

Freedom of the press and media ethics in light of local and international changes

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Received: 27/04/2025

Accepted: 26/05/2025

Abstract:

Media is considered extremely important in our modern era, as people are in constant need of following events and news at any time and from any place. This is due to the spread of education on one hand, and the development of technology on the other. The increasing use of various types and forms of media—such as radio, television, satellite channels, the internet, newspapers, and magazines—has made the dissemination of information faster and more efficient.

Media has a significant influence in shaping public opinion through both traditional and modern means, and it is regarded as an agent of change. The impact of media becomes especially clear when a society enjoys freedom of expression, which refers to the right to publish information, ideas, and opinions without government restrictions. This freedom encourages the spread of ideas that support informed and accurate decision-making on public affairs and social interests.

Keywords: Freedom of the press, media, media ethics, local and international variables.

ملخص:

تعتبر وسائل الإعلام مهمة جدًا في عصرنا الحالي حيث أصبح الناس في حاجة ماسة إلى متابعة الأحداث والأخبار في أي وقت وفي أي مكان. ويرجع ذلك إلى انتشار التعليم من جهة، وإلى تطور التكنولوجيا من جهة أخرى. إن الاستخدام المتزايد لمختلف أنواع واتجاهات وسائل الإعلام مثل الراديو والتلفزيون والمحطات الفضائية والإنترنت والصحف والمجلات جعل نشر المعلومات أسرع وأسهل.

وتتمتع وسائل الإعلام بتأثير كبير في توجيه الرأي العام من خلال الوسائل التقليدية والحديثة، وتعتبر عاملاً للتغيير. ويظهر تأثير وسائل الإعلام جلياً عندما يتمتع المجتمع بحرية التعبير، والتي تعني الحق في نشر المعلومات والأفكار والآراء دون قيود حكومية بهدف تشجيع انتشار الأفكار التي تساعد في اتخاذ القرارات السهلة والدقيقة بشأن الشؤون العامة والمصالح الاجتماعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: حرية الصحافة، الإعلام، أخلاقيات المهنة الإعلامية، المتغيرات المحلية والدولية..

1. Introduction:

The national media landscape in Algeria has recently witnessed widespread controversy, which has tangibly affected the achievements made by Algerian journalism since the beginning of the era of openness until now. This controversy has cast a shadow over the core values and ethics of journalism, particularly those related to promoting the freedom of the written press.

In this context, the debate is shaped by two opposing viewpoints. The first is that of the national political authority, which believes that the press should serve the public interest by complying with the laws of the Republic—meaning adherence to what the authority dictates. The second viewpoint is represented by voices calling for greater freedom of expression. Human rights advocates and members of professional associations are demanding the lifting of restrictions on the media and a reform of the legislative framework, including the abolition of prison sentences for press-related offenses.

Research Problem:

One of the issues that draws the attention of many is the struggle for freedom of expression, as this freedom is fundamental and central, being at the heart of numerous rights and liberties. The Algerian press has faced many challenges that have revealed an imbalance in its relationship with political power, through practices that reflect the peak of the conflict between the authorities and the Algerian press, especially the independent press.(Naomi, 1998, p2)

Many non-governmental organizations, both national and international, have repeatedly expressed their condemnation of the authorities' attempts to restrict the press. In its 2017 report, "Reporters Without Borders," an organization specializing in the protection of journalists and media freedoms, expressed concern about a series of legal prosecutions against journalists due to their writings. The organization called on the Algerian government to abolish prison sentences included in the amendments to the Penal Code. Similarly, Aidan White, the Secretary-General of the International Federation of Journalists, urged Algerian journalists to unite their efforts to reclaim their professional and social rights.

The Arab Organization for Press Freedom, in a statement of support and solidarity with the independent press in Algeria, considered that the campaign launched by the government and some mosques—particularly the attacks by certain imams during Friday sermons—aimed to bring the situation back to the era of terrorism.(Karim, 2004, p02)

A delegation from Human Rights Watch also expressed concern about the imprisonment of journalists, a position echoed by Boujemaa Ghachir, President

of the Algerian League for Human Rights. He noted that transitioning to a more professional press requires continuous training for journalists, enabling access to sources of information, encouraging investigative journalism, prioritizing public interest over personal gains, and avoiding the exploitation of the judiciary. The League also called for breaking the monopoly in the advertising sector and distancing the media from political and commercial pressures that are sometimes imposed on them.(Abdelkoudous, 2005,p3)

In Brussels, the International Federation of Journalists organized a solidarity day in support of the independent Algerian press. During this event, participants issued a statement strongly condemning the violations of the right to practice journalism and the Algerian citizen's right to access information. They demanded an end to pressures, legal prosecutions, political and commercial blackmail, and threats faced by journalists and media institutions. They also denounced the confiscation of public media—especially what is known as "heavy media"—and the obstacles journalists face.(Fadila, 2003, p4)

These demands, raised by NGOs and national media institutions, have been increasingly repeated following a series of harassments that suggest the authorities are seeking to impose a specific orientation within the media environment. This has led to a state of ebb and flow between the press and the authorities, characterized by mutual accusations and attempts by each side to assert its interests. This is particularly evident in recent times, as the government has shown efforts to establish a code of ethics for journalism in Algeria. These efforts have sparked strong reactions from the private written press, often labeled as independent, who view this initiative as a threat to press freedom and journalistic independence.

Based on the above, we pose the following question:

- **Will the current debate surrounding freedom and professional ethics evolve to address the challenges of practicing journalism in the age of modern information and communication technologies?**

2. The Relationship Between Algerian Media and the Authorities

It has become evident that the relationship between the press and the authorities in Algeria becomes tense when the authorities take actions such as shutting down *Liberté* newspaper and imprisoning its journalists. This prompted journalists to unite their efforts in defending freedom of the press and expression, demanding the release of detained colleagues and the lifting of the ban on the newspaper. A broader discussion emerged on how to develop mechanisms for better handling of issues in the media landscape, starting with the journalist's relationship with the justice system and the authorities in general, and extending to their relationship with different segments of society. As a

result, the written press in Algeria came to function as a warning system against any potential violations of its rights. John Hatlung noted that the strongest weapon the press has to defend its freedom is to fully expose such threats in the media, trusting that the public will not tolerate them once informed.(John, 2005, p34)

Before the establishment of the High Council for Journalistic Ethics in Algeria, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika had declared in 1999, coinciding with his assumption of power, that no journalist would be imprisoned during his rule. These statements encouraged journalists to carry out their duties without restriction. However, this situation did not last long, as the Penal Code was amended, financial activities of newspapers were monitored, and pressure was applied to force them to pay off printing debts. As noted in the previous chapter, these measures led to increased tension between the authorities and the press, to the extent that some newspapers threatened to cease publication unless the government reversed its policies.

Defamation cases and media-related crimes began to spread in the courts, particularly at the Sidi M'hamed Court in the capital, which saw major trials on charges including defamation, slander, and insulting the President. One prominent case involved the prosecution of three journalists from *Liberté* newspaper—Ali Dilem, Mostefa Hammouche, and Farid Alilat—on charges of defamation and insulting the President. The case revolved around a series of cartoons by Ali Dilem and journalistic commentary by Mostefa Hammouche published during the 2004 presidential election campaign.

Among the insults directed at the President and documented by the court was the use of an abbreviated form of Bouteflika's name, "BOUTEF," which Dilem frequently used in his cartoons. This occurred in the absence of a clear legal definition of insults, slander, or defamation under the Penal Code. Journalist Mostefa Hammouche had written a phrase suggesting that "officials do not actually govern but are involved in conspiracies," which the presiding judge deemed defamatory "against current officials." Hammouche responded that he did not personally accuse anyone but was merely expressing his opinion on how the country was being managed, noting that officials seemed more focused on politics than actual administrative tasks.

In a parallel case at the Sidi M'hamed Court, *El Khabar* newspaper editor Ali Djerri was interrogated by an investigating judge following a complaint filed by Abdelrahman Haj Salah, president of the Arabic Language Academy and Director of Scientific and Technical Research for the Promotion of the Arabic Language. The lawsuit stemmed from reports published in the newspaper about

alleged violations within the institutions overseen by Haj Salah.(Oanougan, 2005, p3)

In January 2004, the Minister of Interior became involved in a legal case against the press, dating back to February 2003. At that time, *El Watan* newspaper published an article based on a file signed by 56 police officers highlighting violations within the Directorate General of National Security. The next day, *El Khabar* published a similar article referencing *El Watan*'s report. Consequently, the National Security Director Ali Tounsi and his Secretary-General Mahmoud Mohand Amokrane filed a personal lawsuit against both newspapers for defamation and insult. The case was postponed several times due to the absence of the civil party at court hearings. The defense teams of *El Khabar* and *El Watan* were surprised when a judgment was issued on December 23, 2003. Nevertheless, the concerned parties were summoned again on January 6, 2004, for the same case, this time involving the Ministry of Interior and Minister Yazid Zerhouni.

Lawyer Zoubir Soudani expressed surprise at this being the first complaint filed by the Minister of Interior, despite having previously avoided legal action even when personally mentioned in the press. *El Watan* editor Omar Belhouchet viewed Zerhouni's move as politically motivated and an obstacle to journalistic work. Similarly, *El Khabar* editor Ali Djerri said that although he did not wish to influence the judge's ruling, he believed the lawsuit to be political in nature and a sign of the minister's dissatisfaction with court rulings, as well as an attempt to sway the outcome. (Oanougan, 2005, p3)

A significant incident in Algerian press history occurred when *Le Matin* newspaper editor was imprisoned on June 14, 2004, following a ruling by the Harrach Court sentencing him to two years in prison with immediate effect and a fine exceeding 200 million centimes. Many analysts attributed the severity of this punishment to the paper's campaign against the President, which was later turned into a book by Ben Chikha titled *Bouteflika... An Algerian Lie.*(Samia, 2003, p22)

In this context, Farouk Ksentini, head of the Advisory Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, stated that imprisoning journalists is an arbitrary measure and that the court rulings against them for their writings were unjustified. During the *El Khabar* International Forum held on December 10, 2003, about the concept of defamation in the press, Ali Djerri noted that the authorities believe that the way to reinforce press responsibility is by naturally reducing the margin of freedom through repressive laws. He referred to the suspension of six daily newspapers under weak commercial justifications.(Iwanougan, 2003, p2)

In addition to lawsuits and imprisonment, other factors contributing to the continued decline of Algerian media include monopolies on printing, public advertising, and newsprint importation. In Algeria, there are seven large printing presses, five of which are controlled by the government. Two are privately owned: one by El Khabar and El Watan, and the other by the French-language *Le Quotidien d'Oran*. The company “El Babb” monopolizes the import of newsprint. Moreover, the National Publishing and Advertising Agency controls 68% of the advertising budget, estimated at about 1.275 billion dinars (approximately 18.8 million euros), according to official sources.

There are countless examples highlighting the tense relationship between the press and the authorities, too many to fully list here. A few are mentioned to shed light on the prevailing anxiety within the national press regarding the priorities of media in the coming period, especially as new mechanisms have emerged domestically and internationally since 2006. These mechanisms offer opportunities to propose solutions to overcome the current crisis, particularly after statements by the new Minister of Communication, Hachemi Djiar, during the “Current Issues” program on Radio Channel 3. He asserted that opening up the audiovisual sector was unacceptable due to the sensitive content of media and the difficult circumstances the country had gone through. He outlined the ministry’s priorities, notably “supporting public media institutions” and consolidating the gains achieved in press freedom since 1990. He emphasized the need to begin enhancing the capacity of public newspapers by equipping them with all necessary resources and new management methods.(Suleiman, 2006, p24)

Former Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem previously acknowledged a communication gap between state institutions and the media, as well as between the media and political parties. He attributed this to mutual distrust. He also rejected the criminalization of journalistic opinion and strongly opposed all forms of defamation. This acknowledgment reflects the decision-makers’ awareness of the state of Algerian journalism and suggests that the media will face significant challenges in the near future, whether initiated by journalists, the authorities, or as a result of regional and international developments.(Ftour Essabah, 2000, p19)

The greatest challenge facing Algeria’s media sector remains its liberation and the discovery of its latent talents, skills, and creativity. As Mohamed Kirat noted, the challenge lies in making the best use of material and human resources to establish a modern, efficient, and strong media industry—one capable of shaping public opinion, promoting a free market of ideas, and supporting civil

society, which in turn strengthens democracy, accountability, transparency, and constructive, open dialogue for the common good.

According to Mohamed Kirat, these objectives require in-depth study, ongoing research, and the establishment of a strong relationship that fosters interaction, exchange, and open dialogue between the authorities and media institutions, communicators, and the public. The ultimate goal is to build trust and credibility and improve performance more effectively. With these prerequisites in place, it would be possible to formulate a media strategy and policies that propel the country and its people toward the status of developed nations and active participation on the global stage.(Mohamed, 2000, p19)

3.Algerian Media and Mechanisms for Development and Modernization

Algerian media institutions still do not reach the full potential of media organizations in terms of administration, management, organization, structure, means, and human resources. According to Mohamed Qirate, we often observe bargaining, violations, and exploitation of the profession, which harms its principles, honor, and ethics. Media institutions are frequently used for narrow purposes and interests, serving a specific group, party, or movement at the expense of the vast majority of society.(Mohamed, 2000, p19)

These changes necessitate thinking about the challenges facing Algeria and Arab countries in general in the media field, which calls for the need to free it and activate energies, skills, and creativity. The challenge lies in optimally utilizing material and human resources, while establishing the foundations and requirements for a developed and effective media industry capable of shaping public opinion, creating a free market for ideas, and supporting civil society that promotes democracy, commitment, transparency, and constructive dialogue for the benefit of all.

These matters require in-depth study and comprehensive research, along with establishing a strong relationship, interaction, exchange, and open dialogue between the authorities, media institutions, communicators, and the public. The goal is to enhance trust, credibility, and performance effectiveness. By providing these foundations, an effective media strategy and policies can be developed to elevate society and the country to the level of advanced and globally active nations. Serving society and embodying the core functions of media is the main objective of any media operation.

The relationship between media and society is characterized by mutual influence. As Aziz Abdelrahman explains, the strength of the press comes from its connection with society and its institutions, not from attempts to please or conform to others. This requires the involvement of all elites and social groups in the media process, focusing on the role of journalism in clarifying society's

goals and values, in line with the theory of social responsibility in the media. Algerian journalism should motivate the public to actively engage in local society and take responsibility for addressing its issues. The role of journalism should not be limited to transmitting news and information but must contribute to guiding citizens to fulfill their duties and enhance community interaction and participation. Notably, the initiative launched by *El Khabar* newspaper, providing a direct phone line for its readers to voice their concerns, proposals, and problems, is a significant example.(www.philadelphia.edu)

A strong media requires an active civil society, clear separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and a transparent and defined democratic life. Therefore, media freedom and independence are fundamental rights in any society striving for political and intellectual pluralism, as pluralism loses its meaning without freedom, and is futile if media freedom and independence are not guaranteed.(New Al-Kheir, 2005, p24)

With the global trend toward greater media freedom, it is no longer feasible for the state to retain exclusive control over media outlets. Additionally, total governmental oversight is no longer suitable for the current era. As such, there is a need to reconsider legislation and cancel or amend laws that conflict with media freedom, in alignment with international standards. One of the most urgent priorities in this context is the abolition of prison sentences and suspensions related to media and expression freedom issues.

Some media professionals advocate for the creation of a modern media law that aligns with current and future requirements, aiming to end the multiplicity and overlap of legislations and frameworks, and guarantee press freedom under the protection of law and justice. In this regard, editors of daily and weekly newspapers have expressed concern about repeated interventions from various media frameworks attempting to block news or withhold specific information. During an *El Khabar* international conference on the concept of defamation in journalism, they called for a review of the media system, accelerating the privatization of television and radio, and ending the monopoly and favoritism of government agencies. They also urged the government to ensure the provision of means that enable the press to access information, support the judiciary's independence, and stop the harassment faced by journalists and media outlets.(www.hrinfo.net)

Ali Jari argues that achieving more professional journalism and distancing from accusations depends on judicial independence and ensuring journalists' basic right to access news sources at all levels, while emphasizing the importance of protecting journalists' safety and stability so they can perform their duties freely.

This alone is not enough to enable national media to fulfill its responsibilities effectively. There is a necessity to provide the required training for Algerian journalists, who lack many media and journalistic skills. Most academic studies encountered during research highlight the urgent need to enhance media professionals' competency in various areas, with a specific focus on improving their language skills, using modern technology, and managing editorial processes within media institutions. Newspapers often neglect the need for journalist training, which also applies to many national and regional radio stations and television channels that do not focus on training media professionals on tools and methods of the profession. Furthermore, unions and journalists' associations, in general, do not perform their required role regarding enhancing the professional competency of their members, nor do they put sufficient effort into promoting professional principles among them or monitoring their commitment to these principles.

The professional competency of journalists depends on an individual aspect, which is initial training and continuous education, along with a collective aspect related to the quality of journalistic framing within the media institution. Responsibility for improving performance should not fall solely on journalists but must also include media institution officials. They bear a significant portion of this responsibility by providing all necessary measures to raise journalists' qualifications and enable them to act effectively and responsibly. This also places tasks within the context of the professional group, obliging media institutions to fulfill their commitments. (Ali, Newspaper)

As Nacereddine Layaadi pointed out, the role of the "educated journalist" has declined and lost its shine after the fierce battles fought in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This decline coincided with the end of the flourishing of "opinion" journalism and the rise of news journalism, which benefited from the widespread dominance of visual culture. In this period, the journalist emerged as a highly skilled technical expert, proud of their role as a technical intermediary between information sources, reports, and the audience. (Souad, 2002, p4)

Regarding human resources development, it is certain that print journalism in Algeria will face significant challenges following the opening of the audiovisual sector, both in the short and long term. This is due to the widespread reach of this sector and its speed in reaching all places and homes, along with its ability to keep pace with events accurately. Therefore, newspapers must take significant steps to improve printing and enhance journalistic arts to attract readers while adhering to professional ethics. Similarly, television channels, both terrestrial and satellite, and national and regional radio stations managed by the state must update and develop their equipment to align with the

spirit of the times. Training programs and employee qualification in the audiovisual sector to handle advanced technologies are also recommended. Notably, the digitization of Algerian terrestrial TV channels has achieved significant success, with a broadcasting and receiving system created in the Bordj El Kiffan region, allowing high-quality reception of terrestrial channels.(Nasreddine, 2005, p19)

Traditional media must deal with adaptation challenges, as their continuity depends on the ability to develop new ways to offer services that can be funded by the public or governments as newer media platforms become a thing of the past.(Hafeez, 2005, p24)

Discussing the ethics of the journalistic profession and how to strengthen them within media institutions is a crucial point among the proposed challenges. Every media institution must establish a code of professional ethics that its journalists are committed to and apply its diverse principles. For example, *El Khabar* journalists took a positive step by adopting a code of journalistic ethics during a general assembly held on January 3, 2005. They committed to seeking and presenting the truth to readers, adhering to accuracy, objectivity, and responsibility in conveying facts. They also emphasize integrity, trust, and credibility, rejecting plagiarism, and adopting independence and transparency in their work.(Ferial, 2007, p395)

The Ethics Council for Journalists proposed including a clause in the employment contracts of journalists joining a media institution, requiring them to commit to respecting the principles of ethics outlined in the journalists' code. The council also called for ensuring freedom of access to news sources and allocating part of each media institution's budget for journalist training. Additionally, they recommended considering the establishment of a center for journalist training and qualification. The council stressed that the Ethics Council for Algerian journalists needs to develop mechanisms to activate its role as a neutral body that exercises its power in a way agreed upon by all concerned parties. In this context, Abdelaziz Belkhadem, the Algerian Prime Minister, stated in June 2006 that when a strong ethics body exists, journalists will avoid violations to avoid facing a journalists' court.(Code of Ethics of "Al-Kheir" Journalists)

The *El Khabar* International Conference on the concept of defamation in journalism emphasized the need for publishers to separate the management of financing and advertising within their institutions from the organization of editorial boards to ensure full freedom in content preparation, free from the influence of advertising and financing. The conference also called for addressing other social and professional demands, such as establishing collective

agreements, improving journalists' living standards, providing training, and taking responsibility for improving working conditions for journalists and developing mechanisms to protect them from various pressures.

Regarding journalistic ethics, the issue of terrorism and the media has not received much attention at the official government or academic levels, despite the urgent need for in-depth discussion in newspapers, media, and workshops. This is due to the significant impact of terrorism on Algerian society, requiring a study of the media's role in combating the culture of violence and terrorism, as well as considering the impact of the spread of this phenomenon on media freedom and the physical and psychological safety of journalists. The responsibility of democratic countries like the USA and the UK in confronting terrorist threats and reflecting on the consequences of international cooperation in combating terrorism on civil liberties and press freedom should also be considered.

The International Federation of Journalists chose May 3rd to present a report on journalism, civil liberties, and the war on terrorism. The report discusses the effects of the declared war on terrorism on civil liberties and press freedom, along with how these freedoms are sacrificed under the pretext of combating terrorism and ensuring security in democratic countries.(Ftour Essabah, 2005, p2)

Journalistic ethics were put to a serious test during the presidential elections in April. The urgent need to establish clear ethical standards for media coverage of electoral campaigns emerged due to numerous violations committed by certain media outlets. Some of these violations were mentioned in previous chapters, undoubtedly highlighting the need for a code of honor to regulate media coverage of elections. Some academics suggest forming a specialized and high-level committee for every election process to monitor media neutrality and assess media performance using international standards based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of time and space allocated to candidates. These standards would also assess key violations and restrictions that may hinder media coverage of candidates' activities.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression in his annual report discussed a set of principles designed to ensure transparency, freedom, and plurality in media coverage of election campaigns, emphasizing the following:

- It is important to avoid media control by a small group to ensure diversity of available ideas and voices.
- Governmental press should cover all aspects of political life and provide multiple opinions, and should remain free from becoming a propaganda

tool serving one party's interests or used to exclude other political parties and groups.

- Live broadcasting allocations for candidates should be distributed fairly and impartially, providing adequate time for parties and candidates to present their programs, allowing voters to understand the issues at hand and parties' positions on them, as well as candidates' ability to address them.(Fadila, 2005, p3)

Among the challenges facing Algeria is the ongoing need to enhance unstable gains, as well as intensify efforts to develop its capabilities in information and communication technology and access to the international information network. This is essential to cope with market fluctuations and the intense competition imposed by global sector competitors, especially in light of the ambiguity and lack of trust in national policies related to infrastructure development and multimedia and information and communication technology.

4. Conclusion

The media plays a vital role in shaping modern societies. Media and communication have become powerful forces, serving the desires of various social groups "virtually" by producing diverse content aimed at attracting the largest possible audience and achieving significant financial gains. This pursuit may drive some parties to adopt unethical practices that negatively impact the public good and raise questions about the role of media in preserving societal foundations. In the era of globalization, despite the positive aspects it brings to civilization, it may also contain aspects that erode original human values and reshape them according to the interests of the strongest and most fit.

Given the required actions, strategies should be established to enhance media development and move away from narrow perspectives and limited horizons in pursuit of a better future. This includes ensuring the protection of the Algerian citizen in particular and the Arab citizen in general from the risks facing societies still in development and not giving enough attention to the vital role of the media and modern technologies.

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