Forty Years of Inciting Rhetoric

By Radwan Khashim

"I refused to be part of a dirty game. My manager asked me to write a hate-filled and defamatory piece targeting three well-known figures — no facts, no evidence, just baseless words. When I declined, he threatened to fire me."

With these words, journalist Siham al-Yousfi sums up her experience with one of the Libyan media outlets known for promoting hate speech during the Tripoli War in 2019.

It didn't take long for al-Yousfi to realize that she was working in a media institution that wasn't searching for truth, but deliberately manipulating and distorting it to serve specific agendas. She wasn't alone. Many journalists were caught in similar moral dilemmas: either play along with the machinery of hatred or risk dismissal and professional marginalization.

According to data from the General Authority for Monitoring Media Content in 2022, a significant portion of media violations in Libya were related to content involving explicit incitement, from calls to eliminate political or social figures, to language that crossed the line from criticism into defamation and betrayal. Insults and slander have become recurring tools in media rhetoric, reflecting the absence of professional standards in many media outlets and platforms.

The results, illustrated in (*Figure 1)*, show a clear variation in the percentages of these violations across different active groups within the media landscape.

Editorial management topped the list of sources responsible for violations, accounting for 36.6%, which corresponds to 5,510 violations.

In second place were political figures, including activists, analysts, and state officials, who were responsible for 32.6% of the total violations (4,918 cases). They were followed by program hosts and reporters, who accounted for 17.6% (2,648 violations).

Parliamentary figures and candidates recorded a moderate percentage of 6.9% (1,037 violations), while the lowest percentages came from journalistic editors at 0.4% (66 violations) and representatives of foreign governments, who were responsible for a minimal 0.1% (20 violations).

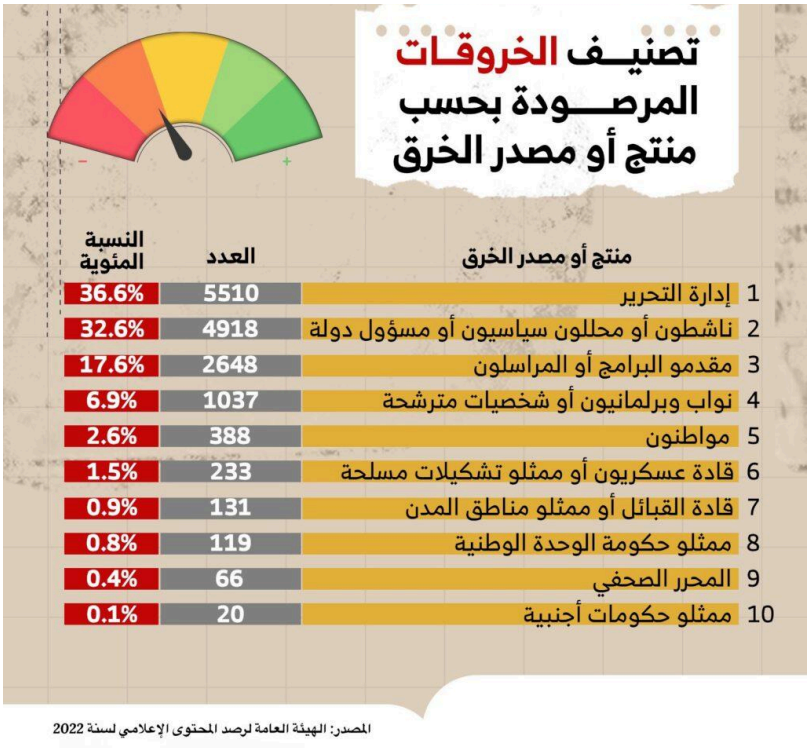

Figure 1: Classification of Observed Violations by Product or Source in Media for 2022

Cities and Journalists Facing the Fallout of Hate and Conflict

During the 2011 events in Libya, some residents of the town of Tawergha were accused of involvement in criminal acts and supporting the Gaddafi regime. These accusations quickly spread to include the entire population of Tawergha. Fueled by hate speech circulating through media and social networks, this led to the forced displacement of Tawergha's residents, who continue to face significant challenges when trying to return to their homes. *(Libyan Tawergha residents prepare to return after years of displacement" — Al Jazeera, YouTube)*

In this context, journalist Ayad Abdeljalil, a resident of Tawergha, says, "Hate speech displaced the people of my town, but it will not silence my voice." He explains, "Tawergha has endured years of displacement, not only because of wartime events that took place during the war, but also because hate speech fueled division and entrenched collective demonization. The media and social networks reinforced this narrative, making returning to our town a difficult effort for years."

Abdeljalil noted that hate speech that spread after 2011 contributed significantly to his town's misery and delayed the return of its residents.

The impact of this hate speech extended beyond his town and affected him personally, as he faced smear campaigns in response to his media criticisms. Abdeljalil says, “When I criticized certain parties, I was subjected to a systematic online attack aimed at defaming me and portraying me as someone trying to incite conflict. It wasn’t just words—I was arrested twice. The experience was harsh, but it did not silence me.”

Despite these challenges, Abdeljalil affirms his commitment to his job and beliefs: “I cannot keep silent about the truth, no matter the repercussions. Journalism, to me, is more than a profession; it is a responsibility. I shall continue to perform my duties, regardless of the pressures I face.”

The roots and escalation of Libya’s enduring media crisis

Hate speech in the Libyan media is not a new phenomenon; it is the result of decades of systematic incitement. According to Reda al-Hadi Ramadan, Director of the Office of Experts at the General Authority for Monitoring Media Content, the problem existed in Libya's media landscape before 2011, since the previous regime utilized media as a tool for inflammatory rhetoric. According to him, “During public executions, media channels aired violent chants like 'Spill their blood and move on without concern.' It was blatant incitement to violence.”

Ramadan further stated that hate speech did not remain within its usual context after 2011, but instead became more prevalent during armed conflicts.

He added, “Whenever we engage in armed conflict, the language of incitement escalates dramatically. We saw this in 2011 (the February Revolution—the overthrow of the regime), then in 2014 (the armed political divide), and then in 2019 (Haftar's attack on Tripoli). Even in elections, Hate speech is also weaponized to delegitimize opponents both politically and personally — targeting their reputation, undermining their presence, and attempting to erase them from the collective public narrative.”

With the collapse of already weak and ineffective media regulations, this form of discourse exploded in an unprecedented way. Many channels and platforms turned into open forums for defamation, slander, provocation, and accusations of treason — all without legal accountability or oversight.

Data from the General Authority for Monitoring Media Content indicate that some media outlets commit between 10 and 20 different types of violations annually, ranging from incitement and defamation to slander and others. This serves as an indicator of the increasing diversity and scale of media violations in Libya.

As illustrated in (*Figure 2)*, some TV channels and news websites topped the list for the highest number of breaches, while others recorded very low violation rates.

At the top of the list was Akhbar Al-Saa 24 website, with 742 violations, followed by Libya Al-Hadath Live channel with 690 violations. Tanasuh Channel recorded 537 violations, while Al-Jamahiriya Channel followed closely with 527 violations.

Among those with moderate numbers of violations were February Channel with 415 cases, Libya Panorama Channel with 400.

In contrast, some institutions demonstrated higher levels of professional adherence. At the bottom of the list were Fawasel Platform with only 2 violations, Al-Raseefa News Website with 23, Libya Rouh Al-Watan Channel with 31, and Abaad Platform with 45 violations.

At this point, Media regulation measures remain limited. Moreover, in the absence of strict laws holding media institutions accountable for adopting hate speech, the impact of these violations persists, reinforcing an unprofessional media environment that contributes to escalating tensions in the public sphere.

Figure 2: Media Institutions and Violations in Libya – 2022

Laws riddled with loopholes target journalists more than the instigators

Laws in any country dealing with hate speech are seen as the major instrument for combating this dangerous phenomenon and mitigating its societal consequences. So what about Libya?

Fatima Abdullah, a lawyer and legal expert, agrees that Libyan hate speech rules are vague in terms of the actual sanctions for individuals who propagate such rhetoric. However, these regulations are instead exploited to put increased pressure on independent journalists and civil society organizations.

“The issue is not only the lack of legislations that holds media organizations responsible for spreading hate speech, but also the existence of laws that target journalists directly, like Article 195, which is used to prosecute journalists and activists for allegedly insulting the government,” she stated.

Furthermore, Article 208 of the Penal Code criminalizes receiving foreign funding “for purposes harmful to the national interest,” a vague provision that can be used against media institutions receiving funding aimed at supporting press freedom and combating hate speech.

Article 245 also provides for imprisonment for anyone who publishes what could be considered incitement or a call to anarchy in the media, which may lead to the arrest of journalists covering political or security events, even if their reports are based on evidence and facts. (Libyan Penal Code, Libyan Legislation Website).

These legal provisions grant the authorities a broad legal instrument to target independent voices and undermine any efforts to hold media outlets involved in spreading hate speech accountable.

How can hate speech be effectively countered? The role of civil society in providing solutions

Aisha al-Habouri, a conflict resolution and peacebuilding expert, believes that the media may promote peace rather than fuel violence. She points out that some media outlets prioritize dividing segments of society, when they could play a more positive role.

“When the media focuses on highlighting common ground rather than deepening divides, it helps promote peace,” al-Habouri says. “The language of blame and incitement only intensifies conflict, whereas thoughtful programming and human-interest stories can nurture a spirit of understanding.”

Al-Habouri underlines the media's role in encouraging reconciliation in other nations that have faced similar crises. In those situations, it was utilized to help reconstruct communities by disseminating messages of tolerance and peaceful cooperation.

“In some countries, media was leveraged to spread a culture of tolerance and to rebuild trust between different groups, rather than continuing to fuel hostilities,” she explains. “This experience can be applied in Libya by shifting media discourse toward greater awareness and responsibility.”

Ramadan Maatyeg, former head of Misrata's Civil Society Commission, emphasizes the importance of civil society in the fight against hate speech. He observes that, while certain groups, associations, and media-focused institutions have attempted to combat this discourse, their impact has been minimal in comparison to the prevalence of hate speech in Libyan media.

“There are some institutions and media centers that have made genuine steps to fight hate speech,” Maatyeg says, “but they haven't received adequate support or attention. We cannot ignore this issue; we must engage civil society organizations in devising effective measures to decrease or eradicate hate speech in the media.”

Maatyeg adds that the solution cannot be based exclusively on legislation or media. Civil society must play a clear role in raising awareness, collaborating with media outlets, and establishing national measures to combat hate speech.

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