

Annika Witzel

This is what they tell US

The US Printing Press on the
2011 Revolution in Egypt



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1. Introduction

“Lotus Revolution” (Egypt State Information Service¹), “18-Day Revolution” (Armbruster 2011), “Nile Revolution” (Murdock February 8, 2011), “Facebook Revolution” (Herrera February 12, 2011) – what happened in Egypt at the beginning of 2011 was given many different titles. Some even call it “the most unexpected development in modern Egyptian history” (Sharp 2011b: 2). After 18 days of protests in Cairo and other cities all over Egypt, the Egyptian people made their President Hosni Mubarak resign. He had been ruling the country for almost 30 years and his people wanted to get rid of him and his regime. That was their goal and that is what they achieved.

Of course there were international reactions to the uprisings from all over the world. “Numerous press reports [...] have recounted feelings of popular empowerment and pride inspired by the exploits of Egypt’s young protesters” (Sharp 2011b: 5). During the revolution, European leaders urged “Egypt’s transition to a new government” at the beginning of February (Murdock February 4), while China blocked the word “Egypt” from a twitter-like micro blogging website, according to Associated Press (quoted by Al Jazeera 2011). Further, when considering recent developments in Libya and Syria, other Middle Eastern countries seem to be inspired by the revolutions in both Tunisia and Egypt. After Mubarak had stepped down on February 11, the reactions were even stronger – “Today, we are all Egyptians”, stated Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg and David Cameron suggested “We should teach the Egyptian revolution in our schools” (ESIS 2011).

However, the United States seem to keep a particularly eager eye on the most populous country of the Middle East. Souad Mekhennet, *New York Times* and ZDF correspondent, states in an interview with the German *medium magazine* that “curiously, the American media reacted much faster than the European” when it comes to reporting about the Egyptian revolution (Milz 2011: 20). Moreover, she adds that the large US media outlets’ reporting on the topic is “much more continuous and broader” (ibid.), giving a lot more background information on the region. This special attention is most likely due to the fact that for the United States, Egypt is a highly important actor when it comes to foreign policy in the region. Egypt is, behind Israel, the second-largest recipient of military aid from the US (cf. Armbruster 2011: 48), receiving an annual amount of \$1.3 billion (Sharp 2011b: preface). To the United States, this form of support “has long been framed as an investment in regional stability [...], sustaining the March 1979 Eryp-

¹ Abbreviated ESIS from this point onwards

tian-Israeli peace treaty” (ibid.). With the fall of Mubarak the United States saw this stability crumbling. Ever since the “Greater Middle East Initiative” was introduced by George W. Bush in 2005, the United States has been trying to export democracy to other Arab countries, including Egypt (Armbruster 2011: 48). However, when the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist party, managed to reach a relatively high percentage of votes in Egyptian elections, the US backed off again because “they preferred Mubarak over the feared Brotherhood” (ibid). Hosni Mubarak was long considered a stalwart ally to the US and during the revolution, when Mubarak’s reign was close to over, it was uncertain which system and which people would follow the President. The United States feared that Egypt might become an anti-American Islamic state, ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood (cf. Sharp 2009: 12). On the other hand, democracy is a concept that has always been promoted by the United States and it would have felt wrong to them not to support it in Egypt when people are demonstrating for it. For these reasons, the United States government was facing a dilemma when confronted with the uprisings in Egypt. Should they support Mubarak or the people in the streets? This was one of the most discussed aspects in various news reports at that time and will be the main focus of this analysis.

One problem when looking at the Western way of reporting such events is that stereotypes and prejudices can often get in the way of suitable and just reporting. Ulrich Kienzle, an expert when it comes to reporting from and about the Middle East, recalls in the German *medium magazin* that the revolution at first seems “typically Egyptian” to him (Kienzle 2011: 25). “I thought the demonstrators would smash everything for two or three days, venting their anger, and then back down again. As always” (ibid.). However, that was not the case and many Western journalists, Middle East experts and politicians were taken by surprise by the fact that the protests just did not stop. “Very often, clichés are stronger than reality – also among correspondents”, says Kienzle. Not being able to maintain the journalistic objectivity actually required when reporting on such an event, is not an uncommon problem. Michael Schudson starts his book *Discovering the news* with the sentence “American Journalism has been regularly criticized for failing to be ‘objective’” (1987: 3). However, the question is whether it is even possible to produce a news text which is completely objective. “Letting the news speak for themselves also produces news reports which are evaluative and judgmental” (Harrison 2008: 39). This is based on the fact that journalists are almost free to decide which news coming from which source are going to be in the text and which are not. Therefore, the selection alone of what is considered newsworthy, contributes to a newspaper article never being completely objective.

Nonetheless, this study is more concerned with the political bias US newspapers are said to have and carry through their news reporting. Many papers are said to lean towards the liberal or conservative side and this is reflected in their reporting. This study investigates whether this also holds true for US coverage on the Egyptian revolution of 2011. How did the US print media depict the 2011 revolution in Egypt? Are there any differences in reporting within the media landscape? This study aims at answering these questions by looking at four newspapers from the United States and their news coverage throughout the 18 days of the revolution in Egypt². Of course, these problems with biased media outlets are not only to be found in the United States. As Danuta Reah states about the press in the United Kingdom, “[t]he problem of bias in the press is not a matter of who, or of what system, is supported. The problem is that the bias exists [...]” (2002: preface). Even so, as the relationship between the United States and Egypt is particularly tense due to the reasons explained above, this research aims at looking at US print media rather than any other country’s press.

The medium chosen for this analysis are newspapers. Although the number of people who read a newspaper on a daily basis has decreased strongly in the last years due to the development of Internet news platforms, tablet PCs and smartphones, newspapers are, indeed, not an extinct species. Especially when it comes to features, profiles, or just extensive news reports, newspapers are still highly respected by people looking for news and information (Linden 2010:12). According to Linden, the Internet often serves as a direct news informant, delivering the most important information fast, direct and impersonal, while newspapers have enough room to produce background stories (ibid.). Danuta Reah even takes it a step further, stating that newspapers “present the reader with aspects of the news, and present it often in a way that intends to guide the ideological stance of the reader” (Reah 2002: 50). Of course it would also be interesting to investigate different broadcasting stations delivering news about the revolution in Egypt. However, newspaper articles are easier to access from any country in the world. In addition to that, one can expect to find a greater variability of reporting in newspapers than e.g. on TV, due to the fact that print journalists can work and research undercover more easily, while TV journalists often have to rely on wire reports or pictures from other stations. That would probably have led to the problem of a lot of TV stations showing the same pictures about the revolution, which would have made a comparison rather difficult.

² A more thorough description of the methodology can be found in chapter 1.3.