Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Hana Nouh
Interviewee: Professor Mohamad El Masry
Date: 20 Feb. 12
Place: Interviewee’s Office
Mass Communication Department
AUC New Campus, Cairo, Egypt
College: The American University in Cairo, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
Prof: Professor Kim Fox
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Mr. Ahmed El Masry is an assistant Professor of Mass Communication and the graduate director of the department at the American University in Cairo located in New Cairo. He currently lives in Heliopolis, and is 36 years old.

I was specifically interested in interviewing this Professor due to the great knowledge he has on topics that relate to journalism and the press, therefore, I felt that he could positively benefit my interview by providing his input on the questions I asked. In addition, I made sure to conduct my interview with someone who is highly qualified and has a great deal of knowledge, which happened to be Mr. El Masry.

Mr. El Masry answered all of my questions with great depth and detail, and as an assistant Professor in the Department, he was able to give answers that were very relevant to his field.
20 February 2012

Persons present:  Nouh Hana- I

El Masry, Mohamad- N

Nouh:  This afternoon, I will be interviewing Professor Mohamad El Masry, good afternoon professor.

El Masry:  Good afternoon to you as well.

El Masry:  So my name is Mohamad El Masry, I am an assistant Professor of Mass Communication and the graduate director in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the American University in Cairo. I live in Heliopolis, and I am 36 years old.

Nouh:  Thank you professor, I will now begin with my questions. The first question is what risks do journalists take releasing a story, whatever it may be?

El Masry:  You mean in Egypt or in general?

Nouh:  In general.

El Masry:  Well (laughter) it’s hard to answer that question in general because every society in every location comes with its own rules and it’s own risks so for instance in Egypt, under the Mubarak regime and probably to a similar and probably a lesser extent now, under the SCAF [Supreme Council of the Armed Forces], publishing anything about the, armed forces or about the
ruler of the country or about national security is essentially off limits and you know if any journalist crosses those sort of pre-determined red lines, then they open themselves up to penalty, that could either mean that their newspaper could be shutdown or they could be fined or they could be put in jail, or all of the above. So, there are a lot of risks, more risks in Egypt, certainly under the Mubarak regime, and like I said to a lesser extent now under the ruling SCAF than there are say in the United States where there is relatively more freedom.

Nouh: Yes, definitely, which brings me to the second question which is very relevant to your answer, nowadays with the new and free Egypt, do you feel that there is information still that may be too dangerous to print other than about the SCAF?

El Masry: Yeah. Well there are things that have to do with the politics and the government that continue to be off limits, but, for instance, you can only say so much about the armed forces as a journalist.

Nouh: Yes.

El Masry: There are also restrictions in Egypt that have to do with the culture and the belief system, so for instance you know the overwhelming majority of the Egyptians are of the Islamic faith, and there’s a minority that are of the Christian faith, the Coptic faith, and so, it’s a deeply religious society

Nouh: Definitely.

El Masry: There are certain things that cannot be said, if they for instance contradict the basic religious belief. You won’t find for example an editorial that
promotes Atheism or doubts the existence of God, or something like this; 
those are things that are generally off limits in Egypt, and there are other 
things like speaking of Muslims and Christians but that issue of Muslim-
Christian relations is an area that needs to be handled by journalists with 
极端 care. A lot of editors are very careful whenever they publish 
anything that has to do with a particular religious denomination; if there 
was a crime committed by for example a Muslim against a Christian, most 
of the newspapers would try to downplay the religious, element, in that 
story, so as not to further insight interreligious tensions.

**Nouh:** Definitely, I could not agree more. Okay, in your opinion, what role does 
independent media play in the new Egypt?

**El Masry:** Well, really since 2004, since the first daily independent newspaper was 
established, independent newspapers have been very vital to the 
information flow in Egypt. They have been the newspapers and news 
organizations that have often pushed the envelope, if you will, that 
includes both during the Mubarak era and now in the post Mubarak era, 
and I think that the independent outlets are going to continue to play a 
very prominent role, they are often the trend-setters, what we find now is 
the independent newspapers and news organizations publishing 
information and then the state run outlets sort of following suit, or at least 
having to react to or respond to what is being published in the 
independent outlets and it may be that in a few years, were talking about 
an entirely independent press, that’s I think the hope of many people that
post revolution that there will be no more state run media, at least not in
the way that it has been operated up until now.

Nouh: Definitely, I think that everyone hopes for that, and that people wish that
down the line at some point, that the media becomes independent of the
government, and that people reach a point where they say whatever they
need to say without getting punished for it or without being at risk.

El Masry: It’s of note though, and I always tell my students, independent news
organizations are not truly 100 percent independent, they are owned by
somebody, so, news you know, reporters, journalists, editors, have to pay
omage to the people that own the press so you will not find for example
scathing criticisms of Naguib Sawiris or any of his businesses on the pages
of Al-Masry-Al-Youm, because Naguib Sawiris owns Al-Masry-Al-Youm,
and that’s not something that’s unique to Egypt, that is something that you
will find that as an International phenomenon. The newspapers in the
United States, Europe, they suffer from the same kind of restriction, and it
just goes to show you that journalism is an imperfect enterprise, it’s not a
perfect enterprise.

Nouh: Definitely, but I would have to say that it is much better for it to be owned
by someone independently such as Naguib, as oppose to the government,
where it leaves you very little space to talk about basically anything,
whereas trying to avoid one person, although he is an important figure is a
lot easier than trying to avoid the people who run the entire country.

El Masry: I would agree with you 100 percent on that.
Nouh: Definitely. Alright what role do you think journalists have in keeping the public constantly informed and updated of the current issues?

El Masry: Well I think in any democratic society, the press play an absolute critical role. If people are going to be in charge of their own affairs, then they have to be kept informed and in a mass society that job of you know disseminating information lands in the hands of the mass press.

Nouh: Definitely.

El Masry: So, I think that in this new nascent democracy, what we hope eventually turns into a full-fledged democracy in Egypt the press are going to continue to be absolutely critical.

Nouh: Yes, yes that is true. Okay, and finally, to wrap this interview up, I would just like to ask you a question, as Professor Mohamad El Masry, how do you feel that freedom of the press now is a year after Mubarak’s downfall? Is it better, is it more free is it less free? How do you feel about it?

El Masry: Well I don’t think there is any question that there are more freedoms now than there were you know a year and a half ago, but I don’t think that were all the way there yet, you can see that there are still these you know quote on quote red-lines. Just the other day, one of the members of Parliament harshly criticized the Mosher Hussein Tantawy, and he was asked to apologize for what he said and that just underscores some of the sensitivities in a place like Egypt where you know reputations are very important.

Nouh: Definitely.
El Masry: Family names are very important, and so, you know, there are certain things that are still and may continue to be off limits and that at least need to be approached with extreme care and caution, but, there's no question that there is more freedom now than there was before you know, the January 25th revolution, I think people have basically, gotten, they've been emboldened by what has happened by taking to the streets and chanting and joining hands against what they perceive as a brutal dictatorship and that has I think translated into the media coverage as well where journalists and editors are now more, they're more brave to say things that they might not have otherwise wanted to say.

Nouh: Yes, that is definitely true. Thank you so much professor for your time, thank you so much.

El Masry: Thank you for having me.