

The media transparency in the investigative electronic journalism in Algeria Analytical study of “Twala.info” profile content



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Abstract:

The media transparency is one of the key principles for any investigative electronic newspaper that targets broad audience mainly that the survival of journalism requires modern funding models and the readers trust. This study aims at revealing the commitment of the electronic newspaper “Twali.info” to transparency in its profile content. In so doing, we used the analytical descriptive method and the content analysis to focus on the profile content of the newspaper. Findings show that the newspaper shows media transparency in defining itself. Besides, it commits to the editorial transparency and follows a set of publication ethics that meet the information transparency. Finally, it respects the financial transparency, as it discloses all the needed details about its capital, including the shareholders, the turnover, the funding sources, and the fiscal policy.

Keywords: investigative journalism; electronic journalism; media transparency; slow journalism.

Introduction: The investigative journalism is key in detecting the hidden corruption cases and violations. It is widely found in the states that ensure freedom, multiplicity, and legal guarantees that protect the newspapers and facilitate the investigation under ethical and professional standards that serve the public interest. The concept of the 04th estate is commonly linked with the journalism, as the latter controls the three branches of power and the methods of their management. According to McQuail, the investigative journalism is a tool to question the governments and reveal any deviations to the public. ¹ Despite that

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journalism has a big role in detecting corruption, and in society and politics, it has been many times part of propaganda on behalf of specific parties under political or material pressures to ensure its survival.

In the light of the pressures and the technological development in the field of media and information, transparency is a challenge, mainly after the loss of trust in journalism. In this regard, in its different definitions, transparency is based on the access to, and examination of, the information to foster the concept of the 04th estate.² In the general discussions, it is the responsibility of the media outlets in consolidating the relation between the journalists and the audience to gain trust³.

The new model of the investigative journalism in the electronic environment provides diverse tools that support transparency, at the same time, raise professional, organizational, and legislative issues regarding what is declared, and what is kept as a professional secret. The best model of media transparency is the one that shows the audience how the editorial agenda is built and the information sources are found, and reveals the funding sources.⁴ Thanks to transparency, journalism fosters its credibility and increases its commitment to exactness and neutrality.⁵

The media transparency is one of the pillars of journalism freedom that is key for the investigative journalism to optimally exercise its tasks. According to Reporters without Borders, the main indices in rating the journalism freedom are the political, legislative, economic, social, cultural, and security aspects.⁶ Despite that, many states do not provide the conditions that foster transparency and freedom for a successful investigative journalism, many attempts to launch such journalism has been made, as international and regional unions of investigative journalists have been established to support their work. In this regard, these unions train journalists, cooperate in investigation, and set ethical charters to foster transparency and get rid of the financial and political pressures.

Problematic of the study:

Algeria is one of the Arab states that target the freedom of journalism through enacting laws that support the media multiplicity and the freedom of journalism. In this regard, the law of 1990 and the information law in 2021 enshrine the media multiplicity, including the written and audiovisual outlets, and set a legal frame for the electronic journalism. However, in implementation, the laws restricted the work of the investigative journalism, which gradually emerged in Algeria. In its start, this journalism made investigations on corruption cases. Then, with

the emergence of the electronic journalism, new experiences were launched thanks to the electronic platforms. However, different obstacles were faced. In this context, Twala.info newspaper is an electronic newspaper that makes a good model of the development of investigative journalism in Algeria, as it releases investigation reports and incarnates the experience of investigative journalists. Based on what was said, this study aims at revealing the commitment of Twala.info to the media transparency in its profile content and declared editorial policy. In so doing, we raise the following problematic, **"what are the indices of media transparency found in the profile content and editorial policy of Twala.info?"** From this question, sub-questions arise, as follows:

- **Is the profile content of Twala.info clear and exact?**
- **Does Twala.info commit to the editorial transparency in its declared profile content?**
- **Does Twala.info commit to the financial transparency in its declared profile content?**

1. The study concepts:

1.1. Definition of Investigative journalism: different definitions were given to this concept. Some see it is about investigations and reports based on professional and scientific rules that target different facts and complicated issues to remove vagueness and control the authority.⁷ In addition, a methodological behavior needs exact and objective research and detection to confirm the news. It aims at achieving the transparency, fighting corruption, and controlling the government. It is a tool for accountability that exceeds the governmental field to health, education, business, crimes, and all what harms the public interests. It manifests in the investigations and in supporting the role of media outlets as a 04th estate to protect the society.⁸

Besides, it needs time, effort, and serious potentials, as its outputs influence the society and may even lead to laws amendments and prosecution of criminals.⁹ UNESCO defines it as, deliberately or undeliberately, revealing to the audience what the authority hides to foster the freedom of expression and media development. In addition, the Investigative Reporters and Editors league sets three pillars for this journalism, namely the preparation of reports by the individual initiative, as it is characterized with authenticity in research and topic, and does not publish reports about an investigation or report on files received by an officer. Thus, it is about revealing important issues that some parties want to keep secret¹⁰

1.2. Definition of transparency: It is the process through which the institution confirms the quality of its services to meet the expectations and demands of the public opinion. The media agencies set different charters and standards to ensure transparency in the media outlets.¹¹ Moreover, it is the set of procedures taken by the media institution to provide the information to the audience, and the responsibilities, strategies, management methods, performances, and processes of the institution¹². Furthermore, it is providing information about an institution and its employees to allow the audience to exercise control and evaluate them. It has a tight relation with the cyber openness and the social responsibility and accountability, mainly in the era of technology.¹³ The concept of transparency refers to the continuous flow of the information related to the rule from the real source to allow the people to know the truths¹⁴. Besides, it is the higher authorities' safe and secure disclosure of their legal and financial situations, actions, and strategies¹⁵

2. The media transparency in the investigative journalism: views and trends:

The media transparency in the investigative journalism increases credibility and triggers different views regarding the transparency in the media outlets in general. In this context, some see that the nature of the investigative journalism needs an absolute transparency to reduce bias and the audience doubts about its credibility. Besides, it provides the chance for the audience to follow a given topic and participate in the investigation¹⁶. This absolute openness raises threats against the sources and their protection because, according to Brown, the investigative journalism is the balance between the disclosure of facts to the readers and the achievement of credibility in investigations.¹⁷

This goes with the premise that the absolute transparency that reveals some details about the method of investigation keeps the sources secret to ensure their protection, which is an ethical necessity. The technological development and the digital potentials increase the risks because the gatekeepers in the traditional journalism had absolute trust due to the absence of alternatives, unlike the gatekeepers in the digital environment, who must provide proofs of transparency to gain trust. Despite transparency is needed, it threatens the profession, as the details about transparency may threaten the independence of journalism, and the much information about the source of news deviates attention from what is more important¹⁸. On the other hand, the selective disclosure of the

information shakes the audience trust in journalism, as the readers may see this as deception and propaganda for the media institution¹⁹.

The characteristics of the investigative journalism link it to different points of professional transparency that affect the work of the investigative journalist. The main rules that guarantee the media transparency include:²⁰

- A legal and judicial frame that allows the media outlets to exercise accountability and show transparent.
- The audience access to the information in the institution policy, message, liability, and strategy.
- The commitment to the professional ethics.
- The establishment of transparency and accountability standards.
- The respect of the economic model according to the applicable laws.
- The periodical disclosure of the institution activities to the public opinion.
- The use of different communication channels to publish its activities.
- The advice of experts from outside the institution when needed.

The main task for the investigative journalism is revealing the hidden in the corruption cases, and the facts the authority wants to keep secret. Thus, it must be free from all pressures that limit its independence and credibility, mainly regarding the financial aspects. In this context, the characteristics of the investigative journalism require an atmosphere without pressures to ensure freedom that helps the investigative journalism work. This journalism relies on the investigations and must be independent and deep, as it takes a long time to collect and analyze data. Besides, it is in charge of detecting corruption and the unethical practices, such as the mismanagement and the legal violations that are hidden and target the authorities, institutions, and wealthy people.

3. The financial transparency in the media outlets:

The financial transparency in the investigative journalism fosters trust and gives guarantees about the independence of the published information, which must be based on ethical considerations.²¹ It has a positive effect on the audience satisfaction and loyalty.²² It links the audience with the newsrooms, as the recipient can understand the process of news production, making the newspapers more aware about their responsibility towards the audience and better their professional ethics, mainly that the present journalism faces threats of survival due to the

crisis of trust and credibility in the digital era.²³ To be a free investigative journalism, it must have guarantees about its independence from any governmental party and the social responsibility, such as the profitable aims of the media outlets, the power of the pressure groups, the material pressure, the advertisement restrictions, the dominance of advertisers on the news edition, and the secret donations from the government or foreign parties to direct the journalistic work. The investigative journalism faces financial pressures that affect their work, as money is needed to conduct the investigations.²⁴

The standards of financial transparency in the investigative journalism include:

- The disclosure of the funding sources: When the investigative newspaper discloses its funding resources, it gains trust and credibility, as the recipient can evaluate its neutrality based on the funding sources. Besides, it must reveal the donations and gifts received from the non-lucrative organizations.²⁵
- The publication of the annual financial reports according to the items of expenditure showing the costs during the production phases fosters credibility.
- The financial independence shows that the funding sources do not affect the investigation or dictate the news.²⁶
- The advertisements have a big role in directing the investigations. Thus, it is necessary to disclose any advertisers' help in the investigation content, and the editorial content must be free from the advertisement.²⁷

4. The editorial transparency in the media outlets:

The media transparency is a recurrent expression in information production. The establishment of the concept of transparent journalism in the digital era raised many questions in the journalistic exercise, as the new transparency models, such as the transparent newsrooms, the transparent edition, and the archives provide more potentials of transparency²⁸. The latter is a construct that is tightly linked to the general accountability and the ethical practice. It is a strategy that fosters the general knowledge and participation to remove vagueness from the journalistic practices and clarify the journalistic values.²⁹

Journalism can achieve the scientific quality, objectivity, and reliability through putting the audience in a situation to repeat the report, or the ability to investigate, as McQuail put it.³⁰ The transparency implies quality evaluations by the audience, and the increase of

credibility. In Western Europe for instance, only 33% of people trust journalism while 43% in USA do.³¹ Therefore, journalism must regain trust today through making known its editorial board and considering the audience a partner in the news creation. The transparency is an ethical criterion and is strongly linked to the search for truth. In this context, the journalist must be truthful to the audience and explain where he can reach in investigation.³²

Transparency has so long been a criterion to distinguish the professional journalism from the other forms of public discourses. It is related to data journalism and the exact journalism, which was established by Phillip Meier in USA, who called the journalists to adopt social methods in making their reports, and to bring journalism closer to science³³. The scientific process and the different proofs reduce uncertainty and foster objectivity. In this context, transparency is seen as the new objectivity.³⁴ The journalists must respect exactness, clarity, and fairness, and reveal the unethical practices in journalism³⁵

Theoretically speaking, the data journalism can explore transparency. However, after analyzing 150 articles on the data journalism in USA, we find that 90% of the articles do not show the data used; i.e., the media institutions still do not reveal everything to the audience, including the documents used in investigation. The researchers identified a set of criteria for transparency in the investigative journalism, mainly:

- Revealing the sources of information used by the newspaper in the investigations to gain the audience trust, mainly if the source is not threatened³⁶
- Showing the methods of investigation and the different steps it goes through, such as data collection, interviews, and reports³⁷
- The journalism must be neutral through the presentation of facts without bias to any party to increase credibility³⁸
- Taking the responsibility of the journalists' mistakes and correcting them to foster transparency and media responsibility towards the recipient³⁹
- Publishing the documents used in the investigation, mainly with the development of the electronic media. According to the offices of investigative journalism and the general news agencies, the transparency is one of the scientific dimensions of the data journalism. It focuses on revealing the process used in building the news through the links that help access documents and

databases, i.e., opening the sources to the reader. This adds reality, as transparency is proving the narratives and achieving objectivity⁴⁰.

- Interacting with the audience, as there is always inquiries and interactions between the company and the audience about the investigations and inquiries.⁴¹
- Respecting the professional ethics through a charter that provides for respecting privacy and avoiding defamation⁴².

5. Method and tools of the study:

5.1. Method of the study:

We used the analytical descriptive method that exactly describes the phenomena and texts to find out the characteristics of the phenomenon.⁴³ It helped us make the qualitative analysis of the profile content made by Twala.info though decoding the content and understanding its context.

5.2. The study tools:

We used the qualitative content analysis to deeply study the texts and deduce the implicit meanings of the content. It is an analytical method that classifies the qualitative texts and information in categories and units to understand the different dimensions of the textual content.⁴⁴ We collected the texts of the profile content of Twala.info and classified the content into categories that include the identity of the institution, the indices of the editorial transparency, and the indices of the financial transparency. Then, we coded the data, and deduced and analyzed ideas in their context.

5.3. The sample of the study:

We chose a purposive sample, namely Twala.info newspaper, as a model to study the status-quo of the investigative journalism in Algeria and its relation with the media transparency because this newspaper, which had been established in 2020, is a unique experience in the field of investigative journalism. The publication director is one of the Algerian investigative journalists who have international and national experience in the field, and who had participated in big international investigations, such as Panama Papers, Swiss Leaks, and Paradise Papers. We surveyed and qualitatively analyzed the whole profile content of the newspaper.

6. Discussion of the study results:

6.1. The identity of the company:

6.1.1. The index of clarity in defining the company and its vision:

The company defines itself in the points found in the façade of its website. Its symbol is an upside-down yellow T, which refers to its name, in moving lines, which symbolize the movement of the information. In addition, it explains the meaning of its name to avoid any false interpretations. In this regard, the war survivors bring the name "Twala" is derived from the Algerian proverb "al Khbar Ydjibouh Twala", i.e., the news. The newspaper says that the good and valid news need time; therefore, it is a slow journalism. The expression "slow journalism" first appeared in 2007 in the article of the British scholar Susan Greenberg in Prospect newspaper, where she explained the expression and confirmed that people in the era of technology are bombarded by fast and urgent news that lack exactness due to the speed and low costs. Thus, we need a newspaper that takes time to discover and interpret the news. In addition, it defined it as a journalism that focuses on quality in looking for the facts, and the logical explanation, interpretation, and narration.⁴⁵ The use of this expression by Twala.info in defining itself shows it has clear views and is distinguished from the other electronic newspapers and platforms that privilege speed than quality, as confirmed in the icon "who are we?". In this regard, the newspaper managers confirm that their challenge is giving a quality-information to the reader to enlighten the public opinion. Thus, it sets clear goals to the reader to achieve the media transparency. Besides, the newspaper declared the date of its foundation, the scope of its coverage, the nature of its products, the media subjects, the publication language, and the collaborators who are experts with legitimacy and authority to discuss their specialties.

6.1.2. The index of the declaration of the institution independence:

From the icon "who are we?" the newspaper defines itself as an electronic newspaper published by the limited liability company "Twala". It introduces its legal nature and says it is private, not public. In addition, the founding members are known in the media scene, independent, exact, and work for a reliable and exact journalism. In addition, the newspaper shares pictures and biographies of its founding members so that the readers know their trends and history. This reflects a high media transparency and denies any hidden bias. Through analyzing the institution introduction of itself, we find out that its managers are aware about the transparency indices and have clear goals, namely the trust of the audience and the increase of credibility.

6.2. The editorial transparency in Twala.info:

From the content profile, the newspaper set different frames that reflect its editorial trends and professional ethics. It introduced all these professional duties in the icon of "commitments". This means that it focuses on exactness and the principles of the investigative journalism, as it is rare to find an Algerian electronic newspaper that publishes an ethical charter on its website. This is a good initiative to gain trust and loyalty of the readers. The main edition indices mentioned in the charter are:

6.2.1. The index of objectivity, neutrality, and exactness:

The newspaper is committed to voicing out people who have no voice and serve the public interests, i.e., it does not work for any party, what marks one of the paramount indices of media transparency. Besides, it shows its attitude regarding gifts and bribes that may affect the content and create propaganda to confirm its independence from any party that may exercise pressure. Furthermore, it bans its members from affiliation to any political party to ensure transparency and avoid serving any political orientation or ideology. In addition, it insists on respecting the professional ethics.

6.2.2 The index of dealing with the news and investigations:

The newspaper focuses on its commitment to exactness in formulating the news and attempts to recognize and correct any mistake. This shows that the newspaper aims at gaining the readers' trust and taking its responsibility. Besides, it tries to gain a strong position through its credibility that manifests in its practices and commitment to neutrality in dealing with news far from any thefts. In this regard, it produces the texts, videos, and images, and mentions the source in case it uses other parties' ideas to promote integrity. Finally, it does not discuss personal lives, unless to serve the public interest and deter any social harms.

6.2.3. The index of sources' clarity:

The newspaper reveals its sources, except in rare cases when it fears the source would be subject to threats. Revealing the sources is one of the main features of the investigative journalism to ensure credibility and deter rumors, unlike the tabloids. In addition, it does not pay money to the sources to maintain its credibility.

6.3. The financial transparency in twala.info:

The financial aspect is one of the main aspects that cause pressure on the media outlets and affect their editorial policy and survival.

However, Twala.info identified a set of conditions it targets to avoid any financial intervention in its editorial policy.

6.3.1. The index of revealing the legal situation and capital of the institution:

The newspaper introduced the publishing company, its legal nature, its website, and its headquarters. These are the main elements that most of the newspapers share on their pages. However, Twala.info added information about its capital in numbers and shares, and declared the names of the shareholders whose photos are shared in the icon "who are we?". In this context, the Algerian law does not oblige the newspapers to reveal the nature of the shareholders; however, this newspaper aims at giving a model for the transparent slow investigative journalism that clarifies everything to its readers, mainly as it relies on the reader as the first source for funding through subscriptions.

6.3.2. The index of revealing the funding sources:

The newspaper transparently revealed its funding sources and discussed all the sources of funding that must be introduced to the reader to prove its transparency. It relies on the readers' subscriptions for funding, as it makes hybrid publications, i.e., there are articles open for everybody while the important articles are accessible after a monthly or annual subscription. In addition, it revealed the returns of the advertisements and the partnerships, which do not yield gains, but help the newspaper enrich its content through trainings and content exchange with local and international partners who share the same principles and quality. Besides, the exchange of content saves costs of producing reportages abroad and of transnational journalistic investigations.

The newspaper refuses any donations from the state and sees them as a violation of the competition rules and a blackmail of the publishers. Rather, the newspaper prefers the indirect donations that motivate the media outlets to invest in producing content. This newspaper is one of the rare electronic newspapers that rely on the subscription for funding, as is the case in international newspapers, mainly after the shift towards the digital environment and the recession in advertisements market. Moreover, it aims at diversifying its funding sources in a way that does not affect its editorial policy.

In Algeria, the electronic journalism witnessed different complications in funding, just like the printed newspapers. Since the 1990s, the state has been dominating the public advertisements through the national agency for advertisements, which it uses to influence the

editorial policy of the newspapers, leading to the shutdown of many opposition newspapers and the survival of the supporting ones. In addition, the state exercises pressure on the biggest private companies through banning them from advertising in the opposition newspapers/⁴⁶ The relation between the advertisers and the electronic newspapers seems complicated, as there are different economic companies that withdrew their advertisements from the electronic newspapers after publishing information the companies do not like, such as the tax evasion.⁴⁷

This explains the refusal of Twala.info of any advertisement or funding from the state, and its reliance on subscriptions to ensure its media independence and transparency without any pressure. Even in its relation with the partners, it refuses financial collaboration and opts for the collaboration in training and work to avoid the foreign and local interventions in its editorial policy.

Results:

The transparency indices in the profile content of twala.info are:

The identity transparency:

- The newspaper is electronic with a limited liability.
- It is independent.
- Its founding members are known figures whose photos and biographies are published on the website.
- The newspaper is slow and relies on depth and investigation far from speed.
- It aims at enlightening the public opinion.
- It writes articles based on field investigations.
- Its geographical interests are limited to Algeria, the Mediterranean, and the Sahel.

The editorial commitments:

- Serving the public interest.
- Refusing gifts, bribes, or any privileges that shall affect the editorial policy of the newspaper.
- Avoiding speed, short articles, and advertising articles.
- Banning the political affiliations and gatherings in the edition room.
- Committing to the professional ethics.
- Attentively reporting and formulating the information, and correcting the mistakes if they exist.

- Moderately dealing with information to satisfy the need for information without violation of the news subjects.
- Avoiding thefts of images or videos, and referring to the producer if necessary.
- Banning writing about the personal life of citizens and public figures, unless this affects the public interest and reduces the harm.
- Avoiding the reliance on unknown sources, unless in exceptional cases when fearing the source of information is threatened.
- Avoiding paying money to the sources.

The financial transparency:

- The newspaper defined the publishing company and mentioned its website, legal nature, and headquarters.
- The newspaper disclosed its capital and shares.
- The newspaper declared the names of the shareholders.
- The newspaper pointed that any change in the capital formation shall be revealed to the readers.
- The newspaper revealed its funding sources.
- The newspaper refuses the state aids.
- Partnerships help the newspaper enrich its content thanks to the workshops that train employees and help exchange content with local and international partners far from the financial cooperation.
- The newspaper publishes its financial reports periodically.

Conclusion:

Our findings show that Twala.info newspaper adopts transparency, as it discloses all what may strengthen its relation with the reader and increase its credibility. In the icons "who are we?", "our commitments", and "legal notification", the newspaper showed all the transparency indices, as it defined itself and showed its ethical standards that include the editorial transparency and the financial transparency. The latter needs the disclosure of all the funding sources and the financial policy. These contents are rarely found in the other Algerian newspapers, which are limited to giving simple introductions about themselves.

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