

The History of the Printed Press in Algeria: A Socio-Historical Reading

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Abstract:

Owing to its pivotal role, the Algerian press is considered one of the most prominent and influential media institutions in Algerian society, particularly during the War of National Liberation. Through its commitment to preserving national identity, it significantly increased Algerian people's awareness of their cause while also introducing and promoting the Algerian question at both the national and international levels. Following independence, the press played an essential role in the construction of the national state. Notably, in its early stages, the Algerian press functioned as a public press under direct state supervision. However, in the 1990s, Algeria witnessed the emergence of media pluralism, marking a pioneering experiment in the Arab world. This transformation contributed substantially to the expansion of freedom of expression and to the enlightenment of public opinion nationwide.

Keywords: National press; state; pluralism; Algerian people; media.

Introduction:

The historical context of the emergence of the Algerian media from its inception to the present day, particularly through the printed press, represents a genuine stake upon which the Algerian nation relied in confronting the various challenges and difficulties it faced, most notably French colonialism, which sought by all means to erase Algerian identity. Nevertheless, the Algerian press constituted a mirror reflecting the development of Algerian society and its political and cultural transformations across different historical stages. Its initial manifestations began during the period of French colonial rule, when newspapers were subject to French censorship and were often employed in the service of colonial ideology, alongside the emergence of certain limited attempts at a national press that served as a fundamental actor in expressing the Algerian voice and its struggle for freedom. With the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution, the national press played a pivotal role in disseminating awareness and introducing the Algerian cause at both the local and international levels. Following independence, journalism in Algeria entered a new phase and experienced notable development, particularly in the aftermath of political reforms implemented at various points. The history of the Algerian press reveals pioneering experience at both the Arab and international levels, especially during the colonial period. Notably, it constitutes a fundamental element in understanding modern Algerian history and its role in the construction of society. Within this context, the following question may be raised:

What are the most prominent milestones, trajectories, and challenges experienced by the Algerian press from its emergence to the present day?

The history of the Algerian press highlights a trajectory rich in challenges and achievements, making it an essential component in understanding the past. Those who examine the various historical contexts and trajectories of Algerian media, from its emergence during the colonial period to the present day, observe that it has undergone profound transformations, whether in the printed press, radio, or audiovisual media. However, this study focused specifically on printed and visual media. Within this context, the discussion begins with the scene of the printed press, which emerged following the French colonial invasion of Algeria as a means to facilitate occupation. It was subsequently relied upon to suppress and penetrate various forms of popular resistance and to dismantle the structure of Algerian society. Conversely, this context also gave rise to a national press that opposed these ideologies and practices, which sought to undermine Algerian values in general.

A. Before the Revolution:

With respect to the emergence of journalism in Algeria, historical studies indicate that the printed press did not exist there before 1830, the year of French invasion and occupation. When the French army prepared to invade Algeria, it brought with it a printing press and an editorial board responsible for issuing the first newspaper, *Estafette d'Alger*, whose mission was to provide information about the French campaign in Algeria to the French public (Ahddaden, 2011, p. 135). This newspaper served as a means of internal communication within Algeria and was the first publication to appear after the French army landed on Algerian soil. It was published in French and supervised by a French army officer. Its content included information on the French campaign, along with some political news related to France, and it was distributed to soldiers and departments tasked with conducting the war against Algeria (Saif al-Islam, 1982, p. 80).

After the cessation of this newspaper, which published only three issues, the colonial authorities resorted to other publications, such as leaflets and posters, at both the national and local levels until early 1832. They subsequently initiated the publication of the weekly *Al-Murshid al-Jaza'iri* in colloquial Arabic, with limited circulation confined to the province of Algiers. This publication primarily sought to confuse Algerian public opinion during the initial phase of national resistance. In 1839, it was supported by the nongovernmental newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, which continued publication until the end of the century (Daliou, 2003, p. 182).

Within this framework, the French authorities realised that a single newspaper was insufficient to contain and suppress the resistance of the Algerian people to occupation, particularly given its narrow geographical scope, which limited its impact. This prompted the authorities to reinforce it with another publication. However, owing to the latter's failure to achieve its assimilative objectives and the French authorities' recognition of the importance of Arabic in shaping Algerian public opinion, they proceeded to issue Arabic-language newspapers, foremost among them *Al-Mubashshir* (1847). Notably, the end of the nineteenth century witnessed intensive media activity by European settlers, who published approximately 150 newspapers and imported and distributed newspapers from France (Saif al-Islam, 1982, p. 182).

On this basis, the French authorities altered their strategy. They relied on Arabic-language newspapers, given that Arabic is a decisive factor in ensuring the effective transmission of messages to recipients. In general, the most prominent newspapers active during this period may be listed as follows: 30 in 1871, 38 in 1883, 50 in 1886, and 92 in 1890 (Zubair, 1982, p. 10).

Several national Arabic newspapers subsequently emerged in Algeria, including *Al-Mubshir* in Constantine in 1883, *Al-Haqq* in Annaba in 1893, *Al-Akhbar* in Algiers in 1903, *Al-Sabah* in Oran in 1904, *Kawkab Ifriqiya* in 1907, *Al-Farouq* and *Dhu al-Fiqar* in 1913 in Algiers, *Al-Najah* in 1919, *Al-Muntaqid* and *Al-Shihab* in 1925 in Constantine, *Al-Nour* in 1931, *Al-Nibras* and *Al-Umma* in 1933, *Al-Bassa'ir* in 1935, *Sawt al-Ahrar* in 1943, *Al-Manar* and *Al-Qabas* in 1952, *Sawt al-Jaza'ir* in 1953, and *Sawt al-Sha'b* in 1954 (Ahddaden, 2011, p. 136).

According to this perspective, influential national newspapers emerged and contributed to enlightening Algerian public opinion across various intellectual, political, social, and cultural dimensions while confronting the colonial tide. Nevertheless, the French authorities sought to tighten restrictions and exert pressure on these communication outlets through various means, given that the press constituted one of the most influential means of communication and had attained a significant position within Algerian society. The press ranked third in the hierarchy of priorities and education, following political and military organisations. However, media, in the sense of communication and mobilisation, served as the primary weapon for disseminating awareness before the use of actual arms. During the armed struggle, propaganda operated alongside military battles, preceding and following them alike. This significance was manifested in two phases.

Before the Revolution, the mobilisation of the masses was at times centred on supporting a national newspaper, such as *Al-Iqdam*, *Al-Umma*, *Al-Bassa'ir*, or *Al-Jaza'ir al-Hurra*. During the Revolution, the National Liberation Front paid particular attention to issuing modern media outlets, including press, radio, and news agencies (Guendouz, 2015, pp. 253–254).

Notably, during the War of National Liberation, the Algerian press focused primarily on the liberation of minds and political awareness through this medium, in addition to introducing the Algerian cause at both the Arab and international levels and defending it. In this context, the leadership of the Revolution decided in 1956 to issue newspapers in Morocco, Tunisia, and France under the title *Al-Muqawama al-Jaza'iriya*, whereas a newspaper was established within Algeria under the name *Al-Mujahid*. During this period, the Algerian press constituted a form of political struggle waged by the Algerian people against French colonialism. It also undertook the task of mobilisation and political guidance to galvanise Algerian

citizens and recruit them into the ranks of the Revolution or into forces supportive of and allied with the cause of liberation (Ahddaden, 2011, p. 136).

An analysis of the press's communicative context during this period reveals its association with a French press that promoted the colonial project through misinformation, the falsification of facts, and the erasure of Algerian identity. In contrast, a national press emerged as the sole means of communication with Algerians, through which a liberation-oriented consciousness was shaped and consolidated, free from the constraints of French colonialism.

C. Independence Era:

Following Algeria's independence, the Algerian press experienced a transformation in both its orientation and content. Whereas during the colonial period, it functioned to disseminate collective awareness aimed at liberation from colonial domination, its content during the independence era shifted, as this field was closed in favour of the ruling powers and utilised as a propaganda apparatus for the various ideologies of the governing regime during that historical phase. This pattern has persisted to the present day, with changes occurring only in form, quantity, and the actors operating within this field.

The historical context of the Algerian press may be divided into distinct phases, beginning with the period from 1962--1965. This phase extended from independence until the June 1965 coup, encompassing the entire rule of former President Ahmed Ben Bella. It was characterised by diversity and plurality in the field of the printed press, drawing upon the French law of 1881, which recognised freedom of the press and individual liberties. This principle was affirmed by the law governing media activity issued on 13 December 1963, which emphasised the continued application of previous legislation on press freedom. This legal framework was primarily enshrined in the Algerian Constitution, which was promulgated on 10 September 1963. Article 19 stipulates that "the Algerian Republic guarantees freedom of the press and other media, freedom of association, freedom of expression and intervention in general, and freedom of assembly." This article implies that the media field, as addressed by the 1963 Constitution, aimed to continue providing opportunities for the expression of ideas that constituted the intellectual foundation of the War of National Liberation under the leadership of the National Liberation Front (Ahddaden, 2011, p. 138).

A review of the Algerian press during this period indicates that it was characterised by disorderly and poor organisation across most official institutions in the country. This was an expected consequence of Algeria's emergence from a war of liberation that resulted in thousands of deaths and the destruction of infrastructure, necessitating comprehensive reorganisation and restructuring aligned with the cultural, social, and political structure of Algerian society.

However, this objective has not been fully realised to the present day, owing to the political system's adoption of ideological orientations and its continued reliance on classical mentalities in the management of this field. This was followed by the second phase, which extended from 1965--1988.

The most significant milestones of this period were the dominance of political authority over all official institutions in the country, including the media, as manifested in the printed press serving specific agendas, particularly the promotion of socialist thought and various economic projects. What distinguished this phase from the preceding period was that those responsible for media outlets simultaneously served as producers of the political system's ideological discourse. This discourse was mobilisational in nature and reflected the Algerian authorities' determination to exercise total control over the media and to direct journalistic practice to perform its function within the framework of militant action (Guendouz, 2015, p. 135).

Naturally, this situation was the result of the policies adopted during that period, which produced a single-orientation press, whereby the communicative message followed a hierarchical pattern in which the political system exercised dominance and control.

Within the new economic context of the country, Article 1 stipulated that the media constitute one of the sectors of national sovereignty.

The Fourth Phase (1988–2000):

During this period, Algeria witnessed pluralism in the fields of the printed press and audiovisual media. However, this pluralism was limited to quantitative aspects, namely, the number of newspapers and channels. In terms of freedom of expression, little changed, as political authority continued to restrict the media space.

In this context, this phase was marked by the events of October 1988, which led to the promulgation of the Constitution of February 1989. This constitution allowed for the establishment of associations and political parties, as well as freedom and diversity of the press (Article 39). Subsequently, Media Law No. 07/90 of 1990 was enacted, ushering in a new phase of media pluralism. This phase was embodied in the emergence of the private press, with the appearance of Arabic-language newspapers (*Al-Khabar*, *Al-Nour*, *Al-Hayat*, *Al-Youm*, *Barid al-Sharq*, *Al-Shorouk al-Arabi*, among others), as well as French-language newspapers (Abdelrahman, 2017, p. 19).

2000–2012:

The golden age of the Algerian press spanned 2000–2009, both quantitatively and qualitatively. During this period, the number of daily newspapers increased from 31 dailies in 2000 to 43 dailies in 2005 and 2006, rising to 52 dailies in 2007 and 68 dailies in 2008, before reaching 80 dailies in 2009. Newspaper circulation likewise rose from 1,310,000 copies in 2000 to 2,700,000 copies per day in 2009. Periodicals increased from 41 titles in 2000, with a circulation of approximately 81,000 copies, to 69 titles in 2009, with a circulation exceeding one million copies. This growth was accompanied by a relative improvement in journalists' professional conditions. During this period, some publishers, such as the newspapers *El Watan* and *El Khabar*, succeeded in transforming into major economic institutions subject to large taxpayer regulations. These institutions developed to the extent that they establish companies specialising in printing, distribution, publishing, advertising, and promotional services. Nevertheless, relations remained strained at times due to judicial proceedings brought against journalists (Guendouz, 2015, p. 139).

Professor Salah Eddine Hafez described the reality of press freedom in Algeria as follows: regrettably, the democratic experiment in Algeria paid a heavy price before it had fully taken root, as it was extinguished while still fragile. Consequently, freedom of the press, opinion, and expression were among the first casualties amid elite conflicts and their terrifying and destructive violence. The independent press failed to exploit this freedom effectively, owing, on the one hand, to the new conditions that characterised the Algerian political and media spheres at the end of the 1980s and, on the other hand, because it fell victim to financial and political magnates who skilfully exploited circumstances and opportunities to advance their discourse and achieve their objectives at the expense of a free, responsible, and effective press. Moreover, security conditions and the challenges posed by terrorism were never conducive to the flourishing of press freedom in Algeria or to the media system's contribution to the democratic transition. Even after the elimination of the scourge of terrorism, the Algerian media were unable to free themselves from mechanisms of censorship and methods of control, thereby failing to contribute to democratic transformation and transition, despite the party and media pluralism witnessed in the country since the late 1980s (Guerat, 2019, p. 130).

An examination of the Algerian print media sector from independence to the present day reveals that it has remained under the control of the political system. Despite apparent pluralism and the large number of newspapers and journals, this reality does not genuinely reflect freedom of expression. A decline in the quality of media content is evident, along with a significant similarity in the treatment of marginal issues, without shedding light on fundamental topics, particularly those related to governance. This has resulted in a uniform trajectory of debate due to several factors, most notably economic factors, as the majority of national newspapers are printed in state-owned printing presses. Moreover, the dominant authority has used advertising rents to exert pressure on the print media sector, whereas newspaper owners have benefited from advertising revenue. This has led to the closure of this field and its utilisation as a propaganda apparatus.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the history of the Algerian press played an important role in resisting French colonialism by contributing to political, cultural, and social struggles while defending Algerian identity. After independence, the Algerian press followed a different trajectory and orientation, contributing to the construction of the national state and accompanying various transformations across different fields, despite the difficulties and obstacles it faced during that period, particularly those related to freedom of expression and various forms of pressure. The Algerian press nevertheless remains a fundamental element in enlightening public opinion and strengthening democracy.

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