has experienced since the 1990s, which most often insisted on their apolitical character, such as associations of ‘unemployed graduates’ who limited their action to asserting their right to work and to enter the civil service without competition. The M20F highlights the articulation between social issues such as education, teaching, health and the way the country is governed. Strong slogans included the promulgation of a constitution limiting the king’s executive power, the fight against corruption, and an economy free of ‘oligarchy’. His watchwords were ‘freedom’, ‘dignity’ and ‘justice’. See Bennani-Chraïbi and Jeghlaly, 2012; Desrues, 2013; Hivert, 2013.

2. The Hirak Rif Movement is a mass protest movement that took place in the Berber-speaking Rif region in northern Morocco between October 2016 and June 2017. It was partly triggered by the death of Mohcine Fikri, a fishmonger who was crushed to death after jumping into the back of a garbage truck, following the confiscation by local authorities of the fish which he was selling on the local market. The mass protest movement has caused a violent repression from the Moroccan regime with many clashes between police and protesters in various cities and towns in northern Morocco. More than 150 Moroccans, seen by the regime as protagonists/leaders or media activists in the movement, were arrested. For example, Nasser Zefzafi, who has been described as the leader of the protest movement, received a 20-year imprisonment.

3. The statistics in this paragraph are based on data by Alexa (accessed October 18, 2018), displaying therefore only broad tendencies. Available at: https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/MA
4. Indeed, *Al Jazeera* was ranked behind *Hespress* in terms of traffic according to a study carried out in 2010/11 also citing *Alexa* (Zaid and Ibahrine, 2011: 55), but the top foreign general news websites lagged far behind in mid-October 2018: among them were two London-based pan-Arab media, *Arabi21.com* (62nd) and *Alaraby.co.uk* (164th), *Aljazeera.net* (223rd), the English-version website of the transnational Russian TV network *Russia Today* *Rt.com* (275th). The top French-language website was *nouvelobs.com* (285th).

5. In 2013, Ali Anouzla, director of the Arabic version of the news website *Lakome*, was incarcerated by the King’s Attorney General for ‘providing material assistance’, ‘promoting’ and ‘inciting terrorist acts’ after the website posted a link to a propaganda video by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The website (both French and Arabic versions) was shut down and resurfaced in 2014 under another name, *Lakome 2*, with very little financial resources.

6. The data used is that provided in the document ‘Liste nominative des journalistes détenteurs d’une carte professionnelle’ [List of Journalists with a Professional Press Card] released by the Ministry, which stated that it reflected the situation as of August 30, 2016.

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