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Resilience in Newsrooms in Times of Authoritarian Resurgence: We Went From the Sky to Under the Ground

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This article examines resilience as a framework for explaining how individual journalists cope in restrictive political environments, using Egypt and Algeria as case studies. Focusing on the everyday lifeworld of journalists, it investigates how their practices shape conditions of survival under unequal power dynamics. Drawing on semi structured interviews and life histories with a sample of dissenting journalists in both countries, the article explores the forms of resilience employed to withstand extreme pressures at the micro level. It argues that journalists deploy shifting strategies of adaptation to circumvent structural limitations while preserving professional gains achieved during previous periods of relative openness. Journalistic resilience manifests as pragmatic reworking of opportunities for "breathing," far removed from the model of the heroic journalist defending freedoms at all costs. This reworking encompasses a spectrum of practices, ranging from "getting by" through adaptation, exit, silence to, in rare cases, radical voicing.

Keywords: resilience, journalistic practices, authoritarian resurgence, reworking, voice

Resilience is an increasingly fashionable concept in media policy and journalism studies. In recent years, organizations such as the European Journalism Centre have foregrounded resilience as a key concern (Thomas, 2019), while Free Press Unlimited awards an annual "Most Resilient Journalist Award" (Free Press Unlimited, n.d.). In this article, we question the applicability of resilience to journalistic practice in highly repressive contexts and develop an alternative understanding of what journalistic resilience looks like at the level of individual practice, as opposed to normative expectations. We examine resilience among journalists in Algeria and Egypt—two contexts in which periods of limited media reform failed to produce lasting changes in journalistic practices or media structures, either because reforms were never institutionalized or were later reversed under renewed autocracy. We ask: What does journalistic resilience look like in everyday

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practice? And how do individual journalists develop and enact resilient strategies in response to authoritarian retrenchment? These research questions guide the article's broader theoretical contribution toward refining an alternative approach to resilience within journalism studies.

To explore how resilience is inscribed and enacted by journalistic subjects, we analyze journalists' personal narratives of newsroom experiences during periods of radical authoritarian retrenchment. Based on how resilience is enacted in everyday practice, we argue that it does not align with narratives of the journalist-activist turned heroic freedom-of-speech warrior. Instead, resilience emerges through small, uncelebrated acts of "getting by" that carve out livable spaces for journalists and their publics, without necessarily constituting overt resistance.

Resilience and Resilient Subjects

Resilience is commonly understood as the capacity to absorb shocks, accommodate structural insecurities, and bounce back from disasters. Reflecting on the concept's broad uptake and impact, Tierney (2015) describes resilience as a "boundary object" that traverses disciplinary borders and enables communication across diverse fields. Perhaps inevitably, given its influence, resilience has attracted robust and sustained critique. Scholars argue that resilience operates in concert with neoliberal forms of governmentality, shifting responsibility onto individuals to adapt to and protect themselves against the pressures and precarity of life under late capitalism (Chandler, 2014; Joseph, 2013; Pugh, 2014).

The resilient subject is thus imagined as the versatile worker, durable survivor, or resourceful actor. Consequently, subjects or communities who fail to secure themselves against adversity are held personally responsible for their non resilience and are framed as "lacking" or "deficient" (Aranda et al., 2012, p. 551). This psychological ontology of resilience, which stresses the autonomous, rational, and self-organizing resilient subject, normalizes the structural inequalities and power asymmetries that generate vulnerability and precarity (Welsh, 2014). Resilience is therefore critiqued as a depoliticizing force that marginalizes resistance and forecloses the imagination of alternative worlds (Evans & Reid, 2015).

In response to these critiques, some scholars have argued that it is both possible—and politically and analytically productive—to think "resilience beyond neoliberalism" (Krüger, 2019, p. 55). Recent work has emphasized the ambiguous, contingent, and unfinished nature of the resilient subject (Aranda et al., 2012; Brassett & Vaughan-Williams, 2015). Brassett and Vaughan-Williams (2015), for instance, draw on Judith Butler's (2010) work to advance a theory of resilience that attends to its varied performances across different actors and contexts:

> The everyday performance of resilience is not deducible to grand logics of adaptability or neoliberal governmentality—though they tell a part of the story—but must engage with details of how such logics materialize and affect different subjects in various ways. (p. 39)

A similarly grounded and "worldly" approach to resilience is advanced by MacLeavy et al. (2021), who argue for resilience as "a new way of being in the world" (p. 1569). They conceptualize the resilient subject as generative and relational, "performative rather than stable or socially constituted" (p. 1569).

To clarify resilient journalistic practices, we draw on Cindi Katz's (2004, 2009) analytical distinction between resistance, resilience, and reworking as a useful guiding typology. In *Growing Up Global,* Katz (2004) critiques the tendency among some scholars to read all practices—however covert—as forms of resistance. Based on her ethnographic study of children growing up in Sudan and New York City, she argues for a parsing out of three overlapping categories: resistance, reworking, and resilience. While resistance requires an overt demonstration of "oppositional consciousness," resilience is a strategy of endurance: "small acts . . . which fostered ways to get by each day" (Katz, 2004, p. 245). Positioned between resistance and resilience, reworking refers to practices that deliberately seek to make the world more livable and workable without directly confronting existing power relations.

This typology proves particularly useful for interpreting our empirical material. The journalists we interviewed described engaging in forms of reworking aimed at mitigating the effects of severe censorship and developing strategies to circumvent such constraints, without escalating to overt rebellion against editorial lines or management directives.

Resilience and Journalism Studies: A New Turn?

In recent years, the related concepts of resilience, vulnerability, and resistance have become increasingly prominent in journalism and media studies (Cammaerts et al., 2013; Mattoni & Treré, 2014; Waisbord, 2019). This growing body of literature highlights how journalists in both the Global North and South operate under increasingly challenging conditions, even as long-standing professional, institutional, and economic safety nets continue to erode. Scholarship has, for example, examined sectoral precarity among Canadian journalists (Cohen et al., 2019), journalists' strategies for coping with trauma encountered in the course of reporting (Novak & Davidson, 2013; Verhovnik, 2017), and how resilience is represented within television news narratives (El Zein, 2021).

While resilience risks being pathologized, Latin American journalism scholarship has been particularly attentive to vulnerability and resilience as relational phenomena (Barão da Silva et al., 2022; Barrios & Miller, 2021; de Bustamante & Relly, 2021; Ganter & Paulino, 2021; Ozawa et al., 2023). This body of work conceptualizes resilience as a set of "counterstrategies for preserving [journalists'] lives or well-being" (Barrios & Miller, 2021, p. 1424), foregrounding journalistic solidarity, unionization, community organizing, and collegial practices of risk sharing.

Hughes et al. (2021), for example, examine journalists' resilience in Mexico under conditions of severe occupational stress, including physical attacks, psychological intimidation, and violence targeting journalists and their equipment by criminal groups, police, and political actors. They underscore the importance of solidarity and community in sustaining journalistic work, noting that "professional camaraderie is more than utilitarian and additionally supports emotional well-being across many contexts" (Hughes et al., 2021, p. 986). In the absence of employer-sponsored support systems, Hughes et al. (2021)

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argue that civil society organizations function as crucial spaces where journalists can turn to one another for collaboration and care, including psychological counselling following threats of violence, legal assistance in defamation cases, and safety training and guidance on secure reporting practices (p. 984).

Agency and Structure in Unequal Power Dynamics

Investigating journalistic resilience under conditions of extreme repression raises fundamental questions about the forms of agency available to journalists within profoundly unequal power relations. Journalists are often portrayed as mere mouthpieces of power, obedient subjects incapable of effecting meaningful change. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory offers a useful framework for complicating this view by emphasizing that social structures are simultaneously constraining and enabling. Structures do not simply limit action; they also enable certain practices. Central to this perspective is the duality of structure, which conceptualizes structure and agency as mutually constitutive: "The structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (Giddens, 1984, p. 25).

Bourdieu's (1998) concept of habitus provides a complementary lens for understanding agency under conditions of unequal power. While practices are shaped by internalized dispositions acquired through socialization, they are not mechanically determined. Rather, agency is practical and embodied, guided by what Bourdieu terms a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25)—a form of tacit, experiential knowledge that enables actors to navigate constraints without being fully conscious. This practical agency unfolds within fields: structured social spaces that exert power over agents while being simultaneously shaped by their practices. Fields impose specific constraints, hierarchies, and relations of power; yet through everyday action, agents both reproduce and, at times, subtly transform these structures (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 30).

Journalists' adaptations to structural constraints exemplify practical forms of agency. Through strategies and tactics, they navigate professional and personal survival without compromising core values. While their actions are shaped by—and at times reproduce—the structures in which they operate, journalists exercise judgment to preserve gains, mitigate risk, and maintain a foothold in precarious environments, demonstrating context-sensitive and situated agency.

Context: The Algeria and Egypt Case Study

Despite differences in historical trajectories, both Algeria and Egypt have experienced cycles of limited media liberalization followed by renewed authoritarian control, producing constrained environments in which journalists must navigate censorship, repression, and professional precarity.

In Algeria, following the independence in 1962, the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN) established a state media monopoly, tightly controlling the media sphere and coordinating information dissemination nationwide. Journalism was largely treated as a tool of propaganda, with media ownership, organization, and staff selection under central government control (Gafaïti, 1999, p. 51–52;

Layadi, 2021, p. 300). In response to the 1988 popular protests, the 1990 Information Code formally ended the state media monopoly and introduced a nominal liberalization of the Algerian media sphere. This liberalization, however, has been described as "cosmetic" (Zaghlami, 2020, p. 120) or a "façade" (El Issawi, 2017) of media pluralism, with a proliferation of new private media outlets, but little variation in media output and style.

The outbreak of the Algerian civil war in 1991 severely constrained journalists' ability to report on a wide range of issues. Journalists, alongside cultural figures, feminists, and civil society actors, were targeted by terrorist groups, with 58 journalists killed between 1993 and 1996 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 1999). A state of emergency was declared in 1992, and the decree of 14 June 1994 prohibited all reporting on political violence except through the state-controlled Algerian Press Service (APS). Despite these severe restrictions, the 1990 legislation—and its subsequent clarification and extension to audio-visual media in 2012—created limited openings for new forms of expression, expanding the range of topics that could be reported and debated.

The 2019 Hirak movement (meaning "movement" in English) challenged both the ruling elite and entrenched state-media relations. Social media played a central role in mobilizing and sustaining the protests (Hamitouche, 2022), fostering transnational linkages and solidarities (Mattoni & Sigillò, 2022), and contesting mainstream media norms (Bentahar, 2021). Since the Hirak, however, press freedoms have come under severe crackdown, with journalists subjected to harassment and arrest. Under the pretext of combatting the spread of false information related to COVID-19, the penal code was tightened in 2020, introducing prison sentences for disseminating "false news" or "hate speech" deemed harmful to "national security and order" (Reporters Without Borders, n.d., para. 4). These measures have resulted in the blocking of television and online channels, further constraining the media environment (Farmanfarmaian, 2020).

Egypt's media history shows parallel dynamics. During the post-independence Nasser era (1956–1970), the nationalized media functioned as the propaganda arm of the ruling party. This was then followed by the abolition of formal censorship as a part of Sadat's "open door" policies (*infitah*), replaced by a broader and more subtle system of control. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the expansion in private outlets, the advent of satellite television, and growing Internet use created a seemingly pluralistic media scene; yet, as in Algeria, diversification of ownership did not translate into diversity of views.

The January 25 Revolution of 2011 opened a brief window of transformation: new private outlets proliferated, citizen journalism flourished, previously taboo topics were addressed, and alternative voices—including political satire—emerged (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Newsom & Lengel, 2012). The plurality of voices, however, was not supported by structural reforms (El Issawi, 2014). Under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the incarceration of journalists has become "systematic" (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). The Cybercrime Law of 2018 further narrowed the scope of freedom of expression in the online sphere. In addition, President al-Sisi has strived to co-opt Egypt's media in both the public and private sectors leading to a "Sisification" (Reporters Without Borders, 2019) of the Egyptian media, with key media organizations bought by loyalists to the regime and the security and intelligence services embedded within broadcast media outlets.

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Methodology

This article draws on a series of semistructured interviews with dissenting journalists in Algeria and Egypt, designed to elicit detailed life histories. Journalism studies has a small, but growing body of research employing life history methods to examine journalists' professional trajectories (Brennen, 2001; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Waschková Císařová, 2021). Such approaches foreground the interplay between public and private life, as well as the "structures of feeling" (Williams, 1977, as cited in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 673) that shape journalists' lived experiences and professional practices.

During the interviews, participants were invited to engage in a self-reflective process, recounting key moments in their professional lives related to major political events. For Egypt, a central reference was the Rabaa massacre of August 2013, in which hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters were killed by security forces. Largely ignored by Egyptian media, the massacre was described by Amnesty International as "a turning point following which the Egyptian authorities have relentlessly pursued a zero-tolerance policy of dissent" (Amnesty International, 2023, para. 3).

For Algerian journalists, a comparable turning point was the previously mentioned Hirak movement of February 2019 against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to seek a fifth term, despite his health. The movement culminated in Bouteflika's resignation on April 2, 2019, largely because of the withdrawal of military support (Parks, 2019). Across both contexts, journalists identified these political events as critical turning points in their professional trajectories.

It is important to clarify that this article does not undertake a comparative analysis of journalistic practices between Algeria and Egypt. Rather, it adopts a case-study approach focused on the dynamics of resilience at the individual, micro level. This methodological choice reflects our interest in examining forms of practical agency exercised by journalists as individual practitioners coping with extreme conditions, particularly in contexts where professional associations and collective support structures are weak or absent, an area that remains largely understudied. The selection of Algeria and Egypt is instead motivated by the severity of renewed authoritarianism in both contexts, which has rendered independent journalistic practice increasingly difficult and risky.

The interviews were conducted in two phases. An initial series took place between 2017 and 2021 with 20 independent journalists working across different areas of journalistic production. This data set was subsequently expanded through four additional interviews conducted in 2025 (two in each country), bringing the total number of participants to 24 journalists (14 in Egypt and 10 in Algeria). The term "dissenting journalists" is used to refer to journalists who adopt professional practices and identities that challenge authoritarian restrictions on press freedom, regardless of the specific forms such dissent may take. The most recent interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom or other communication platforms selected by participants for security reasons. Interviews were carried out in Arabic or French. The authors, both fluent in these languages (one a native speaker), undertook the translation of interview materials.

Several of the journalists interviewed had left their home countries, and some had moved to alternative careers, citing the extraordinary pressures and unpredictable risks associated with journalistic work. Others continued to practice journalism despite facing multiple forms of intimidation. Four participants asked to be identified by name. All other participants were anonymized to protect their confidentiality and personal safety, with all identifying details removed.

Given the sensitivity of the topics discussed, participant selection combined systematic research on major media outlets and journalistic production, drawing on our established networks in both countries. All selected participants had a demonstrated record of dissenting journalistic activity, including the publication of critical reporting or the public expression of oppositional views. Participant selection was guided by the need to achieve the greatest possible diversity of experiences in terms of gender, professional role within media organizations, career seniority, and journalistic genre. The majority of interviewees were mid-career journalists who had covered the revolutionary moments in Egypt and Algeria. The sample also slightly favors male journalists (15 men and nine women), reflecting gender imbalances commonly observed in newsroom demographics.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in journalists' narratives and perceptions of their lived experiences, including changes in professional practices, working conditions, and forms of emotional expression. The analysis adopted an inductive approach, treating the data as a generative terrain for developing new analytical insights into journalists' capacities for resilience under conditions of duress (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Guest et al., 2012).

Consistent with this inductive approach, the analysis adopts an emic perspective, attending to how participants—positioned as insiders within specific cultural and professional contexts—interpret and articulate their experiences in relation to significant political and professional events. This aligns with Reed's (2011) conception of culture as a landscape of meaning, in which social actors actively construct and navigate shared symbolic worlds. The interviews reveal how journalists engage in processes of symbolic representation to make sense of their professional and personal realities. While participants "draw their own canvas," they simultaneously illuminate the structural conditions shaping their work and lives, offering insight into how individuals understand and negotiate these conditions beyond the immediate context of the interview (Tavory, 2020, p. 458).

The Multiple Faces of Resilience

In the discussion that follows, we trace journalists' strategies of resilience. To interpret these trajectories, we draw on two typologies: Cindi Katz's (2004, 2009) analytic distinction between resistance, resilience, and reworking and Hirschman's (1970) Exit–Voice–Loyalty (EVL) framework. These analytical tools illuminate how journalists exercise practical agency by crafting limited, but meaningful forms of action, even in the absence of resilient institutional support or effective professional solidarity.

Strategies of Self-Preservation Under Duress

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Journalists' experiences reveal a clear reluctance to acquiesce to the new political order, as they actively tested multiple avenues to circumvent imposed constraints. By adopting various strategies to express dissatisfaction, journalists resisted compliance in varied and overlapping ways. These strategies align with Hirschman's (1970) framework, encompassing exit (leaving a position or the profession altogether), voice (open or covert expressions of resistance), and loyalty (continuing to work under constraints).

Across the interviews, journalists most frequently resorted to exit or loyalty, while voice was exercised only in limited and narrowly circumscribed contexts. Crucially, journalists' responses to authoritarian retrenchment were not static. They moved fluidly between positions as political conditions shifted, continually reassessing risks and opportunities. The experience of Journalist 1*,* a mid-career Egyptian female journalist who extensively covered post-revolutionary events in Cairo for a leading independent news website, illustrates this pattern of strategic adaptation. To evade censorship without immediately exiting the field, she moved between different newsroom desks, seeking to preserve a degree of editorial autonomy. Only when reporting became virtually impossible did she resign from her position. She subsequently transitioned from reporting to training younger journalists and eventually left the country. Reflecting on this trajectory, she recounts:

> The time came when I realized we can no longer conduct investigations. By this time, I was feeling terribly down. Even ordinary topics such as healthcare became very difficult to investigate; we needed leaks from private sources, or the work would take too long. When I was given responsibility over human rights stories, I became a problem for the management as I could not do what they requested from me. I asked the editor in chief to go back to conduct field investigations, but we were told that there won't be any investigations allowed, so I decided to resign. I did not choose to be silent, but we were obliged to do so. I was given the file of human rights since 2010, and it was impossible to write on such sensitive issues, so I had the choice to write on light topics, just to pretend I am journalist and to have a byline, or to leave.

Few journalists chose overt forms of resistance, engaging in radical acts of voice. These experiences carried significant personal and professional risks, including imprisonment, and often led to a reconfiguration of their professional identity toward forms of activism. Algerian journalist Khaled Drareni provides a particularly illustrative example. Before his extensive coverage of the Algerian Hirak—which ultimately resulted in his imprisonment in 2020—Drareni repeatedly resigned from his positions as acts of defiance against editorial lines or was dismissed for posing challenging questions to senior officials that were deemed to transgress political "red lines." He reflects on his choices:

> I am often asked: Are you a journalist or activist? I usually answer saying: If I were a journalist in Switzerland, I might just be a journalist, but I live in Algeria where there is no freedom of the press. It is obvious and necessary for me to be an activist and a journalist at the same time, but I am an activist for freedom of expression and the media. I hope that, in Algeria, we reach a phase where we are no more activists when we finally work in an environment that respects the freedom of the press. When I was in prison, I

> told myself that my place is not in the prison, but I was also immediately correcting myself saying that since I am defending freedom of expression in Algeria, it is logical that my place is in prison.

Algerian journalist and activist Ihsane el Kadi regards the question of radical voice—and its costs—as "a real question." He spent 22 months in prison in retaliation for his professional activities challenging the regime's repression, notably as director of *Radio M* and *Maghreb Émergent*. He was released in October 2024 after receiving a presidential pardon, following a prominent international campaign in his support (Amnesty International, 2024). Reflecting on his decision to raise the ceiling of dissent during an especially repressive period, he explains:

> I felt guilty as a manager because I had 30 journalists working with me who lost their salaries. Did I make the right decision to challenge the regime at that very repressive moment? I am not sure—this is a real question. But if I don't challenge the jailing of journalists, repressive laws, intimidation . . . then I am no longer a journalist.

Strategies of resilience and resistance took diverse forms; yet, as journalists recounted their life histories, these strategies often appeared as a fluid cycle of advance and retreat, shaped by the intensity of media repression, temporarily eased during brief political periods of détente. To navigate heightened repression, journalists frequently employed forms of strategic withdrawal, ranging from avoiding politically sensitive topics or shifting to ostensibly less restricted beats to even taking a temporary leave from work. A leading mid-career Algerian journalist (hereafter, Journalist 6) describes this approach as "strategic withdrawal," explaining her decision to avoid political reporting to focus on topics of local relevance in the southern region where she works. She recounts:

> I currently practice a journalism of proximity, and this is as important as reporting on national politics. The choice of topics is led by my understanding of the political mood, by observing the regime's reactions, especially the kind of topics that led journalists to prison. I am isolated here, I am alone with no colleagues' support or presence, I have no protection, I must be careful.

For this journalist, trained in one of Algeria's leading private newspapers, peers who challenge the regime to the extent of facing jail sentences are taking "unnecessary risks" because "we can do things differently, we can think about how to deal with the regime in a more efficient manner. Risking prison is not courage; it is recklessness. We should find other tools to continue practicing and surviving these tough conditions without paying such a high price."

Creative Resilience

Journalists interviewed experienced what they described as a golden age of inquisitive and bold reporting during the revolutionary momentum and its immediate aftermath. Among those who had previously worked under pre-revolutionary media and political regimes, there was a greater understanding—and in some cases acceptance—of the cyclical dynamics of expansion and regression in journalistic freedoms.

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By contrast, journalists without such prior experience tended to frame this shift primarily as a profound personal loss. For example, an Egyptian female journalist who received training in field investigation after the 2011 uprising (hereafter referred to as Journalist 2) described the transformation of her work environment following the introduction of new forms of newsroom censorship under the Sisi regime: "We went from the sky—in the immediate years following the 2011 revolution—to below the ground."

The transition from emancipation to renewed authoritarianism—often more severe than former regimes—has not been accompanied by processes of unlearning. Instead, journalists described a process of selective adaptation, in which they sought to preserve and repurpose elements of what they had previously learned within the constraints of the new environment. They must learn how to "play the game" of power to their advantage. It is a game in which they have to excel in deciphering the rules of the game to avoid paying its horrifically high costs. Their work, therefore, is not so much a process of learning and unlearning professional skills as it is a continual negotiation with interruptions—periodic reductions of the spaces available for testing critical reporting.

Journalists demonstrate creativity in exercising vigilance in their struggle to preserve some of their professional practices, shifting between avoidance, loyalty, and voice. All of them, with no exception, stressed the need to be careful to avoid gifting their detractors with the opportunity to arrest or silence them. Their use of the available margins is felt as a form of "breathing" space while adapting to multiple, growing, and shifting pressures. "I felt after 2014 that we have no more oxygen to breathe," stated journalist 2 when asked about how she lived with the renewed control over newsrooms after a short parenthesis of freedoms in Egypt. Despite the continuing threat of imprisonment, Algerian journalist Ihsane el Kadi continues to raise his voice, even though he and his team are now largely limited to covering economic topics. "I feel safer if I use my voice for press freedom. We must comply with the regime's restrictions, but we must not regress too much. The important thing is to know how to express this dissent," he explains. For these journalists, finding spaces for dissent that can be relatively safe is equivalent to safeguarding life under precarious and risky conditions.

One major form of resilience is the knowledge of the legislative and tacit boundaries of media freedoms and how this knowledge can be used to avoid retaliation. This knowledge operates less as clear legal guidance than as a calculated gamble. Despite the weight of restrictive legislation, the formal legal arsenal often appears largely irrelevant in journalists' lived experiences. An Algerian journalist who employed satire as a tool for political expression (hereafter referred to as Journalist 4) reflects on the complexities of navigating this uncertain terrain. He recounts:

> Lately, I became less comfortable with writing. I try to be very careful by avoiding using what can be considered as insults when I write about the president or institutions of power. At the same time, I try to continue disseminating counter narratives, especially to challenge mainstream media's negative narratives on the Hirak. I am scared. It is normal to be scared. This is why I decided to stop all my activities in a phase when the crackdown on dissent became very high with multiple arrests of journalists and activists. but I then

> told myself: it is not acceptable that your colleagues suffer retaliation, and you continue to be silent. I went back to publishing but within limits.

Efforts to avoid providing the regime with grounds for retaliation have prompted journalists to adopt creative strategies of self-preservation. These include avoiding direct or personalized criticism—even when such criticism is voiced by sources—and skillfully navigating what are commonly understood as "red lines." A prominent Algerian talk show presenter, who was forced to change positions multiple times because of his confrontational interviewing style (hereafter referred to as Journalist 5), describes these constraints and his creative responses to them:

> There are topics that are off-limits in Algeria, such as the budget allocated to the army or any criticism of the army's counter terrorism activities. For instance, a local newspaper once published a report about an alleged bribe paid to a judge to secure the release of prisoners accused of terrorism. I invited a deputy to discuss the issue since he is protected by his parliamentary immunity. I can still face criticism for hosting him, but I can argue that I chose him because he raised the issue in parliament. Yet, it is not a protection for me.

Journalists employ numerous strategies to circumvent structural limitations. One strategy cited by several journalists involves strict formal compliance with regulatory requirements—such as obtaining the necessary licenses, paying taxes, and outwardly adhering to official directives—while simultaneously seeking ways to report on issues that are omitted or underreported within state-sanctioned narratives. Nora Youness, editor in chief of *Al Menassa*, an alternative Egyptian news website that combines citizen and professional journalism and remains one of the very few independent outlets operating in the country, explains that the platform strives to adhere to universal journalistic values to mitigate retaliation:

> We fact-check our information very carefully, and we avoid unnamed sources unless we have no other choice. We always ask official sources to comment on our reports, even when they are unresponsive. However, this is not sufficient to protect us. Official sources often refuse to speak to us, and some provide statements only on the condition of anonymity. We also face severe financial difficulties in recruiting qualified journalists and achieving financial sustainability, especially since our website has been blocked 19 times so far.

In Algeria, journalistic "scoops" have become effectively unattainable, as journalists are legally required to adhere to official narratives when reporting breaking news. A veteran Algerian journalist (hereafter referred to as Journalist 10) describes how he and his peers have adapted their professional practices to these constraints:

> Exclusivity is the soul of journalism, yet it has become almost impossible to achieve. We spend hours in editorial meetings discussing whether to cover a topic at all, carefully weighing the legal risks involved. If we break a news story, we immediately come under scrutiny and are asked to reveal our sources. To protect ourselves, we often wait until the

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> news is released through an official statement or appears on social media, and only then develop it further. Under these conditions, practicing journalism becomes an extremely difficult—almost impossible—task.

Solidarity in Fractured Professional Communities

While Zelizer's (1993) notion of journalists as an interpretive community helps illuminate shared meanings and experiences that extend beyond professional rituals, the practices described by interviewees align more closely with Zirugo's (2025) concept of *fractured interpretive communities*. This fragmentation is particularly evident within a contested and polarized public sphere, where there is little consensus over what constitutes professional journalism. In both Egypt and Algeria, journalists' experiences are shaped by a lack of solidarity, driven primarily by generational and ideological divisions, as well as by weak and uneven connections between journalists and civil society.

A pervasive sense of powerlessness and the absence of reliable support structures emerged as common themes across the interviews. Feelings of isolation were especially pronounced among journalists who had been emotionally invested in the revolutionary moment and who experienced the subsequent erosion of media freedoms as a deeply personal loss. The account of Journalist 1 is illustrative: "Some groups within the journalistic community tried to resist, but they faced many problems. As for the role of the journalists' syndicate, the former head of the organization was arrested and is now at home with no job," she explains.

The solitude of the few rising reporters who managed to make a reputation post revolution and became active players in public debates is a matter strongly felt by journalist 2. She argues:

> Under the former Mubarak regime, we used to talk about a margin of freedoms journalists used to push to expand it. It no longer exists. The regime has a new understanding for this margin blamed as being behind the revolution considered as a setback [*waksa*], so it closed all possible avenues for such margin. There is no structure for resistance, only individuals who are fighting with severe consequences for their safety. I used to feel I am part of a phenomenon, a new experience for journalism. Today, I barely can write. I always ask myself: What is the point?

Experiences of solidarity and support, particularly that received from international actors, seem contradictory in how journalists perceive their effects on their ability to cope with a high level of pressure. Among Egyptian journalists, most interviewees viewed international support as largely irrelevant in deterring the regime from arresting them, and thus ineffective as a protective mechanism. On the contrary, such support was often perceived as exacerbating vulnerability, as regimes frequently prosecute journalists on charges of acting as "agents" or "tools" of foreign interests. Journalist 2's encounter with this form of protection—or lack thereof—is illustrative:

> When we began collaborating with international organizations, rumors circulated accusing them of working with the Israeli Mossad to destabilize the country. We were scared. Another significant challenge was that most of these organizations demanded political contributions that focused heavily on the regime, showing limited interest in more apolitical topics. Over time, however, they shifted toward scientific themes to avoid retaliation.

Algerian journalists described a different pattern, in which international solidarity can be effective, but often operates by elevating the journalist-as-activist into a symbolic figure or hero. For example, Khaled Drareni considers both national and international solidarity to have been crucial in pressuring for his release from prison. He recounts:

> This solidarity, national and international, from defenders of freedom of expression, was the biggest protection I could enjoy. I was lucky. I used to tell myself I can sleep tight in my prison cell thanks to this solidarity. I am confident that this solidarity got me out of prison. My release from prison took a year which is too long, but it was possible only thanks to this solidarity and pressure.

If international solidarity remains ambivalent, internal solidarity among journalists appears elusive. As journalists themselves describe, this weakness stems from generational and ideological divides, as well as from the cooptation of—or lack of agency within—the bodies that represent journalists. For Algeria**,** several interviews highlighted a lack of professional cohesion as a major factor enabling the regime to silence journalists. A significant contributor to this fragmentation is the divide between an older generation of politically committed journalists and a younger generation perceived as more "obedient" and self-serving. Journalist 10, for example, attributes the weak sense of solidarity to the absence of institutional structures capable of transmitting professional values to the new generation of Algerian journalists:

> We failed to transmit our values to the new generation of journalists. They are too accommodating toward those in power and less willing to engage in the struggle for freedom of expression. This is also a reflection of our own shortcomings: we did not build a unified professional community capable of mentoring younger journalists. There is no journalistic community today, but rather isolated individuals fighting alone with limited impact.

The experience of the Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate reflects a different form of solidarity, one in which journalists' attachment to their syndicate—an institution that has historically played a significant role in challenging successive regimes yet has also been co-opted at various moments—does not translate into tangible pressure. Instead, solidarity manifests as a symbolic act of resilience through the syndicate's continued existence and performance, even if only at minimal or essential levels. In this context, adapting to shifting political conditions—from periods of relative openness to renewed closure—takes the form of perseverance through institutional survival itself. Despite extraordinary pressure aimed at discrediting and ultimately controlling the syndicate, its members elected an anti-regime leader for two consecutive terms. Khaled El-Balshy, the head of the syndicate, explains his strategy for survival in the face of relentless regime campaigns:

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> I focused solely on professional matters, avoiding politics. The political context was more favorable a few years ago, due to the national dialogue, and I made full use of it. I exploited political divisions among different factions to secure gains. I organized major conferences and opened our doors to everyone, including journalists supportive of the regime. What saved us was concentrating exclusively on professional issues rather than political debates, while engaging with the media group that currently controls the press—without compromising our priorities.

The solidarity among journalists that enabled the election of an independent leader, defying the regime's attempts to control the syndicate, does not represent a secure or lasting victory. At present, the syndicate and its president are once again under intensified pressure following the regression of the period of détente that had enabled limited advances on their agenda, including renewed financial and legal pursuits. "Clashes are inevitable when it comes to sensitive dossiers like journalists in prison; I cannot compromise on these essential issues," El-Balshy acknowledges.

While generational cultural differences clearly shape divisions among journalists, an equally significant line of demarcation separates those rooted in legacy media culture from those producing alternative narratives, including journalists engaged in forms of activism. The mushrooming of online platforms disseminating alternative narratives has amplified dissenting voices, blending professional-neutral and activist-oriented styles. However, according to most journalists interviewed, these alternative voices have further fractured already fragile solidarity among journalists. They are criticized for being biased, elitist, unable to form an effective counterpoint to regime-friendly mainstream media, and lacking recognition among legacy media journalists. "They are impactful but have little respect within mainstream journalists, this is why their ability to bring real change is limited," journalist 10 comments.

Discussion and Limitations

In the article, we argue that resilience, when understood as a form of situated agency operating within a Bourdieuian (2005) field of action, offers a useful framework for understanding journalistic practices that occupy a middle ground between contention and acquiescence. This middle ground is often neglected in studies of resilience and resistance, interpreted as an act of giving up. According to Giddens' (1984) theory, structure and agency are intertwined, since agency involves creating opportunities to cope with repressive structures while simultaneously expanding possibilities to evade them without significant risk.

In journalists' experiences, resilience emerges as performative and unfinished, continually recalibrated in response to shifting configurations of power. In line with Katz's (2004) thinking, these practices are not forms of overt resistance. They are rarely heroic, and may, at times, be conservative in bent, appearing to reinforce systems of oppression and censorship rather than challenging them. The reworking that journalists develop seeks to exploit any margin permitted by the political field to resist the erosion or "unlearning" of skills, norms, and professional dispositions acquired during earlier phases of relative openness. Their ability to strategically reposition themselves following structural and political

changes creates a space for breathing, enabling them to remain relevant and continue reporting, even at considerable cost. In their experiences, reworking takes the shape of a skillful and relentless negotiation with disruption, since cycles of advance and retreat are internalized as part of professional identity. In doing so, journalists create fragile and contingent spaces for resilience not aimed at restoring previous circumstances, but at consolidating opportunities to continue performing, despite the constraints.

Hirschman's (1970) typology of exit, voice, and loyalty helps illuminate the kinds of strategies individual journalists adopt in response to uncertainty and adversity. However, journalists' practices point to a more nuanced typology. First, exit or withdrawal is often performed as an act of self-preservation—a common response among journalists. As we observed, self-preservation involves adapting to repression through strategic repositioning in terms of the substance, style, and form of journalism. Moving to newsroom desks considered less political, taking on new roles within the news organization, or engaging in training and mentorship activities for junior colleagues allow journalists to avoid a complete exit from the field. Second, while there were examples of journalists choosing to overtly and vocally challenge systems of power, we found that, overall, journalists' performance of voice is closely tied to their understanding of where the "red lines" lie at any given time. Voice thus becomes an articulation of journalists' understanding of the "rules of the game" and how these can be navigated to strategically exploit structural limitations. In this sense, voice represents the strategy of the possible, far removed from the figure of the heroic journalist or activist who accepts punishment as an inevitable prerequisite for political change. Instead, vigilance emerges as a central modality, enabling journalists to navigate the constraints imposed by authoritarian regimes without becoming ensnared by them.

Linked to practices of creative reworking, Hirschman's (1970) notion of loyalty is performed through scrupulous attention to regulatory requirements and legal frameworks. While journalists understand and operate within tacit "red lines," they also performatively demonstrate their "loyalty" to media legislation to protect themselves from state repression. In this sense, the power of loyalty comes from what it signals: journalists who are loyal to legal codes and cultures of production in newsrooms reduce the grounds on which the state can legitimately justify repression.

We acknowledge that this study carries important limitations about generalizability, given the few journalists interviewed. These limitations stem primarily from the nature of the field itself: journalists who express dissent or perceive themselves as independent constitute a very narrow and highly vulnerable community in both countries. Accessing this group is extremely challenging, even when using secure communication channels. Despite relying on trusted intermediaries and employing multiple methods of contact, many journalists declined to take part.

Nevertheless, we argue that the study's design offers valuable insights. The research does not aim to measure resilience systematically through a comparative framework; rather, it focuses on individual experiences of journalists navigating extreme repression in the absence of institutional support. In this sense, the testimonies collected are highly relevant and, to a certain extent, representative of the conditions faced by independent journalists under extreme repression. This is particularly significant given the considerable risks associated with speaking openly about journalistic practices in such contexts and the extensive efforts made to ensure confidentiality and protect participants' safety.

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Conclusion

Despite the extraordinary challenges they face, journalists' experiences reveal forms of context-sensitive agency in which practitioners continuously negotiate between professional ideals and political constraints, sustaining a fragile equilibrium between survival and integrity. Their resilience is marked by a quiet yet vibrant creativity: It constitutes a way of being in the world, while excelling in the daily act of balancing adaptation to political restrictions with the preservation of standards and integrity.

Global trends of increasing precarity, repression, and anti-press violence affect journalists worldwide, extending far beyond the context of this study. As a result, there are growing calls for greater efforts to support collective resilience as a key priority within media development programs and to recognize it as central to the long-term sustainability of the media sector (Relly & Waisbord, 2022). In the experiences of the journalists in this article, collective solidarity remains elusive. Journalists find themselves isolated and vulnerable, operating as solitary actors rather than as members of a cohesive professional collective. Internal and international forms of solidarity do not necessarily contribute to collective resilience-building, given the multiple cleavages that divide the fractured journalistic communities. In the high stakes struggles over voice, these divisions reinforce journalists' sense of isolation. Consequently, resilience becomes increasingly atomized and individualized, taking the form of personal strategies and tactical adjustments in response to authoritarian resurgence.

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