An interview with journalist Karim Wannas
head of the Ethics Committee of the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists
The public has lost faith in the Tunisian media and will inevitably revolt against it.

“The media has contributed to demonizing the practice of politics and weakening the state institutions in exchange for strengthening parallel entities that are waiting for the country to collapse, mafia-type entities that only care about accumulating fortunes and easy gains; we should reform all these defects to reform the country.”

Interviewed by Walid Al-Majri
According to your experience in the field of journalism and media in general, do you think that the Tunisian media performs its duty towards its fans and meets the expectations in the context of professionalism, or has it turned into a way to influence and manipulate public opinion?

The answer is self-evident and is backed by a set of studies and research. The Tunisian public today is completely dissatisfied with what the Tunisian media offers. One of the studies published by the Center for Prospecting Opinions concluded that the percentage of those who are dissatisfied with the Tunisian media exceeded eighty percent, whereby the public considers that the media has deviated from its basic message and has slipped into a culture of excitement, arousing feelings and relying on “Buzz” programs which resulted in objectification of media content and its transformation into purely commercial and communication content. The flaw lies in falsifying people’s awareness and promoting a consumption pattern that does not really reflect audience expectations.

Anyone who wants to talk about the media in Tunisia and dismantle its system must, essentially, turn to private media institutions, as they are the ones that create public opinion and influence it according to their narrow private interests.

Does your position above apply to both public and private media, or does each sector have its own characteristics?

The overwhelming media on the scene in Tunisia is the private media. The public media is almost exclusively on the national TV channel. The latter can also be summarized in the news broadcast, which still has respectable follow-up ratios because, despite some occasional distortions, it still provides credible material and is far from a culture of excitement and forgery.
Anyone who wants to talk about the media in Tunisia and dismantle its system must, essentially, turn to private media institutions, as they are the ones that create public opinion and influence it according to their narrow private interests, which usually intersect with the interests of influential businessmen and the bulk of the political and ideological entities surrounding them. On Nessma and Tunisian dialogue channels, are the best example for that.

The Tunisian dialogue channel, for example, was transformed into a platform for daily attacks on the government whenever its owner, Sami Al-Fihri, is exposed to judicial problems. It is the same thing that Nessma TV has been doing for years, as its owner, Nabil Karoui, who had the second largest vote in the last presidential elections, has turned it into a flexible tool for settling accounts with political opponents in addition to using the channel to attack the symbols of the state, civil society, etc. All of this is taking place within the sight of the concerned authorities, executive and oversight bodies, that have been unable to find a fundamental legal solution to deter the channel without being at the expense of freedom of expression and the press.

As Chairman of the Ethics Committee at the heart of the Tunisian Journalists Syndicate, we would like to know the ways and means by which you are informed of the abuses committed by journalists or press organizations? Is the public communicating with you to report, or is the matter subject to the monitoring effort of the Committee?

First, it is necessary to emphasize that the committee was established since 2018 during the plenary session of the Press Syndicate, and the aim behind its establishment was to contribute to modifying the media’s scene. We are neither
a reporting authority nor a public prosecution, nor can we in any way impose on media organizations what they should pass and what they should not. We do not get involved in the editorial line and do not adopt defamation policy.

Our primary mission is to adjust the scene by first playing a mediating role among fellow journalists among themselves in order to manage conflicts and disputes before their access to justice. In the sense that we play a conciliatory role in dissolving disputes and conflicts and purifying the atmosphere for the public in the media sector so that it does not reflect negatively on the press content so it becomes a material for settling personal accounts. On the other hand, the committee is communicating with the editorial boards in order to draw its attention to violations of journalistic ethics. We have relied many times on complaints that we have received directly or through social networks, from the general public. Some of these complaints were related to media engagement with major national events such as natural disasters, major road accidents, and coverage of political and electoral stations.

During the beginning of December of 2019 the Tunisian street was shaken by a traffic accident that claimed the lives of at least 29 young men and women. The Tunisian street was in mourning, and was looking for media content that would rise to the moment, but they were surprised by some private channels, especially the Tunisian dialogue channel” Al-Hiwar TV”, as they broadcasted contents similar to cabarets and discos. It was a catastrophic event for the psyche of a large segment of Tunisians who resorted to social media in order to denounce what is being passed on to the media and to demand respect for the general state of mourning in the country.

Day after day, our media proves that it is purely commercial and that the content it broadcasts does not live up to the expectations of the public. This deepens the gap between the public and the media, and creates mistrust in the local media.

Regarding the “lack of confidence in media” which you referred to, do you not think that this situation would undermine the remaining democratic transition in Tunisia and legislation to trample on the gains of freedom and pluralism?

I will say it frankly, that the Tunisian public abandoned the local media and directed towards the external media] French, major Arab channels, etc. (is an automatic translation of the state of rejection for local media, which, as mentioned above, has turned into a flexible tool that politicians and businessmen use to pass communication messages that have contributed significantly in disrupting the democratic transition and delaying Tunisia’s exit from a state of political instability.

What is required here is not to impose prior censorship on the content produced by the media, but to apply the law to all violators. There are channels and
radio broadcasts without a license, and others trample all laws and covenants regulating the profession of journalism.

It is not possible to talk about democracy and freedoms without talking about a free, transparent, and serious media that deals with national issues in every literal way, away from the logic of militarism and ideological, political and cheap employment.

The media has contributed to demonizing the practice of politics and weakening the state institutions in exchange for strengthening parallel entities that are waiting for the country to collapse, mafia-type entities that only care about accumulating fortunes and easy gains; we should reform all these defects to reform the country. Because the public audience will not remain passive, but there is a day will come when they revolt against this media which is not representing them.