Out of sight:

A study on the effects of three years of blocking news websites

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Table of contents:

Methodology

This study on blocked news websites in Egypt is based on data and statistics collected by the monitoring and documentation unit at the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE). The unit used Ooni Probe, an open source tool designed to trace censorship and other forms of traffic manipulation on the internet. The software helps detect whether or not a website is blocked, carries out various other network tests, and tests to see if the website works on commonly used browsers and on other browsers designed to override blocks, such as Tor.

AFTE stresses that the list of blocked news sites is not an exhaustive list of all the news and media websites being blocked in Egypt, but that it lists those which the monitoring and documentation unit was able to verify.

Interviews were also conducted and recorded with six representatives from four blocked news websites. All of these were done face-to-face and recorded, except for one which was conducted via email. AFTE's researchers tried to reach the representatives of four other websites but were unsuccessful, as site managers either declined the interviews or didn't respond to contact requests.

AFTE's study also reviewed three judicial cases on blocked websites that were heard at the Court of Administrative Justice, including Case 50624/71, Case 51294/71, and Case 52474/71.

The study also drew on the team's general research on digital rights, and its research on website blocks in particular, since the team works to collect all press statements, news, and official statements on this file.

Introduction:

In May 2017 the Egyptian state launched a massive crackdown on websites in Egypt in an attempt to impose total censorship on the internet. In most cases, the source of the official decision to block the website is unknown. A committee tasked with seizing Muslim Brotherhood assets has issued a block on 33 websites[1], while the Supreme Council for Media Regulation has issued a decision to block 11 websites over the past three years.

There are now at least 127 news and media sites that are blocked. Hundreds of other sites are also blocked, including the websites of local and international human rights organizations, along with the websites of proxies and VPNs that enable users to bypass blocks. The government's ceaseless attempts to tighten control over the internet aren't a new phenomenon, however, but one which began in the 2000's as the internet became more and more important as a tool for mobilizing and applying political pressure.

Perhaps the most notable moment in this regard was the government's complete shutdown of the internet and mobile networks during the January 25 revolution. However, the efforts gained momentum in the period following the ouster of former President Mohamed Morsi. The military's accession to power was accompanied by a concerted effort on the part of the authorities to stifle the whole public sphere and to suppress all forms of opposition in public spaces, leading online spaces to emerge as one of the last places where people could still practice freedom of speech. [2]

At the outset, blocks were aimed at Muslim Brotherhood websites, or at websites belonging to their affiliates. Later, independent local news and media sites and others belonging to the international press were targeted by blocks, as were sites owned by human rights organizations. The blocks had no constitutional or legal basis; on the contrary they go against stipulations in the Constitution which protect the right of citizens to knowledge, to use all forms of communication freely without obstacles. The website blocks also violate prohibitions in the Constitution on the confiscation of newspapers and the prevention of their publication. This prompted three news websites affected by the block to file lawsuits demanding the block be lifted, and for full disclosure of the entity responsible for the block and the reasons the block was issued.

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1. Mohamed el-Taher, The Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, "Occasionally by Decree… Update on the Block of Websites in Egypt", May 18, 2018, https://bit.ly/2YrGLUg

2. Mohamed Nagy (Editor), "New Laws… Ruling the internet with an iron fist", The Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, September 4, 2018, last accessed on March 10, 2020, https://bit.ly/2TQLWuN

As AFTE has traced the various techniques used to block websites at different stages, AFTE has been able to trace thousands of websites that were blocked as the state went in pursuit of websites attempting to use alternative domains or IP addresses to make their websites accessible. Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) project, which was designed to speed up access to web pages from smartphones, has also been blocked, which has resulted in the blocking of millions of pages that benefit from the service.

In an attempt to legalize these practices, several laws have been issued over the last two years to regulate the media and press landscape. These include a law that regulates the press, the media and the SCMR, as well as a law to combat cybercrime. These laws have granted wide-reaching powers to the SCMR to issue decisions to block press and media sites on the basis of a broad spectrum of violations which the SCMR has a lot of freedom to interpret. This law also granted juridical, investigative, and prosecutory bodies the power to block websites directly.

This research sheds light on how the state uses internet censorship against press and media sites. The study also attempts to map out website blocks, how they have developed, their background, and the particular legal conditions around them. It also tries to look at how these blocks affect press institutions. There is a particular focus on the economic repercussions, taking into account the deteriorating state of journalism in Egypt over the past few years, as well as looking at the state's attempts to control the televised, audio, and written media, both on and offline.

Main conclusions:

- By blocking websites the Egyptian government violates Article 57 of the Egyptian Constitution, which stipulates that: "The state shall protect the rights of citizens to use all forms of public means of communication, which may not be arbitrarily disrupted, stopped or withheld from citizens, as regulated by the law." The practice also violates Article 65, which reads,"Freedom of thought and opinion is guaranteed. All individuals have the right to express their opinion through speech, writing, imagery, or any other means of expression and publication." Additionally, it is in violation of Article 71 which stipulates that "It is prohibited to censor, confiscate, suspend or shut down Egyptian newspapers and media outlets in any way. By way of exception, they may be subject to limited censorship in times of war or general mobilization."

- The Egyptian authorities' practice of blocking websites violates Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that states:

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference

2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in artwork, or through any other media of his choice

- Despite the issuance of laws legitimizing the practice of blocking press and media sites, the entity responsible for the block, and the methods and technologies used remain unknown, except in the case of a few sites that have been blocked by the Committee for the Inventory, Seizure, and Management of Muslim Brotherhood Funds and by the SCMR.

- Most news and media website blocks have proven to be a result of editorial policies that are pro-democracy and human rights, and attempt to display ideas other than prevailing state narratives.

- Most media bodies, including the Journalists Syndicate, the SCMR, the Broadcasting Syndicate, the National Press Authority and the National Broadcasting Authority have not made any attempt to put an end to the widespread state practice of blocking websites.

- The public can sometimes access a number of press and media sites that have been blocked. AFTE attributes this to technical issues in the tools used by official entities to implement the block.

- Several press and media sites have returned to work after blocks were lifted, and until now the site managers are not aware of the reason for the block or the reason why it was lifted. This indicates that there are two types of blocks: permanent and temporary.

- The government has expanded the practice of blocking websites, sometimes blocking not only the intended site but its subdomains as well. For example, when the Tor project (torproject.org) was blocked, six other websites that use its subdomains such as metrics.torproject.org were blocked, even though the site only provides data on the number of Tor users. Another example is the Qatari state-owned *Al-Jazeera* website. Nine of its subdomains have also been blocked even though some do not publish political content, such as *Al-Jazeera Sports* and a website for Arabic language learners.

- The block has significantly affected Arabic-language content on the internet, which is scarce in comparison to content available in other languages. Blocking specific websites has affected an archive of millions of pages of journalistic and human rights-based content written in Arabic.

- The government's widespread practice of blocking websites has affected these sites' economic viability, since their profit is primarily dependent on their being able to attract a large audience base. This has severely affected the rate of investment in Egypt's digital journalism sector.

- A number of press institutions have been unable to overcome the economic repercussions of the block, which led to shut downs, layoffs, and cuts in the number of journalists employed so as to be able to sustain operations.

Chapter One: A map of blocked news and media sites, and how the blocks happened

Blocks have targeted hundreds of websites over the past three years. In blocking websites, the government has mainly aimed to control news, reportage, and content circulated via these sites, especially press and broadcasting sites. More specifically, it has aimed to tighten control over content that is not directly subject to government oversight, most notably those that publish outside the country.

This chapter aims to map blocked press sites, as well as the background of these blocks. Understanding the background of how these websites were blocked helps us to understand the government's policy with regard to implementing them.

1. A map of blocked news and media sites

There are now 127 blocked press and media sites.

Seven of these are local news sites that cover specific Egyptian governorates. All of these local sites are indirectly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and not all publish a printed edition.

The list also includes 10 websites that publish in English and a single website in Serbian. Some of these sites are not solely concerned with Egyptian affairs, and a number of them do not target an Egyptian audience.

The list of blocked press sites also includes six sites that have stopped working, laid off their employees and shut down, and all of which have put this down to the financial impact caused by the block. At the time of writing, the list also included 11 other sites whose domain names were not active, while six websites were also included whose domain was offered for sale.

The list also included six personal blogs and three blogging platforms.

Twelve Qatari websites and eight Turkish websites were also on the list, as well as two Lebanese websites, one Iranian, one Tunisian, and one Palestinian.

2. Background of the block of the news and media sites

Website blocks cannot be separated from the general state of rights and freedoms in Egypt. Particularly following summer 2013, the state has since tightened control over the public sphere and its various outlets. The press and the media were the first to be subjected to these new approaches to exercising control. The market for media and journalism was monopolized in the interests of both old and new entities affiliated to intelligence bodies. As the judicial, legislative and institutional nature of the media sector was changed, space was cleared for the sector to be subjected to executive control, as was its content.

This mania for monopolizing information, and pushing an official narrative of events, has excluded opposition thought, and even suppressed and restricted opposition in all its forms.

Website blocks can be categorized as follows.

- **Websites blocked due to editorial policies:**

  - **Masr al-Arabiya**

The *Masr al-Arabiya* news website has been subjected to a number of abuses. The general manager of the website has been arrested twice, the editor-in-chief detained and police have raided the local news website office several times. The office has been shut down and all the website's accounts confiscated.

In an interview with AFTE, Ahmed Abdel Gawad, the general manager of *Masr al-Arabiya* website, recalled:

> "*Attempts to crack down on the website started before the block. From 2014, we'd get a yearly campaign from the Censorship Board, which tried to find any fault that would subject us to its authority, work permits for example, or computer licenses. We had acquired all the work permits and there was no evidence against us. Yet, they would file a report every time. They arrested me twice, once in 2015, and another time in 2016. I was released because there was no real justification for me to be detained.*"[3]

According to Abdel Gawad, state bodies continued to tighten control over the website, with the Cabinet issuing a decision in early 2017 that prohibited interaction with 24 websites including *Masr al-Arabiya*— until the site was blocked in mid-May of the same year.

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3. In an interview with Ahmed Abdel-Gawad, director of *Masr al-Arabiya* website, Cairo, May 2019

And the pressure on the website didn't end with the block. Abdel Gawad says:

> "About a year after the site was blocked, in April 2018 to be precise, security personnel from the Department for the Investigation of Artistic Products and Intellectual Property Rights raided our office. They did not inquire about licenses, but rather interrogated us on the website's coverage of the presidential elections, specifically regarding a piece we had translated from The New York Times about the elections. It was clear they didn't like our coverage. It was then that they arrested the website's editor-in-chief, Adel Sabry."

Masr al-Arabiya editor-in-chief was detained for three months pending investigation into the case. He was charged with translating and republishing false news by The New York times. However, before his scheduled release in July 2018, the Supreme State Security Prosecution began to investigate him for similar charges in relation to Case 441/2018. Sabry remains in prison until now pending investigation.

- Al-Bedaya, Al-Badil and Darb

On June 11, 2017, the news websites *Al-Bedaya* (the Beginning) and *Al-Badil* (the Alternative) were blocked after publishing an opinion piece titled "Egypt is not for sale: *Erhil*" (the word *Erhil* implies calling on a leader to resign). The piece was attributed to the journalist Khaled al-Balshy. However, *Al-Badil* issued a statement announcing that its website had been hacked and that it was not responsible for the article. It explained in the statement that "one of its published pieces had been taken down, its content and title changed, and the aforementioned article published in its place." The statement indicated that "shortly after the publication of the article, *Al-Badil's* followers had difficulty accessing the website from Egypt, so it seems it was blocked."[4]

Around the same time, al-Balshy published a statement titled, "On the fake article attributed to me and on blocking *Al-Bedaya* website," in which he explained that the article published on *Al-Badil* was "fabricated," and that he publishes his articles on *Al-Bedaya*, a website that was blocked on the same day.[5]

Al-Bedaya has not been publishing content since December 2017, while *Al-Badil* stopped publishing after an announcement in April 2018 that attributed its shut down to "the continued block on the website's content that prevents it from reaching the public."

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4. *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, "Al-Badil: our website hacked, fabricated article by Khaled al-Balshy," June 12, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/trj8j4k

5. Khaled al-Balshy, on his personal account on Facebook, "an important statement on the fake article attributed to me and on blocking Al-Bedaya website, 11 June 2017, https://tinyurl.com/rwdt3g6

In an interview with AFTE, journalist and Editor-in-Chief of *Al-Bedaya* Khaled al-Balshy said:

> *"With the onset of the widespread practice of internet censorship in May 2017, I received information that Ahmed Selim, the secretary general of the SCMR, had a list of 22 sites that were to be blocked, and that Al-Bedaya was among them. Not all websites on the list had been completely blocked at the time. At the beginning of June, I was flooded with a series of angry and insulting calls, which I did not know the reason for. It was the month of Ramadan when a colleague that worked in a press website close to the state, told me that orders had been issued for a smear campaign against me. I was shocked when I learned that I was being attacked for an article that I had not written, published on Al-Badil's website, and full of insults toward the president, the House of Representatives, and leaders of the state. I filed a police report at Qasr al-Aini Police Station saying that I had nothing to do with the article and that I wasn't responsible for what it said. I also filed a report with the SCMR. Al-Bedaya and Al-Badil were blocked at the same time off the back of the publication of that article. Parliament also suspended its general sessions to discuss the fake article and decided to file a lawsuit against me. I sent a telegraph to the speaker of Parliament and the secretary general explaining that I did not write the article and I attached Al-Badil's statement explaining the hack and an explanation of all the details."* [6]

The same thing happened with the *Bawabet Yanayer* (January Gate) website. The website announced that it has been hacked by an unknown party on June 12, 2017. A fake article attributed to Amr Badr, site editor and a member of the Journalists Syndicate, was published on their website.

Badr denied writing the article in a post he wrote on his personal Facebook account. He explained that the website was hacked and said that "at the same time *Youm7* published a response to the article that I did not write." [7] The website was later blocked in Egypt. *Bawabet Yanayer* has not published any journalistic content since November 2017.

Khaled al-Balshy adds:

> *"In addition to blocking Al-Bedaya, Al-Badil and Bawabet Yanayer because of a fake article, the authorities blocked Masreyat, a website edited by my wife."* [8]

The news website Darb was also blocked in Egypt on April 9, 2020, one month after it's launch. The Socialist Popular Alliance Party created the website, which is headed by Editor-in-Chief Khaled al-Balshy.

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6. An interview with Khaled al-Balshy, former editor-in-chief of Al-Bedaya website, Cairo, December 2019

7. Amr Badr, on his personal account on Facebook, 12 June 2017, https://bit.ly/3dqTXiO

8.An interview with Khaled al-Balshy, former editor-in-chief of Al-Bedaya website, Cairo, December 2019

- **Al-Khalig Al-Gadid and Al-Akhbar (Lebanon)**

On January 17, 2018, *Al-Khalig Al-Gadid* (The New Gulf) news website published an article entitled, "Al-Sisi dismisses General Intelligence Service director after leak scandal." According to the news, "President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi made major changes in the General Intelligence Service, including dismissing the director of the agency, along with several other leaders and officers in the intelligence agency." Al-Sisi dismissed Khaled Fawzy from his position and replaced him with his deputy, Major General Ibrahim Abdel Salam.

On January 20, 2018, a few days after the news was published, the site was blocked in Egypt. It was not the only site that was blocked for publishing news about the dismissal of the head of the intelligence agency. The Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar* was also blocked on the same day for publishing a story under the title "Sisi dismisses intelligence chief: Failed to resolve Palestinian issue, media."

- **Raseef 22**

On September 5, 2018, *Raseef 22* published an article titled, "The nature of the relationship between media and security in Egypt." The article tackled the interference of intelligence bodies in Egypt's media landscape in Egypt through the Egypt Media Group —owned by Eagle Capital— and its acquisition of various TV networks. As a result, the website was blocked in Egypt a day after the article's publication.

On September 7, a day after the block, *Raseef 22* issued a statement, saying:

> "Frustrated and sad... This is how we feel about Egypt's decision to censor Raseef22. For someone to come and try and separate you from an audience you loved, an audience that loved you, is no easy matter for those of us who work in the media." [9]

In an interview with AFTE, Hassan Abbas, co-editor-in-chief of *Raseef 22* said:

> "We weren't under any direct pressure. But months before Raseef 22 was blocked, several friends and colleagues in Egypt had told me the same story: I met a security officer who told me, 'We are watching you.' In most cases, our friends and colleagues would be telling us this story with fear. They were afraid for themselves first and foremost, since what could affect us at Raseef 22, could also target them." [10]

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9. *Raseef22*, "Raseef22 is banned for Egyptians... for how long will freedom of expression be suppressed?," September 7, 2018, https://tinyurl. com/te426ep

10. An interview via email with Hassan Abbas, co-editor in chief of *Raseef 22*, May 2019

Abbas added:

"There is no transparency around who is doing the monitoring, nor are any statements issued explaining the reasons for a particular website being censored. The identity of who's observing is essentially undefined. The powers authorizing website blocks in Egypt are spread out over several different bodies, and it's not clear which of these bodies issues the block, nor which entity is responsible for it."[11]

On the reasons behind the block in Egypt, Abbas said:

"After Raseef 22 was blocked in Egypt, we published a statement in which we said that we have committed many "crimes" that justify the block; of course this was a cynical turn of phrase. We presented a set of the most prominent topics that we have covered and that the Egyptian monitors would consider a "red line:" We wrote about the restrictions of the press and freedom of expression on social media in Egypt; government efforts to cover up the facts revealed by human rights organizations; the arrests of activists; the arrests targeting the relatives of opposition figures in order to threaten them; and we wrote on how the government supports non-Egyptian opposition in order to exploit them politically and then suppresses them for the same purpose; that the state has tightened control over the media in an attempt to unify its tone; the police's purposeful targeting of LGBT groups and those in solidarity with them; and the lack of sincerity in the discussion around renewing religious discourse. It's for all of this that we're blocked in Egypt. That's how we see it." [12]

• **Websites blocked by an SCMR decision**

The SCMR has issued decisions to block 11 news websites, including seven owned by the MO4 Network, as well as *Al-Sabah, Al-Ikhbariya, Al-Mashhad and Al-Shoura.*

The online magazine *El Fasla* published an article titled "Emirati passport ranked first worldwide" on December 3, 2018. The article included the phrase "you can have your 7,000 years of civilization," which the SCMR alleged was an "unprofessional transgression and unjustified insult to the Egyptian passport." In response, the SCMR sent a request to the General Authority for Investment (GAI) to suspend MO4, the parent company of *El Fasla*, as well as *CairoTime* and *CairoZoom*.[13]

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11. Ibid

12. An interview via email with Hassan Abbas, co-editor in chief of *Raseef 22*, May 2019

13. Supreme Council for Media Regulation, "SCMR calls on investment authority to suspend digital media services company for violating Egyptian passport," December 3, 2018 https://bit.ly/2UgYs6a

The GAI responded to the SCMR's request on December 13, stating that it "found no evidence of [MO4's] existence," and it "does not fall under the authority's auspices and is not subject to the laws it is entrusted with implementing."[14]

By the end of the month, the SCMR Complaints Committee had recommended that the council block the *CairoScene* website as it had not acquired a license from the council, and that its parent company MO4 did not have a license from the GAI. According to the Complaints Committee, the website contained "indecent photos and pornographic language."[15]

After *El Fasla, CairoScene* was the second of MO4's websites to be blocked by the Complaints Committee for operating without a license, as well as for "publishing content offensive to the Egyptian state." Eventually, the company's other websites were blocked for operating without a license, including *CairoZoom*, *SceneArabia*, *StartUpScene* and *El Scene*.

The SCMR's decision to block websites owned by MO4 Network was the first application of the Law Regulating the Press, Media and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (Law 180/2018), which gives the SCMR sweeping powers, including the authority to block news websites.

MO4 Network also owns *El Scene*, which was blocked in Egypt on June 26, 2017, shortly after it published what became known as the "army cookies" video in which a group of young men review different sweets, including one produced by the army-owned company Tibarose.

• **Websites blocked shortly after their initial launch**

- **Kateb**

On June 24, 2018 the blogging website *Kateb*, under Khaled al-Balshy's editorship, was blocked just six hours after its launch — probably the fastest of such blocks in Egypt. The website addresses "issues from a rights-based perspective and is concerned with press and media freedoms and society's right to know and circulate information." Due to the impact of the block, *Kateb's* founders decided to suspend its operations on November 5, 2018 in opposition to the "press and media laws," or the "laws on the death sentence for journalism" as the statement referred to them.

The statement concluded, "given all of these difficult changes, we made the difficult decision to suspend work at the website and give ourselves the opportunity to search for legal alternatives to fight what's happening, or to prepare to try again."[16]

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14. *Dot Misr,* SCMR Complaints committee blocks CairoScene, December 31, 2018, https://bit.ly/2UCJ4ln

15. Ibid

16. *Kateb*, A statement from the editorial family: suspending work at (Katib), November 5, 2018, https://bit.ly/2y9KHzE

Katib was launched by the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, which had its main website blocked weeks later on August 6, 2017.

- **Jeem**

On July 29, 2018, the website *Jeem* was blocked in Egypt, less than a month after its July 5 launch. Run by the Cairo Goethe Institut, *Jeem* deals with gender, sex, sexuality and their intersections, and is aimed at young Arabic speakers in the MENA region and around the world who are seeking information on these issues.[17]

• Websites which said they stopped work due to the block

- **Alkessa**

Alkessa is a website that launched in mid-2016 and defined itself as "an Egyptian website providing analytic and professional news services." The site was blocked inside of Egypt on June 18, 2017. Because of the difficulty in continuing work as a consequence of the economic effects of the block, *Alkessa* issued a statement on January 3, 2018 announcing that it would suspend its work:

> *"Due to the pressures, restrictions, obstruction and the block by the Egyptian authorities against Alkessa, the website's team has decided to suspend its written and visual analytical content temporarily, both on the website and on its official pages on Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram. And very soon, God willing, we will return stronger than before."[18]*

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17. *Jeem,* On the website, https://bit.ly/2WL8cJw

18. *Alkessa*, "A statement from Alkessa's team," January 3, 2018, (The website's domain no longer works after it was shut down)

- **Egypt Daily News**

Egypt Daily News was an independent English language news website launched in 2000 that was part of the initial wave of website blocks carried out by Egyptian authorities in May 2017. After nearly 10 months straight under the block, the website issued a statement on April 4, 2018, announcing that it would shut down:

> *"For the record, we are closing the site not because it was blocked, but because we see it as insulting and defamatory that Egyptdailynews.com has been placed on a list with terrorist websites and anit- Egypt websites ."[19]*

- **Huffington Post Arabi (HuffPost Arabi)**

Originally launched in July 2015, HuffPost Arabi was blocked on May 24, 2017 during the initial wave of websites blocked by the government. Ten months later, the site announced that "starting on March 30, 2018, it would no longer publish content"[20] and directed readers to its new website ArabiPost, which was subsequently blocked on October 30, 2018.

- **Korabia**

Korabia was a sports website published on the *Moheet* news portal — which is owned by Media Pan Arab. On May 28, 2017, the *Moheet*'s main website was blocked, followed by *Korabia* on July 6. *Korabia* tried to use a new domain, but this was also blocked. Its administrators then decided to halt work indefinitely, "or until we reach whoever is responsible for the matter — the block — and address things properly." The statement read:

> *"Today we are facing a hidden force — we don't know what it is or what steps should be taken to handle the website being blocked twice in Egypt in less than a year. We, the decision makers, are a strictly Egyptian institution.[21]*

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19. *Egypt Daily News*, "Egyptdailynews.com is Closing," April 4, 2018 https://bit.ly/2QMvo6q

20. HuffPostArabi https://bit.ly/2QMwtuR

21.*Korabia,* "Our last message...after Korabia was blocked for the second time with no reason,"March 15, 2018 https://bit.ly/2UFKYlz

- **Maddad**

Maddad is a media platform launched in May 2017 by Al-Karama foundation for press, publishing and distribution. On June 16, just one month after its launch, the site was blocked inside of Egypt. The platform continued operating for a year despite the block, but on May 16, 2018, *Madad* issued a statement announcing the site's closure:

> *After a year, circumstances have compelled us to say that the time has come to end the experiment, whether temporarily or permanently. We apologize for being unable to continue providing the content we tried as hard as possible to put out in the way we aspired to. We may have stumbled a lot in realizing this at times with different issues, but we never presented anything we weren't satisfied with.*[22]

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22. *Maddad* official Facebook page: "Maddad" to its readers … peace, "hope" and conclusion" https://bit.ly/2QKogYg

Chapter 2: The impacts of the block on independent media websites:

Website blocks have a range of impacts. Internet users will notice, for example, that they are unable to access sites that have had blocks activated on them. There are also less immediately visible effects, such as the toll taken on the website itself by the neverending technical and legal attempts to fight the block, or the economic burden it places on websites and their employees. This chapter aims to trace these effects.

- ## The technical impact of blocks

The wave of website blocking started in Egypt in May 2017, primarily aiming to control the flow of news and information[23] on the internet. It's for this reason that news websites were targeted with blocks first. Initially, the Egyptian authorities blocked 21 websites which all produced news, with the exception of two outlets. The authorities continued to block more websites, reaching a total of at least 127 websites at the time of publication. Various outlets are affected, including news websites, websites affiliated with TV channels, and independent media websites.

In response, some websites have tried to adopt new methods not commonly used in Egypt to overcome the blocks like using Google's AMP project or Facebook Instant Articles. Both services allow readers with no technical expertise to circumvent the block and browse the websites easily.

Some websites used other alternative links to publish their content through proxy servers, thereby providing their audience to their audience with unblocked links, or relied on the free metasearch engine searx to provide alternative links through proxy servers. Others resorted to changing their domain name to another that is not blocked. In most cases, the alternatives servers also were blocked[24].

Khaled al-Balshy, editor-in-chief of the blocked *Al-Bidaya* news website says:

> *"The practice of [website] blocking is relatively new in Egypt, so circumventing the block wasn't easy at first. The public wasn't used to using proxies or VPNs, so our website visits decreased sharply. Then, we used alternative links and the AMP tool. And we got back a portion of our readership."*[25]

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23. Ahmed Aboulenein, *Reuters,* Egypt blocks 21 websites for 'terrorism' and 'fake news', 24 May 2017, https://reut.rs/37ZUxSl

24. Mohamed al-Taher and others, AFTE, Shutting down outlets...Internet censorship in Egypt, 19 February 2018, https://bit.ly/3aq65hj

25. An interview with Khaled al-Balshy, former editor-in-chief of Al-Bedaya website, Cairo, December 2019

Three websites that al-Balshy has run have been blocked over the past three years, starting with *Al-Bidaya* in June 2017, *Katib* in June 2018, and finally *Darb* in April 2020.[26] *Al-Bidaya* and *Katib* have both stopped operating, although *Darb* continues to produce content.

Al-Manassa website also took technical steps to overcome the block, steps that its editor in chief Nora Younis describes as " mechanisms of coexistence with the block." She says:

> " *We tried to preserve the site itself and its content, so our own servers are somehow encrypted and we periodically make copies of the website.[27]*"

Al-Manassa's web community manager Ahmed Bilal says that they are currently using several domains. Whenever one gets blocked, they move to the other.[28]

Raseef22's co-editor in chief and political editor Hassan Abbas said that they created a new link that they use just for the Egyptian part of their audience.

Mada Masr, which was blocked in May 2017, has used over 22 alternative mirror links, all of which have been blocked in succession.[29]

In addition to being blocked, *Mada Masr* and its staff have been the subject of several abuses. These include the arrest of one of its journalists, which was followed shortly afterward by a raid on their offices on November 24, 2019, during which security forces held journalists in *Mada Masr's* headquarters for several hours, and temporarily detained three journalists including the website's Editor-in-Chief Lina Attalah.[30] Attalah was also arrested in front of the Tora Prison complex on 17 May, 2020, when she was interviewing Laila Souief, mother of political activist and detainee Alaa Abd El Fattah. Attalah was accused of filming a military facility without permits, although she was released on bail the same day.[31]

Unlike the management of *Al-Bidaya* and *Al-Manassa*, news website *Masr al-Arabiya*, which was blocked in May 2017, didn't wish to use alternative methods to allow its audience to browse their content. Its administrative director Ahmed Abdel Gawad said:

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26. AFTE, Khaled al-Balshy's Darb blocked after one month from launching, 9 April 2020, https://bit.ly/2YeauzV

27. An interview conducted by the researcher with three people from *Al-Manassa*: Editor-in-Chief Nora Younis, web community manager Ahmed Bilal, and Executive Editor Sayyid Turki

28. AFTE's interview with Ahmed Bilal

29. Mohamed Tita, *Mada Masr,* Beating the block: Mada Masr launches Tor mirror, 25 December, 2019, https://bit.ly/3i3zK4X

30. Mohamad Nagy, *AFTE,* To What Extent Does The Egyptian Government Respect Press Freedom?, 4 December 2019, https://afteegypt.org/en/afte_releases/2019/12/09/18262-afteegypt.html

31. *AFTE,* Lina Atallah Editor- in-Chief of "Mada Masr" released on bail, 20 May 2020, https://afteegypt.org/en/breaking_news-2/2020/05/17/18779-afteegypt.html

"At first, we didn't want to use any alternatives to reach the public, because we saw this as a kind of escalation. When other websites created alternative links, they were also blocked. We mainly used other social media networks like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to publicize our video content, because at that time we focused on producing videos that carried journalistic content."[32]

In addition to having their website blocked, *Masr Al-Arabiya* and its staff were subject to several violations, with forces from the police raiding the headquarters more than once. In one raid they arrested the website's financial manager, as well as its Editor-in-Chief Adel Sabry, who is still in detention.

The websites were not the only ones eager for techniques to circumvent the blocks. Thousands of internet users in Egypt have begun to explore and experiment with different techniques. Statistics from Google Trends showed a marked increase in the number of Egyptians looking up ways to circumvent blocks during the same period that the blocks began to be implemented.[33]

The authorities were quick to identify the measures websites were taking to circumvent blocks, and to notice the fact that civilians were using the methods. The government therefore took a new approach toward internet censorship. Authorities put their energies into blocking websites that offered VPN services and proxy servers. It likewise blocked the Tor website and Google's AMP service.

According to the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), in August 2017, 261 VPN providers and proxy servers were blocked. Tor's website and its subsidiaries were also blocked before that.[34]

Among the findings that give some insight into the government's intention to expand the practice of blocking is that the block wasn't limited to the targeted websites, but also reached affiliated networks and subdomains. The torproject.org, for example, has been blocked along with six websites using subdomains such as metrics.torproject.org, even if the websites only provide data about the number of Tor users. Similarly, nine other subdomains were blocked along with *Al-Jazeera's* website, including some which don't publish political content such as *Al-Jazeera Sport* and another Arabic language learning website. Although the subdomains of blogs using the popular Blogger service were blocked, the main blogspot.com domain was not.[35]

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32. In an interview with Ahmed Abdel-Gawad, director of *Masr al-Arabiya* website, Cairo, May 2019

33. Mohamed al-Taher, Ibid

34. Ibid

35. Ibid

- ## The economic impact of blocks

Print journalism is struggling all over the world at the moment, and is struggling in Egypt in particular after several extreme threats to its continuation. Sales have deteriorated for both the national and the private printed press in Egypt, leading to a spike in losses. Add to that the economic difficulties that lead to the flotation of the Egyptian pound in 2017, which in turn raised the cost paper, printing materials, and distribution, as well the cost of logistics and human resources. All of this drove investors to move their capital to the internet, where the online sphere offers a more welcoming space for middle market investors interested in Egypt's press and media markets.

The internet allows for continuous interaction with the public and for live coverage of different genres of news. The internet has also become a more flexible and interactive medium for a wide range of people following local news. As a result, the practise of blocking websites has affected Egypt's journalism industry.

The practice of blocking websites discourages investments. It's unlikely that an investor would feel secure amid all these restrictions, of which even the simplest such as website blocks could deeply affect their profitability. What kind of investor would sacrifice themselves by channeling their capital into supporting an independent journalism venture they presumed could be profitable, while facing the continuous threat of being blocked any moment and losing all their capital?

Nora Younis, the founder and editor-in-chief of the currently blocked *Al-Manasa* website said:

> *"If we're going to talk about the material impact of the block, last year [2018] was supposed to be the new launch for the website. We prepared a model for a website that would attract investors and generate revenue. We'd prepared an advertising campaign that should have started in 2018. But due to the block all of this was stopped. How can you advertise a website that people can only access via the back door? How will you advertise a domain name that you are not present in?"[36]*

The website's web community manager Ahmed Bilal added:

> *" The number of visits was heavily affected by the block. Clicks were decreased by 50 to 60 percent the first time. This had a significant effect on our growth rate.[37]"*

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36. AFTE's interview with Nora Younis

37. AFTE's interview with Ahmed Bilal

On the same topic, Khaled al-Balshy, editor-in-chief of *Al-Bidaya* reflects on how the block affected the website's attempt to grow and develop :

"When we re-launched Al-Bidaya, we self-funded the website. We started looking for investors and indeed we found them. We reached an initial agreement and they began to provide the website with some tools. We were working toward an expansion, so we'd agreed on developing the website and launching a TV section. We aimed to transform into a major professional website with alternative objectives. Yet, all this was put to rest when the website was blocked as the investors pulled out -- and they were right to do so!"[38]

The negative impact wasn't limited only to terminating any chance of developing the website, but it also eliminated any chance to go on as we were, as there was a sharp decrease in the number of visitors. "In one of the months we'd reached 2,400,000 hits. After the block, the number of visitors to the websites was in the hundreds, then tens. It became clear to us that there was no longer any point in continuing," said al-Balshy in his interview.

After the website block, al-Balshy told his employees, of whom there were between 15 and 20, that he had enough funds to allow the website to go on for three months at the most. The journalists therefore began searching for work in other places. Only four people stayed until December 2017, almost six months of the block. Al-Balshy says:

"Despite the few remaining journalists, we had the will and the desire to continue operating the website if we had the financial means to do so. We would have been willing to come up with innovative technical methods to circumvent the block, but this was not an option."[39]

As for Ahmed Abdel Gawad, administrative director of *Masr al-Arabiya*, he stated:

"Before the block, we were among the top-visited news websites. We were ahead of the websites of Al-Masry Al-Youm and Al-Shorouk, and we came second to Youm7 with 40 million visits per month. All of this ended with the blocking of the site, as now in May 2019 we only get 2 million visits [per month] at the most."[40]

Abdel Gawad points to the negative impact of this significant decrease in traffic:

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38. An interview with Khaled al-Balshy, former editor-in-chief of Al-Bedaya website, Cairo, December 2019

39. An interview with Khaled al-Balshy, former editor-in-chief of Al-Bedaya website, Cairo, December 2019

40. In an interview with Ahmed Abdel-Gawad, director of *Masr al-Arabiya* website, Cairo, May 2019

"Around 60 to 70 percent of our revenues come from advertising, which has decreased substantially with the decline in visits. The rest of the revenue came from producing content for other parties, which was affected since we laid off about 70 percent of the team. The salaries of the remaining journalists have also been reduced." [41]

On the chances that the website can continue operating in such circumstances, Abdel Gawad says:

"If we speak purely from an economic mindset, it's madness and frustration on every level. From a security point view, when I got arrested more than once, we addressed the team saying that there is a risk of them getting arrested at work. But the majority of journalists continued working. After the editor-in-chief [Adel Sabry] was detained, I said that I was willing to shut down the website in exchange for him being freed if there was any room for such negotiation. But I thought that shutting it down without Sabry's release would be paying a price for nothing, which I wouldn't do. And ultimately, he was well aware of the risks of the profession."[42]

Other websites depend on funding from other sources, so they were not significantly affected economically as a result of the block. *Raseef22*'s Co-Editor-in-Chief and Political Editor Hassan Abbas said:

"Raseef22 relies on two sources of financing: the publisher's funding, and a group of funds from NGOs whose goals intersect with Raseef22's values. The website wasn't affected by the block, but its plan to convert after some time into a website that could cover its own costs was severely harmed."[43]

Abbas notes that the website lost nearly 20 percent of its viewership due to the block.

Al-Balshy, who is a former board member of the Journalists Syndicate, indicates that another effect of the blocks is the economic toll on young journalists. He estimates that there were around 300 young journalists affected by the blocking of news websites, whether they were laid off or had their salaries cut during the period in which the Egyptian authorities expanded the practice of blocking between May and June 2017.

AFTE was unable to document the number of journalists who were laid off due to media outlets shutting down or reducing salaries to cut costs. AFTE researchers attempted to reach members of the Journalists Syndicate but were unable to do so.

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41. Ibid

42. Ibid

43. An interview via email with Hassan Abbas, co-editor in chief of *Raseef 22*, May 2019

These young people face great difficulties and challenges, as most of them are not members of the syndicate due to arbitrary enrollment conditions in the syndicate law. This pushes young journalists outside the safe umbrella the syndicate is supposed to offer its members, which means they may lose out on money and on their rights if they are laid off.

- **The effect of blocks on content**

Blocks also have an affect on the quality and quantity of the journalistic content that websites produce. Outlets that are blocked fear that they could be subjected to something worse. On the other hand, other websites fear being hemmed in by a block if they crossed the "red line." As a result, the blocks have caused a significant expansion of the rate of censorship within journalistic institutions, as well as leading journalists to practise self-censorship.

Ahmed Abdel Gawad, administrative director of *Masr al-Arabiya*, mentioned that his website now produces no more than 50 pieces per day. The staff used to publish 700 pieces per day. "This was as a result of cutting down resources and staff," he said.[44]

Masr al-Arabiya, similar to many other blocked websites, began to publish its content on social media platforms. However, according to Abdel-Gawad the website's staff faced many difficulties as most of their content is journalistic in nature, and is "inconsistent with the nature" of social media."[45]

Al-Manassa also started publishing its content on social media after being blocked. "Several days after the blocking, we started publishing news articles on Facebook, but there was noreturn," said Ahmed Bilal.[46] Meanwhile, Nora Younis added that "we realized that this is not a solution, as a "Facebook Note" [sic] is not a suitable way to read news, and Facebook is a medium for content other than news.[47]"

On self-censorship and the effect on the website's editorial policies, Sayyid Turki, *Al-Manassa's* editor-in-chief, said:

> *"The question of self-censorship makes us think about why we launched Al-Manassa. We claim that Al-Manassa has a higher ceiling than other online platforms on the scene, in the sense that certain journalistic pieces have a space to be published. So if we stop representing*

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44. In an interview with Ahmed Abdel-Gawad, director of *Masr al-Arabiya* website, Cairo, May 2019

45. Ibid

46. AFTE's interview with Ahmed Bilal

47. AFTE's interview with Nora Younis

this model, we'll lose the relative advantage of our presence. We always think of being within the bounds of the law, so if there's material that is slightly sensitive or that we have doubts about, we send it to our legal consultant for review. The only thing that's changed after the website was blocked and after the law was issued, is that there's now a higher amount of material sent to the legal consultant."[48]

Ahmed Bilal also made the point that some writers are scared to publish with *Al-Manassa* after it was blocked, especially since most of these writers also work for other outlets that do not generally offer the same kind of space that *Al-Manassa* does. "Some people are now afraid of having their names tied to a place that has angered the authorities," said Bilal.[49]

Hassan Abbas said:

"The website being blocked hasn't affected Raseef22's editorial policies. Before we were blocked, we always tried to create a balance in our stories through giving voice to a pro-state representative, or at least a pro-state analyst, and we still strive to do that. What has changed is that certain individuals who are close to the government now refuse to speak to Raseef 22; we've tested this out on many occasions, and we understand their fear that the government might not be pleased with them if they speak to us."[50]

"But we have become more afraid for our colleagues in Egypt," Abbas continues. "And we've even become afraid for citizens that provide us with testimonies, and so we've started taking out some of their names [from stories]."[51]

Khaled al-Balshy points to attacks that targeted his website with the aim of removing archival content.

"In 2018, there was a critical attack on the website, penetration intended to destroy it from within. And, indeed, the attack was successful in destroying the website. But the good thing is that I had agreed with the tech company that built the site to always keep three backups, and as a result we managed to save the archival content."[52]

At the same time, the block has notably affected Arabic language content online, which is much more scarce than content available in other languages. As such, the blocking of a number of specific websites has led to the blocking of archives that contain millions of pages of [journalistic

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48. AFTE's interview with Sayyid Turki
49. AFTE's interview with Ahmed Bilal
50. AFTE's interview with Hassan Abbas
51. AFTE's interview with Hassan Abbas
52. AFTE's interview with Khaled al-Balshy

and legal] content in Arabic.

The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, for instance, had been working on an archive of press releases, reports and data from hundreds of rights organizations in the Arab world between 2003 and 2014. The major significance of this archive is that many of these organizations did not have their own websites. Blocking a website like ANHRI's means that millions of pages disappear, which has a negative impact on the amount of Arabic content available online altogether.

As for the Human Rights Watch website, it was blocked after the organization published a report on torture in Egyptian prisons. HRW's website is not only significant because it's one of the biggest international organizations working to support and promote human rights, but also that the block represents a big loss to users who are looking for Arabic language content, especially researchers, journalists and academics concerned with the state of human rights. This was also one of the first international rights platforms to offer its content in Arabic, and the website comprises a huge amount of reports and data on the state of human rights, not just in Egypt, but in the world—the number of HRW web pages archived by the Google search engine exceeds 180,000.[53]

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53. Mohamed Taher, AFTE, "Closing Windows.. Censorship of the Internet in Egypt," February 19, 2018, https://bit.ly/3eAIXQb

Chapter Three: The Blocking of News Websites and the Role of Media Actors

After the institutional restructuring of the Egyptian media and the journalistic scene, we now have five different entities that represent the main actors and stakeholders in the press and media community. Those are:

1. Supreme Council for Media Regulation [54]

The first version of Law 92/2016 on the Institutional Organization of the Press and Broadcasting laid down the legal framework for the establishment of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) in early 2017. Despite the fact that the law gives the SCMR the authority to block websites, personal blogs and personal accounts with over 5,000 followers for a wide range of violations, the council only blocked a limited number of websites for a temporary period.

Yet, the council also did not intervene to help websites that were blocked without a formal decision, even though those websites fall under the council's protection in accordance with the law. It's even possible to say that the council's leadership assumed a position in support of the blocks, as SCMR head Makram Mohamed Ahmed stated in a press conference held on the morning of November 15, 2017:

> *"There is a campaign against Egypt in the West alleging that there are violations of freedoms. There are no journalists who are detained because of their ideas or orientations, and the websites that were blocked belong to the terrorist organization the Muslim Brotherhood."[55]*

However, the head of the council deliberately ignored talking about the blocking of independent local websites and websites affiliated with human rights organizations.

Although Makram Mohamed Ahmed affirmed that the council's policy is to permit and not to prohibit, he did not take a firm position on the complaints from blocked websites. But he

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54. The Supreme Council for Media Regulation is an independent body that bears a legal personality. It was established in accordance with Law 92/2016 regarding the institutional organization of the press and media (subsequently repealed and replaced by the Law Regulating the Press, Media and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, Law 180/2018) and was assigned to take over the management of audio, visual and digital media affairs in the print and digital press. The council has technical, financial and administrative independence, and it is not permitted to interfere with the council's affairs.

55. *Al-Ahram*, Makram Mohamed Ahmed: "The policy of Supreme Media Council is to permit, not prevent, and there is a campaign against Egypt in the West," November 15, 2017, https://bit.ly/3hg68kt

promised to review the cases after stating that the council was not involved in the decision to block those websites, and that neither he nor the council had any comments because they didn't know why the block had been implemented, nor the authority responsible for enforcing it.

2. The Journalists Syndicate

The Journalists Syndicate cannot be seen as a bloc with a unified position. In reality, there are members of the syndicate's board who have explicitly voiced their rejection of the blockings and criticized their implications on the profession of journalism at large. However, the views of syndicate head Diaa Rashwan, who is also the head of the State Information Service, and the rest of the syndicate's board members don't differ from those of Makram Mohamed Ahmed mentioned above.

An examination of the syndicate board's official announcements shows a good deal of confusion, with the tone caught between its professional obligation to preserve and protect the rights of the journalists it represents, and the fear of defying the political authorities that systematically enforce the blocks.

Rashwan has said that news website blocks in Egypt "are carried out by other authorities."[56] During a session on the relationship between media and state authorities, which was held on the second day of the Egypt Media Forum on November 4, 2019, Rashwan denied that the Journalists Syndicate has any role in blocking news websites.

By contrast, the board of the Journalists Syndicate expressed its solidarity and support for the news website *Al-Tahrir*, whose management announced on June 23, 2019, its plan to shut down after two months of being blocked.

> In a press statement released by the syndicate on June 24, 2019, the council addressed *"the head of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, as the authority legally responsible for websites across the country, to clarify and explain the block on the news website throughout the timeframe and to inform the website's employees and management, as well as the Egyptian public, of the truth of the matter."[57]*
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> The board affirmed that *"it would continue to support the survival and continuity of the Tahrir newspaper and website, the legal rights of our fellow journalists who work there, and*

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56. Mustafa Mohamed, *Masr al-Arabiya*, "Head of Journalists Syndicate talks about websites blocks: What did he say?", November 4, 2019, https://bit.ly/2Aq0ZG1

57. Mustafa Ali, *Masrawy*, Journalists Syndicate issued a statement regarding the blocking of *Al-Tahrir* website, June 2019 24, https://bit.ly/2MPZWBL

would take all steps and procedures to ensure their continued employment in cooperation with the management and all concerned authorities, and prevent the website's resorting to shutting down and laying off its employees," adding that "closure and staff layoffs are a red line for the syndicate, given its commitment to playing a positive role in resolving moments of crisis in the press and making sure websites can operate without obstacles or restrictions."[58]

The council also highlighted its *"rejection of any violation of the Constitution, which prohibits any form of censorship on Egyptian newspapers or broadcasters, or their confiscation, suspension or closure, with the exception of a moderate level of censorship in times of war or general mobilization."[59] The council added that it "would take all the legal measures to defend the freedom of the press and the constitutional and lawful right for fellow journalists to exercise it via print and digital publications."[60]*

Despite the strength of this statement and its consistency with the principles of freedom of the press, as well as attentiveness to protecting journalists' rights, the way the syndicate has acted in practice speaks of a contradiction between how the syndicate board and the syndicate head have handled the block.

First, the syndicate's solidarity was offered selectively. The majority of blocked sites weren't offered the same kind of support, even though a significant number of blocked websites lodged formal complaints with the Journalists Syndicate in order for it to intervene, determine the reasons for the block, identify the responsible authority, and mediate on their behalf.

Khaled al-Balshy, editor-in-chief of the blocked *Al-Bedaya* website says:

"We invited all the publications that were blocked to participate in a campaign to confront the block. I invited the members of the syndicate's board, like Gamal Abdel Rahim and Mahmoud Kamel, who attended. Journalists from Mada Masr, Masr al-Arabiya, Al-Masriyoon, and Moheet also attended. We decided to take several measures, including a sit-in in the syndicate's headquarters to protest the block, filing complaints and so on. But some syndicate members close to us steered away from these actions, which came as a surprise."[61]

Al-Balshy adds:

"The syndicate played an extremely poor role regarding news website blocks. We had an opportunity to make a strong stand against the blocks as there were hundreds of journalists

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58. Ibid

59. Ibid

60. Ibid

61. An interview with Khaled al-Balshy, former editor-in-chief of Al-Bedaya website, Cairo, December 2019

scared for their livelihoods and ready to make a move and protest, but the syndicate aborted the move. On the contrary, the syndicate heads's earliest statements were supportive of the blocks, and so were those of the Supreme Council for Media [Regulation]. Members of the syndicate council are equally responsible, although Mahmoud Kamel and Gamal Abdel Rahim in particular played more positive roles."[62]

Ahmed Abdel Gawad, general manager of the *Masr al-Arabiya* website, speaks about reaching out to the syndicate:

"We officially informed the syndicate with what happened. Yes, as a website we are not affiliated with the syndicate, but many of our employees are syndicate members so we reached out to them multiple times with detailed complaints, during the chairmanship of both Abdel Mohsen Salama and Diaa Rashwan. Our colleagues went to the syndicate themselves and met with the syndicate board to demand a solution, but there was no response."[63]

Some websites decided not to deal with the Journalists Syndicate, deeming it a pointless endeavor. Sayyid Turki, executive editor of *Al-Manassa* news website, said:

"We thought about the feasibility of the matter. If the entire board of the syndicate took a stance against the blocks, what tools did they have at their disposal to put the state under pressure? Almost nothing. The syndicate council couldn't [even] do anything for detained journalists."[64]

Hassan Abbas, co-editor in chief of *Raseef 22*, echoed Turki's opinion, stressing that they "did not inform the Journalists Syndicate about the block because they knew that the syndicate couldn't do anything about it."[65]

Raseef 22 broadcasts from outside of Egypt, but a number of its journalists are Egyptian and work from Egypt. Abbas goes on:

"We thought about an initiative to coordinate with blocked independent websites to achieve two goals. The first was to cooperate in the event of any journalist being suppressed, so that the matter does not go unnoticed and the targeted journalist isn't harmed by their case being mishandled. The second was to set up some kind of exchange of content and expertise to overcome the problems thrown up by the block, which affects the number of published stories and makes access to information difficult. But this still remains an idea and no practical steps have been taken for this important task to advance its implementation."[66]

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62. Ibid

63. In an interview with Ahmed Abdel-Gawad, director of *Masr al-Arabiya* website, Cairo, May 2019

64. AFTE's interview with Sayyid Turki

65.An interview via email with Hassan Abbas, co-editor in chief of *Raseef 22*, May 2019

66.Ibid

With 127 news and media websites blocked so far, dozens of journalists have been severely affected. Some have been laid off because the news websites stopped work completely downsized as much as possible so that they could keep operating despite the block and its financial ramifications.

Most of those journalists were not members of the Journalists Syndicate -- which has very restrictive regulations on membership in accordance with the law which established it -- which also made them vulnerable to unfair treatment with regard to their severance pay, and left them unable to get backing and support. The syndicate was not concerned with ensuring their professional rights before the state and their places of work. If we add to that the crises currently affecting the traditional press in Egypt, as well as the clamp down on the public sphere and the difficulty of pursuing journalistic work in such a repressive political climate, it's possible to get a picture of the conditions for those journalists who were struck by state policies via the blocks, sacked by their institutions as they sought to mitigate the damage caused by the blocks, and finally neglected by a syndicate that did not intervene to defend their rights.

3. The National Press Authority[67]

The National Press Authority manages and regulates the affairs of state-owned press institutions. Although none of the websites affiliated with the national press have been blocked, the authority's stance on the practice of blocking remains crucial, due to the substantial impact that the blocks have on the press industry in Egypt in general.

Where the authority stands on the blocks remains ambivalent today, and has done since the wave of blocks began in May 2017. The position of NPA head, journalist and writer Karam Gabr, differs from that of the NPA's deputy as well as a number of its members, while the authority itself hasn't adopted an official.

During an interview broadcast in January with Basma Wahba, who anchored the Kol Youm TV show for the on ON satellite channel at the time, NPA head Karam Gabr said that "to correct the errors of democracy there must be democratic solutions, not by closures and blocks, but by relaying information from the ground."[68] Gabr has expressed this sentiment on several occasions.

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67. An independent body with a legal personality. Its main headquarters are in Cairo. It can exercise its functions and powers independently and interference in its affairs is prohibited. The authority was established in accordance with Law 92/2016 on the Institutional Organization of the Press and Media to take over the management of state-owned press institutions.

68. Eman Hany, *Al-Masryoon,* "Karam Gabr: Fixing the errors not by closures or blocks," January 3, 2020, https://bit.ly/2MOVTFV

At the same time, Abdullah Hassan, first deputy of the NPA, said at the outset of the wave of blocks on July 25, 2017, that the "decision to block websites that pertain to the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood and to Qatar is one hundred percent correct, since those websites insult Egypt as a state and as a people," as he added that such websites have anti-Egypt agendas.[69]

> Hassan pointed to statements in which the emir of Qatar criticized Egypt and other Arab countries, saying *that it was necessary after this to take a position against those websites and against channels affiliated with Qatar. He noted that the decision does not contradict the freedom of press, but that freedom of the press must bear a responsibility towards the society it broadcasts its messages to.*[70]

4. The National Broadcasting Authority[71]

Despite the blocking of eight broadcasting websites affiliated with television channels, the National Broadcasting Authority (NBA) -- which is responsible for managing the affairs of state-owned broadcasters (The Egyptian Radio and Television Union) -- has commented only on the blocking of websites offering pirated content or material, of which the most notable are EGY Best, Arab Lions, Arab Seed, and Mazzika Today.

Gamal Enayet, an NBA member, praised the decision to block a number of piracy websites that streamed films and TV series free of charge, because they did not observe production copyright.

Speaking with the Sada al-Balad website on May 16, 2019, Enayet said that showing films and shows on television generates profit from advertising, while streaming websites have paid subscriptions, though he noted that piracy websites make money from advertising unlawfully.[72]

He went on to add that these websites sell products they don't own, and that the decision [to block them] is in the interests of regulating the production market and preserving copyright, though he conceded that people have grown accustomed to free streaming, arguing that gradual measures

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69. Afaf Hamdy, *Al-Bawaba,* "Deputy of the Press Authority: Blocking Muslim Brotherhood websites is 'the right decision,' May 25, 2017, https://bit.ly/2YoYRGD

70. Ibid

71. The National Broadcasting Authority is an independent body that bears legal personality, is represented by its president, and has its main headquarters in Cairo. The NBA can independently exercise its functions and powers, and interference in its affairs is not permitted. It aims to manage state-owned media organizations to provide broadcasting services for television, radio, and digital press, along with production and engineering services.

72. Amal Magdy, *Sada al-Balad*, "Blocking websites that pirate artistic productions in Egypt .. Al-Wataniya Media: They were selling what they did not own .. and experts: We hope to close TV channels that steal work," 16 May 2019, https://bit.ly/3fcDu1V

such as warnings and raising awareness should have been taken first to get people used to the idea before the blocks were instituted.[73]

5. The Broadcasting Syndicate

Although the Broadcasting Syndicate was recently established to serve as an umbrella to support and protect the rights of broadcasters in Egypt, its position on news website blocks was similar to those described above.

As Broadcasting Syndicate head Hamdi al-Konaisi stated, the syndicate supports the measures taken by the Egyptian state to block a number of websites that threaten Egyptian national security. He added that this kind of measure is not a novelty nor a restriction of freedoms, arguing that all countries take the necessary measures to protect their national security when they identify threats from the media.

In a statement issued on June 13, 2017, Al-Konaisi said that there are many countries that have taken similar measures to protect their national security, including France, China, Britain, Germany, America and Cuba, to protect their national security.[74]

Konaisi stressed that the media is free, and that freedom is responsibility, and he called on all visual, audio and digital media entities to adhere to professional standards of reliability in the work they do, so that they do not fall under legal scrutiny. He added that the Egyptian state has made a strong comeback through its institutions, and that it is determined to regulate the performance of broadcasters and the media, some of which have committed breachers and did not take account of the national interest and Egypt's national security in light of its battle against terrorism and its battle for development.

After reviewing the positions taken by broadcasters, it is clear that there was no real effort on the part of these bodies to pressure the relevant state agencies to reverse the policy of implementing blocks. Additionally, these bodies ignored all the complaints made by websites that were blocked.

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73. Ibid

74. Maryam Al-Khatri, *Al-Watan*, "The media syndicate supports the decision to block websites and calls on the media to comply," June 13, 2017, https://bit.ly/3hlCCd0

Conclusion

Almost four years after the ouster of former President Mohamed Morsi, the new government has established the foundations of its rule and tightened its grip on the various means of freedom of expression. This has cut off any chance of popular mobilization on the streets or in public spaces. It has also put paid to any possibility of a student movement, despite the fact that university students are at the forefront of opposition to the new regime, through the twin threats of police violence and legal prosecution. During those four years, the regime has worked on totalizing the nationalization of private media through numerous ownership transfers and acquisition deals, and it has established new press and media entities that exercise full control over the state-owned and private media alike.

Aside from this, the internet has remained the last space for citizens to express their opinions and ideas, and independent news websites were the only outlet for narratives other than those promoted by the state. Because of that, and since mid-May 2017, the state has expanded its campaign to block independent websites, reaching at least 547 websites in total, including at least 127 news websites, according to the latest estimates by AFTE.

Yet, since the website blocks and the crackdown on users has exceeded what existing laws permit, the state passed an anti-cybercrime law. This law, which includes 45 articles divided over four sections, aims to fully control the internet, suppress its users, legalize state practices of censorship, website blocks, and the surveillance of all forms of communication.

At the same time, the Law Regulating the Press, Media and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation was passed, and it gave the Supreme Council for Media Regulation the power to impose penalties on every personal website, blog, and personal social media account that has 5,000 followers or more, instituting a comprehensive system of surveillance of online accounts, blogs and personal websites, and the persecution of citizens who express their opinions online.

Yet despite its promulgation of these laws, the state has continued to block websites outside the legal route. AFTE has recorded only 44 websites that were blocked on the back of administrative decisions (33 websites were blocked following a decision by the Committee for Inventory, Seizure, and Management of Terrorist Funds and 11 websites through the SCMR).

And in the midst of these practices, which have negatively affected dozens of press websites and hundreds of employees, the actions of the Journalists Syndicate and the SCMR have not been sufficient to pressure the state agencies involved in online censorship practices.

Through this publication, AFTE hopes to renew the public debate about censorship practices online and their extremely negative implications for the independent digital press in Egypt. AFTE urges all relevant authorities to take action to stop censorship and to enable internet users in Egypt to access all websites without restrictions.