



 REPORT ARAB POLITICS BEYOND THE UPRISINGS

All Truth Is Worth Publishing

Mada Masr and the Fight for Free Speech in Egypt

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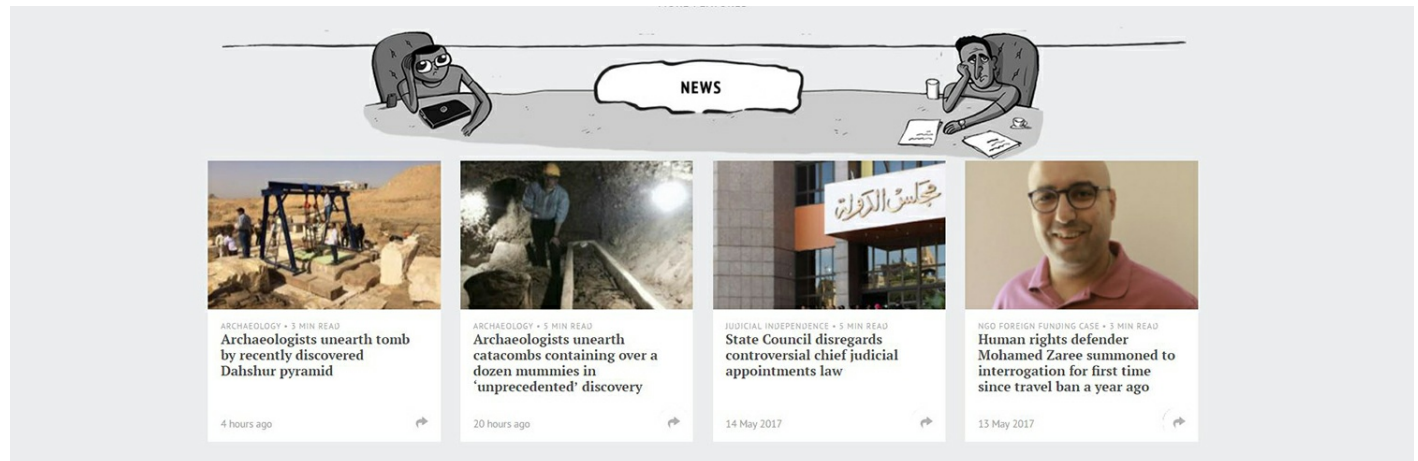
As an authoritarian cold front settles over Egypt, a newsroom full of left-leaning journalists provides one of the last redoubts for the revolutionary ideals of 2011. The online newspaper Mada Masr was founded in 2013 by veterans of several envelope-pushing publications. Since then, it has distinguished itself not only for its bold reporting and experimental style, but also for management based on consensus, and the pioneering of a business model that relies on revenue sources beyond advertising. The newspaper has proved exceptionally resilient to efforts to silence it, weathering the arrest and imprisonment of some of its editors and contributors. And with a fast-growing Arabic section, Mada is more popular than ever. A new law that would drastically restrain digital media may yet prove to be Mada's undoing. Yet the paper remains fully committed to continuing its truth-telling, and has resolved to resist the ongoing crackdown on speech. The story of Mada Masr provides a rare case study of a grassroots institution almost wholly sprung from Egypt's uprising.

It is almost difficult to recall now, but following the uprisings of 2011, people in Egypt began to divide historical time into two periods: before the revolution and after the revolution. In the latter, all manner of things seemed possible. It was at the tail end of this euphoric time, in the early summer of 2013, that a group of young Egyptian journalists set out to build an online news site. They called it *Mada Masr*—"mada" means "scope" in Arabic and "Masr" is the Arabic word for Egypt. Since then, protests have been outlawed and many of the architects of the 2011 uprisings and of *Mada* itself have been thrown in jail or left the country. Yet the principles that drove people into the streets in 2011 survive in *Mada's* newsroom. Its staff represent a hodgepodge of left-leaning views, but the guiding principle is one of equality: providing a voice for those who don't have one in Egypt's classist, Cairo-centric society, and highlighting injustices, no matter who perpetrates them.

As platforms for free expression and dissent have dropped away, *Mada's* website has become one of the only places where those still brave enough to publicly express ideas can do so. The publication's English articles have served as a window on Egypt for many foreign journalists and analysts, and its Arabic coverage is expanding. But in a country of ninety million people, it is a difficult and unfolding proposition to assess the impact of a small group of idealistic journalists.

Mada is the leading representative of a post-2011 Egyptian movement to invent new types of organizing and political expression following the ouster of Hosni Mubarak. It remains one of the sole surviving public manifestations of what was once a large revolutionary wave of establishments. Most have folded due to new legal restrictions, state pressure, budget cuts, or despair. From its inception, *Mada's* creators sought to invent a new kind of media institution, steeped in the values of the 2011 uprising—to embody those values in its coverage, as well as in its corporate ethos, making editorial as well as business decisions based on consensus. The paper attempted to lead socially as well as journalistically, by example of its work and by its day-to-day behavior as an independent collective. It often published its newsroom

discussions, showing that its commitment to transparency extended to itself, as well. As a media organization, rather than, say, a political party or an artists' collective, *Mada* was unique in waging its struggle to create new media forms and collectively organize almost entirely in public.



MADA MASR STARTED AS AN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE WEBSITE BUT ITS ARABIC SECTION CAME ONLINE IN 2013.

At first, *Mada's* readership was limited to those who spoke English—an educated, left-leaning audience that was sympathetic to the ideals of Egypt's 2011 revolution. But since its Arabic section came online in 2013 and as independent outlets and dissident voices in Egypt's mainstream media have gone silent, that community has grown. Its readership and contributors represent the broad coalition of the secular revolutionaries—more Islamist-leaning Egyptians have their own outlets.¹ What began as a community geared specifically toward a generation of revolutionary youth has expanded since 2013 to include anyone looking for an independent account of what has transpired in Egypt over the three years since *Mada's* founding.

At first, in part because it was an English language publication, *Mada* was largely ignored by officialdom. However, its recent proliferation of Arabic copy and the hiring of prominent human-rights-defender-turned-investigative-journalist Hossam Bahgat have catapulted it onto the government's radar, and scrutiny has only increased since Bahgat was detained for two days and interrogated in November 2015. Since much of the rest of the media is either under direct state control or is run by businessmen who fear falling afoul of the state or support its policies, when *Mada* does feature in mainstream Egyptian news outlets, it is often, though not always, with a negative cast.

The purpose of this research is to offer an oral history of the first three years of *Mada's* trajectory. Researchers and policymakers interested in collective media, new media, Egyptian freedom of expression, and political speech will find much grist for further study in *Mada* and its deep online archive, which is full of attempts at self-documentation in addition to its news coverage and opinion pieces. Going forward, *Mada* may serve as a bellwether—or a casualty—of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's unprecedented level of oppression.

Egyptian Media: From State Control to a Smokescreen of Semi-Freedom

Until the mid-1990s, every newspaper on the newsstand was owned and published by the government. The same was true of television channels. But in what was the twilight of the Mubarak era (though the world did not know it yet), the aging dictator began to loosen some of the laws governing freedom of the press. Adel Iskandar, an assistant professor at Simon Fraser University who has written extensively about Egypt's media, has called this "the freedom-of-the-press smokescreen" whereby the regime sought to demonstrate to international governments and human rights groups that it had a free press, while maintaining heavy censorship and clear red lines that extended to the president's family and the military, among other topics.² For instance, in 2007 Ibrahim Eissa, cofounder of *Al-Dustour*, one of Egypt's leading independent papers prior to 2011, was sentenced to a year in prison for writing about Mubarak's failing health. The sentence was suspended but the incident served as a reminder to Egypt's media that its freedom was conditional.

Mubarak's strategy has been called the "the freedom-of-the-press smokescreen" whereby the regime sought to demonstrate to international governments and human rights groups that it had a free press, while maintaining heavy censorship and clear red lines that extended to the president's family and the military.

Nevertheless, private newspapers and satellite channels mushroomed. One unforeseen consequence of this loosening was that it attracted enterprising journalists who saw space in which to critique the government. The regime chose to ignore most of them, determining that they, and their readership, were small fry. "There is a sense that there isn't really a reading public, or a perception that Egypt doesn't read, referring to the non-elites and nonbourgeois society," explained Iskandar. "One could fairly convincingly make the case that Mubarak didn't see *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *Al-Dustour* [two of Egypt's most widely-read privately owned newspapers] as threatening—even though they were critical, they represent a small constituency."³ Ignored by the regime, these papers grew in reach and influence and began to take greater risks. The first decade of the century was fraught with labor strikes and more overt non-Islamist opposition to the regime than the country had seen in the preceding decades. In 2005, the Kefaya movement, led by a broad-based coalition, protested the corruption of the Mubarak regime and the expected succession of the president's son, Gamal. Nobel Prize winner Mohamed ElBaradei returned to Egypt in 2010 calling for political change. It was an environment of growing political

boldness.

In 2009, Fatemah Farag, a sharp and idealistic journalist, was asked by *Al-Masry Al-Youm*'s leadership to establish an English section for the paper. Until then it had published an English page consisting of poor translations of selected Arabic articles. Farag proposed an independent English section that offered high-quality original journalism in addition to drawing on the Arabic content. She hoped this would also influence the journalistic standards of the Arabic edition, which could be partisan or sensationalist at times, and bring a sense of balance and objectivity to a wider audience of Egyptian readers.

But such ambition, particularly one that contained an implicit critique, did not go down easily with others at the paper. The head editor of the Arabic paper felt that Farag should report to him and was dismayed at the autonomy the English section enjoyed. Meanwhile, the paper's owners also felt entitled to weigh in on editorial decisions. "The owners of the paper were used to intervening," Farag said, explaining that it was standard practice at the Arabic paper, but she saw things differently: "We had set up quarterly targets. My argument was, you can change that, that's your right, and then you can see if I'm still the person you want for this, but you cannot pick up the phone and ask me to do something every day. That is outside the scope of what we've agreed on."⁴

Many former *Al-Masry Al-Youm* staff members recall the conflict that flared over the coverage of the Egypt-Algeria soccer match in Khartoum in November 2009. Clashes broke out between fans, after which some Algerians reportedly threw stones at a bus full of Egyptians. The Egyptian press went wild. Rumors skimmed up the Nile—none of them true—of Egyptian fans, forced to leave their bus, undertaking a harrowing march on foot, guarded by the Sudanese army. Instead of contributing to what she and her staff saw as "war mongering" and "hate speech," Farag chose to wait a day or two, and then wrote what she considered a balanced account of the events. The paper's owners accused her of "not reporting the Egyptian people's struggles" and denounced her in an op-ed in the Arabic section. Farag fired back with an editorial calling their war cries "unethical journalism." The matter was eventually dropped but left a residue of resentment with both parties.

At the time, there were no online media outlets in Egypt covering current affairs in English, and Farag's was the first English-language website started by a privately owned media company. This gave Egyptian journalists looking to write for a larger audience, and potentially one beyond Egypt, a wider platform. "It allowed Egyptian journalists to tell Egypt's story to the world not as fixers through foreign correspondents"—the glass ceiling for many of them—"but as storytellers themselves" said Sharif Abdel Kouddous, an Egyptian journalist who wrote a biweekly column for *Al-Masry Al-Youm* when he was in the United States in 2010.⁵

Despite her many successes, Farag and several other staff members left *Al-Masry Al-Youm* in 2010, after disagreements following the owners' repeated attempts to interfere in editorial decisions.⁶ One of Farag's early hires, a young journalist named Lina Attalah, who had started out at the *Cairo Times*—a publication founded by compatriots of Ayman Nour, an independent liberal politician who ran against Mubarak for president in 2005—was assigned the management and rebranding of the English section, along with Saif Nasrawi, who had been the Arab affairs editor.⁷ The team—about fifteen reporters—renamed the English edition *Egypt Independent*, because “the core value of the kind of journalism we were presenting was independence, the ability to write stories without being influenced,” Attalah said.⁸

“People coalesced around these spaces of independent media and they became revolutionaries,” Iskandar added. The current regime has learned from the mistakes of its predecessor, he said: “Mubarak’s approach of ‘let them be and nothing will happen’ is what the security apparatus has learned never to do again.”

Some have contended that spaces like these where there were relatively free exchanges of ideas laid the groundwork for what would become the January 25, 2011 uprisings. “People coalesced around these spaces of independent media and they became revolutionaries,” Iskandar added. The current regime has learned from the mistakes of its predecessor, he said: “Mubarak’s approach of ‘let them be and nothing will happen’ is what the security apparatus has learned never to do again.”⁹

After the Revolution

In the early days of 2011, young men began to light themselves on fire around Egypt to protest the stagnant economic and political conditions. They were imitating Tunisian fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation had precipitated the revolution that knocked longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power in Tunis. In Egypt, ElBaradei warned darkly of a “Tunisian-style explosion” if the government did not implement political reforms, and there were growing calls on- and offline for people to take to the streets.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Egyptian officialdom was in a state of anxiety and denial. Eyeing the unfolding events in Tunis, they were adamant that Egypt would not be next. Yet despite the mounting pressure, in the months leading up to January 25, 2011, *Egypt Independent* didn't read like a radical revolutionary sheet. It published articles on ElBaradei's return and the labor strikes, but as 2011 began, its editors had little inkling of what was about to happen. “We did publish some articles saying that Tunisia is not Egypt,” Nasrawi

admitted.¹¹ One well-known Cairo-based journalist, Issandr El Amrani, broke ranks, writing a piece that argued Egypt would follow where Tunisia had led. But the paper's leadership, Attalah included, still fully expected that security forces would shut down the protest scheduled for January 25, 2011, as they had done for decades, and she made no special plan to cover the event. Still, she went down to the streets herself to report. She was beaten and nearly arrested. The following morning, she came into the office with a new understanding: The rules had changed, she realized, and anything could happen.

Nasrawi put together a plan to cover the unfolding events. But three days after the protests began, on January 28, Egypt went silent. The government had shut off the internet, isolating the country (including the journalists) from the rest of the world. The *Egypt Independent* team sent the website's passwords to friends abroad so that they could update it in case the journalists couldn't find a way around the internet blackout. In the meantime, they heard a rumor that the Semiramis, a luxury hotel just off Tahrir Square, still had a working internet connection. "We moved the entire newsroom to the Semiramis," Attalah remembered. "It became the unofficial broadcasting center for the revolution." The hotel, fearing a raid by government forces, tried hard to fight their presence, and indeed that of much of the international press corps.¹² One day the hotel staff emptied the restaurants of food in an attempt to starve out guests. But the journalists persevered, and the hotel for unknown reasons didn't close down. *Egypt Independent* was one of the few local outlets that managed to keep reporting despite the internet blackout. Most other local online news sources stopped updating until they were reconnected to the internet five days later.

Thus began what Iskandar has referred to as "the golden age of Egyptian journalism."¹³ The media environment—along with everything from politics to art to traffic patterns—opened up wildly: small publications cropped up along with artists' collectives and new political parties and movements. There was new trust and interest in social media platforms and independent voices that had broadcast from Tahrir, and skepticism of state channels that had peddled pro-Mubarak propaganda. Indeed, everything associated with Mubarak was now tainted.¹⁴ People who had learned never to speak about politics in public were suddenly discussing political parties and complaining about leaders to anyone who would listen.

Yet despite a loosening of tongues at all levels of society, mainstream media outlets remained somewhat wary of too stark a critique of those in power. Decades of red lines were difficult to erase overnight. And though its figurehead had changed, the hand of the government was far from absent from the media space, and Egypt's public was still subject to massive propaganda from state-manipulated media. When state newspaper *Al-Ahram* declared that "The People Have Brought down the Regime" in February 2011, a newspaper vendor remarked to *Guardian* reporter Jack Shenker that "state-controlled media's own revolution had begun."¹⁵ But soon thereafter it became clear that they had simply found

new masters. Many journalists at state media outlets continued to trumpet state propaganda. And while within state news outlets there were some efforts to break away from the political interests that had long controlled them—videos circulated of state television bosses being chased from their offices—none was particularly successful.¹⁶

The events that have come to be known as the “Maspero Massacre” highlighted the fact that little in state media outlets had changed. On October 9, 2011, a crowd of mostly Coptic demonstrators were protesting the demolition of a church in Upper Egypt when military personnel began attacking them, eventually running down unarmed protesters with an armored vehicle. As this was unfolding, state television and radio misreported the incident, relaying a false official claim that three members of the military had been killed by armed Coptic demonstrators and calling on “honorable citizens” to “defend the army against attack.”¹⁷ Mobs flocked to Maspero, joining a melee orchestrated by security officials. Twenty-eight protesters were killed and 212 injured. The following day, Dina Rasmy, a newscaster for the state-run Channel 2 news, told *Ahram Online* she was “ashamed” of working for state media that had “proven itself to be a slave for whoever rules Egypt.”¹⁸ The coverage of the Maspero Massacre showed how effectively the state could still manipulate the narrative to present itself as keeper of the peace in the face of rabble-rousers. Nor had there been a revision to the sectarian narrative in which the Coptic minority was portrayed as less than Egyptian, and even as traitors. Many commentators on private channels continued to parrot the state line. Much of the press made an easy mark for state propaganda.

As is true for many things in Egypt, one’s class largely determines which media sources are accessible. Poor Egyptians rely on television for news, and many of them do not have satellites, so domestic channels with content from the Ministry of Information are their only source of information.¹⁹ Satellite channels meanwhile indirectly rely on the state because their licenses are state-issued. Even in the days immediately following the uprisings, this often resulted in private channels advocating for the government or, as in the case of influential television host Yousri Fouda, being slow at first to report on abuses of state power, which were ongoing throughout the “revolutionary” period. Under the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi, many of the businessmen who owned private channels aligned with the military in their hatred of the Islamists, and embarked on a campaign to demonize them. Even *Al-Dustour* founder Eissa, who had been persecuted by the Mubarak regime, threw his lot in with the military and used the publication he founded in 2011, *Tahrir*, to advocate for the military takeover and Sisi.

As for *Egypt Independent*, it had gone from struggling to extract news in a stagnant political environment to being unable to keep up with the volume of stories and interest. The newsroom was abuzz with a sense of purpose and excitement. “It was just a really special place,” said Max Strasser, a former news editor who is now an opinion editor at the *New York Times*. “It’s unlike any other newsroom I’ve ever experienced. The political commitment of people there was unlike anything I’ve ever seen, the enthusiasm and ambition.”²⁰

In Cairo, distance grew between *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *Egypt Independent* following Mubarak's overthrow. At times the Arabic leadership would push the English editors to translate and publish stories they didn't agree with. Sometimes the differences were public, management's critiques appearing in the pages of the Arabic-language paper.

Then on December 1, 2011, pressure from the Arabic management came to a head. *Egypt Independent's* second print issue—up to that point it had been exclusively an online platform—never made it to the newsstands. It was the chief editor, not the government, who forbade its distribution. The paper contained an article by American academic Robert Springborg that discussed divisions in the military, which had been in power since the revolution. The *Egypt Independent* staff published the article and the entire issue, with an explanation, online. As is often the case with banned material, the online issue was very widely read. In response, Magdy El Galad, the editor-in-chief of the Arabic edition, published a column calling his English-language counterparts “immature” and “unpatriotic.”

But there were also perks to being attached to one of the most widely read newspapers in Egypt. *Egypt Independent* had its pick of local reporting to translate from *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, which allowed it to cover far more news than otherwise would have been possible given the small size of its staff. A quarter to half of the publication's content on any given day was translated from the Arabic, according to Ahmad Shokr, a former opinion editor. “I'd solicit opinions but I'd also try to translate Arabic pieces and give a sense of what debates were happening in the Arabic media,” he said.²¹ It also helped *Egypt Independent's* reporters: “It was nice to be able to say “*Al-Masry Al-Youm*” when I was reporting and to get the name recognition. People would talk to you when you'd say it was the English edition,” said Jahd Khalil, a *Mada* cofounder and former reporter with the paper.²² As an English-language publication, it also got away with reporting on topics that Arabic papers couldn't, since it was seen as less likely to influence a large audience, and therefore, less of a threat to whoever was in power.²³

The fractious relationship between the English and Arabic sides of the paper continued until early 2013, when *Al-Masry Al-Youm* ran into financial problems. Attalah, a leftist who seeks to live her principles, suggested that the trouble was in part too heavy a reliance on advertising revenue. So management gave her a deadline to prove what she could do with a new reader-supported model. She and her team embarked on a business plan of their creation, offering new services including translations and news alerts, for a small fee. “Everyone brought what they knew: anyone with a bit of business experience pitched in, and all outside of the newsroom,” Attalah said. Their efforts culminated in a large “save *Egypt Independent* from closing” party at a Cairo arts space, which generated \$10,000—not a small sum by Egyptian standards. This they proudly handed over to the paper's accountant, only to be told a few days later that they were to be shut down anyway. “It was clear the decision was taken before we even tried to generate any money,” Attalah said.²⁴

“The mother has to be saved by letting go of the daughter,” the paper’s chairman, Abdel Moneim Said, told her—the daughter being *Egypt Independent*. “I had to tell him, I don’t think *Al-Masry Al-Youm* is my mother, so I don’t think the analogy makes sense,” Attalah said. At the time, she and her colleagues viewed the setback as temporary. In the new media climate, the staff felt sure that *Egypt Independent* would be reincarnated. So they focused on negotiating severance packages and putting together a final issue in which they announced to readers they were closing. “We used that edition to raise questions about the state of independent media in Egypt, saying what happened to *Egypt Independent* is a microcosm,” Attalah said. But someone from the Arabic paper saw the edition at the printing house and deemed it too critical. It never made it to the newsstands. Once again, the *Egypt Independent* editors published a banned print edition online. And once again, it went viral.

After the Coup

A week after *Egypt Independent* disbanded (though *Al-Masry Al-Youm*’s management kept the rights to the name and at the time of writing still publishes some English content) the newly unemployed staff began to meet to discuss what kind of publication they wanted to start, and what the name of a new platform should be. They were moving slowly, a little depressed at their unceremonious ousting from their jobs despite their unorthodox efforts to save them. Still, they had enough energy to come up with and agree on the idea of *Mada Masr*. Meanwhile, a campaign called “Tamarrod,” Arabic for “rebellion,” had gained huge traction across the country, with increasingly apparent support from the military. Young people had appeared at every metro stop and public building asking passersby to sign their petition calling on the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood president to step down and hold early elections. Sensing the gravity of the moment, the future staff of *Mada* decided at the last minute to peg their launch to Tamarrod’s mass demonstration planned for June 30, 2013. On June 17, they met in an empty room. There was no money for furniture—at first there was no money at all—and Attalah and other staff members used part of their severance packages to get things off the ground, at times working for free or very little. On the door a sign read, “The Artists Formerly Known as *Egypt Independent*.”²⁵ Alaa Abdel Fattah, one of the most prominent activists in Egypt and *Mada*’s web designer, stayed up into the wee hours of the morning on June 30 to finish the site. Defying expectations, *Mada* launched on schedule.



MADA MASR'S FOUNDING TEAM MEMBERS. CREDIT:MADA MASR WEBSITE

Three days after the protest, the Egyptian army arrested Egypt's first elected president, Morsi, who is still behind bars. A six-week sit-in led by his supporters followed, which preceded, as Human Rights Watch described it, "one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history," on August 14, 2013: the Rabaa Massacre.²⁶ In the course of clearing the sit-ins in Rabaa Square, Egyptian security forces left, by their own admission, more than eight hundred people dead. Human Rights Watch puts the number of people killed that day at more than eleven hundred.²⁷

Simply reporting the news became a contentious act.

From that moment, simply reporting the news became a contentious act. "When June 30 happened we didn't have time to do the things we said we would do, we were just doing the basics of journalism: objective reporting, both sides of the story," said Amira Ahmed, a *Mada* cofounder, who led its business-development team and served as managing editor and general manager. With no one else doing such reporting, *Mada* became a sort of de facto opposition organization, which was not its editors' plan. "There was one narrative and presenting other sides of the story was considered in opposition to the state," Ahmed said. "But it was just ethical journalism—[opposition] was not our intention."²⁸

Over the years since *Mada's* founding, reporting independent accounts of events has become an increasingly dangerous task. While at first the military government focused its crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, soon its sweeps extended to human rights and media organizations, particularly those that espoused the principles of the January 25 uprising. On November 28, 2013, twenty men broke down Alaa Abdel Fattah's door. They beat him, slapped his wife Manal across the face and took him away.²⁹ After a subsequent trial on charges of violating a protest law that had just been issued, Abdel Fattah was sentenced to five years in prison. But despite the state's tactics of intimidation, his colleagues at *Mada* pressed on with their work. They decided early on that they would not be cowed. "If you decide to focus so much on red lines, you will end up not doing journalism at all," Attalah said. "We try never to ask the question, 'Is it worth it to publish?' All truth is worth publishing."³⁰ While sometimes they might try to minimize the sensationalism of their headlines, the most important thing, *Mada Masr's* editors agreed, is to ensure that all assertions are supported by ironclad evidence.

A New Journalism for a New Egypt

Even in a hostile environment, *Mada's* staff had ambitious plans. At *Egypt Independent*, there had been a sense of collective decision-making, but it was more the feel of the place rather than a stated ethos bolstered by collective procedures. Cut loose from all ties to Egypt's mainstream media machine, the young journalists set out to see if they could run their new enterprise under the egalitarian principles of their revolution both editorially and on the corporate side, while still making it financially viable. Like many of the political groups that formed after the uprising, their vision was one of collective management and ownership, as well as consensus-driven editorial practices.

The choice to make it an online publication as opposed to print, as *Egypt Independent* had been, was a deliberate one. It was in part about finances. "The reason online publications can be independent is that they can be run so cheaply," Lindsey pointed out.³¹ They sought to maintain editorial independence by experimenting with new funding models. "*Mada Masr* has been a pioneer of reader-sponsored media, breaking away from state-run newspapers or those run by big businessmen," the two paradigms that constitute the norm in Egypt, Abdel Kouddous said. But the decision also had to do with Attalah's understanding of the potential of the internet. At a virtual roundtable in 2015 hosted by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS), which was republished on *Mada's* website, Attalah explained that she considered the internet "a laboratory for dissident politics" and uniquely suited to an organization that sought to operate horizontally, as a collective, and value individual voices equally.³² She encouraged individual initiatives at *Mada*, as well as experimentation with nontraditional modes of expression that the internet enabled.

The staff aspired to make their newsroom different from any they had ever worked in. “It was like a student hostel. It was more than a paper,” said Sarah Carr, a British-Egyptian journalist and cofounder, offering a reenactment of the scene: “You! Roll your sleeves up. You! Wash up! You! Paint a wall. You! Put up some cling film and write about Tahrir. And you! Get your dog off my leg! There was always someone’s dog in there, someone’s animal. It was nice, very informal. Lina’s good at that.” Other journalists and friends of the paper would sometimes come and work in *Mada*’s office in Garden City. It was “a little bubble inside the very regimented, conservative and tradition-obsessed vibe of Egypt,” Carr said. “Women were smoking and wearing tank tops in there and all sorts of crazy things. It was like a hippie hipster sort of atmosphere.”³³ There was even talk of setting up a commune.

Mada’s initial site announced itself as a repository for “independent” and “progressive” journalism. The focus of its coverage was unique in Egypt’s media landscape. The priorities of its journalists were “holding those in power accountable and offering a platform for the most marginalized voices,” said Abdel Kouddous, who spent eight years working in independent media in the United States, and saw *Mada* as operating on similar principles.³⁴ *Mada*’s driving political belief was a commitment to a human rights-based approach. “In an ideal situation, this tendency should be filled in by a political party,” said Khaled Fahmy, a professor of Middle Eastern history at the American University in Cairo and Harvard University, and a *Mada* contributor. “But as we know it’s very difficult to politically organize in Egypt, and the result is what we see in human rights organizations and online publications that are professional and complex and way ahead of mainstream politics in terms of ideas.”³⁵ With regard to journalistic standards *Mada* journalists were unique as well, trying to produce work that was unbiased and deeply sourced in a media environment where many publications were beholden to the editorial dictates of their financial backers, and opinion masquerading as reporting was widespread.

Without access to the resources *Al-Masry Al-Youm* Arabic provided in terms of day-to-day news coverage, the journalists shifted away from breaking news. Instead they focused on features and analysis, experimental writing forms, more avant-garde cultural pieces, transcripts of their meetings, and investigative pieces they would likely never have been allowed to publish if they were still affiliated with a mainstream newspaper. For instance, Fahmy published a column in Egyptian colloquial Arabic.³⁶ Once almost exclusively a spoken language, the dialect’s written form has become more standardized over the last few years through communications on social media and internet platforms. Editors frequently narrated their editorial process, and why they made certain choices. In an editor’s note accompanying a piece to mark the third anniversary of the 2011 revolution, Attalah and Mark Levine explained: “We found it hard to solicit pieces commemorating the January 25 revolution, mainly because we seem to have hit a certain boundary in revolutionary prose. A moment of deep ambiguity accompanies three years of thinking, doing and rethinking. But in the spirit of resisting this submission to boundaries, we went back to what columnists and friends wrote during the eighteen days of the revolution and we asked them to revisit their writings. Some wrote reaction pieces, others edited them, adding

reflections from today, and others rewrote them.”³⁷ What followed was a collectively written, unattributed collection of memories and reflections on the eighteen days.

More recently, as international publications have largely turned away from Egypt, *Mada* has continued to cover the minutiae of the ongoing crackdown. Its articles often offer greater detail than those in Western publications and the fact that the reporters themselves come from the place they’re writing about means they often have a deeper understanding of the history and significance of events than foreign reporters do. While their coverage of breaking news is not necessarily the most dramatic, it is their consistency and insistence on writing about the everyday experience of Egyptians that makes them unique. *Mada* has time and again drawn attention to the state’s opaque war in Sinai,³⁸ sometimes sending reporters to cover it when foreign reporters have deemed it too dangerous or been denied permits. Despite the fact that the bar for what is shocking in Egypt in terms of the deaths, abuse, or disappearance of detainees has grown impossibly high, *Mada* continues to report incident after incident of torture³⁹ at the hands of the state. *Mada*’s reporting on Egypt’s failing economy⁴⁰ has also been extensive and detailed, as well as its coverage of Mubarak era officials’ corruption.⁴¹

Unlike most other news outlets, since its inception *Mada* has had a strong connection to the arts, placing as much emphasis on its culture section as on its news reporting. Part of this is due to Attalah’s sensibilities and those of some staff members who have strong connections to Egypt’s contemporary art world. They firmly believe it is of a piece with the rest of their coverage. “We are believers in how art has a prime function in intervening in reality and is not usually available in spaces of politics and basic journalism,” Attalah explained.⁴² *Mada*’s culture editor J.R. Evans is an artist herself.

There is a self-consciousness in *Mada*’s conception of itself as an archive of the events and ideas that defined the years since it began. The very publishing of an interview like the one Attalah participated in with ACSS indicates a desire to be transparent about its processes and its staff’s thinking, though such reflections can at times have a navel-gazing quality. In that interview Attalah referred to an impulse from the days immediately following the revolution to take control of the narrative. “It was in the moments of revolutionary hope that we as activists began to be anxious about archiving our own practices. We thought we owned the present moment and wanted to extend this to the past and future.”⁴³



EGYPTIAN SATIRIST BASSEM YOUSSEF IS INTERVIEWED ON MADA MASR'S MORNING PROGRAM "BREAKFAST WITH MADA." CREDIT: YOUTUBE/MADA MASR.

Much of *Mada's* experimentation and growth has happened in the necessarily public space it occupies. Its sense of itself and the community it has formed extends to its readership as well,⁴⁴ and it has built a community life beyond that of simply publishing articles. For a time, the paper hosted prominent writers, thinkers, politicians, and artists at an informal Thursday morning staff breakfast. Among those who came to speak were comedian Bassem Youssef, and media figures Belal Fadl and Reem Maged. Sometimes the minutes of these meetings would be published on the website. Meanwhile, events such as its anniversary party, or the *Mada* Market—where the paper brought together local vendors and music and charged an entry fee—connected *Mada's* staff directly with its readers.

Its sense of itself and the community it has formed extends to its readership as well, and it has built a community life beyond that of simply publishing articles.

This collectivist, community-based ethos was an integral part of *Mada's* business model. But setting up a collectively owned and run business in Egypt proved challenging, and took months of talking to business experts and lawyers. Ultimately *Mada's* staff concluded that Egypt's business climate just wasn't hospitable to the enterprise they wanted to establish. "It's an aging regulatory framework," Ahmed explained. "You don't have that flexibility in different ownership models."⁴⁵ The paper is still trying to register as an offshore company in a country such as the Netherlands, the United

Kingdom, or even the United Arab Emirates, with a legal framework built to accommodate collectively owned enterprises. Under their status as a limited liability company (LLC), if a shareholder owns 20 percent of the company, he or she can make unilateral decisions. *Mada's* business development team is looking for a model that officially functions on more of a consensus basis—a standard practice in media startups around the world. Such structural protections are particularly important for editorial independence, especially in Egypt.

But members of the business development team were journalists first, with a smattering of business experience between them. Much of their expertise was acquired on the job.⁴⁶ Those in editorial sometimes seemed uninterested in the business side's struggles. And then there was the fundamental incompatibility at times of business and politics: "It was hard to draw the line," Ahmed said. "Where does the collective end? Where does the need for a clear structure that's a bit hierarchical come in? And should we accept it or should we fight it because we are trying to build a progressive institution?"

Attalah had long hoped that she might be able to move away from an entirely ad-based revenue structure. She saw in *Mada* "a capitalization of this imagination I always had...that good journalists can be supported by a base of loyal supporters who want to keep an independent newspaper running."⁴⁷ Today *Mada's* revenue streams are diverse and include subscription-based services and events. The ads it runs are "progressive" in that they promote small businesses and creative industries whose work and mission the paper supports.



LINA ATTALAH, CO-FOUNDER AND CHIEF EDITOR OF MADA MASR. SOURCE: FLICKR/DEUTSCHEWELLE/K. DANETZKI.

But while setting up a progressive company with multiple revenue streams consumed considerable energy, a more crucial aspect of the organization's structure was its legal status. Because of the sensitive nature of some of its reporting, an unimpeachable legal status was paramount from the start. "We are not producing something that is easy to swallow by the government and we have to protect ourselves," Attalah said. "We have to do basic things like operating legally and paying our taxes. It would be stupid not to, given our precarious position."⁴⁸ *Mada* therefore immediately established itself as an LLC while searching for a more appropriate business model for collective ownership and decision-making.

What the revolutionaries soon realized was that though the most powerful symbol of the state—Mubarak—was now gone, the bureaucracy and patronage systems that undergirded his ossified regime were still firmly in place. Many new political parties, such as those founded by the revolutionary youth, lost out to older systems of patronage and familiar personalities from the past—both members of the Brotherhood and the old guard. Many new organizations struggled to sustain themselves in the face of prohibitions on foreign funding, which cut them off from international foundation money. Increasingly draconian laws requiring nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register with and be approved by the state sent several of them to Tunisia, including the Cairo Institute for Human Rights—there was no guarantee of safety in Egypt.⁴⁹ As many of its contemporaries fled or folded, *Mada* struggled on, trying to live by the principles it had established.

But there were downsides to nonhierarchical management. The lack of a more traditional structure could lead to hours of meetings, and sometimes, conflict in the newsroom. "It's one of the things that makes *Mada* special, and one of the things that makes it a very challenging place to make things happen quickly and efficiently," Ahmed said.⁵⁰

"[Lina] likes to keep it all sort of no-management, one level, grassroots and all that. So we were all in endless meetings. Like, a meeting every hour. Endless, interminable meetings!" Carr said. The system is "clunky," she added, "because someone has to take a decision at the end of the day. Eventually someone is going to say, 'it's going to be like this, piss off.'"⁵¹

One challenge was that the closeness of the team sometimes made rules difficult to enforce. "Management structure is obviously something that *Mada* is still struggling with," said Dalia Rabie, one of the cofounders and a longtime reporter at *Mada*. "This is, I guess, one of the downsides of founding something with your friends." She went on: "It's difficult to have an established hierarchy and assert your authority when you are an organic team."⁵² It was also difficult to hold people to deadlines, because a lack of hierarchical structure meant it was hard to implement penalties for late work.⁵³

Despite the collective decision-making, Attalah's leadership was integral to the project. "Lina has a gift for rallying the troops and getting people together," Carr said, echoing a sentiment shared by many former staff.⁵⁴ Attalah's notion of what a publication should be was an expansive one, in which not only writers and editors, but also readers and like-minded people in society at large played a role. "Lina has this wonderful convivial way of having this incredible network of people she helps and talks to," said Lindsey.⁵⁵ "She commands such respect and is trying to keep things as horizontal as possible," Abdel Kouddous said. "They seem to give a lot of space and breadth for people to do what they want and to experiment."⁵⁶ Still, some people were sometimes frustrated with what they saw as Attalah's micromanagement, though they agreed that her vision was invaluable.

New Reach and Attention with Expansion into Arabic

In October 2013, Mohamed Adam, a *Mada* cofounder, spearheaded the launch of *Mada's* Arabic website. Everyone at the newspaper was excited at the prospect of an Arabic-language site and reaching a wider, more diverse audience inside Egypt. These days, when the world, and consequently the foreign media, has turned away from Egypt, the Arabic site often goes into more detail than the English, calibrating its stories for a local audience that already has a background in the issues and is more interested in details. Similarly, due to waning international interest, *Mada* does not translate every Arabic story it publishes into English. The Arabic has outstripped the English in terms of readership. "The Arabic section is much more popular than the English, which is a testament to the hunger for this sort of journalism and these dissenting voices," Kouddous said.⁵⁷ Khaled Fahmy said he had noticed the influence of *Mada's* journalistic standards on other independent online publications.⁵⁸

The hiring in 2014 of Hossam Bahgat, one of Egypt's most influential human rights activists, had a profound effect on the Arabic side of the paper. "When he started writing the investigative pieces in Arabic, our traffic depended on him for a long time," Dalia Rabie said.⁵⁹ This in part drove the shift in the leadership's focus toward the Arabic side of the paper. "They started to feel the need to hire more Arabic writers and copy editors," she said. The combination of more content in Arabic, and the fact that part of that content was comprised of long investigative pieces—some of them about the military—by one of the most prominent human rights campaigners in Egypt, has meant greater scrutiny by the state security apparatus. *Mada*, with its expanding Arabic platform, began to have a greater capacity for influence—and thus became seen as a bigger threat.

After years of working as a human rights advocate, Bahgat had a deep and developed network of sources and an attention to detail and accuracy. Moreover, his organization had defended everyone from LGBTQ Egyptians to women to religious minorities, and he was accustomed to taking on the state. His pieces for *Mada* covered some of Egypt's most

taboo topics, from tax evasion by the Mubarak family to some of the more embarrassing elements of Egypt's relationship with its largest financial backer, Saudi Arabia, to an alleged aborted coup within the military. For this third piece Bahgat was detained by military intelligence and accused of "publishing false news that could harm the nation."⁶⁰ He was later released but is currently under scrutiny (and has had his assets frozen and travel banned) in connection with a reopened case from 2011 regarding foreign funding to Egyptian NGOs.⁶¹ In the meantime, however, Bahgat is back at work.

Adam saw the Arabic site as a place where people could write controversial pieces that no one else would publish. *Mada* became the main outlet that published letters from prominent imprisoned activists, including Alaa Abdel Fattah. It published an open letter⁶² from Abdel Fattah to his sisters, and a joint letter⁶³ from prison that he and Ahmed Douma wrote by shouting between their prison cells. The activists described conditions in the prison, as well as the political state of affairs, and sometimes offered breaking news, as when Abdel Fattah announced the beginning of his hunger strike via another open letter published by *Mada*.⁶⁴ "It really makes me happy when Alaa Abdel Fatah writes in Arabic on [*Mada*]," Adam said in October 2016. "Imagine if *Mada* was only in English. It wouldn't make sense that Alaa is in jail and speaking only in English. Who are we talking to? It would just be confirming all the conspiracies about him," Adam added.⁶⁵

***Mada* became the main outlet that published letters from prominent imprisoned activists, including Alaa Abdel Fattah. It published an open letter from Abdel Fattah to his sisters, and a joint letter from prison that he and Ahmed Douma wrote by shouting between their prison cells.**

Mada Masr was not the only outlet that started publishing after the revolution. There were several websites devoted to independent journalism and commentary that sprang up after the uprising. Each has a slightly different focus—*El Badil* prioritizes breaking news, but does little investigative work, *Al Manassa* focuses on blog and opinion pieces, *Ultra-Sout* publishes news and analysis, and respected journalist Belal Fadl contributes to *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*. But in addition to its content, it is *Mada's* commitment to balance and accuracy that has set it apart. "I don't think there's anyone who quite has the same fairness and accuracy," said Abdel Kouddous, who is an occasional contributor. "That's what they have nailed over these other places. They rarely get the facts wrong and when they do, they correct themselves very openly and they don't publish rumor. The others have the correct spirit but are a lot less reliable."⁶⁶ *Mada* is also the only one of these independent publications that has an extensive English website, making it, and the issues it covers, accessible to a foreign as well as a local audience. Some suggest that the friendship of *Mada's* staff with funders also allows them to

access grants that others cannot.

Surviving Growing Pressure under Sisi—for Now

Independent publications that criticize the state are far harder to quash than they once were. While the plotters of Egypt's 1919 revolution against the British required a printing press, which they hid in the basement of Café Riche downtown, today's dissenters need no such infrastructure. "Functionally speaking they could arrest every single person in the country and *Mada* could keep existing," Iskandar said. Even with sources of funding cut off, publications like *Mada* can operate from other countries, as many in Egypt's human rights community now do.⁶⁷

Still, the government has a monopoly on printing in Egypt—state-owned *Al-Ahram* and *Al Gomhuria* publish several of the independent newspapers, meaning that their content must pass under the eyes of the government employees at the printing house. And while the web has historically been less subject to these traditional forms of censorship, all this may change if proposed laws to regulate new media are passed. In December of 2016, parliament passed the first of several planned media laws that created the Supreme Council for the Administration of the Media, the chairman of which is to be chosen by Sisi. He will appoint additional members on the basis of nominations from other government bodies including the judiciary and parliament. The new council is tasked with creating a list of penalties and will have the power to sue and fine media organizations that violate its rules. It will also be able to revoke or suspend the right to publish and broadcast, and extend or rescind licenses to foreign media. Regulations governing media practice—formation, ownership and management of media outlets, media freedoms, and the relationship between journalism and national security—are to be part of a separate piece of legislation. According to the original draft of the unified media bill completed in November of 2015 by the National Authority of Media and Journalism Legislation, these measures may include a requirement that any new online news site would require a permit from the council and any new media companies would require startup capital of at least half a million Egyptian pounds (more than \$27,000), half of which would have to be deposited in an Egyptian bank. These financial constraints would strangle small independent outlets like *Mada* and would make the media space inaccessible to anyone but wealthy businessmen—in other words, things would go back to how they used to be, at least for publications that were actually based in Egypt.⁶⁸

This, in addition to the fate of other journalists around them in recent years, has alarmed many members of *Mada's* staff. Three *Al Jazeera* English journalists were imprisoned for more than a year and a half and tried for reporting false news and alleged connections with the Muslim Brotherhood. They were released in September 2015 following a pardon from Sisi. In some ways, they were lucky. Many others have been waiting in prison for years without trial. At the time of writing, there are twenty-five journalists in jail in Egypt, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Baher

Mohamed, the only journalist of the three in the *Al Jazeera* trial who held only Egyptian nationality, was seen as being far more vulnerable to targeting by the state and for much of the trial many feared his foreign passport-holding colleagues would be rescued by their governments while he would be left to languish in prison. And he wouldn't be alone. According to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information there are more than sixty thousand political prisoners in Egypt and 1,250 missing people.⁶⁹ Some among them were arrested at peaceful protests that have been outlawed since 2013, and hundreds of people have been sentenced to death in mass trials. "There's been a chilling effect," Attalah said. "When the *Al Jazeera* [English] trial happened I recall how my colleagues ... kept saying they identified a lot with Baher, the local journalist."⁷⁰



PROTESTERS AGAINST EGYPTIAN SECURITY FORCES CRACKDOWN ON JOURNALISTS. CREDIT:FACEBOOK/MADA MASR

As public space grows vanishingly small in Egypt, social media—particularly Facebook but also Skype and WhatsApp—has taken on a new role and has become a very important channel for independent voices, to share news as well as generate ideas. "Silence is the only way to be safe, to not talk about politics ...is the safest way—but online it's a different story," Iskandar said.⁷¹ It has even affected *Mada's* coverage. People are sharing Facebook posts that "you could easily consider an op-ed in a newspaper. A lot of very important political discussion happens on Facebook," said Ahmed Shokr, *Mada's* former opinion editor, who joined the social networking site in 2011 because he felt he was missing out on important political discussions. As editor, he would often use it to generate content, inviting people to transform their posts into op-eds.⁷² As the crackdown intensifies, many of those who once expressed their dissent in the street have

shifted their critiques to Facebook.

In frightening times, *Mada* staff say their most important resource is each other. Their decisions, they explained, were often braver together. “There is comfort in having thirty other people come together and say you are going to stay the course,” Ahmed said. “Thirty people who feel they have ownership in this place and can’t make decisions out of fear.”⁷³ Their perseverance provides inspiration to other journalists working in a dangerous time. Andeel, a provocative *Mada* political cartoonist, “keeps drawing Sisi and it gives me courage to continue on, it’s very inspiring,” Abdel Kouddous said. “If I ever have pause about any coverage, I look at [*Mada*] and say, no, if they are doing it, I’m wala haga,” he added, using a phrase that means “I’m nothing” in Egyptian Arabic.⁷⁴ *Mada* also provided a sense of purpose in a time of great disappointment. “If it weren’t for *Mada*, what else would we have done in this state of things?” Attalah sighed. “A lot of us have close friends in prison...there’s a sense of fatigue and despair.”⁷⁵

“If I ever have pause about any coverage, I look at *Mada* and say, no, if they are doing it, I’m wala haga,” he added, using a phrase that means “I’m nothing” in Egyptian Arabic.⁷⁶

Yet despite everything, *Mada* is growing. It is approaching a million views a month. Attalah is taking a backseat and was succeeded in the late summer of 2016 as editor by longtime journalist Wael Gamal, reflecting a commitment at *Mada* to transfer power internally, as a democratically run institution. Coverage is increasingly weighted toward the faster-growing Arabic section and many of *Mada*’s cofounders are moving on.

Change is hard for some. “It was still our own passion project in the beginning and a lot of the newcomers, they don’t think of the project in the same way,” said Amira Ahmed, who recently left the paper, though she acknowledges it’s healthy to have new blood.⁷⁷ *Mada* “kind of outgrew its staff” as it expanded and its Arabic site received increasing attention, said Dalia Rabie, another one of the cofounders who recently moved on. “It needs a bigger newsroom and a bigger staff, and the kind of organic newsroom that we had was not working anymore.”⁷⁸

The website also recently underwent a redesign. In a characteristic move, *Mada* published an interview between Attalah and the new site’s designer, Phil Gribbon, to explain to readers the thinking behind the new design. *Mada* “couldn’t have the look of the generic-looking professional news website,” Gribbon explained in the interview. “It needed to be more personal, more obviously made by real people involved in the world they’re reporting on.” Gribbon ultimately chose a particularly human motif to frame the site: the cartoons of Andeel—*Mada*’s and perhaps Egypt’s most daring cartoonist.⁷⁹ The investment in a redesign suggests that for now, *Mada* is digging in despite growing pressures.

For years, many people, including *Mada* staff members, have been asking how *Mada* has survived in a climate that has crushed so many other outlets and organizations. No one seems to know. When new laws restricting media have been promulgated, when other civil society groups were raided, and when Hossam Bahgat was arrested, many thought it was the beginning of the end. When the paper was publishing largely in English, it was likely less of a concern to the state, but as its reach in Arabic has expanded, this is no longer true. “Especially after Hossam’s arrest last year for his piece on the army prosecution of military officers, they’ve been put under a microscope,” Abdel Kouddous said.⁸⁰ And yet *Mada*’s doors remain open. The arbitrariness of who gets caught up in the state’s nets and who is left to agonize over whether they’re next seems to be part of a government strategy to foster self-censorship and a compliant media. However, it’s also possible that the government has been waiting to target *Mada* under the new online media law, which would provide an explicit legal justification for such an action. Whatever the case, *Mada*’s friends and former staff are very worried about the site and its employees.

Since Sisi’s crackdown, many other journalists have either left Egypt, gone to work for international news organizations, or reverted to their prerevolutionary mode of operation, where they made their critiques only indirectly, to avoid the ire of the state. But at *Mada*, fundamental changes are off the table: “It’s either published and we do it with the level of liberty we have right now, or we don’t do it at all,” Attalah said. The only reason *Mada* would shut down of its own accord would be “if the price became too high,” she said—if, for example, staff members were under direct threat of arrest.

With so many people being jailed and organizations shut down, Attalah sees no reason why *Mada* will not eventually meet a similar fate. “We have to expect this to happen, we shouldn’t feel comfortable to be protected from what everyone who is saying the truth is facing.” But whether the paper is shut down or not, “the fact that we managed to survive these years to bear witness is an achievement,” she said.⁸¹

Even as *Mada*’s journalists are realistic about the risks, they are buoyed by the belief that Egyptian speech has evolved in ways that cannot quickly be undone. *Mada* might be forced to shut down, its reporters might be silenced or imprisoned, but the internet continues to provide a platform that the government can never fully control. Even more significantly, the revolution changed the way that many Egyptians think about the possibilities of expression and political change. While the authoritarian crackdown has caused many people to watch what they say and scale back their public statements and activities, *Mada*’s large and growing readership is testament to the enduring interest in alternative viewpoints, and the survival of a revolutionary spirit among significant parts of the population. That many people are keeping their heads down is evidence that the battlefield has become exceedingly dangerous, not that the fight is over. If *Mada*’s particular incarnation of the revolution is dismantled, in the view of the paper’s staff and supporters a new incarnation will emerge

elsewhere. The revolution that animates these journalists will not so easily be extinguished. “The most difficult thing is to prevent these ideas from being thought in the first place,” Khaled Fahmy said of *Mada’s* content. “And if they are thought, with these technologies and this energy, it doesn’t take a genius to expect they will be expressed.”

In a piece written from jail on June 12, 2014, Alaa Abdel Fattah compared his generation to his father’s era of human rights activists: “I write of a generation that fought without despair and without hope, that won only small victories and wasn’t shaken by major defeats because they were the natural order of things. A generation whose ambitions were lower than the ambitions of those who came before, but whose dream was larger.”⁸² The let-down and despair of today’s revolutionaries is great. But unlike the generation of Abdel Fattah’s father, they have also experienced a sense of infinite possibility, which *Mada Masr’s* endeavors have kept alive in at least one space.

About This Project

This report is part of “Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism,” a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Studies in this series explore attempts to build institutions and ideologies during a period of resurgent authoritarianism, and at times amidst violent conflict and state collapse. The project documents some of the spaces where change is still emerging, as well as the dynamic forces arrayed against it. The collected essays will be published by TCF Press in June 2017.

Notes

1. A note on the use of the word “secular” in an Egyptian context: in other North African countries, especially Tunisia, the term “secular” is often posited in sharp opposition to “religious” or “Islamist,” a dichotomy analogous to the one that exists in France. In Egypt there is no such bright line between Islamist and secular, or rather, there wasn’t prior to 2013.
2. Adel Iskandar, interview with the author by telephone, September 20, 2016.
3. Ibid.
4. Fatemeh Farag, interview with the author by telephone, September 27, 2016.
5. Sharif Abdel Kouddous, interview with the author by telephone, September 15, 2016.
6. Farag now runs a news network called “Welad el-Balad,” an independent community news organization that works in twenty Egyptian governorates and has ten newsrooms across the country, focusing on stories outside of the capital, a rarity in Egypt. Not everyone agreed with her decision to resign from *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. “My thinking was, we have to stay and fight,” Nasrawi remembered.
7. Saif Nasrawi, interview with the author by telephone, September 29, 2016.
8. Lina Attalah, interview with the author by telephone, September 11, 2016.
9. Iskandar, interview.

10. Jack Shenker, "Mohamd ElBaradei Warns of Tunisia-Style Explosion in Egypt," *The Guardian*, January 18, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/18/mohamed-elbaradei-tunisia-egypt>.
11. Nasrawi, interview.
12. Attalah, interview.
13. Iskandar, interview.
14. As Middle East-based journalist Ursula Lindsey wrote in 2011, "The triumph of the revolution—at least in its primary demand, Mubarak's resignation—was accompanied by a discrediting of government-controlled news, a flourishing of 'homemade' media of all sorts, and a validation of outlets such as Al Jazeera and other pugnacious satellite channels, some privately owned." Ursula Lindsey, "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in the Egyptian Media," Middle East Research and Information Project, February 15, 2011, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero021511>.
15. Jack Shenker, "Egypt's Media Undergo their Own Revolution," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/feb/21/egypt-media-revolution>.
16. Ibid.
17. "Egypt: Don't Cover Up Military Killing of Copt Protesters," Human Rights Watch, October 25, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/25/egypt-dont-cover-military-killing-copt-protesters>.
18. Zeinab el-Gundy, "Outrage over State TV's Misinformation and Anti-Coptic Incitement," Ahram Online, October 10, 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/23813/Egypt/Politics-/Outrage-over-state-TVs-misinformation-and-antiCopt.aspx>.
19. As Ursula Lindsey, who worked as *Mada's* special projects editor from 2013 to 2014, pointed out in 2011, "the government has kept tight control over terrestrial broadcasting, which depends directly upon the Ministry of Information for its content" and is well aware of where its largest audience base lies: "As the regime knows very well, the eight state TV channels are the only source of visual information for the many poor Egyptians who do not have satellite channels or internet connections in their houses." Lindsey, "Revolution and Counter-Revolution."
20. Max Strasser, interview with the author by telephone, September 13, 2016.
21. Ahmad Shokr, interview with the author by telephone, September 26, 2016.
22. Jahd Khalil, interview with the author by telephone, September 4, 2016.
23. Farag, interview.
24. Attalah, interview.
25. Leslie. T. Chang, "The News Website That's Keeping Press Freedom Alive in Egypt," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/jan/27/sp-online-newspaper-keeping-press-freedom-alive-egypt>.
26. "Egypt: Rab'a Killings Likely Crimes against Humanity," *Human Rights Watch*, August 12, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity>.
27. "All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killing of Protesters in Egypt," *Human Rights Watch*, August 12, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt#4ab8e3>.
28. Amira Ahmed, interview with the author by telephone, September 18, 2016.

29. "Update: Alaa Abdel Fattah Being Held at CSF Barracks," Mada Masr, November 28, 2013.
30. Attalah, interview.
31. Ursula Lindsey, interview with the author.
32. Lina Attalah et al., "Who Are 'the People'?", Arab Council for the Social Sciences, February 11, 2015.
<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2015/02/11/feature/politics/who-are-the-people/> target="_blank".
33. Sarah Carr, interview with the author by telephone, September 18, 2016.
34. Abdel Kouddous, interview.
35. Khaled Fahmy, interview with the author by telephone, October 16, 2016.
36. Khaled Fahmy's writings in colloquial Arabic can be found at
<http://www.madamasr.com/ar/contributor/%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%87%D9%85%D9%8A/>.
37. Lina Attalah and Mark Levine, "Another 48 Hours," Mada Masr, February 9, 2014,
<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2014/02/09/opinion/u/another-48-hours/>.
38. See Omar Ryad, "Living under Curfew: Arish Transforms into a Ghost Town," Mada Masr, November 1, 2014,
<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2014/11/01/feature/politics/living-under-curfew-arish-transforms-into-a-ghost-town/>.
39. See Heba Afify, "Disappeared, Detained and Tortured for No Reason: Islam Khalil Recounts His Story," *Mada Masr*, October 19, 2016, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/10/19/feature/politics/disappeared-detained-and-tortured-for-no-reason-islam-khalil-recounts-his-story/>.
40. See Mohamed Hamama, "Your Guide to Understanding the Pound Devaluation," *Mada Masr*, November 3, 2016,
<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/11/03/feature/economy/q-and-a-on-pound-devaluation/>.
41. See Osama Diab, "How Every Dollar Became Twelve Thousand Dollars in Less than a Decade for Gamal Mubarak," October 20, 2016, Mada Masr, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/10/20/feature/economy/how-every-dollar-became-12000-in-less-than-a-decade-for-gamal-mubarak/>.
42. Attalah, interview.
43. Attalah et al., "Who Are 'the People'?"
44. For example, in its current "About Us" section it states that a part of its mandate is "reexamining the role of media in relation to its public." <http://www.madamasr.com/en/about-us/>
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Attalah, interview.
48. Ibid.
49. For more on the crackdown on NGOs, see Khaled Mansour's report on this site, "Egypt's Human Rights Movement: Repression, Resistance, and Co-optation." Source: <https://tcf.org/content/report/egypts-human-rights-movement/>
50. Ahmed, interview.
51. While she and others appreciated the collective decision-making up to a point, some said that at moments of disagreement, they would have preferred to have had some sort of arbiter, which might in the end have led to less conflict.[note]The management structure sometimes led to more serious disputes. Mohamed Adam, one of Mada's

- cofounders, was promoted to editor when the Arabic website was launched. But after differences with management over how he was running the site, he took a leave of absence in the fall of 2014. When he wanted to come back a month later, Attalah decided against it. She said she personally supported his return but that others at Mada did not agree.
52. Dalia Rabie, interview with the author by telephone, October 10, 2016.
53. "I remember having a meeting with writers about meeting deadlines, about how we can encourage ourselves to meet deadlines," Sarah Carr said. "But cracking the whip wasn't part of the culture. In any other institution you meet deadlines or you'll get your pay docked." Carr, interview.
54. Ibid.
55. Lindsey, interview.
56. Abdel Kouddous, interview.
57. Ibid.
58. Fahmy, interview.
59. Rabie, interview.
60. Leila Fadel, "Egyptian Journalist Hossam Bahgat Detained over Investigative Story," *NPR*, November 8, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/11/08/455247165/egyptian-journalist-hossam-bahgat-detained-over-investigative-story>.
61. Lin Noueihad and Ahmed Aboulenein, "Human Rights on Trial in Egypt as NGO Funding Case Revived," *Reuters*, March 25, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-rights-idUSKCN0WQ20X>.
62. See "A Letter from Alaa Abd El Fattah to His Sisters," *Mada Masr*, January 23, 2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2014/01/23/feature/politics/a-letter-from-alaa-abd-el-fattah-to-his-sisters/>.
63. See "Graffiti for Two... Alaa and Douma," *Mada Masr*, January 25, 2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2014/01/25/feature/politics/graffiti-for-two-alaa-and-douma/>.
64. Alaa Abdel Fattah, "An Open Letter," *Mada Masr*, August 26, 2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2014/08/26/opinion/u/an-open-letter/>.
65. Mohamed Adam, interview with the author by telephone, October 8, 2016. After leaving *Mada* late in 2014 following disagreements about the management structure, Adam went on to work for *The Economist* and to do a fellowship at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in London, though he has remained a friend and proponent of *Mada*.
66. Abdel Kouddous, interview.
67. Iskandar, interview.
68. Mohamed Hamama, "New Plans to Regulate Digital Media," *Mada Masr*, November 4, 2015, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2015/11/04/feature/politics/new-plans-to-regulate-digital-media/>.
69. Zvi Bar'el, "60,000 Political Prisoners and 1,250 Missing: Welcome to the New Egypt," *Haaretz*, September 11, 2016, <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-1.741178>.
70. Attalah, interview.
71. Iskandar, interview.

72. Shokr, interview.

73. Ahmed, interview.

74. Abdel Kouddous, interview.

75. Attalah, interview.

76. Abdel Kouddous, interview.

77. Ahmed, interview.

78. Rabie, interview.

79. For more on Egypt's cartoonists, see Jonathan Guyer's report on this site, "Speech Bubbles: Comics and Political Cartoons in Sisi's Egypt." Source: <https://tcf.org/content/report/speech-bubbles/>

80. Abdel Kouddous, interview.

81. Attalah, interview.

82. Alaa Abdel Fattah, "Graffiti for Two...Alaa and Douma," Mada Masr, January 25, 2014,

<http://www.madamasr.com/en/2014/01/25/feature/politics/graffiti-for-two-alaa-and-douma/>.



Laura C. Dean, Contributor

Laura C. Dean is a journalist who specializes in Egypt and the Middle East and North Africa region.