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Media accountability in the Arab World
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A conceptual framework to study media accountability in the MENA region

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Abstract

The concept of media accountability has originally been developed vis-à-vis Western democracies. Yet, democratization has opened spaces for media self-regulation in countries formerly characterized by rigid press control, while even in the Global North, journalists have been facing increasingly hostile political environments attacking their freedoms. This prelude to the JMEM Special Issue on Media Accountability provides insights from the first comparative analysis of media accountability from a worldwide perspective, covering developments across world regions and political regime types. Based on research conducted in 44 countries, this text suggests eight global models of media accountability and zooms in on the MENA region, where the "mimicry model" and the "foreign donor model" of media accountability are prevalent.

Keywords: journalism studies; media accountability; comparative studies; de-Westernization; MENA region

1. Introduction: Why study media accountability in MENA?

This paper proposes a conceptual framework to study media accountability in the MENA region. Thus, we will investigate the practices, potential, and challenges of the original "Western" concept of media responsibility in the context of press freedom and media pluralism. With this paper's focus on the MENA region, we will look at media accountability (MA) in countries that have seen several pro-democracy movements since the "Arab Spring" of 2011 (see Figure 1 below) but remain mostly under tight political restrictions.

Despite these restrictions, we can observe a growing number of institutions and structures in the MENA region that adopt some media accountability instruments: Lebanon has pioneered the introduction of ethics codes in newsrooms before the dissolution of public order in recent years (Al-Zubaidi, Fischer, & Abu-Fadil, 2012); ombudspersons have emerged in Tunisia since 2015 (Hizaoui, 2022); media users have voiced media criticism in Iraq (Wollenberg, 2022); and "media

councils" have been introduced in Morocco and the UAE (Fengler, 2022). How can we make sense of these seemingly antagonistic developments—ongoing political repression along with heightened sensitivity to issues of media responsibility, which implies media autonomy? This essay seeks to promote a critical academic debate about media accountability in MENA countries by clarifying the concept of media accountability, discussing its applicability in "non-Western" contexts, and analyzing recent research results for selected MENA countries to assess the status quo of media accountability in the MENA region and identify key questions for further research. This essay also serves as a context for the papers selected for this special edition of JMEM.

2. The MENA Region: Political and media context

The MENA region remains unique in several aspects. It stands out in global comparison as a cluster of countries dominated in the most part by autocratic governments and characterized by very low degrees of democratic quality (including press freedom). According to annual ratings by the Economist Democracy Index, the V-Dem Varieties of Democracy Index, and Reporters Without Borders:[1] "The least democratic countries in the world include parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region, as well as China, Russia, and Venezuela" (V-Dem Institute, 2021, p. 13). Even in Tunisia, hailed as the only country in the region to implement lasting democratic reforms since 2011, the president ousted the parliament and several ministers in July 2021, with yet unclear implications at the time of writing. Pro-democratic movements have emerged in several MENA countries, but without lasting impact on government structures yet.

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[1] The MENA region includes Algeria, Bahrein, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, as well as Turkey, Israel, and Iran. All of them are described as developing countries by UN DESA (2020). In terms of democracy and media freedom, Israel and Tunisia stand out, being the only flawed democracies in this sub-sample and considered as "free" by Freedom House (2021).

Figure 1: *V-DEM Liberal Democracy in the MENA region, 2010 and 2020*

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN THE MENA REGION, 2010 AND 2020

This pro-democracy mobilization variable captures the extent to which events of mass mobilization for pro-democratic aims have been frequent and large.
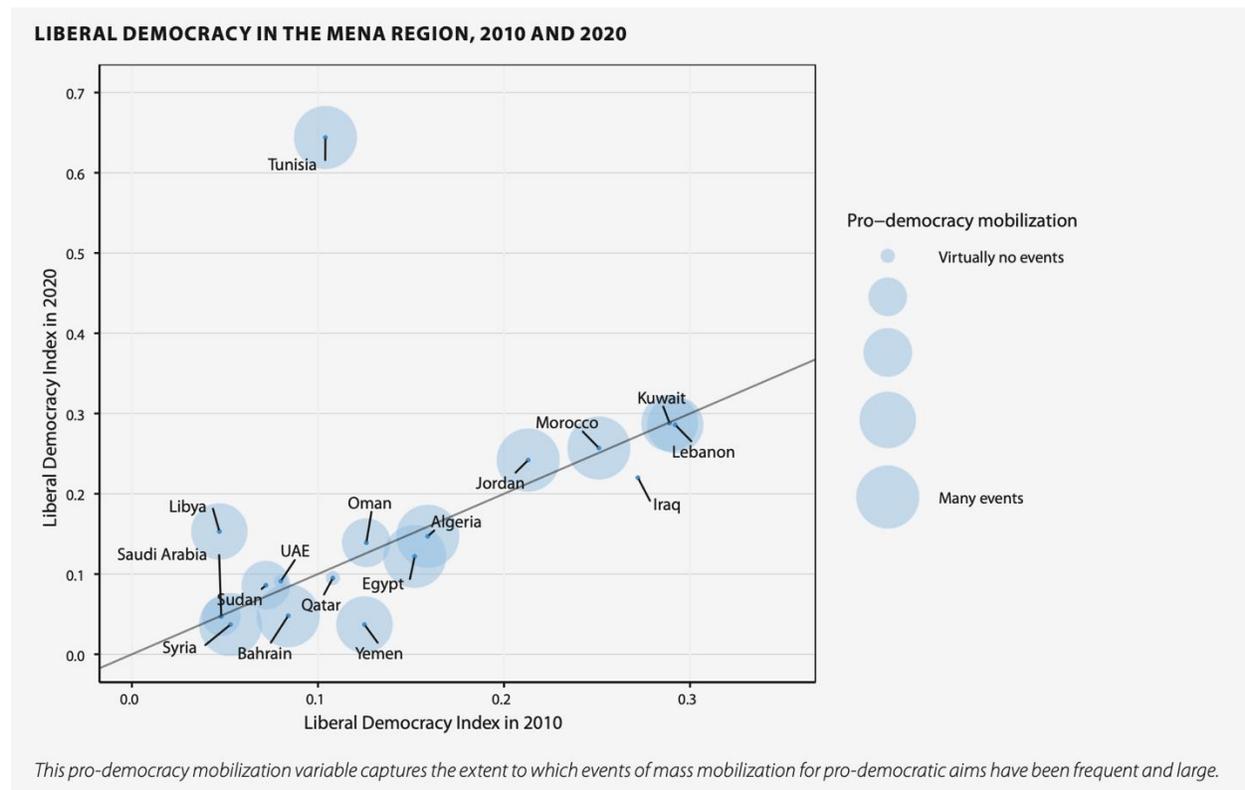
Source: V-Dem Institute, 2021, p. 26.

Press freedom in the region is either low or very low according to annual ratings by Reporters Without Borders, while corruption is perceived as particularly high in most countries according to Transparency International rankings (2020). According to the Worlds of Journalism Study, the countries in the MENA region display typical features of a collaborative journalistic culture, which describes an environment clearly shaped by state authorities, thus being constrained by very low levels of press freedom and (self) assigned duties to support government agendas, for example in terms of national development goals (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2019, p. 303). Another challenge to an effective implementation of media accountability mechanisms in most MENA countries is the specific structure and ideological segregation of local media markets, where government media (which in many cases have not yet been transformed into public broadcasting)

continue to co-exist with privately owned commercial media. Based on regression analyses of comprehensive media ownership data in various media segments, as well as data on press freedom, economic data, and regime type, Djankov, McLeish, Nenova, & Shleifer (2001, pp. 17–18)[2] show that "state ownership of newspapers and television is significantly higher in African, Middle Eastern, and North African (MENA) countries. […] With the exception of Israel, all MENA countries have a state monopoly over television broadcasting. State ownership of newspapers - which averages 50% share of circulation - is also high in MENA countries." They also find state monopoly to be "considerably more common in the television than in the newspaper market", and also to be "largely a feature of poor countries, and of autocratic governments" (Djankov et al., 2001, pp. 17–19).

Their findings on the impact of ownership forms on media freedom are interesting in our context. A correlation between ownership patterns and media freedom shows that state ownership has a negative effect on freedom, while "[m]edia is more independent, and journalists arrested and jailed less frequently, when the media is privately owned." […] countries with state media ownership [also] censor the internet more heavily" (Djankov et al., 2001, p. 21). Moreover, in many MENA countries, private commercial media remain closely aligned with the state as well as a result of "media capture" (Coşkun, 2020; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008). MENA countries provide numerous examples of governments that exercise indirect but highly effective media control by channeling public advertising funds and state subsidies only to state media and to those commercial media outlets that toe the political line of the government, making critical media in 'poorer' markets that depend on unprofitable state advertising (see also Besley & Prat, 2006).

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[2] Djankov et al. (2001) analyzed and compared the impact of media ownership (state versus private) across 97 countries. Admittedly, the media dataset is outdated by now, and media, technological, and of course political change has affected many of the study countries. However, the study is unique as it includes many transformation countries, as well as authoritarian regimes, and takes into consideration countries from all continents.

Ayish (2002) identifies "reformist government media" as a third group of media actors besides state and commercial actors in transitory media markets. Al-Najjar (2020) has analyzed the role of pan-Arab broadcasters as a fourth group of relevant media and their potential to hold local media accountable. Diasporic online media, as a fifth group, can be among those critical voices. But even media outlets abroad risk becoming a target for repression (Khamis, 2020; Galal & Fibiger, 2020). The role of social media for pro-democracy movements in MENA countries has been widely analyzed in numerous studies. Social media has also emerged as a forum to hold other media segments (dominated by state or 'crony' media) to account in various MENA countries. However, autocratic regimes have also started to restrict online journalism and social media in past years, a development which has been accelerated in many countries by the Corona crisis.[3]

3. Origin and key elements of the 'Western' media accountability concept

Media accountability has been famously defined by Bertrand as "any non-State means of making media responsible towards the public"; the key aims of media accountability are "to improve the services of the media to the public; restore the prestige of media in the eyes of the population; diversely protect freedom of speech and press; obtain, for the profession, the autonomy that it

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[3] This text is based in large parts on prior publications of the author (Fengler, 2022; Fengler, Speck, Bastian, & Pies, 2021; Fengler, 2019a, 2019b), which however have not been translated into Arabic before. The author thus hopes to make key literature and research results available to a larger number of academics in the MENA region, and to promote the discussion of media accountability in journalism research and journalism education in Arabic-speaking countries. Readers interested in the subject of media accountability are especially referred to *The Global Handbook of Media Accountability* (Fengler, Eberwein & Karmasin, 2022). Following up on the results drawn from *The European Handbook of Media Accountability* (Eberwein, Fengler, & Karmasin 2018), it provides a comprehensive overview of different models of media accountability in 44 countries across all continents. The Global Handbook pays tribute to the fact that traditional liberal models of media accountability are increasingly challenged in polarized and fragmented societies and even in mature democracies. It also considers that hybrid and frequently innovative forms of media accountability exist in politically restrictive countries with limited press freedom and open up spaces for critical political debates in countries dominated by state media, where traditional instruments of media self-regulation like press councils have for long been captured by the state. Mechanisms to hold the media to account are also of utmost importance in conflict-shaken societies, countering the dissemination of hate speech or fake news and thus providing an antidote to further societal polarization.

needs to play its part in the expansion of democracy, and the betterment of the fate of mankind" (Bertrand, 2000, p. 151). McQuail (2003, p. 19) has pointed out the process-oriented character of media accountability striving for "co-orientation": Accountable communication exists where authors (originators, sources, or gatekeepers) take responsibility for the quality and consequences of their publication, orient themselves to audiences and others affected, and respond to their expectations and those of the wider society".

Media researchers use different terms to describe the processes which journalistic actors apply in order to ensure responsible behavior. The terms *"media self-control"* or *"media self-regulation"* (Puppis, 2009) are commonly used to denote those practices which members of the journalistic profession initiate to guarantee the quality of their reporting. The broader concept of *media accountability*, as already mentioned, discusses "any non-state means of making the media responsible towards the public" (Bertrand, 2000, p. 108) and thus not only includes journalists, but also media users and other stakeholders of the media in the process of journalistic quality management, while excluding any state involvement. In recent years, the concept of *media transparency* (Meier & Reimer, 2011; Fengler & Speck, 2019) has gained increasing scholarly attention. It focuses on a variety of instruments, particularly at the level of the media organization, that can contribute to preserving or regaining trust in journalism by providing information about newsroom processes and the participating actors (e.g., with the help of online profiles of journalists, public mission statements, links to original sources, newsroom blogs, etc.). Media accountability can also be part of concepts of co-regulation (Puppis, 2007), implying that media laws require the media industry to implement self-control bodies. For example, several broadcasting laws require broadcasting organizations to install an ombudsperson to take public complaints. It is also being discussed as part of media governance processes (Puppis, 2010).

Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) have specified the different stakeholders to be addressed in the accountability process: Besides the public, they mention the journalistic profession and the market, as well as the political sphere, which opens the door towards a debate about the role of media accountability beyond Western democracies. Von Krogh (2012) has amended their model by pointing towards the impact of the media system and of technology on media accountability.

Figure 2: *Media accountability frames*
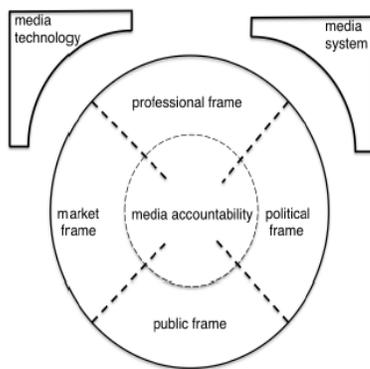
Source: Von Krogh, 2012, p. 21.

Press councils, ombudspersons, media criticism in trade journals, and mass media—as traditional media accountability instruments (MAI)—all have the task of monitoring journalists' professional performance and following up on journalistic malpractice in countries which guarantee freedom of the press and forbid state interference in journalism (Dennis, Gillmor, & Glasser, 1989). Media accountability instruments (MAI) can be classified by using a modified version of the five-level model of spheres of influence on journalism developed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996; 2014).

• On the *individual level*, the MediaAcT study (Fengler et al., 2014) has shown that in terms of accountability, journalists feel obliged to their own conscience, followed by professional values.

• The earliest MAIs were located at the *professional level*: Ethics codes - as voluntary guidelines for ethical behaviour in journalism - and trade journals - offering a forum also to discuss

professional failure - were published by journalists' associations and unions since the late nineteenth century, and many press councils were set up as professional bodies (in some cases including members of the public) to decide cases of malpractice in journalism since the 1950s. Moreover, after the de-regulation of the broadcasting sector in Western Europe in the 1980s, media criticism in the mass media gained prominence.

• Accountability efforts by individual news outlets (the *organizational level*) have played an increasing role since the 1970s, when media organizations started to employ ombudspersons as 'readers' advocates' in the newsroom and introduce organizational codes of ethics. Online ombudspersons, newsroom blogs and podcasts from newsroom conferences, as well as a variety of social media efforts, are among the new MAIs on the organizational level.

• Depending on the respective media system, actors, and organizations at the *extramedia level* can play an eminent role in holding the media accountable in the digital age, raising their voice much more effectively via the internet. This is especially relevant for countries in transition that lack structures of professional and organizational media accountability. For example, media observatories, run by communication departments at universities, have a considerable impact in Brazil. Spain has many viewers' associations, observing the quality of broadcast media. In the UK, and some parts of Eastern Europe, NGOs act as watchdog of media representation of women, children, etc. In the US, media watchdog groups with a distinct political agenda scrutinize newsrooms as well as individual journalists.

Most Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries have key characteristics of a *professional and/or company model of media accountability* in common (Fengler, 2022), which include:

• a multitude of MAIs at the professional and the organizational level,

• an established democratic system or a rather long democratic tradition,

• high trust in institutions,

• relatively highly sustainable and pluralistic media markets,

• professional, legal, financial, and physical autonomy of journalists,

• a high quality of journalism education,

• developed media technologies, high media use, rather high media literacy, and

• active media criticism from academia, NGOs, and the broader society.

The global overview provided by Fengler, Eberwein & Karmasin (2022) adds to the existing literature by highlighting numerous additional - even though in many cases less institutionalized - MAIs reported from the sample countries. *The Global Handbook of Media Accountability* (2022) retrieves the various - highly institutionalized or non-institutionalized - instruments that enable, shape, and structure a systematic discourse about (sometimes competing) journalistic norms and values, using a somewhat more fluid definition of MAIs. For example, ethics committees established by journalists' federations in Brazil will be subsumed with press councils due to their functionality, even though they lack participation of the media industry, as it is typical for many press councils which often include representatives of publishers' associations. Also, statutory media councils can be organized with or without participation of government representatives, as the global analysis has shown. Ombudspersons can be representative of the public on the company level, on the professional level, or installed by statute. Figure 3 summarizes the variety of MAIs to be found across different political and media systems and journalism cultures (Fengler, 2022).

Figure 3*: Spheres of Influence Model of media accountability instruments*
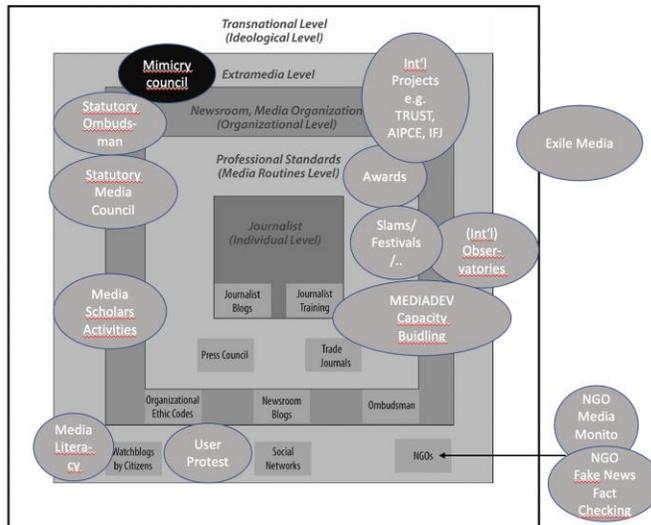
Source: Model adapted from Shoemaker and Reese 1996, amended by the authors

Source: Fengler (2022, p. 558).

In the past years, the effectivity of traditional media accountability practices has come under scrutiny across Europe and the United States. In 2012, because of the *News of the World* scandal, the Leveson Inquiry recommended a fundamental reform of the traditional model of media self-regulation in Great Britain and suggested a new, statutory supported regulatory system. In 2013, the final report of the EU High-Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism argued for an expansion of the sanctioning potential of existing press councils and demanded mandatory media councils in EU states which (like France and Romania) do not have a press council yet (Vike-Freiberga, Däubler-Gmelin, Hammersley, & Maduro, 2013). However, the media industry across Europe voiced skepticism or even protest these suggestions. The debate has now taken a much different turn, as press freedom and safety of journalists have declined in many Central Eastern and Southern European countries. With populist or nationalist conservative governments are less inclined to protect media pluralism; the lack of institutions defending media freedom - like functioning press councils - is much more evident in these countries nowadays.

More systematic research on media accountability in journalism and mass communication studies has started in the 1970s. Excellent overviews over the history of media accountability are

provided by Brown (1974) and Marzolf (1991). Several widely-discussed journalism scandals in Western countries (e.g. "Jimmygate" in the US, "Hitler diaries" in Germany, for an overview see Fengler, 2003) resulted in an increasing theoretical and normative academic debate about the concept of media accountability, but only very few small-scale empirical studies on single instruments of media accountability (mostly press councils, ethics codes, ombudspersons, and media journalism) existed until recently (for an extensive literature overview see Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni, Porlezza, & Russ-Mohl, 2014; Fengler, Eberwein, Karmasin, Barthel, & Speck, 2022). The studies came to rather sceptical conclusions regarding the impact of many media accountability instruments. Studies of media journalists have shown that even journalists who cover media issues for quality media shy away from criticizing their colleagues and supervisors. Studies dealing with ombudspersons reveal similar self-imposed restrictions. Content analyses conclude that media outlets frequently use news to voice their specific media policy interests. Given the obvious insufficiency of traditional instruments of media self-regulation - which mainly results from the collective or individual self-interest of media professionals, engaging the audience and other actors external to the profession might be a promising option to strengthen media accountability (see Fengler, 2012).

Bertrand (2000) and Nordenstreng (1999) were the first to provide comparative analyses of media accountability across Europe. The MediaAcT project (Fengler et al., 2014) was the first study to provide comprehensive empirical data on the status quo and impact of MA in fourteen countries with different media systems and journalism cultures. The project included an analysis of the status quo of media self-regulation and media accountability in Europe and two exemplary Arab states and interviews with one hundred international experts in the field of online media accountability; a quantitative survey of 1,762 journalists in fourteen countries studied the attitudes

of journalists towards media accountability as well as the impact of established and innovative media accountability instruments in different media systems. As a follow-up project, *The European Handbook of Media Accountability* (Eberwein, Fengler & Karmasin, 2018) contains country reports (conducted via desk studies) on the status quo of media accountability in all twenty-eight EU member states plus Norway and Switzerland, alongside Israel, Turkey, and Russia. The qualitative analysis is supplemented by a *European Index of Media Accountability*, created to measure, and monitor national media accountability infrastructures based on the judgments of national experts in the fields of media self-regulation and communication research. According to these studies, different cultures of media accountability have emerged in the various media systems and journalism cultures.

The concept of media accountability originates in the United States and Great Britain, which were the first countries to abolish censorship and guarantee freedom of the press. Thus, de-regulation of media markets in these countries started as early as 1791, and media professionals developed early instruments of media accountability to ensure self-regulation of the press. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, newsrooms developed the first MAIs as the party press model was replaced by the mass press model. As newsrooms now economically relied on the market and needed to establish a trust relationship with media users, press codes were drafted since the early twentieth century, and pioneer news outlets such as the New York *World* already experimented with the "Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play" in 1913. In the years following the Second World War (WW II), public debates about the quality of the media intensified in many Western European countries, and governments threatened to tighten media control and install state-run press councils in countries like the UK and Germany. At that time, public discontent with a press widely considered in many countries as greedy, sensationalist, and politically imbalanced

(McQuail, 2010, p. 170), culminated in the United States with the establishment of the Hutchins Commission (1943–1947). This was a committee of intellectuals set up to investigate the status quo of journalism and develop ideas about how to make the media more accountable to the public. Among other recommendations, this Commission suggested "that the members of the press engage in vigorous mutual criticism." Professional standards are not likely to be achieved as long as the mistakes and errors, the frauds and crimes, committed by units of the press are passed over in silence by other members of the profession" (Leigh, 1947, p. 94) --a notion almost shocking to media professionals at that time. However, journalists in many Western countries finally reacted to public criticism—and political pressure—with the establishment of media accountability instruments in the 1950s, while the media in Eastern Europe fell victim to the Communist regimes that had come into power after WW II. Professional societies of journalists and publishers' associations, which had formed in many countries by the turn of the 20th century, reacted to political pressure by establishing non-state press councils as a first attempt to exercise systematic self-regulation and thus escape from external regulation.

In Europe, the idea of a press or media council as a voluntary institution to monitor journalistic coverage has its roots in *Northern and Western Europe*, with the oldest example (1916) coming from Sweden; in Norway, the Press Council (PC) has been in place since 1928. Public and political pressure in the United States (where the "Hutchins Commission" initiated a wide debate about the responsibility of the press in 1947) and in many Western European countries, criticizing irresponsible journalism, resulted in the creation of press councils. In the United Kingdom, a General Council of the Press was established in 1953 to avoid statutory regulation and reconstituted as the Press Council in 1963. The German *Presserat* was founded in 1956, also in reaction to political pressure. The Dutch Press Council has been active since 1960; the first

Austrian Press Council was established in 1961. Widespread dissatisfaction with powerful institutions, including the media, and shifts in many Western societies since 1968 have resulted in an increase in media accountability initiatives. *The Washington Post* was the first leading newspaper to install an ombudsperson; many new alternative media specialized in regional press criticism; and new trade journals like the *American Journalism Review* were being created. Considering the rather mature development of the profession, professional codes of ethics nowadays are widely accepted in the majority of *Northern and Western European countries*, while organizational codes and newsroom statutes play a much less important role. Media journalism (coverage and critical commentary on media issues) is a common phenomenon in high-quality print and broadcast media, and all countries have at least one and, in many cases, several trade journals and websites. In the United States, where a short-lived national press council never gained acceptance in the industry, relying instead on organizational efforts, there is an exception.

The situation is strikingly different in *Southern Europe* and the countries belonging to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) "Mediterranean Model" of media systems, where media accountability instruments on the professional level are far less dominant and institutionalized forms of media self-regulation sometimes do not exist at all. In France, there is no press council until today, even though the first French code of ethics was developed in 1918. Greece does not have a press council either, the enforcement of the Code of Journalists' Professional, Ethical and Social Responsibility rests with the journalists' trade unions and their disciplinary councils. Even the Italian *Ordine dei Giornalisti* (OdG) is no equivalent to the press and media councils in Northern and Western Europe, as it was established by law and rather operates as an institution that regulates access to the journalistic profession. Spain does not have a national press council either, but regional organizations partly make up for this lack. In many countries, newsroom

councils, established to protect the editorial staff from the frequent political pressure of media owners, exist. In Portugal and France, several quality media have organizational codes of conduct for journalists. Also, ombudspersons are a more frequent phenomenon in the countries of Southern Europe. In France, Spain and Portugal, leading print and broadcast media all have introduced ombudspersons since the mid-1990s and maintained at least several of them until today.

In the media systems of *Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)*, organizations like press or media councils only came into existence in the period after the fall of Communism - if at all. In many cases, their foundation was accompanied by the formulation of new codes of ethics, following the ideals of Western media systems. Often, however, it turned out to be difficult for them to gain acceptance among industry members, as media professionals remain skeptical of the concept of media self-regulation after decades of censorship and state control in the Soviet Empire. In Poland, the Press Act of 1984 defined a Press Council as a consultative body for the prime minister, but this Council does not yet exist, and the conservative government has made substantial efforts to create state-dominated 'accountability' structures recently (Głowacki & Kuś, 2022). In Hungary, the Fidesz government dominates the media council created by a legislation in 2010/11. In Romania, neither a press council nor a similar institution does exist at all. While private media enterprises have been reluctant to establish instruments of media accountability, legislators have obliged public broadcasting stations to implement such measures in the political transformation period after 1990. Media law requires public broadcasters to provide an ombudsperson or an ethics committee in almost all CEE countries. However, CEE public broadcasting stations are less independent from politics, and political actors have a grip on media accountability instruments in several cases. Media-critical NGOs - many of them continue to be financed by international foundations - amend the weak accountability structure.

4. Media accountability in Tunisia and Morocco - two cases from the MENA region[4]

Few studies have focused on media accountability in MENA so far. Pies has analyzed structures and contexts of media accountability in Jordan and Tunisia as two exemplary MENA countries within the framework of the MediaAcT project (Pies, 2014; Pies, 2015). Lindekamp (forthcoming) has compared institutions and practices of media accountability in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Hafez (2002) has provided a comparative analysis of ethics codes in Muslim Arab countries. A summary of literature on media accountability in MENA countries can be found in Lengauer's article in this JMEM volume. The two short studies below that provide the most up-to-date overview on these exemplary MENA countries, are taken from longer country reports in *The Global Handbook of Media Accountability*, analyzing MA structures across the globe (Fengler, Eberwein & Karmasin, 2022). Further MENA country cases are contained in this volume.

According to Hizaoui (2022), Tunisia has been on the way to establishing self-regulatory practices until mid-2021, with the foundation of a non-statutory press council in 2020 and a co-regulation system for private broadcasting with an emerging number of ombudspersons at the newsroom. The country, being the only MENA state that moved towards democracy after the Arab Spring of 2011—until the most recent political events in July 2021—has received an exceptionally high share of media development support to promote a system of media accountability. The Constitution provides freedom of expression, not limited by punitive laws. The National Authority for Information and Communication Reform (INRIC) as an independent body responsible for media reform was created with the support of international cooperation. It "laid the foundations

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[4] The research results for Tunisia, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Egypt presented in the following section have been gathered for *The Global Handbook of Media Accountability* (Fengler, Eberwein & Karmasin, 2022), which aims to further globalize and de-Westernize research on the issue of media accountability.

for the new media landscape and established the broad lines of media reform" (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 257). Institutions from the repressive era were abolished after 2011—the Ministry of Communication as well as the external communication agency (ATCE). "In order to comply with international democratic standards, it was agreed that the broadcast media will be regulated by an independent public authority while print and online media will be under self-regulation" (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 257). Freedom of audiovisual communication is guaranteed by the same decree that mandated the establishment of the Independent Authority of Audiovisual Communication (HAICA).

The process to create and implement a press council in Tunisia has been started by the National Union of Journalists (SNJT) with the international organization ARTICLE 19, while the Tunisian Federation of Newspaper Directors (FTDJ) has later joined the press council project "more by interest than by conviction" (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 262). Thus, the case of Tunisia as a transition country also illustrates the impact of discrepancies between professional organizations of journalists and representatives of the owners, [1] who are mainly entrepreneurs close to the old regime of Ben Ali. Numerous media owners also explicitly follow political interests. Prior to the creation of a press council for Tunisia, the National Union of Tunisian journalists (SNJT) suggested a liberal self-regulation model. However, the Tunisian Federation of Newspaper Directors (FTDJ) intended to create a council with regulatory functions: "The Press Council should play an economic role in defining criteria for the granting of public advertising; for example, the PC should also be authorized to propose invalidating the press card for a journalist not respecting ethics; the PC must be financed mainly by public funds […]" (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 262). After several postponements, the dispute seems to be resolved with the self-regulatory model announced in 2020.

Ombudspersons are now rather well-established in Tunisia, after a first mediator was established by the pioneering private radio station *Mosaïque FM* in 2013. In the field of private broadcasting, the German Erich Brost Institute has initiated a network of trained media ombudspersons since 2015, as "the result of collaboration with Mena Media Monitoring, the High Independent Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA) and the African Center for the Improvement of Journalists and Communicators (CAPJC)" (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 261). "This forum, set up as an association, is currently chaired by the mediator of the national public television. It brings together the mediators of ten press organizations, namely: *Radio Mosaïque FM*, *Radio 6*, *Radio Twenssa*, *Radio Regueb* (3R), *Radio Gafsa*, Tunisian Television (*Wataniya 1* and *Wataniya 2*), *Radio Djerid, Radio Nefzawa, Radio Kasserine* and *Radio Jawhara FM"* (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 261).

A number of other MAIs have emerged in Tunisia as well, among them the only media centered TV program, 'MediaMag', and the program reserved twice a week by *Radio Mosaïque FM* for the interaction between the radio 'mediateur' and the public, but it does not appear on the list of programs available in podcast" (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 261). Organizational codes are reported for the public press agency *Tunis-Afrique-Presse* (TAP) as well as for public radio and TV broadcasters. "(S)ome private broadcasters like *Mosaïque FM* have adopted an editorial charter and brought it to public knowledge" (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 261). The audiovisual regulatory authority (HAICA) and the Union of Journalists (SNJT) have both published "guidelines on media coverage of terrorism attacks and guidelines and on gendered coverage of women's topics". (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 261) "The Independent Elections Authority (ISIE) has issued guidelines for media coverage of elections, in partnership with HAICA." (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 261) Finally, members of the audience in Tunisia increasingly use social media such as Facebook to express their media criticism, and

mobilize unsubscriptions (in one case about 1 million) to protest against bad journalistic practices. Radio stations have developed as important actors of MAI after 2011, opening their programs to public debate.

Morocco is a striking example of the "competitive authoritarian" model, using the labels of self-and co-regulation for institutions that seem to exert media control, as argued by Ibahrine & Zaid (2022). An ethics code was established in 2002 by the National Commission for Press Ethics and Freedom of Expression, which was constituted by members from the National Press Union (SNPM), the Federation of Publishers, civil society organizations, and media professionals. The code is a "binding legal document that includes the rules of professional conduct" (Ibahrine & Zaid, 2022, p. 252). A new Press and Publication Law replaced the "more repressive" (Ibahrine & Zaid, 2022, p. 247) 2002 Press Code in 2016 and 2018, the National Press Council (NPC) was established by law. The NPC issues press cards and controls access to the profession. While it is also tasked with raising professionalism and ethical awareness among journalists, taboo topics like monarchy, Western Sahara, and Islam "were preserved in the new code, and jail sentences were replaced by steep fines, and failure to pay the fines can lead to jail term" (Ibahrine & Zaid, 2022, p. 537). The High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA), an administrative body in charge of regulating the audio-visual communication sector, was established in 2002. Its formal independence is doubted by observers as Morocco has a "multilayered architecture of control, namely the unrepresentative appointment process of its decision-making bodies and also repressive media laws" (Ibahrine & Zaid, 2022, p. 247).

The Audiovisual Communication Law was passed in 2005 and "required the establishment of the ombudsperson in public service broadcast media" (Ibahrine & Zaid, 2022, p. 252). However, only one ombudsperson has so far been appointed to the Société nationale de radiodiffusion et de

télévision (SNRT). The public service broadcast companies 2M and Al Oula have created TV programs devoted to discussing the public's feedback (Ibahrine & Zaid, 2022, p. 252). Also, in Morocco, tight media regulation leaves little room for independent MAIs, while "citizens are playing an active role in the process of making the Moroccan media more accountable to the public" (Ibahrine & Zaid, 2022, p. 252). However, also Morocco allows donor activities and NGOs in the field of media monitoring, and foreign co-operation in journalism education, even though these efforts are described as lacking sustainability.

5. MENA region: Predominance of 'foreign donor' and 'mimicry' models of media accountability

Frameworks for media accountability are fundamentally different in democratic states from those in transitory countries and countries with restricted press freedom: In the latter, journalists' associations and 'media councils' do not have a tradition of being an association of independent professionals, but government tools to control access to the profession; the concept of media self-regulation in practice only disguises censorship in some countries. Studies from the Post-Soviet space emphasize the ambivalent perception of the concept of accountability by members of the journalistic profession skeptical of all institutions that may sanction journalistic malpractice (Coman, 2008; Láb & Tejkalová, 2016).

Thus, we suggest broadening the perspective and taking into account the many forms of media accountability beyond the typical "Western" media accountability systems.[1] Voltmer argues that "emerging democracies develop new types of media systems rather than copying Western models," as they are in many cases "transformations of existing institutions that carry with them the norms and power relations of the old regime" (Voltmer, 2012, p. 235). As a result, in the field of media accountability, we also find a "unique mix of persisting structures inherited

from the past alongside newly adopted elements from existing (usually Western) role models" (Voltmer, 2012, p. 235). This requires an "interpretivist" perspective, considering the relative importance of factors in a "complex set of cultural and situational factors" (Voltmer, 2012, p. 235). Tettey (2006) reflects on this in his proposal of three distinct types of media accountability systems in sub-Saharan African countries. Several scholars, such as Coman & Gross (2006), Al-Najjar (2020), Prapawong (2018), Sawant (2003), Obuya (2012), and Berger (2010), report that media self-regulatory systems in both former Soviet states and the Global South are dysfunctional.

According to the comparative analysis in *The Global Handbook of Media Accountability*, only Tunisia (and to some extent Iraq) stands out among the MENA country cluster, as the massive influx of media donor involvement after political change in both countries has helped to create at least initial infrastructures for more independent debates about journalistic quality. Thus, we suggest describing the media accountability system found in such countries as *foreign donor models of media accountability* (Fengler, 2022, p. 566). Other examples for the foreign donor model of media accountability are Bosnia and Herzegovina, to some extent Ukraine before the war of 2022, as well as Myanmar until the military coup of 2021. In these countries, political transition in the different "waves of democracy" led to a gradual opening and deregulation of media systems, and thus urgently required - at least from a normative point of view - the establishment of media accountability structures.

However, during either an authoritarian, or communist rule, media professionals were tightly controlled, and in many cases poorly educated, as authoritarian governments sought to de-professionalize the journalistic workforce as another way to eliminate criticism. Following regime change and the end or gradual lifting of censorship, journalists and media companies were often

ill-equipped to handle their new freedoms responsibly due to lack of professionalism or simply the economic struggle to stay afloat. Lack of research and use of rumors, sensationalism, and bribery are just a few of the emerging problems described by local observers. Professional associations pre-dating the transformation phase were often discredited because of co-operation with or propagandism for the former repressive political regime. Also, groups of journalists working under repressive conditions may emphasize solidarity over self-criticism, as the example of Tunisia illustrates: Here, the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) has adopted a general ethical charter in 1984 which "contains several provisions affirming solidarity between journalists, which leaves little room for internal criticism" (Hizaoui, 2022, p. 566). After regime change, new - and more credible - associations have not been established timely enough in many countries to fill this void, and media companies did not exert sufficient commitment to media accountability.

In several countries, at the initial stage of transformation, international donors active in the field of media development entered local media markets to provide support in establishing professionalism and pluralism. Due to political developments in the context of the "third wave of democracy" (Huntington, 1991), media development initiatives have focused on the Post-Soviet space, MENA countries, selected sub-Sahara African countries, and transitory countries in Asia (especially Myanmar). Besides capacity building projects as well as media mapping projects, and in the past years increasingly the establishment of local and international NGO watchdog initiatives to counter hate speech, the establishment of MAIs such as self- or co-regulatory press councils has been a focus of these media development initiatives. In crucial periods of transitions, local media systems proved to be too weak to develop media accountability structures. NGO initiatives seek to substitute dysfunctional professional structures and promote professionalism by capacity building in the field of accountability. Certainly, the goals of international actors, active

in the field of media accountability as part of media development, have to be scrutinized as well for their intentions as 'moral agents', argues Schwenke (2011, p. 323). A special issue of *African Journalism Studies* on journalism and foreign aid critically analyzes the interaction between international donors and local media (Paterson, Gadzekpo, & Wasserman, 2018; see also the special edition 2014 of the *Global Media Journal* on international media assistance[5]).

Similarly, Berger voices skepticism towards the major involvement of NGOs and international actors in the establishment of media accountability structures: "If press freedom and autonomy are essential to democracy, then regulation by a majority of non-stakeholders - even if non-governmental - could compromise the character of self-regulation" (Berger, 2010, p. 291). On the other hand, the political (and financial) support provided by supra-national political bodies as well as donor countries to facilitate media accountability structures can also be considered as a factor pushing towards hyper-norms in media accountability across countries.

In contrast, the cases of Morocco and Jordan are marked by strong elements of 'capture' of media accountability instruments and journalism professional organizations. The concept of media capture (e.g., Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013; Schiffrin, 2017; Coşkun, 2020) - or the term 'contracted accountability' as suggested by Tettey (2006), leaving somewhat more space for the manifold ambiguities in transformation countries - provide a highly useful framework to discuss the new forms of media regulation in the guise of media accountability.

As shown above, Morocco has established a statutory media council in past years, but the label 'council' seems purposefully misleading, and we need to consider this institution rather as an example of 'media capture' as practiced by a 'competitive authoritarian regime'. The board of this 'media council' is dominated by representatives or agents of the government, not by peer-

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[5] The special issue is available online: http://globalmediajournal.de/archive-volume-4-no-2/.

elected professionals, and the decisions made do not challenge censorship or violations of press freedom. Also, the Complaints Committee of the Jordan Press Association appears as a more subtle way to exert control over the profession. Accordingly, these councils do not meet the normative criteria for independent press or media councils as laid out by UNESCO (2008) or the Council of Europe (2008). Further examples are the 'media councils' of Egypt and Pakistan, which have been created as government tools to control the profession and exert strict sanctions. In most of the aforementioned countries, press and media councils can impose fines and have in some cases legal powers, even to close media entities. In some countries, the 'councils' regulate access to public advertising spending, and they have regulatory powers in the field of competition law. Some 'councils' do regulate access to the journalistic profession by issuing press cards. While the constitution of these countries might on paper grant freedom of expression, journalists are tightly restricted by other laws on national security, decency, terrorism, or cybercrime.

Turkey is a specific case, with a professional media accountability system considered as a model also for MENA countries until the abolishment of press freedom by Turkish President Erdogan after 2015/2016 (see Fengler et al., 2022). In our typology of eight models of media accountability suggested, Morocco and Jordan would represent examples of the *mimicry media accountability model* (Fengler, 2022, p. 571).

The question remains - why do authoritarian countries establish such 'councils' at all? We argue that this may be an unintended effect of the emergence of media accountability as a hyper-norm in media policy, as part of global governance. Despite the obvious differences between journalistic cultures, it needs to be noted that there are also many signs indicating a transnational trend towards a convergence of journalistic role conceptions and, thus, a development of globally accepted hyper-norms in the field of media accountability. Even multi-country comparisons like

the Worlds of Journalism Study (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & de Beer, 2019) indicate a univocally high support for professional standards (adherence to ethics codes) among journalists from media systems and journalism cultures as diverse as Norway and Bangladesh.

Although journalists from Bangladesh may have fewer options to fulfill these standards in practice, as argued by Josephi (2010), it is evident that respect for professional codes has emerged as a hyper-norm in journalism across countries. With a view to strengthening civil society and thereby supporting a long-term change towards more democracy, the (mostly Western) donor countries have been promoting media and journalism in transition countries for decades (Hamdy, 2008). Pointing out that the existence of free markets is inextricably linked to the existence of free media, the World Bank has also emphasized the economic importance of media development assistance (Islam, Djankov, & McLeish, 2002). Thus, governments in transitory and non-democratic societies may react to international (contract) pressure to qualify for development aid by installing façade MAIs that mimic the real ones. They may also react to growing pressure by civil society in their own countries: Levitsky and Way (2002) add that "competitive authoritarian regimes" use elements of democracy to ensure domination over the opposition forces, "suggesting a more liberal media policy (and thus a freer political system overall) that likely prevails in reality" (Jones, 1999, p. 38). And while receiving countries in many cases may be unwilling to implement true media reforms, such initiatives may nonetheless encourage local actors striving for media accountability and self-regulation - and may unfold long-term 'sleeper effects' in autocratic and fragile states.

6. Limits, discussion, and preview of articles in this volume

The *foreign donor model* of media accountability as well as the *'mimicry' model* are descriptive categories, like all models developed in *The Global Handbook of Media Accountability*, while

many hybrid forms of media accountability exist.[6] This needs to be kept in mind in the discussion to follow; however, the reductionist approach suggested here will hopefully provide readers with more clarity to start an initial debate. We are also aware of the fluidity of the concept, as political contexts in specific regions (especially in MENA, parts of Asia, and Latin America) shift quickly, with a sometimes-immediate impact on the structures of media accountability.[7] Finally, we lack data from key MENA countries like Saudi Arabia due to lack of local expertise and high political risks for researchers dealing with the topic.

Further research - provided by Lengauer in this special edition - will focus on the nexus of professionalism and accountability in the journalistic field in MENA countries. A prerequisite for the development of media accountability instruments in Western countries has been the development of professionalism in journalism respectively among journalistic actors (Meyers, Wyatt, Borden, & Wasserman, 2012), marked by independent professional associations in journalism (journalists' unions, publishers' associations, and the like) as potential actors to hold the media to account (Campbell, 1999, 759). Concerned journalists across Europe and the United States started to form press clubs and journalists' federations in the late 19th century, the earliest

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[6] For example, Brazil displays features of the 'professional' as well as the 'public' model; Hungary has features of the 'dysfunctional professional' as well as the 'mimicry' model; Israel meanders between the 'professional' and the 'dysfunctional professional model'. Countries with strong public broadcasting systems are to be listed in the 'professional model' of media accountability but could also be considered as examples of company models of media accountability, practiced by (public) media organizations.

[7] For example, just a few days after the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, the military junta also dissolved the Myanmar Press Council, established with the help of foreign donors to push for the autonomy of journalists in the transition era. Also, Covid-19 had an immediate impact on media accountability structures, e.g., as several MENA governments prohibited newspaper publication for 'sanitary reasons. But also, the situation in countries in the Global North is fluid, as the example of the United States shows: Here, the last regional press council closed in 2014 (a national news council has been short-lived and only existed between 1973 and 1985). Media accountability is now mainly practiced on the company level in the United States, but the media market has become more and more fragmented over the years (Benson, 2018, p. 1062). Benson (2018) identifies three segments of the modern U.S. journalistic field: an infotainment segment structured around websites like *BuzzFeed* and the *Huffington Post* and commercial television news; a partisan segment represented by cable news networks, conservative talk radio, and a host of smaller websites; and an elite segment centered on national newspapers like *The New York Times* and magazines like *The Atlantic* (cited in Thomas, 2022).

known example being in the UK. Publishers also started to form their own associations. In an attempt to raise the standards among journalists — who often had little or no formal or professional education, and were poorly paid — many of these journalists' associations (later journalists' unions) started to pass codes of ethics seeking to make a distinction between acceptable behavior and unacceptable methods in journalism.[8] In contrast, an examination of journalism cultures in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe shows that renewed independent professional associations did not emerge in many of these countries after political transformation from dictatorship and communism to independence, or remain too weak, with insufficient organizational structures. In some cases (Poland, Ukraine before the war of 2022), several journalists' associations, following different political ideologies or being aligned with different segments of the media market, compete against each other, and weaken the potential political impact of their professional representation.

A first examination of Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia shows that only Tunisia could establish a rather independent professional association of journalists after the end of the Ben Ali regime. Professional associations in Morocco and Jordan remain in the realm of the government, steered by actors who are aligned with the ruling classes and serve as instruments to silence dissent.

Institutionalized media accountability instruments like press councils and institutes of journalism education, or NGOs, for example, are relevant because they provide spaces for informal reflection on the accountability (different segments) of the media and the responsibility of journalists (Lindekamp, 2019). Looking at Muslim Arab countries, Hafez (2002) has stressed that

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[8] Serving as the 'conscience of journalism' (Himelboim & Limor, 2006, p. 266), codes of ethics specify how journalists are expected to behave professionally. Laitila's study (1995, p. 538) found that almost all European codes request of journalists' "truthfulness", "honesty", "accuracy of information" and "correction of errors". However, it needs to be noted that even though professional associations and unions of journalists now exist in many countries, journalism - unlike classic professions such as medicine or law—lacks the characteristics of a profession (see e.g., Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes and Wilhoit, 2007, p. 131), most of all because access to journalism in almost all democratic states is not restricted by a professional body, to ensure its independence.

informal discourses are even more relevant for journalism cultures without press freedom, where journalists cannot fix certain values, such as impartiality and independence from state interference, in written form. Even prior to codes, each journalism culture has developed professional norms that are communicated and passed on in newsrooms, journalism textbooks, journalism education, and professional discussions and venues.

The establishment of independent professional journalist associations, codes of ethics, autonomous legal status for the journalistic profession, and adequate education and knowledge transfer for journalists are all critical factors in enabling a culture of media accountability and serving democratic purposes. The studies highlighted above indicate that most MENA countries lack such a history of independent associations, professional autonomy, and journalistic education. For the first time, this Special Issue of the Journal of Middle East Media (JMEM) brings together the research of a broad variety of scholars on media accountability in MENA. As an innovative and emerging framework, media accountability is being unfolded in basic as well as in empirical research. Monika Lengauer draws in her article on the theorizing and evolving professionalism in the Arab World as it relates to media accountability.

Most of the empirical studies explore prevailing media accountability instruments in both the Maghreb and the Levante. Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, Bouziane Zaid, and Mohammed Ibahrine conclude in Morocco that social media is among the most appreciated MAIs. Khaled Gulam's analysis of media accountability in Libya shows that ongoing political and armed conflicts hinder reform and new legislation regulating the media sector. Nadia Leihs explores what instruments of media accountability exist in the Egyptian media and how journalists perceive them. Suggestions to widen the scope of self-responsible means of regulation include creating opportunities for

training and enabling open debates about ethical and professional standards. Philip Madanat and Judith Pies compare media accountability in Jordan a decade ago to the present. They found that Jordans currently advocate for media freedom as a priority and view media accountability as an accompanying process. Ayman Georges Mhanna and Karim Safieddine reveal Lebanon's generally poor quality of official bodies for media accountability on the one hand and the vibrant non-official MAIs on the other hand. The authors recommend empowering both groups through technical and research-based interventions. Judith Pies and Philip Madanat underpin from the Syrian perspective that times of violent conflict heighten the need for responsible media. The authors conclude from their study that media professionals in Syria now strive for a self-regulatory body to combat hate speech and train journalists on professional norms and media ethics.

Many individuals in academia, classrooms, in the media, and even in the political sphere supported the publication of this special issue. First, Isabella Kurkowski was continuously engaged in a variety of activities. She organized and conducted face-to-face and digital workshops on Arab media accountability in Iraq, Jordan, Sudan, and Tunisia, and she organized and conducted online conferences during COVID-19 for media owners and publishers, journalism educators, journalists, and representatives of journalism associations and media NGOs. Fatma Louati remains a committed partner in these media accountability activities. Alice Pesavento has supported this volume with her sustained dedication, alongside Wiebke Johanna Jung and Katarina Machmer, all being students at the Institute of Journalism at TU Dortmund University. In addition, we have always been in talks with scholars and journalists from all walks of life, particularly with Abeer al-Najjar, Hanan Badr, Mohamed El-Nawawy, Naila Hamdy, Sahar Khamis, and many others.

This discourse was guided by a pilot study (Fengler, Kurkowski, & Lengauer, 2021) and was concluded in three main interventions: (i) The launch of the Media Accountability Online Resource Platform for the MENA region in Arabic and English https://brost.ifj.tu-dortmund.de/projekte/media-accountability-in-the-mena-region/. (ii) The furthering of the Arab Journalism Observatory (AJO) https://ajo-ar.org/ that contains all resources in the Arabic language. (iii) The formation of a network on Arab media accountability that comprises universities, media NGOs, media publishers and other media accountability related institutions and individuals https://brost.ifj.tu-dortmund.de/projekte/media-accountability-in-the-mena-region-arabic/regional-network-for-media-accountability-in-the-mena-region/

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Media accountability in MENA through the perspective of the theory of the professions

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Abstract

This paper explores whether the theory of the professions possesses heuristic value and the openness to explain media accountability in the Arab context. Investigating professional traits as in associations, autonomy, ethics, knowledge and tertiary education, the study reveals professionalism as a familiar concept in the region, with established terms in the Arabic language, and an understanding of traits that largely coincides with those outlined by the sociology of the professions. As professionalism is rooted in the ideal of freedom and a hands-off state where autonomous professions self-regulate, the lack of freedoms in the Arab countries studied for this paper - Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar - appears to be a major hindrance to professionalism as per the sociological theory. The study suggests that knowledge - abstract, theoretical knowledge and its specialized technique - generated, conveyed and transmitted in and through universities, emerges as a prime trait of professionalism in the Arab world. The question remains whether Arab journalism is turning into the new knowledge profession and a pillar of the Arab Knowledge Society or whether the concept of the sociological theory of the professions shrinks to the idea of the knowledge-based category of occupations.
Keywords: professionalism, journalism, autonomy, ethics, journalism education, universities, knowledge profession, Arab Knowledge Society

Introduction

This paper aims to explore the heuristic value of the theory of the professions—specifically across cultures—in explaining media accountability in MENA and defining properties that derive from Fengler's (2022) analysis: associations, autonomy, ethics codes, education, and knowledge. The author refers to the explanatory power of this theory in the wider context of media accountability as well as in the theory's birthplace of Anglo-American academic discourse. The main question is whether the theory is sufficiently open and flexible to substantiate the understanding of Arab media accountability today. Accordingly, this article first discusses the sociological theory of the professions and introduces its framework to the Arab context, which is

a recent approach. It identifies professional characteristics including knowledge, autonomy, ethics, and self-regulation through professional associations and explores how they reverberate in the Arab world[1], particularly in journalism, and under the conditions of a lack of freedom. As the origins of the theory are predominantly grounded in an Anglo-American democratic and liberal context, it is intended to contribute to de-Westernizing the concept [2]. To this end, a range of empirical data is analyzed in the wider context of the research questions of this paper.

Drawing on the theory of the professions and media accountability, this paper has analyzed data sets qualitatively which were collected in four Arab countries from North Africa (Morocco, Egypt), the Middle East (Lebanon), and the Gulf region (Qatar). Ninety-one respondents from these three distinct Arab regions represent a broad variety of stakeholders impacting journalism and journalism education. Their thoughts on professionalism, journalism, and journalism education were analyzed qualitatively.

The article shows that associations have been among the first elements of professionalism studied in this region, but their bearing on professionalism will be demonstrated as limited. Advancing knowledge, particularly in the pursuit of creating an Arab Knowledge Society, has been a strategic goal in several Arab countries. In line with this trend, university education, also in journalism, has increasingly turned into the standard educational path towards practice. The article concludes that the theoretical understanding of professionalism in journalism studies in MENA countries has by and large turned into a focus on knowledge-based work and that Arab professionalism mainly coincides with this reading. The lack of freedoms in the Arab world has been corroborated as a deterrent to a more comprehensive understanding of the concept among the respondents to this study, noting that freedom and autonomy are core values for both, media accountability and professionalism.

Professionalism - a key concept for autonomy and accountability

What is a profession? There is no easy answer to this seemingly simple question, and none that would be supported by most of the eminent scholars in the research field. Sociology has been taking the lead in developing the research field, and in attempting to define its key term, "the professions". Consensus over what the term means, however, has not been reached to date. In the most simplistic demarcation, professions relate to work, to what people do for a living (Freidson, 1986). Professions do not comprise what amateurs do and they do not equate to other occupations, crafts or trades. In a nutshell, professions are "engaged in the process of creating, communicating, and applying" knowledge (Freidson, 1994, p. 67). Four terms - profession, professional, professionalism, and professionalization - represent connected concepts.

The professions are the focus of a huge research field with a long tradition, dating back to "the ancients" who "wrote and argued about them" (Marshall, 1939, p. 325; Neurath, 1906, p. 577). The veritable origins of the professions, however, are embedded in the development of knowledge as an independent element in society (Gellner, 1988; Marshall, 1939). The nineteenth century saw the first development of professions as we know them today (Abbott, 1988) and the first substantial commentaries (Freidson, 1986), largely based upon the work of the European sociologists Max Weber (2007) and Émile Durkheim (1957), among others (Brante, 1988). The first systematic attempts to study the professions came in the twentieth century with the rise of the social sciences and with the growth of university education as a sea-change for the professions themselves (Abbott, 1988; Ben-David, 1964; Bledstein, 1976).

The first testing grounds for the theory of the professions have been medicine and law (Millerson, 1964), archetypal (Abbott, 1988, p. 196; Evetts, 2003a, pp. 29, 31) or - from the viewpoint of journalism researchers (Anderson & Schudson, 2019, p. 136) - traditional

professions. Most scholars agree on this lowest common denominator; while some count it in engineering and the academia (Halliday, 1987), the clergy (Millerson, 1964; Parsons, 1971; Elliott, 1972, & Gustafson, 1982) or historical account (Freidson, 1994); some embrace the army (Halliday, 1987), while others (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964) exclude it.

The traits marking the professions were first identified in these traditional professions, predominantly in medicine. The career of medicine as a profession started as a ritual practiced by the clergy (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964), was first organized together with the barbers in the sixth century, was in the fifteenth century still only carried out by a large number of untrained, unskilled practitioners (Millerson, 1964) and lacked professional knowledge and specialized expertise until well into the eighteenth century (Elliott, 1972); it then developed into the sine qua non of professions, bestowed with highest prestige and status. Status was claimed by the profession, and it was bestowed on the profession by society. Adam Smith has famously made the case in his 1776-work on the "Wealth of Nations":

> We trust our health to the physician, our fortune and sometimes our life and reputation to the lawyer and attorney. Such confidence could not safely be reposed in people of a very mean or low condition. Their reward must be such, therefore, as may give them that rank in society which so important a trust requires. The long time and great expense which must be laid out in their education, when combined with this circumstance, necessarily enhance still further the price of their labor. (Smith, 1776, p. 478)

Summarizing the beginnings of the research field, three issues come to the fore: First, key concepts were formulated in the early days of theorizing, including the professions' specialized knowledge, autonomy, their ethics grounded in a code of conduct and the individual professionals' ethical orientation and the service rendered to clients. All of the above value propositions were seen as requiring generous remuneration, high status in the society, a very good reputation among

the clients[9] as well as professional autonomy, self-regulation in professional associations. The quality of work was raised by Tawney (1920), but it would, surprisingly, only appear implicitly and/or intermittently as a trait of professions in future theorizing. Second, the reference points of theorizing were limited to the traditional professions, mainly medicine and law. Nonetheless, the question which occupations qualify as professions was ubiquitous. Third, culturally speaking, the professions concerned the social sciences in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (US) first, later followed by continental Western Europe; beyond the Global North, the professions were theorized rarely and only very recently. This also applies to the focus region of this study, the member states of the League of Arab States (henceforth: Arab countries).

Traits and functions of a profession: Key concepts in sociology

The traits approach defines the "essence" of a profession (Crompton, 1990, p. 152), pursuing the question "What characteristics classify an occupation as a profession?" (Krause, 1996, p. 15). Theorists like Barber (1963), Caplow (1954), Etzioni (1969), Goode (1960), Greenwood (1957), Millerson (1964), Moore (1976), Wilensky (1964), and maybe even Abbott (1988) identifyied the characteristics of a model profession, mostly medicine. Selected traits would then be validated, aimed at assessing whether selected occupations are "more or less professional" (Macdonald, 1995, pp. 2–3). Knowledge, service, ethics (e.g., altruism), and the code of conduct, autonomy, the professionals' relationship with their clients, their organization in associations, remuneration, status, and social closure resulting in a monopoly (among other traits) established the label. The traits approach has been dominant for most of the twentieth century (Burns, 2007). Proponents of this approach used the "complex formal knowledge and skills along with an ethical

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[9] Clients, in the terminology of the professions, are the specific category of people that require the professionals' services. These services are directed at problem solving for the individual (medicine, law) or the society at large.

approach to their work […] to set professions off from other occupations and to justify the protective institutions and high prestige that also distinguished them" (Freidson, 1986, p. 29).

Those following the so-called functional approach in the theory of the professions viewed the professions as a special category of occupations that enjoyed a superior social status along with a relative freedom from external interference and supervision (autonomy), protection against unqualified competition, an adequate remuneration and their clients' trust in return for self-control through professional associations and the provision of services rooted in a code of ethics, recruitment following high standards of knowledge through higher education and training (Crompton, 1990; Rueschemeyer, 1983). Service provision by the professionals and status guarantees by the society were two aspects of the "regulative bargain" (Macdonald, 1995, p. 10) between the professions and the state. This bargain empowers the professions "to standardize and restrict access to their knowledge [and] to control their market" (Macdonald, 1995, p. 11).

Johnson (1972) lists some of the main objections against the traits approach: The assumption that "true professions" exist "which exhibit to some degree all of the essential elements"; the "atheoretical character" of functionalism, which easily leads to the "error of accepting the professionals' own definitions of themselves" (p. 26) and the focus on Anglo-American culture at a particular time in the historical development of these professions. In brief, scholars started to regard functionalism as "a static and uncritical rendering of an idealized account of the basic features of American society" (Crompton, 1990, p. 153). Functionalist approaches were also criticized for ignoring the power motif of the professions (Allison, 1986). The next phase in theorizing is known as the "professional project" (Larson, 1977) which removed the "professions from their privileged position in the sociological order of things" and represented a complete break from the functionalism, constituting a "sea change" (Macdonald, 1995, xii). But

long before the professions were stripped off their privileges in the new school of thoughts, as early as 1939, Marshall had heralded:

> It can be said that all this insistence on service and ethical obligations is a mere camouflage to disguise the purely selfish desire to create an artificial scarcity and to win the material and immaterial advantages which scarcity can confer. (Marshall, 1939, pp. 327–328)

Millerson (1964) is frequently quoted for his synopsis of 23 traits as retrieved from 21 definitions of professions, taken from some of the most celebrated works of those days (pp. 259-260). No single trait is accepted by all 21 authors as essential to a profession; that, in the case of nine traits, there is a sole advocate; and that no two contributors agree that the same combination of traits can be taken as defining a professional occupation (Johnson, 1972). This synopsis is, on the one hand, a graphic illustration of the variance amongst scholars in defining their core term. On the other hand, this account at least yields six "essential features" (Millerson, 1964, p. 4) that distinguish professions from non-professions, with three of the six top-ranked qualities highlighting knowledge: (i) skill based on theoretical knowledge; (ii) skill based on training and education; and (iii) competence demonstrated by passing a test[1]. The top four traits are the profession's "Code of Conduct" (ethics); the top fifth trait is "service for the public good"; and the top sixth trait refers to the fact that "the profession is organized" (association; Millerson, 1964, pp. 4–5). In addition, the list of 23 main traits comprises the professional-client-relationship with its fiduciary character, compensation (remuneration), independence (autonomy), licensure, and practice modified by generalized knowledge and a non-manual work design, which enforces the strength of knowledge for the professions. Professional associations represent the top six prominent traits in the synopsis of defining features of professions (Millerson, 1964).

No "differentia specifica" of the professions was agreed upon in the decades since theorizing started (Barber, 1963). For Beckmann (1990), the differentia specifica is not one specific trait but "a set of traits" (p. 116). Nonetheless, individual authors have emphasized specific traits, often making them appear as a "differentia specifica", for instance associations, autonomy, knowledge, and tertiary education:

Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1964) regard associations as one of the most important traits distinguishing the professions from occupations: A profession "can only be said to exist when there are bonds between the practitioners, and these bonds can take but one shape - that of formal association" (p. 298), which must be free (p. 495). Professions organize their shared interest - e.g., control of their work - voluntarily in the form of such collegial associations, "in which membership involves an occupational role, a 'job' [emphasis in the original], not casual participation" (Parsons, 1971, p. 98). The association's role includes the protection of the profession's specialized knowledge and certification of its attainment (Gustafson, 1982).

Moore (1976) views autonomy as the most important trait of professionalism, "in effect an ultimate value" (p. 16). He specifies the criteria that establish autonomy and distinguishes between "genuine autonomy" (p. 16) and the "relative autonomy" the professional is "accorded in the performance of his work" in contemporary societies (p. 233). The latter includes commitment to a calling, a high level of education and a service orientation toward the use of knowledge and skills. For Beckman (1990), too, autonomy is "central to professional status", it is "substantial" and she goes as far as to use the word freedom: "[P]rofessionalization theory cannot dispense with an idea of degrees of freedom in work" (p. 118). For her, autonomy and knowledge are two predominant traits. Rueschemeyer (1983) singles out the "special character of […] services [for] a core of autonomy, which […] is greater than the irreducible autonomy found in other occupations" (pp.

47–48). Autonomy is often presupposed by knowledge and education in the analyses (Barber, 1963; Elliott, 1972; Rueschemeyer, 1983). Freidson (1994) emphasized that the autonomy of the professions is contingent upon "sufficient authority over work" which will be attained through peer reviewed, collegial "supervision and evaluation of professional work" (p. 166).

Starting with the founding authors in sociology and in the theory of the professions, the ethics have been researched as a prime trait. Durkheim (1957) posits that "no professional activity can be without its own ethics" (p. 15). The ethics comprise a variety of normative values that guide the professional practice including a credo of altruism (Esland & Graeme, 1980), the recognition of a calling to do good (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964; Gustafson, 1982; Marshall, 1939), the strong sense of service extended to individuals and to the society at large (Esland, 1980; Freidson, 2001; Goode, 1960; Gustafson, 1982; Krause, 1996; Marshall, 1939; Moore, 1976). Nothing less than "trust" is an important property in theorizing the professions (Beckmann, 1990; Evetts, 2006a; Marshall, 1939). The lay peoples' trust in the professionals' knowledge and integrity legitimizes the profession (Beckmann, 1990; Bledstein, 1976; Evetts, 2006a, 2006b; Freidson, 1971; Goode, 1960; Macdonald, 1995; Siegrist, 1990; Smeby, 2006). But this changed over time. Clients gained assertiveness in their relationship with the professionals, supported by the "Education Revolution" that aimed to educate entire populations (Parsons, 1971, p. 95) and later through the ease of access to reliable information through technology, particularly the internet. These developments compelled the professionals to prove that they are indeed trustworthy (Pfadenhauer, 2006). The code of ethics is a representation of these commitments (Greenwood, 1957; Macdonald, 1965), but it has also been challenged as "cosmetics" (Freidson, 1971, pp. 185–186) as an instrument to promote a promise of ethicality "without *necessarily* [emphasis in the original] bearing directly on individual ethicality" (Freidson, 1971, p. 187).

The notion of professionalism in all its variations has advanced triumphantly over time, and it has become the namesake of an era, the professional period. Universally, across occupational groups, disciplines, cultural and national borders, professionalism has evolved as a popular occupational goal. Scholars researched professionalism in areas that were as distant to the traditional connotation as Nayman's "Professional orientation of metropolitan Turkish journalists" (Nayman, 1970). The notion has even crossed over into foreign languages (for instance, German and Arabic; Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964; Evetts, 2003a; Goode, 1960; Kuhlmann, 2015; Kunczik & Zippel, 2001; Lengauer, 2016). It has appealed to numerous occupations, and even an unlikely candidate such as tent pitching in Egypt (el-Sharkawy, 2014) was described as a profession. Discussions about occupations qualifying as professions propelled an array of sub-categories such as pseudo- or postmodern professions - all on the periphery of the original ones (particularly medicine and law) which were also described as traditional or true, learned, liberal, free and status professions, while all of the above were distinguished from failed or disappearing professions like tent pitching (Abbott, 1988; Brante, 1988; Collins, 1979; Esland & Graeme, 1980; Etzoni, 1969; Freidson, 1986; Moore, 1976; Pfadenhauer, 2006; Siegrist, 1990; Singer, 2003; Soloski, 1989). Freidson's (1994) call for the theory to "document the untidiness and inconsistency of the empirical phenomenon and to explain its character in those countries where it exists" (p. 25) turned into a challenging task.

Journalism was usually not categorized as a profession, mainly due to its strong claim of autonomy which coincides with journalism's inherent dislike of any kind of institutional forms of professionalism as membership in formal associations, certification and licensing (Allison, 1986; Boyd-Barrett, 1974; Katz, 1989; Kunczik & Zippel, 2001; Shemberger, 2019).

Just as the traditional professions were also known as the learned professions, scholars started to reconsider contemporary professions as expert and skilled occupations: The "sociological distinction between 'professions' [emphasis in the original] and other skilled and expert occupations should be finally laid to rest" (Crompton, 1990, pp. 156–157). If this radical theoretical proposal were accepted, the professions would indeed move "in the direction of journalism", as Katz (1989, p. 240) has famously declared. The growth of the service sector and knowledge work across the world and the "re-emergence of professions in both developing and transitional societies, indicate the appeal of the concept of 'professionalism' [emphasis in the original] as well as the strength and persistence of 'professions' [emphasis in the original] as an occupational form" (Evetts, 2003b, p. 399). The exclusive specialized knowledge of the professionals became increasingly accessible to the laity thanks to mass media and the internet. Self-regulation was being challenged in a globalized world and "being replaced by external regulation via evaluation programs or supervisory guidelines" (Pfadenhauer, 2006, p. 569). The debate about the death of the sociology of the professions goes back to Hall (1988), and it remains an issue (Nolin, 2008). The way forward seems to be a readjustment towards a multidisciplinary and communicative approach (Kurtz, 2021). The "professionalization of everyone" Wilensky (1964) had disputed, started to encroach onto the hitherto exclusive traditional professional world of Anglo-American medicine and law.

Professionalism in the Arab World

As professions were conceived in the specific Anglo-American settings with comparatively hands-off states, they were largely in charge of their own affairs. This is strikingly different in more state-centered nations. In Europe, for instance, the state has traditionally been greatly involved in setting the standards for the education system through sanctioning qualifications, entrance into the

professions, and as a major employer for members of the professions. Here, the state has even played an enabling role in initializing the professionalization process (Conze & Kocke, 1985; Dingwall & Lewis, 1983; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2012; Siegrist, 1990). Siegrist (1988b) claimed that the theory's focus needs to be revisited in order to run the gamut beyond the Anglo-American birthplace and re-address its relative ignorance towards the state and legislator. In this line of thought, there have been words of warning to just leave the theory of the professions where it originates, in the Anglo-American world of medicine and law (Freidson, 1986; Johnson, 1972; Moore, 1976; Starck & Sudhaker, 1979). In fact, it only hesitantly globalized. Until well into the twenty-first century, it was focused on countries in the Global North (Burrage, Jarausch, & Siegrist, 1990) before the appreciation of diversity of disciplines, occupations, cultures and countries widened the perspectives (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2012).

Has professionalism set foot in the Arab world where the strong state has been a reality across the board of the twenty-two member states of the League of Arab States (Luciani, 2016)? In most Arab countries, the "dirigiste state […] permeate[s] and influence[s] many social, economic and judiciary institutions and [… the] media" (Khalil, 2015, p. 21), leading to media governance determined by close cooperation and a "symbiotic relationship [between governments, political elites and moguls …] accommodating mutual priorities" (Khalil, 2015, p. 28).

Few scholars have published work on Arab associations (Badr, 2020; El Sayid, 1998; Reid, 1974) or related organizations as in the guilds (Baer, 1970; Krause, 1996). Despite a limited number of scholarly works on professionalism in the Arab world, a few analogies can be drawn to the theory of the professions. In regard to associations, Baer (1970) unfolds their origins in the Turkish guild system which started to develop in the fifteenth century; by the seventeenth century, it had become "so copious [...] that all walks of life were encompassed […], much more so than in

any western country" (p. 29). Besides the profession of medicine and connected lines of work (physicians, oculists, surgeons, pharmacists), the system included the Islamic ulema, students of the madrassas (Baer (1970) relate them to Islamic institutions) and entertainers of all kinds (Baer, 1970, pp. 30–31). One of its principal objectives was to serve as an administrative connection from the government to the town population, mainly to supervise and control. While Baer (1970) explored guilds in the center of the Ottoman Empire and the Arab provinces over three centuries, Reid (1974) looked at the origins of the syndical movement in Egypt, starting in the 1900s. A direct link between the two institutions has not been traced, as most guilds in Egypt expired before associations arose. However, the "new professional associations eventually tried to fill the vacuum left by the decline of traditional guilds" (Reid, 1974, p. 37). Krause (1996) talked about professionalism in Egypt, reflecting on medicine, law and engineering. Professionalism, in his description of the term, focuses on knowledge (special intellectual skills; a body of knowledge, a theory; learning at academic institutions) and monopoly (complete control over the association; the workplace; the services and the market for the services; the relation to the state). While the power of the professional group is limited per se (by the military or sectors of capitalism), it is particularly limited when the state is powerful: In this case, the state and not the profession sets the rules and controls their implementation.

Besides this insightful beginning little is known in the Arab world about the professions. Some basic sociological writings exist, like those of the fourteenth century North African thinker `Abd al-Rah·ma¯n Ibn Khaldu¯n (transliterated into Ibn Khaldun), who, according to Alatas (2006), is relevant for contemporary sociology, especially regarding transitional societies. The "crafts, ways of making a living, occupations" (Alatas, 2006, p. 400) were one of five areas Ibn Khaldun focused on, while his main object of study was the history of the Arabs and Berbers of

North Africa. Alatas (2006) presents Ibn Khaldun as "the founder of sociology […] recognized by some prominent sociologists since the nineteenth century", while acknowledging that "[s]uch recognition is neither reflected in the contemporary teaching of sociology in universities and colleges throughout the world, nor in the writing of the history of sociology" (p. 407). Ibn Khaldun remained at the margins of the modern social sciences and is "not a sociologist in his own right" (Alatas, 2006, p. 397). In the context of this study, it has to be concluded with Alatas that a lot of research on this - and other - Arab sociologists remains to be undertaken before their work can be included in contemporary texts on the professions. This investigation needs to be guided by de-Westernizing approaches (Golding, 1987; Jayyusi, 2007; Musa & Domatob, 2007; Salvatore, 2011). In this regard, works on media accountability have conceptualized aspects of professionalism (e.g., Ibahrine & Zaid, 2022; Madanat & Pies, 2022; Pies, Madanat, & Elsaeßer, 2011). Arab scholars have begun to explain core issues by referencing the theory of the professions directly (El-Nawawy, 1995; Elmasry, Basiony, & Elkamel, 2014; Mesbah & Almujaibel, 2020; Tahat, Tahat, & Alhammad, 2020) or indirectly (Rampal, 1996, 2009; Tweissi, 2015) which may indicate that the theory and its core terms have wended into theorizing about professionalism in the Arab World. This is a major breakthrough, laying the ground for future research on Arab professionalism in the media, education and journalism education.

The ethics of Arab journalism have been investigated from a myriad of perspectives, including the Islamic worldview (Hamada, 2016), formal ethics as in ethical codes (Hafez, 2003a), development journalism (Musa & Domatob, 2007), globalization (Rao & Lee, 2005), and journalism education (Pies, 2008). Only a few studies relate to the theory of the professions, and some discuss the ethics under the premise of media accountability. Sakr (2003) concludes her analysis of accountability and freedom of expression in the Arab region with a strong call for

legislative reforms. She demonstrates that citizens in most Arab states "lack functioning institutional mechanisms for holding their governments to account" (Sakr, 2003, p. 31) and advocates for accountability to be placed on the agenda for public debates. In a region with restrictive laws and unequal power relations, the media are restrained "from pursuing these issues" (Sakr, 2003, p. 35). Hafez (2003a) explicitly looks beyond "the violation of freedom [... as] plain reality" in order to shed light on journalists as "subjects able to [...] at least partly determine their own professional fate" (p. 39). In his comparative studies of ethics codes, Hafez (2003b) concludes that journalistic professional traits such as truth, accuracy, and objectivity "are almost consensual cornerstones of journalism ethics" (p. 42) across the world. The bottom line is that there is a disparity between aspirations and realities (Badr, 2020; Pintak & Ginges, 2012; Hafez, 2003a; Ramaprasad & Hamdy, 2006).

In the context of knowledge as a core professional trait, the Arab World has made considerable strides in advancing the modern knowledge society (UNDP, 2003; UNDP & Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation, 2022). The university, the central institution of a knowledge society, has developed substantially in quantitative terms across the region. The Arab World has proliferated the educational system, from a two-digit number of universities across the region in the 1930s to a four-digit number in the 2020s (Herrera, 2006). But quality education and innovative research lagged behind, mainly because the university was often carved as a political institution and figured as a flagship of national pride in states that lacked all sorts of freedoms, including academic freedom (Allam & Amin, 2017; Josephi, 2010; Said, 1994; Taha-Thomure, 2003). If Arab universities are represented among the top universities globally, the humanities and social sciences are mostly absent. Improvement of quality in education and reform of university programs are prime reform targets, aiming at creating an intellectually empowering

environment. Lacking fundamental freedoms, the Arab Knowledge Society is still nascent (Badran, Baydoun, & Hillmann, 2019).

Journalism's autonomy (as an institution) as well as journalists' autonomy (as individuals) are generally restricted at the political, economic and organization levels (Sjovaag, 2015), and, additionally, subjected to procedural influences and personal network (e.g., peers, family and friends) influences (Hanitzsch et al., 2019b). Several authors have exposed how Arab journalists expand on their autonomy as individuals under otherwise restricted conditions and how they can succeed in circumventing some boundaries skillfully and creatively (Harb, 2019; Mellor, 2009; Pintak & Ginges, 2012; Selvik & Høigilt, 2021). Harb's (2019) interviews in Egypt and Lebanon indicate that journalists clearly distinguish between the two spheres of autonomy for journalism as an institution and journalists as individuals: "We don't have independent media, but independent journalists" (p. 111). Mellor (2009) reveals strategies whereby journalists secured roles as experts, eyewitnesses and even as social reformers to "debate and seek solutions" (p. 319) in regard to political and social developments. As her analysis predates the Arab Uprisings, it shows how "even in such bleak circumstances, Arab journalists have managed to negotiate their autonomy, albeit partially, from the political regimes" (Mellor, 2009, p. 318). Harb (2019) suggests to confront the "threats to their safety and economic hardship" (p. 112) by bonding together, which, in the logic of the theory of the professions, would best be achieved in a professional association - contingent that they are free which is not the case in the Arab countries where "[w]eak or absent professional syndicates, divisions among journalists, and fragile working conditions all hindered the media community's ability to launch a debate on professional standards and to protect advances towards political openness against the many pressures facing them" (El-Issawi, 2016, p. 65).

Journalism and professionalism: From Western concept to global perspectives

Journalism and its positioning in professionalism has been debated since the early works of the sociology of the professions (e.g., Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964) but journalism remained largely neglected as a reference profession in sociological analyses. Meanwhile, professionalism has grown as a meaningful notion in journalism scholarship, whereby the backdrop has often been a Western system of journalistic professionalism (e.g., Anderson & Schudson, 2019; Beam, 1990; Janowitz, 1975; Siegrist, 1988a; Tumber, 2008; Zelizer, 1993) and much of the early empirical work was not designed for global outreach (e.g., Beam, Weaver, & Brownlee, 2009; Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1976; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). If surveys were devised for cross-national comparison, they mostly focused on similar journalistic cultures (e.g., Donsbach & Patterson, 2001; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; McLeod & Rush, 1969b; McLeod & Rush, 1969a). Only the earlier studies explicitly discussed journalistic professionalism as theorized in the theory of the professions (McLeod & Hawley, 1964; Splichal & Sparks, 1994) which did, however, not cover Arab countries. Comparative studies have become increasingly inclusive and nowadays regularly reflect the MENA region with a diverse set of countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Tunisia, the UAE (Eberwein, Fengler, Lauk, & Leppik-Bork, 2011; Eberwein & Schneider-Mombaur, 2013; Hanitzsch, et al., 2019; Ibahrine & Zaid, 2022; Josephi, 2010; Kirat, 1998, 2012; Madanat & Pies, 2022; Pies et al., 2011; Pies, 2014; Radu & Popa, 2014; Wollenberg, 2022).

Five Arab countries - Egypt, Oman, Qatar, Sudan, UAE - were represented in the Worlds of Journalism (WJS) study (Worlds of Journalism, 2006-2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2019) that also analyzed demographic and employment patterns (Josephi et al., 2019, pp. 73-89, esp. Tables 4.1-

4.3). Overall, the trend for journalists to acquire their education at university has been corroborated, with over eighty percent of journalists represented in the WJS holding a university degree. Data from the Arab countries are in the upper ranks (e.g., ninety-seven percent of the respondents from Egypt declared to have a university degree, and seventy-three percent from Qatar). While around sixty-two percent of the WJS respondents had studied journalism or communication at university, the respective data for three Arab countries are above this average with seventy-two percent in Egypt, seventy-three percent in Qatar und seventy-four percent in the UAE. This development towards institutionalized journalism education incidentally introduced and formalized certification, which journalism, in principle, objects to (Shemberger, 2019). Membership in professional associations is globally declining, with under fifty percent of the respondents to the WJS reporting that they belong to one, whereby Arab journalists indicate for instance around fifty-four percent membership in Egypt. In line with the WJS average, journalists in the Arab countries reported work experiences of around twelve years, mostly working full-time (e.g., around 63% in Qatar and 84% in Egypt), but often with a second job outside journalism supplementing their income (e.g., in Egypt and Qatar around thirty percent). Journalists in the Arab world are on average in their thirties and mostly male. Influences on journalism are among the highest globally, in all categories (political, economic, organizational), and the editorial autonomy is among the lowest (Worlds of Journalism Study, 2006-2019).

The elements of journalistic professionalism explored in these comparative studies are manifold, yet they converge in three main traits - autonomy, ethics and education which have also drawn in numerous theoretical analyses, e.g. by Birkhead (1986), Boyd-Barrett (1974), Deuze (2005), Donsbach (2010), Nolan (2008), Singer (2015), Soloski (1989), Waisbord (2013), Wiik (2009). The bonding of professionals in association has been a less dominant research focus.

Journalism education

In the early days of theorizing, sociologists Carr-Saunders & Wilson (1964) wrote that "specialized intellectual training is [not] an indispensable preliminary" for journalism (p. 266), a view that was endorsed even by journalism scholars well into the late twenty-first century (e.g., Anderson & Schudson, 2019; Boyd-Barrett, 1974; Deuze, 2005; Katz, 1989; Schudson & Anderson, 2009). The claim that "most journalists are not experts at all but are simply question-asking generalists" (Anderson & Schudson, 2019, p. 145) did not remain uncontested neither by journalism scholars (deBurgh, 2005; Glasser, 1992) nor sociologists (McNair, 1998). Glasser (1992) drew attention to journalism's "growing body of systematic and formal knowledge" with a "proliferation of journals and books devoted to research on and about journalism" (p. 139). McNair (1998) portrayed media studies as a "hybrid" field that "is to present-day social science what sociology was in the 1960s and 1970s: on the intellectual cutting edge; radical and challenging; essential to an understanding of how modern societies work." (vii). DeBurgh (2003) viewed journalism studies as "a serious academic discipline" (p. 95) on the same footing with - or superseding - studies for traditional professions.

In their survey among 1,822 first-year journalism students in twenty-two countries, Splichal and Sparks (1994) reported that 64% of students considered general knowledge by far the most important quality of journalists, while 33% rated "wide experience" among the top five qualities they expected in journalists. In the twenty-first century, journalism has been sustainably established as an academic discipline that comprises a systematic body of knowledge and unique skills, both researched and taught at universities (Deuze, 2006; Goodman & Steyn, 2017; Josephi, 2019). Research broadly agreed that journalism curricula should best comprise research, academic (non-vocational) education, and training of (superior) technical skills with ethics as a cross-cutting

theme (deBurgh, 2003, 2005), as UNESCO's model curriculum for journalism education has outlined (UNESCO, 2007).

Journalism education at university has also been increasing worldwide as Splichal and Sparks (1994) have established. This applies to countries where academic journalism education was pioneered as in France or the USA, where journalism education has a long tradition like in Germany, and where it was subsequently established (Barrera & Harnischmacher, 2020; Nowak, 2019) including in Africa (Berger, 2007), Latin America (Ferreira, Tillson, & Salwen, 2000), Asia (Banerjee, 2008) and the Arab world (Lengauer, 2019; Sakr, 2005). It has turned into a most sought-after study field in many countries (Berger & Foote, 2017; Franklin, 2009; Rivers, 1971; Vasilendiuc & Sutu, 2021), which holds also true for Egypt (Allam & Amin, 2017), Lebanon (Melki, 2009), Morocco (Rampal, 2009), Qatar (Galander, 2015). Scholars identify dilemmas such as the academic-practice divide and political interference in academic governance and curricula development (e.g., Allam & Amin, 2017; el-Nawawy, 2007; Rampal, 2009). Kirat (2016) shared a strong petitum for increasing the education of indigenous (Arab) journalists and advancing the continuing journalism education[10]. Radu and Popa (2014) made a convincing case for journalism education as setting standards for media accountability globally, particularly regarding ethics courses as part of university curricula. Equipped with their new knowledge, journalists have turned into "knowledge workers" (Nolin, 2008, p. 33) in the Knowledge Society. For some scholars, journalists are part of the modern intelligentsia and professional class (Freidson, 1994). Donsbach (2010) laid claim to journalism as the "new knowledge profession" (p. 44). Hanitzsch et al. (2019a), in their global empirical study on the influences that journalists perceive on their

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[10] Most journalists in Qatar are expatriates. Kirat (2016) recalled over ninety percent, mostly from Arab countries including Egypt (around forty percent) but also from Sudan, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

work, also focused on two values that are crucial to professionalism and media accountability, first and foremost the journalistic autonomy and ethics.

Journalistic autonomy

Defining autonomy as the control journalists have over their work, the WJS (Hamada et al., 2019) reveals that journalists across the world perceive relatively high levels of editorial autonomy, acknowledging that journalists from more authoritarian countries are more likely to report lower levels of editorial autonomy than those from politically liberal countries.

Journalists from Arab countries that partook in the WJS (Egypt, Oman, Qatar, Sudan, UAE) perceived influences on the news to be strong in all domains investigated by the WJS (political, economic, organizational, procedural, personal networks (Hanitzsch et al., 2019b, pp. 103-132, esp. Table 5.2).The editorial autonomy journalists perceived - as in the freedom in selecting stories and emphasizing story aspects -, also varied considerably among countries along the lines of democratic freedoms and human development. Journalists generally seem to have less control over the content they produce in politically more restrictive societies (Hamada et al., 2019, pp. 133-159, esp. Table 6.2, pp. 144-146). Accordingly, Weaver & Willnat (2012) have presented wide disagreements among journalists concerning the very important aspects of the work: While over seventy-five percent of the respondents in Australia, Belgium, Canada, and Finland perceived substantial freedom on the job, only twenty-three percent of the respondents in the UAE expressed to feel "very satisfied" with their job autonomy (Weaver & Willnat, 2012, pp. 532-534, esp. Table 38.2, p. 533). This is far cry from Splichal's and Sparks' (1994) major finding, who reported "a striking similarity in the desire of journalism students for the independence and autonomy of journalism" (p. 179).

Journalistic ethics

Because journalists have power, they "fall under the general ethical principles such as to tell the truth and minimize harm" (Ward, 2019, p. 307). What does that mean for the Arab world? In his cross-national comparison of ethics codes which included codes from Arab countries such as Egypt and Morocco, Hafez (2003a) highlighted that value propositions like truth, accuracy and objectivity are "almost consensual cornerstones of journalism ethics as documented in professional codes" (p. 42). He deduced from the study that references to the Islamic tradition and values are common in the Islamic world. This does not mean, however, that journalistic roles in Muslim-majority countries are necessarily "shaped by a distinctively Islamic worldview" as a comparative study of journalistic roles has found (Muchtar et al., 2017). This latter study, which also included Arab countries (Egypt, Qatar, Sudan, UAE), showed that journalists' roles in these countries are more influenced by the political, economic and socio-cultural context while "the rather all-encompassing nature of Islamic principles […] might well complicate such a conclusion" (Muchtar et al., 2017, p. 570). The most recent cross-national study - the WJS - that collected data related to the issue, demonstrated "subjectivism" to be the dominant orientation of Arab journalists in Oman, Egypt, Qatar and Sudan compared to the majority of respondents who "absolutely"[11] believed that journalists should always follow "the codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context" (Ramaprasad et al., 2019, p. 205).

Several studies measured specific news-gathering practices and whether they were perceived as ethical. "Using government or business documents without permission" is a practice that directly challenges authority and was mostly disapproved of by respondents from Arab countries. The approval rate ("always or on occasion justified") varied from 7% in Qatar to almost

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[11] The WJS measures ethical orientations by four statements: absolutism, situationism, subjectivism and exceptionism (Ramaprasad et al., 2019, p. 204).

60% in Oman as per the WJS data (Ramaprasad et al., 2019, pp. 215-221, esp. Table 8.4) and 7% for the UAE in the Weaver and Willnat survey (2012, pp. 540–541, Table 38.5). Regarding the practice of protecting confidential sources, Willnat and Weaver (2012) reported "near-universal" consent, with around 12% of journalists from the UAE indicating that revealing confidential sources may be justified in special cases (pp. 540–541). In Qatar, over 75% of journalists in a study based on Weaver's methodology objected strongly to using "questionable methods"[1] in their research, and a majority of the respondents indicated having learned professional ethics in their daily practice, from peers, families, and in their religious upbringing (Kirat, 2016). Codes of ethics exist in most Arab countries (Fengler, 2022; Pies & Badr, 2022).

Arab journalistic professionalism in the light of global journalism studies

While it is safe to say that Arab journalism and journalism education have firmly settled into global studies, a global study on journalism students' professionalization (Mellado et al., 2013; Mellado & Hanusch, n.d.) is expected to contribute valuable new in-depth data. To date, journalism scholars have also turned to the research of Arab journalism and Arab media accountability through the lens of the sociology of the professions. Recent investigations covered a broader spectrum of agendas including journalistic ethics and autonomy (Hamada, 2020), social media platforms (Mesbah & Almujaibel, 2020), journalism education (Tahat et al., 2020), and changes in journalistic professionalism in the light of the Arab Spring (Elmasry et al., 2014). Relating to traits in Arab journalism, Hafez (2003b) has edited a collection of works on a variety of issues under the premise of self-regulation (or the lack thereof), including regional analyses (Nafie, 2003; Vogt, 2003) and case studies on Morocco (Boutarkha, 2003) and Algeria (Abdellah, 2003).

Drawing on the theory of the professions - particularly on Wilensky's (1964) "typical sequence of events" (p. 142) - Reid (1974) condensed four "indexes of professionalization" in his

country study Egypt: Step one is the establishment of university-level training, followed by the rise of specialized journals, the growth of practitioners and the founding of a syndicate. The latter being his research focus, Reid reviews the development of associations in law, medicine, engineering, teaching, and journalism. Journalism was emerging slowly as a profession, with education only just developing as a factor to advance journalistic professionalism. In this study, the associations turn out to be the one trait largely characterizing the professionalization in Egypt of the early twentieth century, under conditions of massive political interferences. The associations dug in to the system deeply and firmly over decades, with a clientele of exclusively traditional journalists. Non-traditional journalists have, however, started to encroach on the jurisdiction, as Badr (2020) shows with her research on the Egyptian syndicate (association) and the claims made by digital and freelance journalists. With the association as a starting point, she approaches the notion of redefining journalism as a profession, unfolding power imbalances, suggesting to reshape boundaries.

As demonstrated, the boundaries of journalism in the Arab World are highly politicized. A recent study on journalistic autonomy by Meyen (2018) developed a new analytical typology. Egypt, Iraq, and Kuwait were subsumed into two categories, both under direct state influence: clientelism in Iraq and patriotism in Egypt and Kuwait (Meyen, 2018, p. 13). The study also shows that ideology defines the media and "strongly restricts journalists' autonomy" (p. 19). States often have toolkits that restrict media freedom and journalists' autonomy (e.g., as a media owner or advertiser, in defining reporting taboos such as religion, sex, the military, censuring any criticism of the head of state and affiliated individuals and institutions, or being vague about any red lines, or, as per Khalil (2015), in a "symbiotic relationship [… with media] moguls […] accommodating mutual priorities" (p. 28). What is left of journalists' autonomy under these conditions is further

limited by inadequate working conditions (including poor pay) and is at risk due to the shortfall of public support for journalists' autonomy. Acknowledging that Hafez (2003a) focused on the journalist as a subject and not so much as an object of a system that lacks freedoms, it is also true that journalists in the Arab world often operate under debilitating conditions in terms of media freedom (Allsop, 2021), while freedom is conditional for the pursuit of professionalism, media accountability, and press freedom. Al-Najjar (2020) suggests that these concepts are also linked to "notions of responsibility and control and are repeatedly anticipated and practiced as a restraint to press freedom" (p. 8).

Method and sample

In order to address the research question as per the heuristic value of the theory of the professions to explain media accountability in the Arab world, the study follows a qualitative research design. A structured questionnaire was used that is based on the theoretical findings derived from the theory of the professions and journalistic professionalism.

As generalizability and representativeness were not the aim of this study, the non-probability sampling method was chosen for the qualitative research. As Brennen (2022) has noted, "qualitative research is interdisciplinary, interpretive, political and theoretical in nature" (p. 4), while the goal of qualitative research "is simply to render plausible the terms by which groups explain themselves to the world" (Pauly, 1991, p. 7). The non-probability sampling method was used to isolate particular professional traits in the specific Arab context, which, according to theory, exist in the sphere of professionalism, journalism, journalism education and media accountability. A structured questionnaire, derived from the theory, comprised twenty-two standardized questions in four chapters (I. Journalism in the Arab context; II. Journalism studies; III. Academic journalism education; IV. Professionalism in Arab (academic) journalism

education). Qualitative interviews permit the respondents to freely elaborate on selected topics in the attempt to aggregate along categories (Riesmeyer, 2011). This is particularly relevant as research on the professions and journalistic professionalism in the Arab World is just being developed. Face-to-face interviews were chosen as the adequate mode of data collection, partly because the interview questions required the respondents' "deep thinking" (Ha et al., 2015, p. 42) and therefore the presence of the interviewer (researcher).

Four Arab countries were selected as case studies (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Qatar) to reflect the Arab World's diversity: They comprise three distinct Arab regions (the Maghreb, the Middle East, and the Gulf). They stand for different political systems (monarchies, republics) and different experiences with popular uprisings (Egypt and Morocco experienced Arab uprisings, Qatar did not, and protests for reform in Lebanon are ongoing (Masoud, 2021); in human development, the four countries span from "very high" (Qatar), "high" (Egypt, Lebanon), and "medium" (Morocco); (UNDP, 2020, 344-345). Press freedom indices show these countries in between a "problematic situation" (Lebanon, rank 107), a "difficult situation" (Morocco, rank 136; Qatar, rank 128) and a "serious situation" (Egypt, rank 166; Reporters Without Borders, 2021b). As for academic journalism education, Egypt and Lebanon have a comparatively rich tradition, while Qatar has been investing in this area recently (Lengauer, 2019).

Since the definition of professions is not determined solely by any single group - particularly not by members of an occupation themselves, but also not by those of the other occupations that deal with the occupation under review, nor by their clients nor by sociologists or by the state (Freidson, 1986), a variety of respondents was chosen from nine types of populations: (1) Faculty in mass communication, media studies or journalism programmes (mostly academic and in special cases non-academic); (2) Students of mass communication, media studies or

journalism (mostly academic and in special cases trainees); (3) Media practitioners; (4) Social media producers; (5) Representatives of journalism associations; (6) Media politicians; (7) Representatives of the audience; (8) Donors of journalism or media programs; (9) Others (e.g., media freedom activists; gender scholars).

The sampling methods began with a convenience sample of stakeholders known to the researcher in person or institutionally following which snowballing was applied. Snowballing was selected as the adequate non-probability sampling strategy, given that, firstly, no "hidden populations" (Berndt, 2020, p. 226) were part of the research design that would require specific strategies, and secondly, the range of stakeholders in the world of media and journalism education in the selected Arab countries is limited, permitting effective selection of initial interviewees (Berndt, 2020). All ninety-two interview requests were responded to affirmatively and only one appointment was canceled, leading to a total of ninety-one interviews conducted in the four Arab countries. The techniques to boost participation included two letters of endorsement (European scholar in journalism studies; Arab media leader) and the researcher's acquaintance with the Arab media and journalism education sectors, conducting the interviews in the respondents' preferred environment. The response rate of ninety-nine percent is high (Ha et al., 2015).

Interviewees were offered the choice to respond anonymously or identify themselves with their names. A limited number of respondents preferred to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions. It was therefore decided to keep all respondents anonymous and distinguish the individual through a country code - indicating the country where the respondent was working and where he or she was being interviewed; mostly, but not always, this country coincided with the interviewee's nationality - and a number based on the chronology of the conducted interviews (e.g., EGY1 for Egypt, first interviewee). Data were analyzed using the MAXQDA software

(Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). The interviews were conducted face-to-face in English, French or in English with translation Arabic/English, transcribed verbatim. Data for this study were collected in the context of a PhD project at the Institute of Journalism at TU Dortmund University between 2013 and 2015, and were first published or presented elsewhere (Lengauer, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019). They are being reprocessed and analyzed in the wider research context of this study. Since data collection, the political and socio-economic conditions in the Arab World have changed, and autocracy has had a strong comeback, furthered by the Covid-19 pandemic (Khamis, 2020; Reporters Without Borders, 2021a; Storm, 2020)[12].

Findings

The paper attempts to explore whether the theory of the professions has the heuristic value - across cultures - to explain media accountability in MENA in selected values that the sociology of the professions theorizes as traits. Following the theoretical discussion, the question remains if Arab individuals who work in communication as researchers, educators, practitioners, bureaucrats, donors or who are social media producers or members of the audience in selected countries can relate to the notion, and how they delineate it.

Despite decades of theorizing, the core term of the theory - profession - remains intentionally undefined (Ben-David, 1964; Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964; Cogan, 1955; Evetts, 2003b). This paper will not attempt to approach the matter from an Arab angle but it has collected indication that allows to assemble some "referents, that is, attributes, traits, or defining characteristics, by which the phenomenon may be discriminated in the empirical world" (Freidson,

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[12] The ranks on the EIU democracy index changed for Egypt from rank 134 of 167 countries (134/167) in 2015 to rank 138/167 in 2021; for Lebanon from 102 to 108/167; for Morocco from 107 to 96/167; for Qatar from 134 to 126/167, e.g., the democratic performance of Egypt and Lebanon decreased and it improved for Morocco and Qatar (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). The press freedom rankings changed between 2013 and 2021 for Egypt from rank 158 of 179 countries (158/179) to rank 166/179, for Lebanon from 101/179 to 107/179, it remained unchanged for Morocco and it deteriorated for Qatar from 110/179 in 2013 to 128/179 in 2021 (Reporters Without Borders, 2016; Reporters Without Borders, 2021b).

1986, p. 31). To this end, responses to the question "What does professionalism denote to you?" elicited a set of traits attributed to professionalism in general which are largely but not entirely reminiscent of the discussion of various traits in the sociological theory.

Regarding professions as "work" (Freidson, 1986), respondents also believe that professionalism relates to regular work and is far removed from amateur activities (e.g., EGY8, LEB9, MOR1). Given that comparative studies have revealed that journalists mostly work full-time but frequently need to supplement their income with a second job outside journalism (Josephi et al., 2019), it is noteworthy that respondents to this study do not expect to make a fortune from their work (e.g., LEB7, LEB25, MOR7), which aligns with the altruistic approach outlined in sociological theory (Freidson, 1986; Marshall, 1939). Respondents underscore their service to the public (e.g., EGY8, LEB6, MOR10, QAT13) in line with the prime value that the theory ascribes to the service benefiting an individual or society at large (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hughes, 1964; Macdonald, 1995). Several respondents expressed appreciation for journalistic service delivery (e.g., EGY8, LEB 16, MOR10, QAT7).

Autonomy from political and economic powers as well as from organizational and procedural influences that allows journalists to have control over their work (e.g., EGY11, LEB15, MOR10, QAT13) is often seen as crucial but as an ideal that does not stand its ground in daily life (e.g., EGY16, LEB20, MOR4, QAT17). While the theory is very transparent about autonomy as an essential professional trait (e.g., Barber, 1963; Beckmann, 1990; Elliott, 1972; Moore, 1976; Rueschemeyer, 1983), comparative studies have uncovered a rather different reality in Arab countries. Journalists in politically more restrictive societies, like Arab countries, seem to have less editorial autonomy than those in liberal countries and perceive generally strong influences on their work (Hanitzsch et al., 2019b) and are therefore among the least satisfied with their work

(Weaver & Willnat, 2012). Reflecting the region's low freedom rankings, some respondents' assessment of the lack of freedom is also stern (e.g., EGY16, MOR17, QAT18). There is some certainty that executing autonomy in journalism "may cost the job" (EGY4).

Nonetheless, some respondents advocate for teaching the notion of autonomy in journalism. As the "reality is not being independent, the university needs to focus on being independent", according to one educator (LEB10). Another educator highlights that "it is very important to understand what autonomy means, and it is very important to know the borders you are not supposed to cross" (MOR7). A student summarizes these pledges in the formula that "you have to learn about autonomy. But when you start working - you have to forget it" (MOR4). Journalistic autonomy is considered to be part of the ethics curricula (e.g., EGY9, QAT1). Regarding its ethics, the profession is committed to its values which have been established in the theory of the professions (e.g., Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964; Durkheim, 1957) and substantiated in the literature on Arab journalism (Hafez, 2003a). Respondents to this study hold ethics in high esteem and explain its prime value citing other morals like truth, honesty, responsibility (e.g., EGY5, LEB22, MOR15, QAT12) or even apply the ethics as a synonym for professionalism altogether (e.g., EGY9, LEB24). Ethics as a trait of professionalism is being raised by the respondents to this study recurrently, addressing a formal code of ethics (e.g., EGY15) or aspects of what the theory of the professions (Gustafson, 1982) deems a "calling" (e.g. EGY11, LEB7, MOR7, QAT5). What Freidson (1971) has challenged as "cosmetics" for the theory of the professions has been described by several respondents to this study as political limitations to freedom, a lack of transparency, rule of law, quality issues in education and an abundance of corruption (e.g., EGY2, LEB11, MOR19, QAT17), an assessment that is substantiated in literature and comparative studies across the board.

Professionalism is being "generated, conveyed and transmitted" (Brint, 2006, p. 110) at universities, the intellectual environment where future professionals develop in prolonged education that comprises knowledge and know-how (e.g., EGY1, LEB21, MOR1, QAT1). This also describes the Knowledge Society (Bell, 1973), that has become an ambitious policy target in several Arab countries. Knowledge is often seen as a vital foundation of professionalism by the respondents, and as comprehensive as in "knowing and knowing how to implement ethical and academic standards" and in its multidisciplinarity (QAT1). Accordingly, and following the data of the WJS (Josephi et al., 2019), the vast majority of journalists in Egypt (ninety-six percent) and Qatar (seventy-three percent) have acquired their education at university which corroborates the trends described by Splichal and Sparks (1994) and Josephi (2010), among others. Likewise, respondents to this study generally pointed to the university with its knowledge-based teaching (e.g., EGY7, LEB1, MOR11, QAT1), contingent that the curriculum also offers the space to hone practical skills, for instance internships and teaching newsrooms (e.g., EGY22, LEB5, MOR6, QAT5). This must be seen in light of a necessary push for quality education and for balancing the curricula that often heavily lean towards theory (el-Nawawy, 2007). Respondents' reasons to champion university education for journalists centered first and foremost on the accumulation of interdisciplinary knowledge, academic research skills and practical know-how (e.g., EGY7, QAT1). But certification was also prized as a proof of educational attainment (e.g., LEB15), as a door opener into the profession (e.g., QAT5), as a demonstration that "you are taking your profession not just as a hobby" (EGY6), that you can "be more trusted in the media" (QAT11), as a social value (e.g., EGY3), and to boost the salary (e.g., MOR7). This appreciation of certification is in line with the theory of the professions but in stark contrast to journalism's claim of autonomy (Shemberger, 2019).

Overall, the theory of the professions assumes a state that is hands-off in appreciation of the professions' self-regulation. The opposite is true in the Arab world with its strong states, as the literature has exposed. The "regulative bargain" (Macdonald, 1995) between the state and the autonomous professions does not materialize here. This not only explains the gulf between the ideal considerations of autonomy, ethics and education and the reality in the Arab world. This could also explain why some respondents to this study explicitly introduce "economic and legal security" (MOR2) as a professional trait - contrary to Western theorizing of professionalism that deem factors like salary and job security non-professional items (McLeod & Hawley, 1964; Weaver & Willnat, 2012).

The contribution of associations was not volunteered as a feature of professionalism by the respondents. Yet, in theory it is one of the essential components of a profession (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964; Parsons, 1971; Wilensky, 1964) - under the condition of freedom and the "regulative bargain" (Macdonald, 1995) between the profession and the state. Associations have been relatively well researched in the Arab world (Badr, 2020; Baer, 1970; Hafez, 2003b; Krause, 1996; Reid, 1974) and turn out as a factor stabilizing the old order. Associations, as Badr (2020) has shown for Egypt, are rather a force dividing the group of practicing journalists, excluding non-traditional journalists like digital and freelance journalists from membership. Likewise, some respondents in this study feel that most vulnerable journalists are deprived of organized peer support (e.g., LEB22, LEB23). Others note that journalism students, too, having no right to membership in the association, miss out on professional benefits such as press cards (e.g., EGY5). If journalism associations exist at all in Arab countries (e.g., QAT1, QAT12, QAT25), respondents to this study may express support for the ideal association that self-regulates the profession, upholds journalists' rights, safeguards the profession's ethics, and provides services (e.g., EGY16,

LEB17, MOR21, QAT14). They are, however, disillusioned by the performance of journalism associations as entities dependent on the state or political parties (e.g., EGY7, LEB13, MOR13, QAT8) or do not "believe in governing a profession" (LEB5).

Reportedly, journalism curricula only rarely discuss the value of associations (e.g., EGY3). In Egypt, one respondent recalls, the press association ("syndicate") was revamped in the wake of the Arab Uprising. Before, it had been known as a government association and part of the state institutions in which state security played a major role. After the uprisings, "an independent, non-partisan, respectable journalist was elected in free elections" to lead the syndicate (EGY7). This opening was not sustained (Badr, 2020).

After identifying the factors that they ascribe to professions, respondents were asked to propose an Arabic term for "professionalism." Arabic language is based on three-letter-roots, and variations are manifold. Many respondents opted for terms that relate to two major concepts: The first set of terms was based on the three-letter-root m-h-n (م ه ن) which was mentioned fifty-eight times (by a total of ninety-one respondents). It was perceived as most pertinent to these respondents' comprehension of the notion of professionalism. The second set of terms was based on the three-letter-root h-r-f (ح ر ف) with twenty-nine mentions, which was said to relate to a variety of meanings including the crafts in general, but also to practical or technical skill sets and the excellence in performing them. Most respondents opted for variations of the three-letter-root m-h-n (م ه ن) in order to translate the generic category of work as mehna (مهنة), and the notion of professionalism as mehaniya (مهنية). Some respondents were clear in their view that *mehaniya* (مهنية) is the only Arabic word that resonates with professionalism (e.g., LEB1, MOR9) and that mehna (مهنة) denotes not a job but a profession (QAT25). Using journalism at regional Arab broadcasters as a backdrop, one respondent (MOR4) opted for the three-letter-root h-r-f (ح ر ف) to

explain that "you work with big channels - and you know what big channels and big newspapers ask for: They ask for experience, they ask for professionalism".

In general, respondents wish to draw a definitional line between manual work - based on the three-letter-root h-r-f (ح ر ف) on the one hand and knowledge work - based on the three-letter-root m-h-n (م ه ن) - on the other hand. Pondering about the ultimate use of the two three-letter words are common among the respondents. Some respondents use the terms interchangeably (e.g., MOR1), others proposed supportive concepts to the notion of professionalism, for instance ethics (e.g., LEB4) or quality (LEB26). Based on the expressions collected in this study, the working terms used hereunder shall be *mehna* (مهنة) for work, particularly knowledge work, and *mehaniya* (مهنية) for professionalism.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has aimed to explore whether the theory of the professions possesses heuristic value - specifically across cultures - and the openness to explain media accountability in MENA. As a concept that originated in and grew along with Western thoughts of freedoms and the conditions of a rather hands-off state in Anglo-American countries, the question was discussed whether professionalism resonates beyond these countries and cultures, particularly in the Arab World. Theoretically, it returned to the very beginnings of the theory of the professions that "dated back to "the ancients" in both cultures, in the West and the Arab World. For Adam Smith (1776), the professions partook in creating the "Wealth of Nations", for instance with their knowledge through the "long time and great expense […] laid out in their education" (Adam Smith, 1776, p. 478). As early as the fourteenth century, the Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun wrote about the "crafts, the ways of making a living, occupations" (Alatas, 2006, p. 400). However, the field remained largely unsurveyed until recently, when Arab scholars took the lead to de-Westernize the theory and claim

it for the Arab context (El-Nawawy, 1995; Elmasry et al., 2014; Hamada & Wok, 2020; Tahat et al., 2020).

Associations have been addressed through the theory of the professions, where they play a major role as independent self-regulatory bodies (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964); through comparative studies that demonstrate declining numbers of membership in journalistic associations (Josephi et al., 2019); through analyses of the associations in the Ottoman era and in contemporary Egypt (Badr, 2020; Baer, 1970; Krause, 1996; Reid, 1974). These discourses, along with the results of this study, suggest that the associations in Arab journalism do not reflect the features rolled-out by the theory of the profession, e.g., autonomy, self-regulation, inclusiveness. As much as journalism is of course opposed to licensing, certification (Shemberger, 2019) and other control mechanisms that require a "regulative bargain" with the state (Macdonald, 1995; Weaver & Willnat, 2012), Arab journalism associations are not inclusive, as has been shown, they do not represent the profession but a fraction of it, excluding for instance freelancers, journalism students and the growing group of social media producers. They are "state institutions" (Allam & Amin, 2017; El-Issawi, 2016; EGY7), affiliated to political parties (LEB13, MOR12) or do not exist at all (QAT25). If they exist, they do not exist as independent and self-regulating representations of journalism. Respondents to this study have been in favor of certification, which is also foreseen by the sociological theory as a role of the self-regulating association (Millerson, 1964). However, journalism rules certification out as "intrusive" (Shemberger, 2019). If, then, certification comes solely under the state - not the autonomous profession - and more so, if certification is in the hands of a strong state with the educational system as a politicizing agent and academia lacking academic freedom - then this feature may well be detrimental to the idea of professionalism (George, 2011; Kunczik, 1988; Kunczik & Zippel, 2001).

Literature and comparative studies frame autonomy as an indispensable trait of professions as per the sociological theory as well as per journalistic professionalism. These academic sources as well as institutional databases of freedom rankings (democracy, media) demonstrate and reiterate a lack of freedom in the four Arab countries studied for this paper. While this is largely uncontested, a parallel reality has also been documented, mainly drawing on the distinction between the autonomy of journalism as an institution and the autonomy of journalists as individuals (Hafez, 2003b; Moore, 1976; Sjovaag, 2015). Several authors have exposed how Arab journalists expand on their autonomy as individuals under otherwise restricted conditions and how they can succeed in circumventing some boundaries skillfully and creatively (Harb, 2019; Mellor, 2009; Pintak & Ginges, 2012; Selvik & Høigilt, 2021). This study has documented analogous views of respondents. Educators, students and practicing journalists concur that they will teach and study "what autonomy means" and "understand that it is very important to know the borders you are not supposed to cross" (MOR7).

Professionalism and journalism alike are committed to ethics, to telling the truth (Ward, 2019), and to undertaking an "honorable calling" (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964). Many respondents hold ethics in the highest esteem, including a student of mass communication at the Islamic Al-Azhar University in Cairo and a foreign educator at a liberal university. But ethics may embody different values for different people, as the literature and cross-national studies have shown. When measured by journalistic practice, differences surface. The techniques that corner authorities—e.g., "using government or business documents without permission"—are mostly rejected in Arab countries that participated in the WJS (Ramaprasad et al., 2019).

Knowledge and journalism education evolved as the most broadly appreciated professional trait in this study. Tertiary education is the "central institution" (Bell, 1973) of the Knowledge

Society which has become an ambitious policy goal across the region. Bell (1973) portrayed the Knowledge Society with the university as the "axial structure" (Bell, 1973, p. 26) "where theoretical knowledge is codified and enriched" (Bell, 1973, pp. 245–246), the scientific personnel as the "chief resource" (Bell, 1973, pp. 216, 221), the professional as the "central person" (Bell, 1973, p. 127) and information as the "central resource" (Bell, 1973, pp. 127–128). In this architecture, the journalist would be the knowledge worker (Donsbach, 2010; Nolin, 2008). To reach that goal, journalism will have to continue its academic path with research on the one hand and curricula composed of abstract and theoretical knowledge as well as technical skill delivery on the other hand.

This study examined whether the theory of the professions possesses heuristic value—specifically across cultures—to explain media accountability in MENA, particularly regarding associations, autonomy, ethics, education, and knowledge. It has shown that professionalism is a familiar concept in the Arab world, with established terms in the Arabic language and an understanding of its traits that largely coincides with the ones outlined by the sociology of the professions. Yet, the Arab peculiarities of the professional ideal evolved. As professionalism is rooted in the ideal of freedom and a hands-off state where autonomous professions self-regulate, the lack of freedoms in the Arab countries that were studied for this paper appears to be a major hindrance to professionalism as per the sociological theory. The lack of freedom affects all traits of autonomy, ethics, knowledge, and journalism education. Associations that, in theory, take responsibility for self-regulating the professions do not fulfill this role. It appears from the study that knowledge—abstract, theoretical knowledge and its specialized techniques—generated, conveyed, and transmitted in and through universities emerges as a prime trait of professionalism in the Arab world. The question remains, then, whether Arab journalism is turning into the new

knowledge profession and a pillar of the Knowledge Society or whether the concept of the theory of the professions shrinks to the idea of the knowledge-based category of occupations.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

This study focused on exploring whether the theory of the professions possesses heuristic value - specially across cultures - and the openness to explain media accountability in MENA. The study's limitations comprise a focus on the English language, suggesting broadening the inquiry into the Arabic language, which would be an important additional step towards de-Westernization. A closer inquiry into governance in MENA - especially media governance - would help to deepen the understanding of the strong state and how the alliance of the state and its cronies' impact professional journalism and education. The evidence in this study has been reprocessed from earlier data collection, suggesting replicating the research or parts of it in the attempt to compare results over timelines. For the practice of journalism education, this study lays the ground to develop an academic journalism curriculum based on the notion of the Arab Knowledge Society and journalism as the new knowledge profession.

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An assessment of the supportive and inhibitive factors of media accountability in Morocco

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Abstract

In the last few years, Morocco has introduced different media accountability instruments (MAIs), including the National Press Council, ombudspersons, and professional associations, to improve the quality of news content and protect the profession of journalism, among other objectives. This paper analyses the perception of MAIs, supportive/inhibitive factors, challenges, and prospects among significant practitioners in the Moroccan media sector. It explores whether more sophisticated MAIs should be in place to provide further protection to the public. The paper uses in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten prominent media practitioners in Morocco on their perception of MAIs. The findings suggest that the struggle in journalism focused on the fundamental issues of press freedom and censorship and largely ignored the questions of accountability, ethics, and self-regulation. The authors would recommend that more sophisticated MAIs are needed to provide further protection to the public.
Keywords: media accountability instruments, digital news industry, media practitioners, Morocco

Introduction

Until the end of the first decade of the new millennium, Morocco had undertaken a few initiatives

to promote media accountability, but the authoritarian culture forced media practitioners to focus

more on press freedom and less on media ethics and accountability (Zaid, El Kadoussi, & Ibahrine,

2020). However, since the so-called Arab Spring (2011), Morocco has introduced several

instruments of media accountability such as the National Press Council (NPC), ombudspersons,

and ethics committees of professional associations to improve the quality of information and

protect the profession of journalism. While these traditional instruments are of considerable value,

new media accountability instruments are emerging in the context of social media activism (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Newman, 2020). A considerable amount of research has examined media accountability; nevertheless, scholars have only recently started to explore how media accountability is becoming more dependent on digital platforms (Fengler et al., 2014; Eberwein, Fengler, & Karmasin, 2018; Fengler, 2019).

In this paper, we draw on interviews with prominent media professionals to provide a critical assessment of accountability, ethics, and self-regulation. A key concern is whether the existing media accountability instruments are sufficient to hold the media accountable. We first provide a brief description of the legal environment in Morocco to know how the state as an accountability actor holds the media accountable. We describe the Constitution, the Press and Publication Law, the Audiovisual Communication Law, the Anti-terrorism Law, and the broadcast regulator. Second, we introduce non-state media accountability instruments; namely, the press council, Ombudsperson, professional associations and unions, and NGOs. Finally, we explain the methods and we present and discuss the findings.

The legal environment

Article 25 of the 2011 Moroccan Constitution guarantees "freedoms of thought, opinion, and expression in all their forms." Article 28 in the Constitution states that "freedom of the press is guaranteed and may not be limited by any form of prior censorship" (Constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco, 2011). However, Article 19 introduces two constraining phrases: "with respect for the provisions of the constitution's permanent characteristics and laws of the kingdom", which stands in contradiction to international conventions on human rights with respect to media freedom (Constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco, 2011). One of the strongest provisions of the 2011

Constitution was when it made the judicial system a separate branch of government and thus central to respect for the rule of law and the protection of human rights. But an analytical look revealed that it is far from independent in Morocco, leaving the media without adequate protection of the law (Zaid, 2018).

The 2016 Press and Publication Law brought many positive adjustments, including the elimination of jail sentences for journalists and the establishment of a self-regulatory body - the National Press Council. The law also carries specific provisions to regulate digital media. The law was heralded as a positive step in the right direction despite the fact that the three taboo topics - monarchy, Moroccan Sahara, and Islam - are still preserved in the new law. Although jail sentences are replaced by steep fines, failure to pay the fines is still very likely to lead to jail term. The Audio-Visual Communication Law allows the state to control program contents and to limit private ownership by commercial media organizations. Article 9 states that TV channels and radio stations must not question the national consensus on Islam, the monarchy, and Moroccan Sahara - the three red lines that remain a standard to which all published discourse must be held. Yet, the law does not stipulate prison sentences for infractions. Article 21 requires that any broadcasting company or shareholder can own shares in another broadcasting company for 30% of its holdings. The objective from this requirement is to prevent any individual or group from controlling more than one media entity (Zaid, 2014; El Kadoussi, 2016, 2018).

On 21 May 2003, a week after the terrorist attacks of 16 May 2003 in Casablanca, the parliament passed an antiterrorism law. The law legitimizes the government's tight control of any media content that is deemed to 'disrupt public order by intimidation, force, violence, fear, or terror'. The law defines terrorism in broad terms and considers it as 'the involvement in organized groups or congregations with the intent of committing an act of terrorism,' and critically, 'the

promulgation and dissemination of propaganda or advertisement in support of the above-mentioned acts' (Zaid, 2017).

On 31 August 2002, the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA) was established to regulate the audio-visual communication sector. HACA's legal authority lies in its presumed independence. But the appointment process for the Higher Council and the criteria for the nomination of members for Audio-Visual Communication are flawed. HACA consists of the Higher Council of Audio-Visual Communication. It is a nine-member council, five of whom are appointed by the King - including the president. The prime minister appoints two members, and the remaining two are named by the respective presidents of the two chambers of the parliament. This is the highest authority within HACA and the organ that makes final decisions on licensing and every legal action. Given the appointment process, it is clear that HACA's highest decision-making apparatus remains in the hands of the state (Zaid, 2017; Ibahrine & Zaid, 2021).

Non-state media accountability instruments

Press Council/Media Council

The creation of the National Press Council (NPC) in 2018 was considered by all professionals a long-awaited initiative towards self-regulation. The institution set as its principal objective the promotion of the journalistic profession by both monitoring journalistic practice and ensuring respect of professional ethics. It also watches over issues and conflicts within press organizations and issues professional cards to journalists according to eligibility standards and normative regulations derived from the Status of Professional Journalists.

The primary self-regulatory initiative of the NPC was the drafting of a comprehensive and overarching deontological framework. The framework enshrines four fundamental principles:

professional responsibility, social responsibility, independence and integrity as well as professional rights. The document bears binding regulations for journalists and media organizations and holds them to account in case of deviations and professional misdemeanors and ensures, in return, their safety and protection in case their rights were infringed.

Ombudsperson

The 2005 Audiovisual Communication Law stipulates the establishment of an ombudsperson in public service broadcast media organizations. The Licensing Obligations Documents also require the establishment of internal ethics commissions. The ombudsperson's role consists of mediating between the broadcast company and their public, listening to the suggestions and forwarding complaints and criticism of the audiences to the responsible entities and conveying the solutions proposed by media executives (El Mouraille, 2017).

The two public service broadcast companies have sought other ways of responding to the public by creating TV programs devoted to discussing the public's feedback. The main public service TV stations, both 2M and Al Oula channels, air a monthly program called "El Wassit" (the mediator) that addresses the public's comments and suggestions regarding the TV programs. The show cannot be interrupted by advertising and cannot endorse any sponsored media content. One of the show's objectives is to trigger a debate about the quality of TV programs.

Professional Journalists Associations and Unions

In 1963, the Moroccan National Press Syndicate (Le Syndicat National de la Presse Marocaine, SNPM) was founded as an independent professional association (Moroccan National Press Syndicate, n.d.). The SNPM provided the institutional framework to address media accountability, but given its history, its focus remained limited to defending the right to free speech during the

colonial period (1912-1956) and after Morocco's independence. The founding members of the SNPM contributed to the national struggle for independence. The media served as a site of political tension between the liberation movement and the French colonialists, and later between the monarchy and the opposing political parties.

The 1990s witnessed the beginning of Morocco's political liberalization. In this context, the SNPM started to address journalism ethics. In 1996, the SNPM took serious initiatives to promote media ethics, improve the conditions of journalists, and advance print media.

In July 2002, the National Commission for Press Ethics and Freedom of Expression was established and mandated to create a code of ethics. This commission consisted of 23 members from the SNPM, the Federation of Publishers, civil society organizations, and media professionals. The National Commission is an autonomous body and is not affiliated with any political party or any governmental entity. Its primary function is to monitor professional performance, evaluate professional output, and promote free and responsible journalism. The National Commission's recommendations and decisions are not legally binding, so its impact on the profession remains limited.

Following the legislative elections of November 2011, the Minister of Communication promised to reform the legal framework by introducing three Decree Laws: a) the Press and Publication Law, b) Law on the Status of Professional Journalists, and c) Law on the Creation of the National Press Council. The laws were approved in parliament in 2016. In 2018, the NPC was effectively established as a self-regulatory body with the self-proclaimed aims to contribute to the development of the journalistic profession, to defend freedom of expression, and to promote journalism ethics. It considered ethical conduct and freedom of speech to be two sides of the same coin.

NGOs and media related organizations

Many international organizations carry out projects to improve the quality of journalism by conducting country reports, media mappings, and professional workshops. The Open Society published the "Mapping Digital Media in Morocco" report in 2011 (Zaid & Ibahrine, 2011). Drawing on the organization's transdisciplinary competencies, UNESCO has recently launched some programs and workshops to train and empower journalists to leverage the influential role of media accountability. These ethical implications in the journalism profession are critical to an objective: unbiased and transparent transmission of news and information. In 2014, UNESCO launched its Media Development Indicators report; the report has not yet been published. In 2017, Reporters Without Borders collaborated with Le Desk, a news website, to map media ownership in Morocco (Le Desk & Reporters Without Borders, n.d.). Other organizations, such as the Moroccan Association for Investigative Journalism, Centre Culturel Français, British Council, Goethe Institute (Germany) and NDI (USA), organize capacity building professional workshops for journalists and media organizations. These initiatives add value to the media scene especially in terms of providing data for researchers, but do not seem to materialize into institutional instruments to maintain media accountability (Ibahrine & Zaid, 2021).

Method

In order to gauge the effectiveness of existing MAIs in Moroccan media and explore further accountability instruments, mechanisms, issues and recommendations, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 renowned media professionals. Our interview guide was based on the Erich Brost Institute's MAI survey. Our focus was on institutional transformations relating

to media accountability, so we mainly interviewed professionals in senior positions, including two executives, six directors of publication and editors in chief of prominent media outlets, a chair of a civil society federation and a member of a parliamentary committee in charge of public communication. The interviews were conducted from June to July 2020 using audio and video calls spanning an hour each on average. The interview subjects were anonymized according to confidentiality conventions. Each research team member undertook close scrutiny on the interview texts and recordings, after which all the team met online to discuss emerging patterns and tendencies of convergence and divergence. This strategy facilitated the framing of the findings into the themes and categories outlined below.

Findings and discussion

Supportive and inhibitive factors of media accountability

For the respondents, Morocco has currently experienced dynamic transitions in politics, economy, society, human rights, and freedoms. There are at least four enabling factors of media accountability in Morocco.

First, the respondents highlight the importance of the professional culture within the press institutions. With distinct functions and responsibilities and organizational hierarchies, newsrooms cultivate considerations and routines that render practitioners accountable towards their peers and superiors. The interviewees recognize the benefits of the existence of professional structure and culture as well as the risks of not respecting professional ethics.

Second, the interview subjects confirm that media organizations, including owners, editors, and journalists, have become aware of the value and importance of the trust of the readers, viewers and users. A media executive describes the audience as "sophisticated and critical audiences". To

build strong and lasting relationships with their audiences, media organizations must provide accurate and reliable news content. Additionally, digital platforms have pushed for the rise of personalized news tailored to satisfy the specific needs and wants of micro audiences across their preferred platforms and devices.

The third factor refers to the existence of a diverse and competitive media landscape. To mark their territory in the midst of the exponential growth of digital platforms, traditional media practitioners are urged to rethink their old ways of doing business and of running a media organization when it comes to the production and delivery of their media content, using social media such as Facebook and Twitter and news aggregators such RSS (Really Simple Syndication) and Google News (Ibahrine, 2020). The co-founder of Hespress, the most visited news website in Morocco, describes the dominance of this emerging news ecosystem by social media as "Facebook news". He states that one of his aims is to distinguish his news website by providing accurate information and integrating multimodal formats and news 'platformization.'

Finally, the interviewees recognize an unprecedented institutional dynamism in the country in the past decade. One of the most recent and most critical institutional developments is the establishment of the NPC in 2018. For the first time in Moroccan media history, this institution introduced the experience of self-regulation to Moroccan media. Another institutional dynamism concerns the creation of professional associations. Regardless of their conflicting economic and ideological motivations, these professional associations will likely create a debate about the sustainability and viability of business models, quality journalism, and media accountability. On the other hand, media accountability is curtailed by more downbeat factors. Despite their diverse affiliations and editorial orientations, the interviewees have anonymously underscored the following inhibiting factors.

First is the vulnerability of the business model. Moroccan media organizations depend on governmental subsidies and advertising that is not transparently and equitably allocated. Both resources encourage official patronage and defer surveillance and criticism. In this sense, media accountability is seriously undermined since media organizations cannot 'bite the hands that feed them.' Besides, a business model that is contingent on government subsidies, vested economic interests, and corporations' control can weaken editorial independence -a primordial prerequisite of media accountability.

Second is the narrow margins of freedom and the difficulty investigative journalists endure to access information. Moroccan journalists cannot readily access information in executive institutions and administrative departments; especially after the Law of Access to Information (2014), which contains thirteen types of official proscriptions. The subjects additionally remind of the fact that not all Moroccan media organizations possess adequate tools, technologies, and logistics of investigation. More importantly, for them, investigative journalists are viewed by the authorities with suspicion, mainly when they scrutinize politically sensitive issues or events. The director of publication of Akhbar Alyaoum insists that the journalists Radi and Rissouni are kept in detention to date, not for the extra-journalistic charges that were concocted and contrived against them, but for their investigative audacity (El Kadoussi, Zaid, & Ibahrine, 2021).

The third inhibiting factor is the inadequate professional qualification. Over six hundred of the licensed news websites' owners, for example, do not have formal training and professional qualifications. Some schools and institutes of journalism still teach with outdated programs and methodologies.

Fourth, with severely declining reach and revenues, many legacy newspapers have been compelled to either adopt digital-first publishing strategies or disappear. Low readership does not

mean low interest in the consumption of news content. Inversely, as the chair of a professional association states, Moroccans are increasingly more connected and more informed than ever. They have moved to online venues and information platforms and networking sites in masses. However, the exponential growth of news websites (between 2,500 and 3,000 in Morocco) has negatively affected media accountability. One of the most acute problems is the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and sensationalism. The race for 'views' and 'likes' pushes several sources to pay minimal attention to journalistic practice ethics. As a result, public opinion, which is more and more influenced by unsubstantiated and unauthenticated news, becomes a negative factor for professional media practitioners.

Finally, the interviewees lament the low social image of professional journalists. Over the last few years, professional journalists' image has witnessed a decline for several reasons. A few respondents point out that journalism has become fluid in Morocco and that pseudo-professionalism has become a serious concern. As one senior executive says: "Anyone may call themselves a journalist." Consequently, errors in reporting, discourse, and mechanics have become alarming in their frequency and intensity. Plain and dry news delivery has taken over depth of analysis and eloquence in aesthetics and style. Very few names are known and followed these days for their analytical and rhetorical competencies.

Inefficiency of existing media accountability instruments

The interviewees agree that associations of journalism exist but for reasons other than an instrument for the promotion of media accountability. Lately, there has been an important dynamism in journalists' associations and civil society organisms: the revamping of an already established federation and the creation of a new association. However, as a director of a major publication points out, "their competition over the recent government subsidies (200 million

MADs, roughly 180,000 Euros) to support the media sector severely damaged by COVID 19 pandemic contradicted the ideal objectives they set in their charters."

The interviewees add that unions of journalists fail to protect journalists. First, they fail to unify all journalists under one institutional umbrella with a clear and well-defined mission. Second, what these bodies do best is write annual reports on problematic instances and abuses against journalists. One interviewee, the head of a professional association confirms: "Unions are very often inefficient even in preserving the livelihood of journalists who get unjustly dismissed by their superiors. Above all, they are utterly unreliable in protecting critical journalists from administrative harassment."

Regarding the newly established National Press Council, the respondents report that it is too early to judge. Though professional partners consider it as an all-encompassing organic authority that initiates significant projects such as self-regulation and professional advancement, the interviewees state that two years are not enough to gauge the efficacy of the National Press Council. A few interviewees seem less enthused by the advent of the new institution since its composition includes a representative of the government, and its leadership is also the leadership of the National Union of the Moroccan Press.

The interviewees see that media accountability instruments such as ombudspersons, letters/emails to the editors, publishing of corrections, and media NGOs may exist, but their effect is limited. The six chief editors among our interviewees claim they publish corrections to mistakes and inaccuracies after double-checking; still, they consider their action's impact on media accountability strictly minimal. With relatively more importance to them are professional journalists' codes of ethics and media organization's internal codes of conduct. They insist that these instruments are likely to bring about more media accountability in Morocco if respected.

Social media as a media accountability instrument

All interviewees consider social media as a much more efficient media accountability instrument. With the rise of social media activism, blogging, and 'citizen' journalism, citizens play an active role in making the media more accountable to the public. Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube remain the three most predominantly used social networking websites in Morocco. Online users serve as watchdogs to media professionals, and most unprofessional or unethical actions by the media are reported and negatively commented on. When it comes to the continuous monitoring of media content quality, social media criticism seems to have a higher impact than traditional instruments, as most interviewees suggest. Driven by digital platforms and built on user engagement, these new instruments are likely to develop further and thus enhance media accountability in Morocco. The 2M "Sabahiyat" morning show and an Al Ayam news article are two cases in point.

In November 2016 and on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the 2M TV show "Sabahiyat" featured a tutorial to show women how to cover facial bruises of domestic violence with makeup. This episode triggered a wave of criticism and protest from social media users and led to the TV station issuing a statement of apology about the incident. HACA, the media accountability instrument for the broadcast sector, did not issue a statement to criticize the show. It was the public empowered by social media that did.

In January 2019, a journalist at Al Ayam newspaper interviewed an orphaned 7-year-old girl about her experience of her mother's murder. The event triggered a vast wave of criticism from social media users and activists who denounced the unethical practices of the journalist. This

is another example that shows the power of digital platforms in providing the public with mechanisms for oversight over journalists' transgressions.

Two other very recent cases were Maroc Hebdo's publication of an image insinuating that sub-Saharan immigrants have brought Covid-19 to Morocco and the release of the government's intention to issue a law restricting citizens' use of social media. These cases instigated massive reactions of indignation and criticism on social media, after which respective media sources had to issue formal apologies and even sanction those held responsible.

The government's role in media regulation

The interviewees report that regardless of their diverse structures and formats, all media organizations have to respond, for licensing, creation and operation, to technical requirements and bureaucratic prerequisites underlined by different governmental departments like the Ministry of Communication, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, HACA, and Cinematographic Center. They add that legal charters like the Penal Law, the Press and Publication Law, and the Law Regulating Access to Information set strict guidelines for 'correct' journalistic practice for media organizations. According to all respondents, these governmental media regulatory instruments do not foster media accountability as much as they restrain it; they neither support nor inhibit it. Complex bureaucratic procedures and binding laws, unalterably overwhelming as they are, exert pressure and censorship on journalists and compel them to self-censor; they do not serve accountable journalism.

Access to information

The Law Regulating Access to Information issued in 2014 underscores thirteen intransigent restrictions on diverse types of 'national security' information. However, most interviewees confirm, state-controlled broadcast media are always more privileged than print media or news websites. Pro-regime print media, commercial radio stations, and news websites have more access to information than others.

Editorial independence

All interviewees confirm that the conditions favoring media independence have not yet been achieved. Editorial independence cannot hold without financial autonomy and real constitutional guarantees of free speech. Media organizations in non-democratic contexts perpetuate a culture of dependence, partiality, amateurish, and anti-professional journalism. A chief editor asserts that "we cannot hold journalists accountable for the quality of their reporting when the existing laws prevent them from doing so. The lack of ethics-based journalism in Morocco is a consequence of lack of democracy."

Media self-regulation

Although media self-regulation is a project underway, at least for the last two years, very often, resort to general prosecutors and courts is still the norm. Two years after the National Press Council's creation, many journalists are still taken to court, and some are currently in prison. The interviewees agree that the state has adopted a new strategy to silence the most critical voices without triggering criticism from international human rights organizations. The state charges journalists with crimes related to their personal lives, such as rape, extramarital sex, or even abortion. This scandalization of the journalists' private lives has been a systematic strategy

implemented by the authorities to silence 'dissenting' journalists ever since the hard-won Media Law of 2016 was launched. The law is considered more progressive than that of 2002 because it replaced prison sentences with fines.

Respondents' recommendations

For media accountability to improve, the interviewees recommend a multi-stakeholder approach. All stakeholders, media organizations, media accountability institutions, and journalists have a share of responsibility. For media organizations, the respondents argue for sustainable media business models and more investment in digital technologies. They also call for restoring the social responsibility and watchdog functions of media organizations. They finally emphasize the need to improve the socio-economic conditions of journalists.

For media accountability institutions, the interviewees call for genuine self-regulation, untethered from state interference. They insist on the elaboration and implementation of a comprehensive and overarching code of professional ethics. They also reiterate their call for the media's independence from political influence and economic interests.

For journalists, the interviewees recommend continuous professional training and upskilling to restore practitioners' image as reliable and trusted sources of news. They emphasize the importance of responding to the audiences' sophisticated needs and expectations. Finally, they appeal for journalists to engage in capacity-building to overcome the disruptive nature of digital technologies.

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Conclusions

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Our findings suggest that the mere existence of media accountability institutions and instruments is not sufficient with regard to the superficial institutionalization of Moroccan polity as well as the

socio-political and socio-economic contexts of journalists. The state may, under pressuring campaigns, approve the establishment of self-regulatory bodies, civil society groups and labor unions while maintaining control, supervision and hedging from above. One of the mechanisms of state surveillance over media accountability instruments in Morocco is the requisite of a government representative in their executive circles, which curtails independent decision making and invokes the possibility of prosecution in extreme cases.

Another non-democratic practice permeating principal media self-regulatory instruments like HACA and NPC is the top-down nomination rather than representative election of some of their executives. Also, the existing repressive media regulations still cripple journalists' work and render their responsive concerns geared towards administrations and courts rather than towards society and the profession. Eventually, for most journalists, self-censorship is a more imminent challenge than self-regulation.

As for journalists, their precarious socio-economic conditions orient their concerns towards livelihood ensuring and preserving practices more than towards professional and correct reporting. Further, their awareness of the unpredictability of the reigning socio-political environment cripples their investigative and critical potential and compels to self-censor (El Kadoussi, 2020) and reorient their responsive obligations to political and legal centers, not to citizens.

Additional challenges impinge on the quality and accountability of Moroccan digital media. Media digitization has altered patterns and processes of news production, dissemination and monetization, which bear curtailing implications for quality journalism and media accountability in Morocco. Maximum reliance on the gigantic digital leaders, Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Twitter (GAFAT) for revenue based on algorithms-driven standards has compelled Moroccan news organizations to compete for traffic rather than for quality and

credibility. Moreover, these novel patterns are detrimental to local news websites in terms of revenue streams. They are also detrimental to individual journalists by making their professional and socioeconomic situations volatile and precarious. Without more stable, predictable and sustainable conditions for journalists and media organizations, concerns about revenue and continuity of business models would take over concerns about quality and professional credibility.

To conclude, Morocco may be considered among the very few MENA nations with institutions and vehicles of media accountability like HACA and NPC; however, state surveillance and absence of genuine freedom and independence inhibit their effectiveness. The past few years have demonstrated, for example, that HACA is incapable of serving publics and institutions other than the government and the state. As for NPC, it remains too early to assess its self-regulatory performance and its efficacy in holding journalists and media institutions to account for society and for the profession rather than for administrations and courts. However, the only genuine prospects of effective media accountability are upheld, for the time being, by digitally empowered audiences.

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The state of media accountability in Libya

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on the state of media accountability in Libya from 2011 to 2020. This period starts with the February revolution which ended Muammar Gaddafi's leadership in Libya. The paper addresses the state of Libyan media accountability, its practices and challenges and its instruments. The paper reviews the scholarly literature on Libya's political scene over the past ten years, and to a lesser extent during Gaddafi's rule, and how these political scenarios have impacted the media field and journalists in general, and specifically to media accountability. The results show that there is an absence of effective legislation regulating the media sector, accompanied by a lack of applied media accountability instruments in the Libyan media sector. The ongoing political and armed conflict in Libya does not provide an environment for such implementation, however, social media, as a form of debate and assessing the quality of the news media, turns to be a preferred instrument of media accountability in Libya allowing for a limited freedom of expression, monitoring of various media outlets and discussing the quality or misconduct of the news media among professional journalists and bloggers. The conducted interviews revealed a need for the establishment of systemized media accountability instruments in the near future such as an independent media council and an active journalist union/syndicate, as tools of media self-regulation. The context of such an implementation can only be enforced in a stabilized political situation in Libya soon. However, current activities and training as well as education in Journalism universities are relevant to prepare this process.

Keywords: accountability, media, journalists, legislation, Libya

Introduction

Media accountability monitors media performance and is crucial to the media sector because of its role in improving media services for public consumption and restoring the prestige of the media in the eyes of the recipient (Eberwein, Fengler, Lauk & Leppic-Bork, 2011). However, we must consider that setting certain standards for media accountability requires stable democratic societies, in which there are legislative or autonomous oversight institutions for the profession of journalism. Such legislation is almost non-existent in Libya due to the dramatic changes that the country has undergone in its recent history, during which many political, economic, cultural and social characteristics and circumstances have contributed to shape media policies. Indeed, at each

stage of recent history, Libya has adopted a new concept of freedom of opinion, expression and access to information (Al-Asfar, 2016). The first stage began with the independence of Libya in 1951, when the press was established on sound foundations. Journalists, at the time, were committed to professionalism, and audiences of that period could participate in the political, social, and cultural mobility of Libyan society. The media at that time was able to deal with issues at hand and connect with Libyan society and its concerns, with a sense of responsibility that the press today lacks (Gulam, 2015).

However, this situation changed considering the political change that occurred after coup d'état of 1969 that led to de facto rule of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi when the media was transformed under authoritarianism (Jubran, 2013). The criterion of accountability in this second stage is how far the media discourse was consistent with serving the ruling regime to the extent that Gaddafi's speeches became binding obligations.

Libya's media entered, following the coup, a stage characterized by restrictions, such as when private newspapers were abolished in 1972 (al-Taybe, 2012). Five years later journalists were jailed on charges of disturbing public opinion after the decree criminalizing partisanship was issued, which reduced political diversity and freedom of opinion and expression. There followed the Declaration of the People's Authority on March 2, 1977, which was the official declaration to change the direction of the press to express Gaddafi's ideas (Al-Sharief, Al-Hensheri & Tantosh 2019, p.21).

Change occurred at the same pace for the audio-visual media sector, as the regime did not allow privately owned radio and television stations. Broadcasting was limited to the visual and audio broadcast networks of the General Authority for the Great Mass Radio, except for the establishment of al-Ghad Media Company in 2007, which was founded by Gaddafi's son, Saif al-

Islam. Al-Ghad launched two audio broadcasts, *Iman* and the *Al-Liby*a Satellite Channel, both of which were merged in April 2009 into the structure of state-owned channels (Abdel Ghani, 2014). The Gaddafi regime destroyed the robustness of the media and caused it to be subservient to the regime. The sole media related legislation was Publications Law (No. 76) of 1972, which was entirely aimed at not compromising the Gaddafi regime (Fhelboom, 2019) and does relate to media accountability. The law consists of 51 articles, including 28 deterrent, disciplinary and punitive articles for journalists and media institutions (Al-Asfar, 2014). Breaches of this law could result in severe penalties including life imprisonment and the death penalty. For example, anyone who dared to defend theories or principles aimed at changing the basic principles of the national constitution or the basic structures of the social system, or overthrowing the political, social, or economic structures of the state would be punished (Fhelboom, 2019). This ensured that open criticism by journalists was almost impossible. The law included several positive articles in line with international media accountability standards and regulations, such as investigating objectivity and truthfulness in the media, verifying the correctness of information before publishing and correcting post-publication everything found to be wrong. However, Al-Asfar (2016) argues that these articles were used mostly in the interest of the Gaddafi regime.

The third stage that followed the February 17, 2011 Arab Spring Revolution, and the end of the Gaddafi regime, enabled the media to flourish as numerous newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations were established throughout the country. The media outlets took advantage of the absence of any kind of restrictions on freedom of the press or any imposed licenses (al-Taybe, 2012). Content forbidden by the Gaddafi regime became available to everyone without control or the supervision of ethical standards. In the post-Gaddafi media transformation, society

now has a choice of a variety of newspapers, magazines, radio stations and various new television stations as pluralistic sources of information (Gulam, 2015).

However, this diversity and lack of accountability created chaos in Libya's media, which transformed from being subservient to one man and one ideology to serving multiple military organizations each with a distinct political ideology. Despite this lack of accountability, the US Institute of Peace declared a positive spin on the chaotic media environment (Abou-Khalil & Hargreaves, 2015). Media advancing their opinions on the legality of security actors have thus contributed to related consumer perceptions about those actors, and in turn play an important role in how the security situation in Libya continues to unfold.

In this third stage from 2011 to present, Libya had three governments. First that of Abdurrahim Al-Kaib, commissioned by the Interim Transitional National Council on 24 November 2011. Secondly, the government of Ali Zidan on 14 November 2012, and thirdly the Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Faiz al-Sarraj, which was codified in the Libyan Political Agreement signed on 17 December 2015 at a conference in Skhirat, Morocco. Other post-revolution legitimate bodies emerged. In 2012, the elected General National Congress (GNC) was established in Tripoli, and in 2014 the House of Representative (HOR) was in Tobruk. Lastly, as a direct result of the 2015 conference, the High Council of State was established in 2016. However, government has now splintered, with the GNA and Faiz al-Sarraj politically dominant in Tripoli (in the west of Libya) and Abdulla al-Thani dominant in Tobruk and Bayda (in the east).

The political situation was further complicated by the emergence of other bodies interested in controlling the political arena. The largest is the Libyan National Army led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar who controls power in the eastern part of Libya, to the extent that without consulting the House of Representative, he launched the offensive war on Tripoli in April 2019. In western Libya,

multiple armed groups control political power to the extent of kidnapping in 2013, Ali Zidan in Tripoli, when he was prime minister.

This partition also reflects Libya's international relationships with other countries which support the governments according to their interests. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt support the government in Baydar, while Qatar and Turkey[13] support the GNA. This split support has affected the media sector. The funding of some private TV channels dealing with Libyan affairs, which are based in Jordan, have been criticized of being funded by the UAE (Democracy Reporting International, 2019), whereas the *Al-Ahrar* channel initially received funding from Qatar before it moved to Turkey. Transparency of media ownership does not exist (Libyan Center for Freedom of the Press, 2020).

This political conflict has also affected the performance of local media, which now serve either one or the other of the two conflicting forces. *al-Hadath*, a TV broadcaster, supports Marshal Khalifa Haftar in the east, while Libya's official TV channel, *Libya Alrasmia*, supports the government and armed groups in the west. Libyan journalists have also become partisan declaring themselves as supporters and opponents of the parties in conflict.

Fhelboom (2019) mentions that most of the public and private media have been drawn into the spread of a culture of violence and hatred in the Libyan society. This argument is based on affiliations with one of the parties involved in the conflict, political tensions and wars in the country during the past five years. Some of these media outlets are financed and supported by regional and international stakeholders who have fueled the ongoing conflict, like other Arab countries that witness political conflicts and wars such as Yemen and Syria (Al-Najjar, 2020).

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[13] Turkey signed in November 2019 broad security and military agreements and restriction of marine jurisdictions with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord during the war that broke out in April 2019 between the Libyan National Army led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar, based in eastern Libya, and the Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli.

This political conflict was reflected in the performance of the media which has become fragile, weak and dispersed, resulting in two opposing manifestations. First, in the absence of social responsibility and media accountability, there are currently no governmental, media professional or civil society bodies existing to create laws and establish standards for media accountability and implement them. Secondly, the absence of freedom of expression, the high level of self-censorship by journalists and the impossible criticism of corruption and political injustice in the presence of violence against journalists and political activists prevails. Cases like the arrest of the director of *Al-Jawhara Radio*, Sami Al-Sharif, in August 2020 after his news coverage of the demonstrations in Libya calling for improvement of living conditions in the country (Al-Wasat, 2020), and the sentencing to fifteen years imprisonment of journalist Ismail Bouzriba Al-Zwi in Benghazi in August 2020 (Othman, 2020), require journalists to practice self-censorship due to the fear of imprisonment and risks to their lives.

I. Research Review: Existing media accountability institutions and organizations

Several attempts have been made during the past eight years to lay down state-level legislation, laws and decisions related to media accountability, whether at the government level or self-directed attempts from the media related institutions, NGOs, and the journalists' community. In 2012, The National Transitional Council issued Resolution No. (44) related to the establishment of the Supreme Council for Media and the appointment of its members. This was followed by Resolution No. (43) of 2012 which relates to the establishment of the National Press Foundation and the Libya Radio and Television Corporation by Resolution No. (37) of 2012. The Supreme Media Council mandated the reorganization of the media industry in Libya. It includes setting regulations and draft laws regulating media work, adopting a code of conduct, granting the

necessary licenses for various media outlets. It also takes the necessary administrative decisions that contribute to the running of all media facilities of the Media Supreme Council and looking into individual complaints against media organizations (Fhelboom, 2019).

However, this decision caused widespread controversy in the media circles, especially about the mechanism for selecting the members of this council, which led to the election of another council by the journalists themselves in June 2012. The elected council consists of twenty-one members who oversee the regulation of the Libyan media and its institutions and defines responsibilities, as well as the election of the Journalists' General Syndicate in a meeting held on June 26, 2012. The National Transitional Council approved the election of the members of the Supreme Council for Media and members of the Libyan Journalists' General Syndicate and issued decisions giving the elected Supreme Council the right to supervise the Libyan media in general in Resolution No. (58) of 2012. However, Asbita (2013) argues that a legal problem emerged related to the cancellation of the Resolution No. 44 of 2012, which led to the existence of two conflicting media councils, each claiming legitimacy. The result is the inactivity of both councils. The Government of National Accord also issued Decision No. (1625) of 2018 to establish the National Observatory of the Audiovisual Space, which takes responsibility for the preparation of relevant codes of conduct regulating media work and which acts against violators of ethical breaches. However, this decision has not been executed until now. To date, the parliament in eastern Libya has not yet put in place any legal legislation towards media accountability.

On September 8, 2020, the Government of National Accord issued Decision No. (597) of 2020 to establish the Libyan Media Foundation (LMF), which implements the plans and general policy of the field of media. The LMF is responsible for proposing draft laws and regulations related to national media work. The LMF also establishes and implements standards and

regulations governing media work and taking all necessary steps to raise level of efficiency and performance of the media and issuing the necessary licenses and permissions for outlets. Considering the chaotic and confusing situation that the media sector has been experiencing since 2011 and the absence of legislation regulating this sector, some media actors, both professionals and academics, have raised their voices to organize and frame media accountability structures in Libya. This has involved meetings of journalists in several Libyan cities to formulate a professional code of conduct for the media as well as in establishing a journalists' union (Gulam, 2015). However, considering the current political division and civil wars, all these attempts have failed like the endeavors of the various governments that have appeared in Libya recently.

Other efforts for establishing media accountability instruments have also emerged by civil society institutions through the coordination of relevant meetings between journalists, lawyers and media experts under the coordination of the United Nations in cooperation with international organizations. These efforts planned to produce a code of conduct or a media charter for responsible and professional media. In 2015-2016, UNESCO organized meetings in Madrid to create a specified code of conduct for Libyan journalists in times of crisis (Fhelboom, 2019). In early 2020, more than forty Libyan journalists from all regions of Libya participated in a comprehensive four-week-course on methods and state-of-the-art fact-checking tools to strengthen professional journalism in Libya, which was conducted by DW Akademie with the support of the EU Commission (Scholz, 2021).

Several media-related NGOs have emerged as press and media freedom watchdogs since 2011 in Libya. They have tried to establish various forms of media accountability instruments in recent years. The first attempt was by the Libyan Organization for Independent Media (www.lofim.org), which was founded in 2018 and began implementing several activities,

including trainings on combating misinformation and hate speech. The organization prepared a media professional code of conduct, which was reviewed by both local and international experts and legal advisors to be a basic reference that directs media workers and guides them to their rights and duties and how to better perform their jobs regarding ethics. Among these newly established NGOs is also the Libyan Centre for Freedom of the Press (LCFP; https://lcfp.org.ly), which was established in 2014. The LCFP provides support and assistance to journalists, training them and developing their skills as well as monitoring and documenting physical attacks against journalists. The LCFP enjoys high public recognition and is also supporting legal changes in Libya by providing legal reviews as well as drafting bills to reform the national media legislation, enhance press freedom, and ensure the independence of the media.

Several newly established NGOs in Libya act as media freedom watchdogs as well as important non-academic educators in order to raise awareness on media accountability within the civil society as well as the journalists' community. The Libyan Centre for Defending Freedom of Journalists (LCDFJ) is affiliated to the Libyan Center for the Support of Democracy and Human Rights (LCDHR). The latter was established in 2011 in order to provide a voice for the marginalized and to promote civil society expression, accountable journalism and human rights in Libya (https://lcdhr.org/hesn). The NGOs in Libya that attempt to implement media accountability instruments are perceived by civil society as a good step towards accountability within the media as well as the civil society sector. However, most of these attempts have failed to reach the level of prominence in the relevant legislation or in form of a national code of ethics due to the ongoing conflict and political division. In this sense, there is still no national code of ethics available in Libya to which all journalists should adhere.

II. Media Accountability in Libya: Perspectives from Libyan media professionals

With regard to the almost complete absence of literature on media accountability in contemporary Libya, the author conducted a small-scale pilot study, consisting of qualitative interviews with media professionals and journalists[14] in Libya in July and August 2020. The interviewees belonged to either think tanks (LOFIM; Middle East Directions; and the Journalism Faculty of the University Of Benghazi and the Libyan Institute for Investigative Journalism) and news producing outlets (*Aswat*, *Alsabah* and *Libyan News* [these three are newspapers], *Alhadaf News Web*, *Alwast TV Channel*, *Radio Libya*). The interviews consisted of questions about factors enabling and limiting media accountability as well as about the impact of the media accountability instruments that recently emerged in Libya.

The interviewees highlighted the four most important factors currently needed to uphold media accountability in Libya:

- new media laws and legislation,

- an independent media council as a tool of media self-regulation,

- creating an independent and active union/syndicate,

- introducing a press code of conduct.

The interviewees also demonstrated that there is a need for new legislation to regulate all media (audio-visual, print and digital) as the existing legislation in Libya only regulates print media and violates the international conventions for Human Rights related to media freedom, such as Art. 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states:

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[14] Interviews were conducted anonymously for the protection of the interviewees. Journalists cannot be named because of the risks to their personal safety at this stage.

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." (United Nations, 1948, p. 6)

Lawyer Wael Bin Ismail points out that many articles of the Libyan print media law, including articles 195, 203, 207, 291 and 318, impose a range of punishments up to the death penalty for crimes related to expression of opinion, which is contrary to the constitutional declaration of Libya and international conventions on freedom of expression (Fhelboom, 2019). Six of the pilot study's interviewees emphasized the need to establish an independent media council that self-regulates all media and punishes according to ethical standards those who violate the media code of conduct as essential. The other interviewees stressed the need to activate the existing journalism syndicate in Libya in order to get involved in defending and protecting journalists' rights as a watchdog-institution. The interviewees also argued there is a need to "push the parliament to enact laws that reduce hate speech, violence, and punish those who are involved in fueling armed conflicts".

The interviewees see that "the lack of or absence of new media legislations and regulations" is the main issue that inhibits news media accountability. One interviewee points out that "the only existing media law is the Publications Law No. (76) of 1972, which is very rarely applied." The interviewee continues to say that "there is no kind of punishment, sanction, or fine posted for those who violate publicly the law by committing crimes like slander, libel, defamation and incitement to hatred or violence, or by breaching media law". Similarly, another interviewee confirmed that "hate speech increased in several private media outlets". In the same vein, an interviewee added that "the media bias towards others, many media institutions adopted already measures to fight hate speech, however, the security agencies are not familiar with this kind of media work". In

2020, in its report on "Editorial practices in newsrooms", the LCFP launched a quantitative monitoring study of fifteen Libyan media outlets over the course of twenty-four continuous hours. The monitoring referred to professional breaches of journalistic content on websites and social media pages of the relevant media outlets. The observation and continuous monitoring have shown significant professional irregularities, aggregating during this twenty-four-hour period 24,073 ethical standard breaches (Libyan Center for Freedom of Press, 2021).

There is neither legal protection and political support of free speech nor public access to information in place in any consistent way. For example, Libyan journalists operate without the protection of any special press law. The regulatory framework has not yet been developed, and society has not yet fully accepted or recognized the role of an independent media in the transition towards democracy. This lack of regulation affects the news media in Libya to act in an accountable way.

Asked about the main challenges and needs for media accountability to act, interviewees said that political stability and the absence of media laws as well as a proper legislation are considered the main challenges for media accountability. One interviewee commented: "Stability in our country - as the war continues - is lacking. The media strongly amplifies war, violence and hate speech". That interviewee added that "safety for journalists is endangered as some armed groups are acting outside the law by attacking independent journalists and media outlets and silencing critical voices."

Another interviewee expressed that "the biggest challenges to Libyan media accountability are the political division and the offensive war, which broke out in April 2019 between the Libyan National Army led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar, based in eastern Libya and the GNA based in Tripoli, because it has created an appropriate environment for media chaos".

The lack of financial sustainability of many private media outlets, the lack of free access to information, and the lack of freedom of expression, free press, civil liberties and political pluralism are other challenges expressed. Interviewees also stated that journalists and audiences lack an understanding of the role of the media as a news source in the democratic transition in Libya. Another interviewee added: "In short, there were no serious efforts to set up a self-regulatory body such as a union for Libyan journalists or a center for independent journalism in order to improve the professional standards of journalism and to draft an ethical code for the Libyan press".

The situation is getting even more complex as the GNA's media authority has stopped issuing licenses to any Libyan media outlets since 2017. In the Eastern government in the city of Benghazi, the Public Broadcasting and Television Institution for radio and TV issues licenses to radio and TV channels, however, there is no system implemented for receiving and responding to complaints on media content and ethical breaches or issuing fines. Currently, many interviewees believe that there are no factors in Libya that would either support or enable news media to act in an accountable way. One interviewee concludes: "It appears that supporting news media to act in an accountable way in Libya, which takes into consideration the failure of freedom of expression after forty-two years of authoritarian rule in the country, is a difficult task." This is understandable given that Libya's democratic transformation is pausing during abrupt economic, political, and social transitions. It will take significant time to establish proper and applicable media accountability instruments as there are no professional unions that have developed clear policies and legal bases in order to determine the framework of media accountability, including journalists, citizens, media owners and the government.

Media accountability is so far not part of journalism curricula at universities. The situation in Libya in the absence of a national press code of ethics and rarely provided trainings on media

accountability and self-regulatory standards to journalists is creating a high number of ethical

breaches in the media contents. One interviewee emphasizes that there is no self-regulation of the

media in Libya because all media are subject to capital policy, and the media in Libya are of three

types - government media institutions, media institutions supported by foreign countries based

inside Libya, and media institutions supported by foreign institutions and based outside Libya.

According to this journalist, the need for media accountability is huge as most of the Libyan media

outlets do not adhere to any professional values. A further study about existing internal codes of

conduct in the relevant media outlets would be necessary to be conducted in the future in order to

provide a better assessment of the situation.

Social media, especially Facebook, has become the most popular communication medium

in Libya after the 2011 Arab Spring Revolution. There were six million social media users in Libya

in January 2021, 86.8% of the total population (datareportal, 2021). "More than two thirds of all

Libyans have a Facebook account and regularly use the network to stay informed — a fact that all

conflict parties have learned to use to their advantage" (Scholz, 2021). Social media seemed to

have an important role as they have become a tool in public criticism and monitoring of various

media outlets. Majority of respondents agree that social media turns out to be a preferred

instrument of media accountability in Libya allowing for a limited freedom of expression. It

becomes a form for debate and discussion on quality or misconduct of the news media among

Libyan bloggers and professional journalists. Freedom House documented in its´ Freedom on the

Net report for 2021 that "the 2011 revolution brought a notable increase in the number of bloggers

writing within Libya, many of whom expressed hope for the future, discussed political activism,

and voiced criticism of authorities. More recently, Libya's bloggers have increasingly practiced

self-censorship due to continued instability, increasing threats, and violence against journalists

over the past years" (Freedom House, 2021). Social media use is becoming increasingly relevant for news consumption and public communication in general.

Conclusion

The lack of political stability, the chaos and confusion in various media institutions has resulted in the absence of effective and independent instruments for media accountability in Libya. Civil society, however, by being engaged through social media in the public discourse on and about news, has other demands related to trustworthy news. Journalists due to the high self-censorship and danger of becoming victim of physical attacks cannot perform their work freely and have no active watchdog standing behind them, even existing laws are not protecting them. Self-regulatory institutions such as ombudspeople in newsrooms, media councils, active and unified journalistic associations depend partially on the training of the journalistic community about media accountability structures and instruments. Training would enable media professionals to support a national code of conduct and create a strong independent media council to act as both a watchdog of media freedom and an independent self-regulatory institution. This institution could also be engaged in civil society, resolving complaints on ethical breaches in a free, timely and transparent way. Tunisia with a newly implemented Media Council and, as a first for MENA countries, introduced in 2014 a network of ombudspeople in media outlets. These positive signs of existing media accountability structures in Tunisia are of huge value for Libya and reveal the potential for future trainings. On the other hand, it is of utmost importance for the media community to step into a relevant dialogue with the judiciary and parliamentary committees in Libya in order to generate change and put media legislation and media accountability on top of the governmental agenda. Universities involved in educating journalists in Libya should include the subject of media

accountability in their curricula. As one interviewee stated, there will be a huge demand for

professional trainings soon in the non-academic sector. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to

create a National Media Development Strategy for Libya in order to support the democratic process

of the country through media accountability to be included into all existing media structures.

Finally, a broad scale survey in Libya on media accountability as well as media sustainability

should be conducted soon in order to understand the changing structures and the opportunities for

media in a country of democratic transformation.

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Media accountability instruments in Egypt: Status quo, challenges, and future directions

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Abstract

This paper explores what instruments of media accountability exist in the Egyptian media and how journalists perceive them. As a part of a larger survey including nine countries from the MENA region, it contextualises currently existing media accountability instruments by analysing the Egyptian media legislation and media regulation authorities. The surveyed journalists assess the level of media accountability in Egypt as rather low and constricted. Suggestions to widen the scope of self-responsible means of regulation -apart from the priority of safeguarding the freedom of the press- include creating opportunities for training and an open debate about ethical and professional standards inside the profession as well as establishing spaces to build trust and loyalty between journalists and their audiences.
Keywords: Egypt, media accountability, professionalism, media legislation, social media

Introduction

The Egyptian media system shows a stark paradox: Despite its long history and pioneering position in the Arab media landscape, under the current authoritarian rule the media system has extremely blocked potentials which stifles independent media and journalism. The political and legal framework has been dominated by mainly illiberal phases, with brief intermittent phases of liberalization that led to short-lived flourished media landscapes. The state engages in methods that apply legal authoritarianism (Hamzawy, 2017) to convey an impression of observing the rule of law. However, in fact it restricts freedoms and controls the political economy through indirect state capitalism. Media ownership stays within the state or the loyalist business elite, in particularly for the popular audio-visual media. Amid the global journalism crisis, Egypt's media system struggles for its financial survival, professional quality, and recognition among the younger audiences. Experts speak openly of the "death of journalism" (Shuman, 2017).

The tight grip on the media through legislation, (self-)censorship, (economic) sanctions and intimidation by security services and citizens alike does not leave much space for the implementation of media accountability. Instruments like press or media councils and codes of ethics have been exploited by the ruling regime to control the media. Other means to increase transparency and therefore trust in the media like ombudspersons, newsroom blogs or the publication of corrections are close to non-existent in Egypt. Consequently, the Egyptian media rarely displays self-responsible accountability by pointing out potentially harmful developments in the profession, encouraging ethical behaviour among its members or disclose its professional standards to the public. Furthermore, the Internet and social media are heavily monitored, and users are prosecuted for alleged misconduct, thus shrinking the space for (media) criticism by journalists and citizens even further.

This survey is part of a larger study conducted by the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism on media accountability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Striving for a detailed examination of the specific media accountability systems of nine countries in the MENA region, it sheds light on the status quo of media accountability in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia. Research was conducted as desk studies, complemented with semi-structured interviews, which were carried out online and offline in June and July 2020 with around one hundred representatives of the individual countries' media sectors. Respondents come from print, broadcast and online media and include "practitioners, media executives, representatives of journalism associations, and of NGOs, parliamentary commissions, and bloggers among others" (Lengauer, 2021, p. 14). In Egypt, the author reached out to sixteen journalists from diverse backgrounds in terms of media type (print, online, broadcast) and ownership (state, private), out of whom nine journalists responded.

After a short introduction of existing regulation authorities and other bodies relevant to media accountability, the results of the Egyptian sample are presented. The surveyed journalists predominantly judge institutions such as the Press Council or the Journalist' Syndicate as neither efficient nor independent. Taking into account suggestions from the participants, the paper concludes with recommendations to strengthen Egyptian journalism by increasing its transparency, professionalism and independence.

Existing media accountability institutions and organizations

Press and media councils

The media landscape after the 25th of January Revolution in 2011 was a contested field: Abolishing the Ministry for Information in 2011 echoed journalists' aspirations to change the dominant centralized state structures towards more independence, public service and professionalism. After numerous experts' and stakeholders' deliberations from 2011 until 2016, three new media councils were established. On December 26, 2016, the Egyptian President ratified a new media law, introducing three new regulatory bodies that oversee print, broadcast, and electronic media. The new law, which was approved by parliament, implements three main articles of the Egyptian Constitution: Article 211 for the establishment of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, Article 212 for the National Press Authority and finally Article 213 for the National Media Authority. Later in 2019, the Ministry of Information was also reinstated to control the "chaotic media scene" as stated by the Minister for Information Osama Heikal in a BBC interview (BBC Arabic Youtube Channel, 2020).

The Supreme Council for Media Regulation (scm.gov.eg) as an entity is the broadest umbrella in scope, as it is responsible for managing all media sectors (print, broadcast, online) including private and public ownership. It oversees the two other authorities: National Press

Authority and National Media Authority. Different from voluntarily self-regulative bodies like the German Press Council for instance, the ethical standards are not intrinsically developed by journalists, but determined by forces outside the journalistic field. Examples for its work include the Ramadan Drama Monitor that counts ethical violations, e.g. the use of rogue language, or drug abuse scenes. While this tool emulates liberal normative guidelines that aim to protect youth, monitoring can also be abused to ban certain narratives and actors from appearing on TV. A novel extra-judicial route is granting the public the right to submit complaints. Possible legal sanctions include warning, monetary compensation or even revoking the licensing.

The National Press Authority oversees and manages the state-owned print media organizations. It relies on the heritage of its predecessor Supreme Press Council (SPC) that was established in 1975 under President Anwar el-Sadat. Working closely with the Shura Council (a chamber of the Egyptian parliament), SPC monitored the print media, recorded their circulation numbers, or set the rates for government advertising in the national newspapers. It also set the number of copies publishers could produce and the price they may charge for them (UNESCO, 2013, p. 57). Its membership consisted of editors-in-chief of state-managed newspapers. Since the passing of the privatization laws of print media in 1996, its responsibilities expanded to issue licenses for private newspapers. Its most relevant task for media accountability was issuing the monthly journalism practice monitor that would quantitatively monitor ethical misconducts in the print media.

The establishment of the new National Press Authority was heavily criticized by the Journalists' Syndicate, the only professional association for print journalists. Its former head Yehia Qallash commented that these councils only show the authorities' "rooted inclination" to expand

their domination and expected this to be reflected in the laws regulating the journalism and media sectors, which were to be passed later (MadaMasr, 2016).

The National Media Authority (maspero.eg) oversees and manages the state-administered audio-visual broadcasting services. It is the successor of Maspero, its name referring to the iconic TV and radio building in Cairo. Its scope is limited to state TV and radio stations, managing their complex financial situation and the employees' affairs, and thus functions as the main broadcast regulator.

Membership and composition of the council and two authorities are set by the 2014 Constitution. The regulations include the appointment of heads of key institutions and experts by the president. The new policies seek to invoke an image of transparency through publications in a top-down approach, using websites and social media. The tenor uses themes of modernization, stability, ethics and technological innovation to boost the credibility of the new regulatory bodies. The search for societal relevance is shaped by two priorities: 1) rejuvenating the human resources through training initiatives and 2) managing the major financial crisis that causes an annual drain for the broadcast and state-owned print journalism. Installing multiple regulative actors could have led to the desired and long overdue decentralization in the media sector, to a renewal of the media landscape and practices. Instead, rivalry and friction among its heads occurred due to a lack of clarity over jurisdiction and executive reach.

Finally, the State Information Service (SIS) systematically monitors foreign media and issues feedback on their articles to ensure a favourable coverage of Egypt.

Ombudspersons

As of 2020, no Egyptian media employs ombudswomen or -men. This concept of mediating complaints and making the working processes and standards of journalism transparent as well as

involving the audience in the news production is widely unknown to journalists and media managers. The introduction of ombudspersons to Egyptian newsrooms might be hindered by the high rate of self-censorship among journalists as well as a lack of a culture of constructive criticism and a deeply ingrained patronage system in newsrooms of the state media.

Professional associations and unions

The Syndicate of Egyptian Journalists was founded in 1941 (UNESCO 2013, p. 15) and is the sole representative professional association tasked with print journalists' protection. It has a rich history despite its paradoxical politics: Depending on its leadership, the Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate has oscillated its focus of work between defending the freedom of speech and solely offering socio-economic benefits and services to its members. Candidates in Syndicate elections, especially those close to the state, instrumentalize the financial bonus which is paid monthly to Syndicate members, because they rely on state compliance in funding it (Berger, 2013; Yehia, 2011). "Therefore, only loyalist heads of the Syndicate can accumulate social capital and votes" (Badr 2020b, p. 6). The dependent political economy weakens the Syndicate's independence.

Despite positioning itself as journalists' home, and occasionally as a stronghold for the freedom of expression, the Syndicate's membership regulations exclude many journalists (e.g. young, freelance, and digital). Even progressive leaders in office have failed to include the young and digital journalists because its General Assembly is reluctant to embrace inclusive reforms out of fear to risk losing or sharing their benefits (Badr, 2020b, p. 6). To become a formally recognized journalist, candidates among other things need a portfolio. Not being accredited with the syndicate means to work under conditions of uncertainty.

Current laws prevent the establishment of an alternative association. All efforts to found independent and inclusive journalists' unions during the transition period after 2011 were not

fruitful but were described by Sakr as "unionization in [legal] limbo" (2013, p. 76). On the other hand, a Syndicate for media workers in audio-visual broadcast exists, but it focuses on social and leisure activities.

Broadcast regulators

Multiple state actors act as broadcast regulators. Since 2017, the Supreme Council for Media Regulation and the National Media Authority in addition to the reinstated Ministry of Information co-regulate the broadcasting sector. They licence the private channels and radio stations, and they monitor the contents for ethics and moral values. This strategy seeks to tighten executive control through overlapping jurisdiction, but it also leads to structured conflict due to actors' rivalry and lack of clear boundaries of action. Working closely with the Media Production City, Maspero has had prominent productions in drama, a role that has diminished since 2011. Due to the financial crisis, the state-owned productions had put severe caps on finances which led to an increased privatization of drama productions. The Supreme Council for Media Regulations issues a drama monitoring report, especially during Ramadan, counting scenes with smoking, drug abuse and profanity. Critics see this reporting practice as attempts to impose moral rules over fiction content.

NGOs and media related organizations

With the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), founded in 2003, and the Arab Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), founded in 2006, two well established NGOs regularly monitor the Egyptian media scene. Both organizations however focus their work on a broader array of issues related to human rights. As such they monitor press and broadcast publications -usually focused on specific issues such as women's rights or events such as elections-, publish reports, involve themselves in social and political debates, and lobby for the rights of journalists.

ANHRI regularly raises awareness about the situation of imprisoned journalists and supports them and their families. With its current "Consciences and memory program" AFTE builds an archive documenting political events since 2011, thus trying to prevent the loss of knowledge. Furthermore, the project aims to document perspectives which challenge the official narratives about the events in Egypt since the Arab Spring often found in mainstream media. Both organisations are linked to international NGOs that work for media freedom and human rights such as Reporters Without Borders (RWB) or the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Founded in 2011, the Egyptian Media Development Program (EMDP) was the first Egyptian NGO offering training programs for journalists and media managers. Previously, training opportunities were only available from international players such as Deutsche Welle Akademie. In-house training or schools for mid-career training were and still are rarities in the Arab speaking world (Mellor, 2007, p. 61). EMDP offered training all over Egypt as well as in other parts of the Middle East, and with the foundation of the "Egyptian Editors Forum" offered a room for debate on best practices in journalism and media management. In 2017 and in cooperation with the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) and the American University in Cairo (AUC), EMDP launched a glossary on hate speech. The handbook aims to help journalists to avoid the use of hateful language and provides guidance for journalists as well as members of the audience on how to detect hate speech (EMDP, EJN & AUC, 2017). However, as of 2020, EMDP has stopped its activities without further explanation. This only became public as former employees shared the information through social media (see for example Hamed, 2020).

The main challenges for such organizations and initiatives comprise a lack of financial stability, a dependency on international funding as well as harsh policies towards NGOs through a revision of the NGO law in 2014 (Heiss, 2018).

Media legislation

Legal provisions have long been used as a tool to control the Egyptian media scene and punish journalists and outlets who crossed the lines. While the Constitution formally guarantees freedom of expression (namely articles 65 and 68), more than 180 laws from the civil penal code as well as other regulations have since long been used to silence journalists (UNESCO, 2013, p. 35; ANHRI 2012). One way of controlling the media is the process of licensing: Private ownership of daily newspapers and television channels has only been possible since 1996. However, receiving a publishing license is still under the obligation of a plethora of restrictions such as approval by the security apparatus, limitations on shares or registration fees from 100,000 Egyptian pounds for online newspapers to up to six million Egyptian pounds for daily newspapers. During the transition period of 2011 to 2013, the market mushroomed as license restrictions were lifted. But after the change of power in 2013, many outlets were closed with the justification of lacking a license (Richter 2015, p. 137), namely those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Other legal provisions such as harsh sentences for "spreading false information" or "harming national security" have been used repeatedly to silence journalists and stop unwanted reporting. Although NGOs, media experts and the profession itself have repeatedly demanded to change the plethora of laws that obstruct freedom of opinion (Leihs, 2015, p. 74), none of them has been dropped yet.

During the past years, more laws and regulations have been introduced which serve to tighten the grip on outspoken journalists as well as citizens such as the 2015 Counter-Terrorism Law. In 2016, three highly controversial media laws were passed by the parliament to replace former media regulations. The new laws were criticized for giving the Supreme Council for Media Regulation "sweeping, unsanctioned powers" (Mamdouh, 2018). It is required even for non-journalists with a followership of more than 5,000 people to register their online presence, but the

law fails to provide an exact definition of the term "website". The Cybercrime law similarly was criticized during its drafting process for its vague wording and judged by experts as "a total ban on internet use" (Hamama, 2016). The law, which was passed in 2018, was recently used to sentence several women for violating "family values" through their TikTok channels (El-Mahdawy, 2020).

Survey: Media accountability as perceived by Egyptian journalists

This survey is part of a larger pilot study on the perception of media accountability instruments in the MENA region. Around one hundred media workers and experts from nine countries answered questions online and offline on the status quo of media accountability in their respective countries and judged their efficiency and independence. The respondents were asked to answer open-ended as well as multi-level response scale questions. Data collection was in the time frame June/July 2020.

In Egypt, out of sixteen contacted journalists, nine responded. Those participating in the survey come from diverse backgrounds in terms of media type (print, online, broadcast) and ownership (state, private). However, the sample is not representative. A central limitation certainly lies in the proficiency of the English language (language of the questionnaire) of potential respondents. An Arabic questionnaire could have widened the circle of possible participation. Furthermore, the limited response rate needs to be conceptualised within a highly restrictive field for academic research and freedom of expression due to the current political climate in Egypt. Despite the limitations of this study, the following results serve to generate an overall trend in assessing the status quo of media accountability in Egypt. They confirm previous results that underline that the efficiency of self-regulation instruments such as ethical codes or professional

bodies in Muslim countries is limited (Fengler, Eberwein, Lauk, & Leppik-Bork, 2011; Hafez, 2002; Vogt, 2002).

Lack of freedom of speech inhibits media accountability

The respondents agree on the lack of freedom of expression under the current political-legal framework. All nine respondents estimate the practice of self-censorship among their colleagues as either "very high" (7) or "rather high" (2). This indicates the tight margins for freedom of speech and journalists' protection. Pertinent examples on how issue selection and tone of coverage pose limitations on journalists can be seen in the repercussions on independent coverage of protests in the provinces either due to socio-economic reasons or violence by security forces, and reporting Covid-19 (MadaMasr, 2020).

Figure 2.1*: Journalists' application of self-censorship in Egypt*
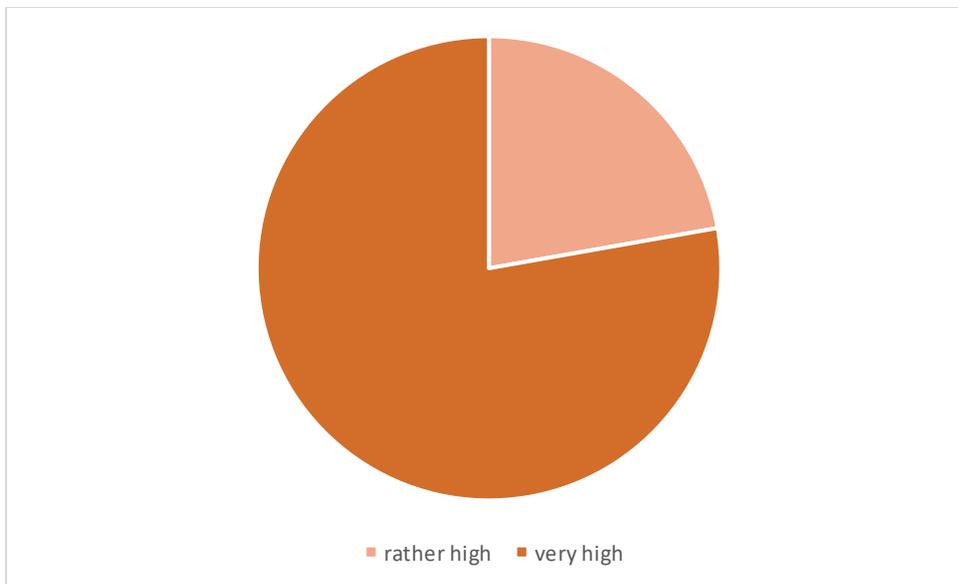
Seven out of nine of the journalists assess that there is no editorial independence in media outlets, while the rest sees it is only partly so. Six out of nine think that in the past three years the

accountability of news media has "strongly deteriorated", while one journalist states it "rather

deteriorated", and another respondent states it "remained stable" and one journalist prefers not to

give an answer. Six out of nine of respondents see that the media-related laws "fully inhibit" the

news media to behave in an accountable way. One response each assesses that Egyptian media

laws "rather inhibit" accountability, "neither support nor inhibit", and "rather support".

When asked about the government-maintained media accountability instruments, the surveyed

journalists name five central institutions (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: *Journalists' awareness of media regulatory instruments initiated/maintained*

by government
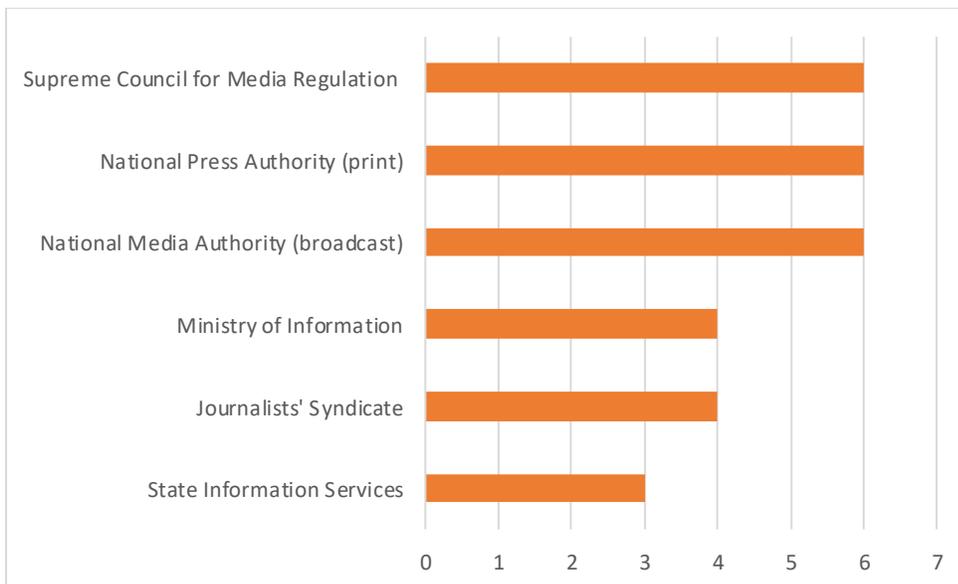
The participants agree on the same actors maintained by the government but diverge on its actual

role and influence. Six out of nine of responding journalists perceive its role as "very low", one

estimates it as "average", and another journalist as "rather high", while one journalist does not give

an answer. Almost all journalists, eight out of nine, reject the statement that the Press/Media

Council is a self-regulatory and independent body. No respondent assesses the Press/Media Council as an actor that has increased the ethical standards in Egyptian journalism. The surveyed journalists are aware that those bodies are not independent as numerous comments show: "Those bodies work in collaboration to implement regulatory instruments and laws to control the media" (J3). "Members of councils/authorities are appointed by the government and are used as a tool to restrict media freedom; even independent bodies fall under the governmental scrutiny" (J7). One longer statement clarifies the current state of limited freedom of speech and its influence on media and journalism:

> "State censorship and military dominance remain the biggest challenges. There can be no independent press, or media accountability, without an overall change in the system. As it stands today, the military and the security services micromanage the media, both private and public." (J2)

In congruence with these responses, most journalists (seven out of nine) agree to the statement that Egypt provides a regulatory framework for audio-visual sector. One respondent does not know, and another does not provide an answer.

Status quo of media accountability instruments and its efficiency

The evaluation of media accountability efficiency by the respondents varies according to the different instruments. Figure 2.3 shows that several media accountability instruments are judged as minimally effective in the Egyptian context. Self-regulative instruments like media NGOs, publishing corrections, journalists' code of ethics or a media company's internal code of ethics seem to be only minimally effective in Egypt. The state-regulated Media Councils and Journalists' Unions are assessed as more efficient.

Figure 2.3: *Journalists' evaluations of media accountability efficiency in Egypt*
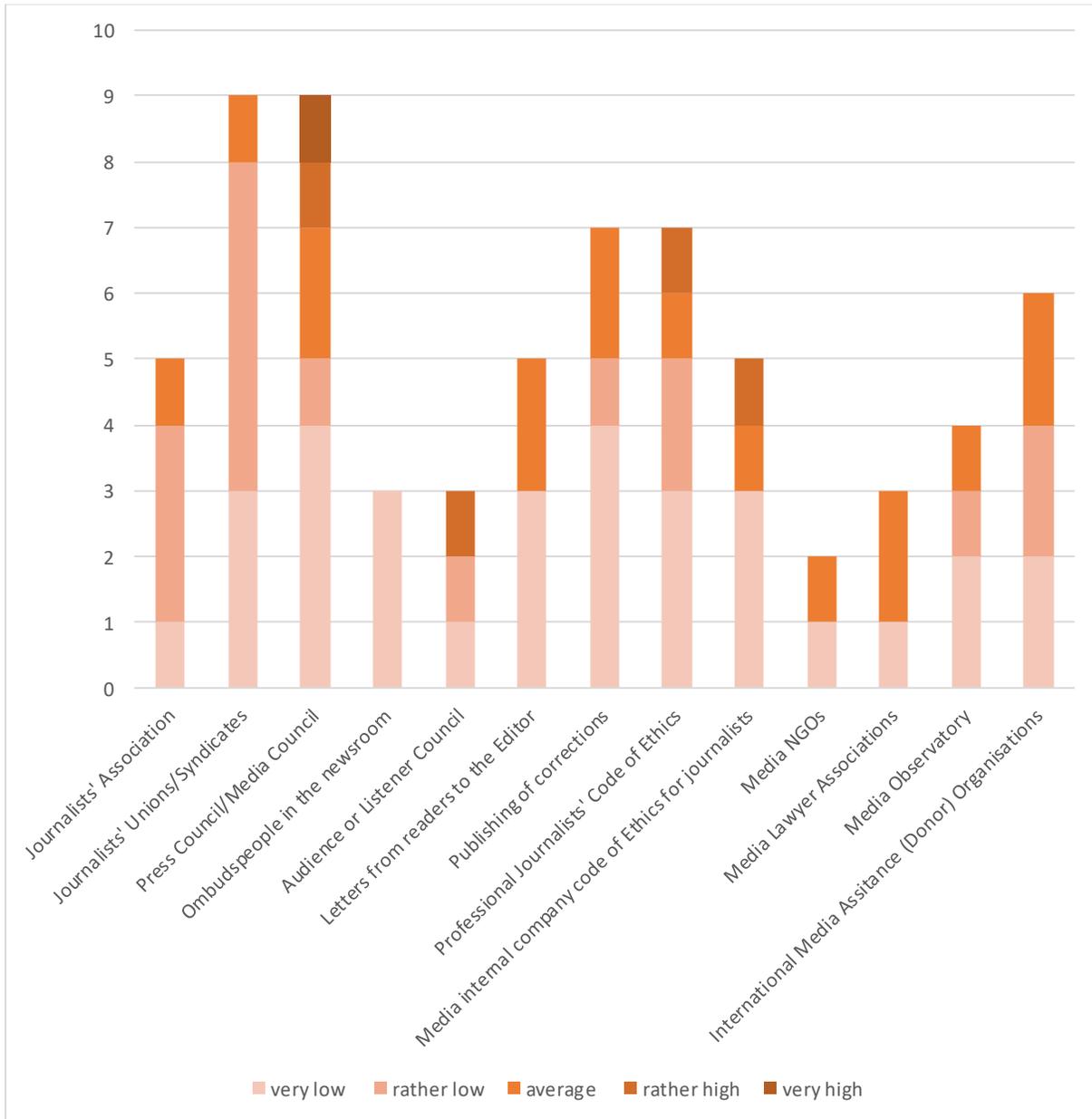
The question on mediation procedures against incorrect media reporting that are settled without court or governmental interference and performed by a Press/Media Council divides the surveyed journalists: While four respondents assess the existence of self-regulation as "rather weak", one judges it as "very weak", and three respondents see it as "average". It is important to note that the term Press/Media Council is not equivalent to the same idea of independent councils

in Europe. As explained in Part I, Egypt's media council invokes the idea of independence and the rule of law but is controlled by the executive. Research shows that journalists wish to practice more self-regulation from within their profession, without clashing with the political regime (AbdelAziz, 2018). The attribution of the journalism crisis differs according to political orientation. Some claim that media accountability and credibility are only by-products of freedom; others see that journalists' misconduct is the reason for a lack of professionalism (Badr, 2020a). Respondents' ratings of the importance of media accountability within Egyptian journalists' set of values and professional culture vary across the spectrum. Three respondents agree with the statement that it is "very important," while one journalist views it as "rather important." Three journalists maintain that media accountability in Egypt is "not important." Two journalists do not give an answer. Only one journalist confirms that his media outlet regularly provides feedback to readers/audience/users related to published journalistic pieces. The other respondents are divided, as three say there were no responses to the audience from their newsrooms and three report that it happened only partly. Two journalists do not give an answer.

Eight out of nine respondents claim that there are no differences in accountability practices between the state-owned media and mainstream private media. Only one journalist perceives a difference. This can be understood against the background of 'media capture' acquisitions by state security organizations, as mentioned by some journalists and described in Figure 2.4 (see also Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Almost all surveyed journalists, seven out of nine, estimate that the government, parliament, and the courts are not open to the media in a fair and equal way. One respondent perceives those institutions as "partly open"; one evaluates them as "open". To understand this evaluation of the different state institutions, one needs to consider harsh legislations and frequent imprisonments of outspoken journalists, as well as the fact that whole

parliament sessions have not been aired - all of which does not fit the transparency doctrine that is established in the Constitution.

Social media rising and confusing new actors

Most of the surveyed journalists (seven out of nine) agrees to the statement that social media are "important" as a forum for debate on quality/misconduct of the news media, while the remaining two journalists see that it is only "partly important".

It is noteworthy that respondents claim that social media is slowly eroding the credibility of the mainstream professional media. Examples include angry social media campaigns against media coverage by launching media-critical hashtags. The audience is a rising but ambivalent power in Egypt: Sometimes successful campaigns on social media push for accountable media coverage. In the meantime, digital communication channels also enable hate speech and mob attacks on journalists.

Sometimes digital tools also are being abused by the state to limit press freedom. The Internet and social media have increasingly been monitored and regulated through surveillance techniques and court orders. Examples include regulating accounts on TikTok, Facebook and Twitter by applying real-life consequences on deviant forms of communication (Badr & Leihs, 2021).

Furthermore, social media poses as a serious and free-of-charge challenge for journalism that Egyptian journalists cannot compete with. As the economics of the press market are weak, and certainly not as strong as in established media markets, newspapers struggle hard with an economic crisis. "The business models of all media outlets are failing" (J3) captures the essence of the fear of economic hardship on news media.

Challenges and needs for media accountability

Despite the massive political challenges for strengthening media accountability (as shown in Table 2.4), the surveyed journalists are also aware of the need to strengthen it. Respondents reveal a dire need for political and economic independence, where freedom of expression and freedom of the press are prevalent values in society and respected by the ruling regime.

Figure 2.4: *Enabling and hindering factors for establishing media accountability*

Supporting factors mentioned by respondents	Hindering factors mentioned by respondents
• Legal factors and media regulating laws • Freedom of information • Political environment • Social and cultural norms • Media accountability organizations, like the Journalists' Syndicate • Audience interaction • Growing digital media sphere and strong social media campaigns • Professional editing before publishing • Technological development	• Political restrictions and limited accountability • Absence of freedoms • Legal system • Military regime that tolerates no dissident media or free flow of information / Media ownership either by state or security apparatus (intelligence agencies) / Media capture • Political polarization • Economic and political factors • Self-censorship • Journalists' bias, lack of professionalism and accuracy, lack of fact-checking in newsrooms / conflict of interest (due to working in more than one medium because of low wages) • Low credibility • Lack of audience research

One journalist makes a reflective statement and points out that the Egyptian government relies on a competing normative media accountability system that does not adhere to liberal values: "Accountability refers to professional standards, the question is to whom. For the state, their perceived national interest dictates the normative value that control the news media" (J4). This intersects with the concept "constructive journalism" (Allam, 2019) indicating that some journalists want to reassure the public after times of political contestations and turmoil. In this vision, journalists need to be independent actors of media accountability that truly push for self-regulation.

Further needs are located on the professional and day-to-day routines level of media and journalism:

- A written code of ethics in all media organizations, known to journalists and binding to them (J1)

- An accountability committee in the Journalists' Syndicate to enable it to have a supportive role in case of complaints (J1)

- Legal changes, for example to eliminate the lack of freedom of information (J9)

- A political will to comply with the constitutional provisions protecting the freedom of the press (J9)

- Editorial and financial independence (J8)

- Strengthening the people/audience through Syndicates, Media Councils/Authorities and regulations (J7)

- Training on knowledge and skills in media accountability (J7)

Conclusion and future recommendations

The status quo of media accountability instruments confirms the paradoxical state of contained media pluralism and crushed independence in Egypt (Richter, 2015): Media accountability instruments cannot thrive in a stifled political climate. While the surveyed journalists are mainly preoccupied with the political and legal challenges, they do not overlook the valid economic concerns that overshadow the whole media system. Looking into Egypt's sustainable media outlets shows that those are either state-owned and therefore subsidized, or dependent on media assistance programs and foreign donors' support. Economic viability beyond both actors is extremely hard to reach as the credibility of the Egyptian media is waning and the relevance and future of its journalism and mass communication programs are being questioned (AbdelAziz, 2020).

Despite the current grim challenges that make independent media accountability difficult, some respondents mentioned the word "shift" several times as a possible game changer for the future directions: A shift is multi-layered and refers to changes in media practice and journalists' commitment towards the audience amid the fluid media ecosystems and volatile situation in the MENA region. The shift is a by-product of the technological advances and the rise of peripheral actors that co-shape the media ecosystem. The era of uncertainty can lead to new dynamics in the mid-to long-term future. Meanwhile, journalists must work within the confines of the media boundaries and cannot dream of making great political breakthroughs. Supporting them means encouraging initiatives from within the profession that do not confront the political regime but rather support the enclaves of professional journalists in their survival amid constrained times.

As political activities, among other types of cultural and social activities are closely monitored by the Egyptian security apparatus, especially those in collaboration with foreign institutions, supporting Egyptian journalists eager to advance their profession is a delicate intent. Any media

development project needs to make sure not to put its participants to risk and should adhere to responsible safety precautions for journalists in constrained fields. The author suggests the following ideas for the road ahead:

- Involve Arab journalists in trainings and support networks for media accountability

- Create (real and digital) spaces for small and big networks of media workers

- collect best-practice examples of media accountability initiatives from the Arab World and publish the collection in Arabic, e.g., in form of directories, handbooks, digital learning courses

- focus on best-practice examples that might be implemented by single journalists, experiment and prove in a cost-efficient way that media accountability pays off and allows for a gradual advance of whole media organisations from within

- offer training for media workers of all levels on a range of issues touching on media accountability, such as audience research, web marketing, social media use, verification practices, or data journalism and crowdsourcing

- address seemingly non-political issues like health communication or other topics from the science and service sections as venues for experimentation with tools of media accountability

- persuade media managers that editorial transparency, journalistic professionalism and knowledge about one's audience help to foster trust and loyalty among the audience and as such to create a financially stable and sustainable media outlet

- and last, but certainly not least: support media outlets and journalists who already push the limits of the regime's censorship, be it by financial means, foreign policy, or moral support.

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Ten years after the Arab Uprisings: Are there any structural changes in the media accountability landscape in Jordan?

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Abstract

When the Arab Uprisings reached Jordan in 2011, social media had become a tool for political transformation and revealed the challenge for traditional mass media to regain trust. In the ensuing years, the relationship between the media and regime were under negotiation and so were new ways for independent instruments of media self-regulation. The paper updates research on media accountability practices from a decade ago by focusing on structural changes in the media accountability landscape in Jordan between 2011 and 2021. It describes the regulatory framework and presents practices of media accountability - established instruments such as press councils, ombudspersons and journalists' associations as well as practices of media accountability run by NGOs and media organizations. It finally analyzes the perceptions of actors involved in media accountability practices on the status quo of media accountability. Although nothing structural has changed since 2011, future activities may build on journalists that support the idea and a variety of experts and organizations that have been active in holding the media to account, some for more than ten years.

Keywords: Jordan, media landscape, media accountability, media regulation, media critique, freedom of expression, media politics, media governance, survey

1. Introduction

This study intends to fill the empty space surrounding the topic of media accountability in

Jordan. Since our research a decade ago (Hawatmeh & Pies, 2010; Pies & Madanat, 2011;

Pies, 2014)[15], a lot has happened in the socio-political and legal arena in the country. Since

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[15] The research was part of the international comparative research project MediaAcT, which investigated Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe, Jordan and Tunisia between 2010 and 2013 and was funded by the EU. See MediaAcT (n. d).

independence in 1946, Jordan has managed to navigate a crafty chronic policy of brinksmanship amidst a volatile region (Ryan, 2018). Ethnic-based patriotism and partisan politics that have been the norm for decades came to an end with the onset of the Arab Uprisings which started in North Africa in the late 2010. Jordanian youth departed their anachronist nationalism reframing it in terms of economic reform, human rights and loyalty to the homeland in lieu of fidelity to the king (Doughan, 2020). They were empowered by social media tools, which since then have become an important channel for receipting news in Jordan. While in 2010, the date of our first research, websites had just begun to flourish and were gaining ground against the use of television news (UNESCO, 2015a), in 2019 social media had already become the major source of news among the youth aged 18-24 (89% social media vs. 79% TV) and had almost equaled among all Jordanians (81% social media vs. 85% TV; Dennis, Martin, & Hassan, 2019).

Although the "Media Use in the Middle East" survey only provides comparable data on news consumption for the years 2017 and 2019, this short period already indicates the fundamental change with which media organizations had to cope. Another challenge is indicated by the same study: people's perception of news credibility fell from 66% in 2013 to 42% in 2019 (Dennis, Martin, & Hassan, 2019). In addition to a general loss of news credibility, a national survey in 2019 shows that 57% of Jordanians trust the media as their prime source of information about local events compared to two third three years earlier mentioned by a Gallup poll in 2016 (CSS, 2019).

Not only media organizations but also state institutions have been challenged by the developments following the Arab Uprisings. Their reactions have proved the Jordanian state would never live up to the pristine political model of constitutional monarchy as

enshrined in the constitution. The regional upheaval gave consecutive governments an unexpected chance to enact constitutional amendments in May 2016, a move described by the former lower parliament speaker Abdul Karim al-Dughmi as Jordan becoming an "absolute monarchy" and "a coup against the political system" (as cited in Sowell, 2016). The resulting scraping of political life gave the government further teeth to enact restricting laws. The bill went back and forth between government and parliament, the latter requesting an accurate definition of hate speech, and accusing the government of recanting on its initial promise to open dialogue on the amendments, let alone online campaigns accusing the government of inducing nebulous definition of hate speech and fake news, and "circumventing popular demands to mitigate its blatant infringement on the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the constitution". After the parliament had been convinced, the government enacted the Cybercrime Law despite ongoing concerns from the media sector and media freedom activist (section 2.1 of this paper).

The law has a chilling effect on the freedom of expression. Subsequent governments also issued several gag orders and the apprehension of journalists who cover sensitive issues such as the Teachers Syndicate's strike (Madanat & Pies, 2022). The most recent examples from 2021 refer to the "sedition" related to Prince Hamza, the king's half-brother, and the king's properties in safe haven countries, aka the Pandora Papers (Ersan, 2021, October 4). Mohammad Ersan, chief editor of Radio Al-Balad, says the latest crack down on the media was through calls and threats by the security apparatus against journalists covering or aiming to cover the Pandora Papers (Ersan, 2021, May 9).

Such practices are part of a so-called "soft containment policy" and ironically let officials praise the media for being wise and responsible as in the case of Tareq Abu

Ragheb, director of the government-controlled media commission, who explained: "The media was not pressured at all not to publish the documents of the Pandora files, but what happened is that Jordanian media realized there was no value to this information and therefore avoided making the mistake of publishing it" (as cited in Ersan, 2021, October 4). In this case, the soft-containment practices to hold the media to account (to the official definition of public interest) came clearly from a state-representative. Hence, it would not fall into the definition of media accountability as outlined by Bertrand (2000) as "any non-state means" to hold the media to account. In other cases, the state attribution is not that explicit. Tribe leaders, entrepreneurs, party members etc. are also among those practicing "soft-containment" (Al-Quds Center, 2009, 2012[16]). As some of these actors are also influential in the political arena without being explicitly representing the Jordanian state, Bertrand's distinction between state and non-state accountability mechanism becomes challenging. The nature of media system and particularly ownership structure even aggravate it. Media ownership and political powers often fall in one hand; journalists are at the same time politicians or in the same cahoots, which is characteristic for the blurring borders of the journalistic and the political field. Therefore, a clear distinction of state and non-state media accountability practices is hard to make for the Jordanian context - and probably for authoritarian contexts in general. This doesn't mean that there aren't any non-state or independent actors holding the media to account, but they are few and need thorough analysis in terms of: How are the media accountability actors positioned within the regime and towards the state? What are they exactly holding to account and with what

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[16] A summary of the studies conducted by the Al-Quds Center for Political Studies on Soft Containment and its Effect on the Independence of Media can be found here:
http://www.jmm.jo/application/uploads/assets/jmm_1339592473_2435.pdf

kind of intention? And finally, for assessing the resonance of media accountability practices, it needs clarification what kind of resources they have.

Jordan economically depends on international aid. This is why it positions itself as a modern and loyal ally to Western powers and tries to fulfill international conditions for example from the International World Fund (IWF). The Jordanian regime plays a balancing role in foreign as well as in domestic politics. Hence, Jordanian politics always has an eye on their international image and imitates democratic institutions by keeping a tight rein on them. Compared to its regional neighbours, Jordan has witnessed a long period of peace, allows for a a relatively vivid NGO landscape, some political freedoms[17] and a high literacy rate. This is coupled with further factors that enable an environment conducive to media accountability such as a relatively widespread and stable infrastructur allowing access to the Internet, an active social media culture and international support to media literacy.

This contradictory background necessitates an update to the status of media accountability practices in Jordan. This is why the article aims to find out whether any structural changes in the media accountability landscape in Jordan have taken place since 2011. To make it comparable to our earlier research we work with the same definition by Fengler, Eberwein, and Leppik-Bork (2011) of media accountability as "any informal institutions, both offline and online, performed by both media professionals and media users, which intends to monitor, comment on and criticize journalism and seeks to expose and debate problems of journalism:

- at the individual level (e.g., plagiarism of a single [piece of] journalism, misquotations in an article)

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[17] Historically it is built on a decade-long amicable conflict resolution between people and the regime vis-a-vis the case in other Arab countries in the region. But this is in decline.

- at the level of media routines (e.g., the acceptance of corruption among journalists)

- at the organizational level (e.g., PR influence on editorial decisions in a newsroom), and

- at the extra-media level (e.g., state repressions against journalism)" (p.20).

We describe the regulatory framework (section 2 of this paper), and present practices of media accountability, "established instruments" (Fengler et al., 2011, p. 9) such as press councils, ombudspeople and journalists' associations as well as practices of media accountability run by NGOs and media organizations (section 3 of this paper). In a final step, we analyze the perceptions of actors involved in media accountability practices on the status quo of media accountability (section 4 of this paper) before concluding our results (section 4 of this paper).

The research presented here is part of a wider project initiated by the German Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism on media accountability in the MENA region. In a first step, the authors explored in a desk study conditions for media accountability and organizations interested in or practicing media accountability. Additional expert interviews within Jordan helped to identify such organizations (Madanat & Pies, 2022). An explorative survey aimed to identify perceptions among media professionals on the status quo of media accountability. The survey was conducted on behalf of the Erich Brost Institute in July 2020. The list of potential respondents included journalists, representatives from different media organizations and NGOs as well as bloggers who are involved in practices of media accountability. Though the sample is not representative it allows to draw first assumptions for future research.

2. The Regulatory Framework

Holding the media to account is still to a great extent a way to execute power over the media instead of reminding them on their public duties. This is why an important instrument of holding the media to account in Jordan is still the law.

2.1 Media Legislation

Thirteen laws and their amendments[18] directly or indirectly regulate the media in Jordan (UNESCO 2015a; Pies 2015b):

1) Press and Publications Law (1998) and amendments

2) Penal Code (1960) and amendments

3) Protection of State Secrets and Documents Law (1971)

4) Access to Information Law (2007)

5) Contempt of Courts Law (1959)

6) State Security Code Law (1959)

7) Jordan Press Association Law (1998) and amendments

8) Jordan Television Corporation Law (2000)

9) Provisional Law for Audio-Visual Media (2002)

10) Prevention of Terrorism Law (2006) and amendments

11) Jordan News Agency Law (2009)

12) Cybercrime Law (2015)

13) Telecommunications Law (1995) and amendments

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[18] The years given here, refer to their first enactment. Many have been amended since then several times. All laws can be found in the official search engine for Jordanian laws (ديوان التشريع والرأي [Legislation and Opinion Bureau], n.d.).

Freedom of opinion, expression and the press are guaranteed by the Constitution, however, these positive pledges fall short of international guarantees (UNESCO, 2015a). International press freedom indices rank Jordan as in "difficult situation", and net freedom status as "partly free" with 49 points out of 100 (Freedom House, 2020; Reporters without Borders, 2020; Repucci, n. d.).

Three laws have given consecutive governments' teeth to directly control media content, the Press and Publication Law (PPL), the Penal Code and the Protection of State Secrets and Documents Law. All have been revised at least once since 1989, when the late King Hussein of Jordan had started a tentative process of political reform. A tradition of taboos to cover - even on social media - are the royal family, the army, the security apparatus and the judiciary. Jordanian youth also pinpoint to the government and parliament as immune to criticism in the media as well as on social media (UNESCO, 2015b). The PPL and the Access to Information Law guarantee the right to access information. The former applies to Jordanian journalists, and the latter for everyone.

Though this guarantee cannot be taken for granted (e.g. other countries in the region don't have it), journalists identify the laws specifying this right as a main hurdle in their work (UNESCO, 2015a). Academic professor Abeer Alnajjar (2021) has recently pointed out that "lack of home coverage of the royal family's biggest public rift in decades reveals the dire state of access to information in the kingdom."

Since 2011, the amendment of the PPL and the introduction of the Cybercrime Law evoked harsh critique from local and international organizations, NGOs and net activists. The PPL was amended in 2012 to consider published comments as part of the newsroom content, therefore subject to legal accountability. It also ruled that all publications -

including private blogs - which publish articles on political and social issues in Jordan fall under the legislation of the PPL. As a consequence, blogs need to name a chief editor being a member of the Jordan Press Association and present financial reserves (Almasri, 2015; Pies, 2018). In 2010, the Temporary Information Systems Crimes Act21 No. 30 was passed, which was transformed into a permanent law under the name of the Cybercrime Law22 No. 27 in 2015. Two years later, the government proposed changes to the Cybercrime Law and in September 2018, the parliament referred the amendments to the parliamentary legal committee for discussion.

In the amendments, the government proposed a broad definition of hate speech. The proposed amendments were rejected by multiple unions, parties and international organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and were also criticized at Jordan's Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva in November 2018 (Kaye, 2018). The Jordanian government eventually withdrew the amended bill in December 2018 but announced a second draft law within 48 hours without consultation with stakeholders such as MPs, journalists and civil society. The House of Representatives rejected the new draft law on February 19, 2019. Its current status is unclear, but it is one of the tools to further limit the freedom of expression (ARIJ, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

2.2. Broadcast Regulator

Broadcast regulation has been restructured several times since the opening of the broadcasting sector in 2002 by the Audio-Visual Media Law and its bylaw. While the state broadcaster Jordan Television (JTV) is still directly controlled by the government and Al-Mamlaka TV established by royal decree, the private audio-visual sector is ruled by

regulations and instructions that also gave the base for establishing the Jordan Media Commission (MC).

According to the Audio-Visual Law, the MC is not independent from the government, neither financially nor structural (Article 3(b)). The MC "Director shall be appointed by virtue of the Council of Ministers" (Article 6(b)) and "shall be responsible before the Minister for the progress of the Commission's works" (Article 8; Audio-Visual Media Law, 2015; Mendel, 2016). Yet, interviewees noted that interference has been rare (Y. Shukkeir and M. Qutaishat, personal communication, December 2019) [19] and the MC has been able to play an "informal role in resolving conflicts between the public and the licensed outlets", mainly through "the moral authority of the former MC Director [Mohammad Qutaishat]" (D. Kuttab, personal communication, December 2019). [20] According to Article 4 of the Audio-Visual Media Law (2015) the MC is responsible for:

a) Developing and regulating the audio-visual media sector in the kingdom, as well as working on the creation of an investment atmosphere therein.

b) Studying the license applications.

c) Monitoring the works of the licensees.

d) Approving the Recorded Materials and granting the licenses required for their display and circulation places according to the provisions of this law and the bylaws emanated from.

e) Approving the offices for the correspondents of Radio and TV Stations under a special bylaw issued for this purpose.

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[19] Interviews in December 2019 with Yahia Shukkeir and Mohammad Qutaishat, former Head of the MC.
[20] Interview in December 2019 with Daoud Kuttab.

f) Licensing the technical equipment and means used for Radio and TV broadcasting works in coordination with the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC).

Getting a private broadcasting license is bound to several conditions including the content of programming. Licenses for political news are extremely expensive and acquisition and renewal depends a lot on the "well-behaviour" of the respective outlet (Pies, 2015a).

Electronic and print media licenses are not bound to any content-wise regulations, but only to financial and organizational requirements.

3. Practices of media accountability

3.1 Press Council/Media Council

The Jordan Press Association (JPA) runs the JPA Complaints Committee, through which people complain about JPA members. The Jordan Press Association Law (JPA Law) stipulates that Jordanians with education and/or relevant experience (including teaching experience in journalism or media, or relevant work in the public sector) are entitled to join the JPA as members. Though staffed mostly with media professionals and legal practitioners, this quasi-self-regulatory body still decides on the basis of law: The normative reference, the JPA code of ethics, is part of the JPA Law. The Committee's decisions have the force of law, too, and can apply sanctions against JPA members, such as withdrawing their membership. The decisions of the Complaint Committee may inflict non-pecuniary gradual sanctions such as warning, reproof, temporary suspension from practicing the profession, or permanent suspension in case of major violations. Journalists can appeal against the rulings at the Administrative Court, which has the power to hear

governmental and government related decisions and overturn them (Madanat & Pies, 2022).

As a reaction to the liberalized TV market, another complaints committee was established in 2015 through article 4 of the Audio-Visual Media Law (2015). The Media Commission (MC) was to form an experts committee to deal with people's complaints against private broadcast content. The head of the MC Complaints Committee is elected by the Committee members in his personal capacity. Yet, the Committee members (nine experts) are appointed by the MC director. There are also legal means available for sanctions. The audio-visual licensing agreement set by the Audio-Visual Media Law allows for banning programmes.

Instruments like the JPA's and the MC' Complaints Committee are an extra-juridical route for complaints meant to help in the avoidance of legal actions against journalists. The appointment of their members is not an independent professional decision nor are their sanctions. Therefore, it cannot be called a self-regulatory body. Yet, experts point out that wisely appointed people may serve as a kind of ombudsperson between the public and media professionals as well as between media professionals.

3.2 Ombudspersons

Radio Al-Balad established a Listeners' Club, which is involved in the programming cycle, the production and engaging the audience. The Listeners' Club functions as a balancing institution between Radio Al-Balad's newsroom and its audience. Therefore, it takes over ombudsperson-specific tasks (Madanat & Pies, 2022).

Many media offer their audience a way of complaining, e.g. through a correction box underneath the page or an e-mail for complaints. In most cases, the chief editor is

responsible for proceeding with the complaints. But no media organization has yet established the position of an ombudsperson (Madanat & Pies, 2022; UNESCO, 2015a). This is despite the concept was suggested to Jordanian media owners. Experts, familiar with the process, mention several reasons for the failure of implementing: One is, that the majority of the media is either owned directly or indirectly by the government or by businesspeople close to the government. "This has meant that the proper and healthy independence of media has been absent in most media outlets. Media owners rather than editors make the final decision and as a result, editors and journalists start to practice self-censorship as they see that higher powers often interfere with their editorial work". Another reason mentioned is the lack of freedom and hence a lack of a self-regulatory culture, which also has hindered the establishment of a robust and independent syndicate or a real self-regulatory press council. Finally, an ombudsperson is considered to cause "incalculable situations" (D. Kuttab, and Y. Shukkeir, personal communication, July 2020), which media organizations in authoritarian context rather try to avoid.[21]

3.3 Professional Journalists Associations and Unions

The Jordan Press Association is the only body representing Jordanian journalists. It was established in 1953 by law in order to improve professional standards and to support the social security of its members. Therefore, it functions as a professional association and a union at the same time. The JPA has been rather apolitical compared to other professional associations that sometime have taken over extra-parliamentary oppositional roles. Only recently, it organized a campaign together with media NGOs and managed to inflict a "severe defeat" to a proposal by the Media Council director (a former opposition figure) to

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[21] E-mail communication to the authors in July 2020 with Daoud Kuttab, General Manager of the Community Media Network and Yahia Shukkeir, Head of the Audio-visual Complaints Committee.

impose more financial and license regulations on social media (Badareen, 2021). There traditionally has been an inconsistency in the membership rules. Defining who is a journalist is one issue, with which the JPA has been struggling to solve in recent years. Another is related to attempts for freeing itself from the image of being an extended arm of the government and whether it is the right body to impose instruments of media accountability (Madanat & Pies, 2022; Pies, 2015b).

3.4 NGOs and media related organizations

Actors from the centre of political power have a strong say in holding the media to account in Jordan not only through formal or legally bound media accountability institutions. Within the political power system there are actors with differing interests, e.g. royal court, government, security apparatus, economic elites, tribal leaders, oppositional politicians, who also use informal ways of holding the media to account: State media are internally held to account by politicians from the respective governments; some previous MPs owned media organizations and used them for their own political interests; individual politicians practice soft containment, go to court or complain about the coverage mostly to the chief editor (Al-Quds Center, 2009, 2012).

Media monitoring initiatives initiated by actors from the political power centre, such as Akeed and Haggak Tiraf, underline that assessment. Akeed is run by the Jordan Media Institute, which was found by HRH Rym Ali and receives funding from the Hashemite Court and the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. Its aim is to pinpoint to "the wrong news" instead of claiming "the right news" (Akeed, n.d.; Jordan Media Institute, n.d.; T. Darwish, personal communication, December 2019). [22] Haggak

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[22] Interview in December 2019 with Taha Darwish, Managing Editor of Akeed.

Tiraf was established by the former Minister of Information to fight rumours and is now run by the Prime Ministry (Aljadid, 2018; Haggak Tiraf, n.d.). Both institutions are directly or indirectly related to important political players and have come under criticism for their selectivity in monitoring and the ways of verifying news (L. Ejeilat, Y. Shukkeir and D. Kuttab, personal communication, December 2019).[23] One private youth-initiated platform is Fatabayyano.net. Registered in Jordan in 2014 and launched as a Facebook page (Fatabyyano, n.d.), it is now a pan-Arab news fact checker aimed at purifying Arabic content on the Internet from rumors, false news and myths. Fatabayyano[24] relies on a partnership with Facebook to monitor the most popular posts shared on Facebook and Instagram.

Therefore, it is important to have a close look at the independence of organizations and initiatives that claim to hold the media to account to live-up with the criteria of media accountability instruments as Bertrand (2000) has defined them as "any non-state means of holding the media to account" (p. 107). We have identified the following examples, that mainly aim at contributing to a journalistic professional development or act "on behalf" of their audience.

7iber.com

7iber.com is an organization that started as citizen blog in 2007. Since 2009 it is registered as an online media magazine that seeks to promote "an open society that upholds values of accountability, rule of law, human rights, and pluralism". 7iber.com conducts in-depth

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[23] Interviews with Lina Ejeilat, Co-Founder/Editor of 7iber.com; Yahia Shukkeir, Head of Freedoms Committee of Jordan Press Association and Head of Audiovisual Complaints Committee of Media Commission; Daoud Kuttab.

[24] Fatabayyano, investigate in Arabic, wittily took its brand name from the Quran (49:6) "O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful." See: Qur'an Wiki (n.d.).

multimedia journalism, critical analysis and public conversation. The magazine has a strong focus on responsive practices involving users to comment and contribute to the media landscape in Jordan. Its initial aim was to hold the media to account for what they don't cover (7iber.com, n.d.).

Al Hudood

Al Hudood is an Arabic website based in London with the purpose of "creating a certain amount of media literacy". Established in Jordan in 2013 it first mocked Jordanian news before it spread to other countries of the Middle East, too. They invite their audience to grant the Al Hudood Price for news that are worth making fun of. Then, they present the news and wish it were fake, but the news proves factual. Thus, they contribute to the media accountability landscape in Jordan by criticizing the media with satire (Al Hudood, n.d.).

Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ)

Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalists (ARIJ) was founded in 2005 and is based in Amman. Its aim is to support "independent, quality and professional journalism, by offering training, media coaching, mentoring, funding and networking opportunities with local and international media outlets." With their activities ARIJ enables investigative reporting, which is not widespread in most Arab countries including Jordan. Thus, it contributes to the media accountability landscape in Jordan by holding the media to account for what they otherwise would not cover (ARIJ, n.d.).

Centre for Defending the Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ)

The Centre for Defending the Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ) was established in 1998. Since 2005 it publishes an annual status of media freedom in Jordan, the CDFJ Media

Monitor, which focuses on hate speech by analysing the four daily newspapers and ten electronic news websites. For the year 2020, the report "Restricted Media" criticizes the effects of the above mentioned "soft-containment" policy on media organizations: "The editorial departments (the editor-in-chief, managing editor, and desk editors) are now carrying out tribal censorship and the revision content, and deleting or modifying what they deem to be contrary to the directions of the state and the government." (CDFJ, 2020). Besides, it supports journalists through its Legal Aid Unit in media law issues. The CDFJ is also involved in projects and activities concerning media governance and self-regulation. In 2007, it was among the first organizations working out a code of ethics for media professionals for election campaign coverage (CDFJ, n.d.).

Radio Al-Balad

Radio Al-Balad (formerly known as Ammannet), run by the Community Media Network (CMN), established a Listeners' Club. In addition, it runs a program produced and presented by taxi driver Mohammad Abu Safieh and his colleagues. People are perceived as partners in making the news. They contribute to critical discourse and reflection within the newsroom as Walid Husni, editor-chief stresses: "We differ in opinions and criticize each other in the context of respect and on the basis of freedom of disagreement. But Ammannet remains a free space for opinions, disagreement and agreement" (Husni, 2021). This ambition is transformed into practice by a focus on hyperlocal-news, and thus contributes topics that would otherwise been left aside in the Jordanian public (Community Media Network, n.d.).

Sahafi.jo

The website sahafi.jo was established in 2009. It is almost exclusively dedicated to reporting and analysing issues related to the media scene in Jordan and the Arab World. Sahafi.jo provides a resource about journalism and media issues in Jordan. Its key aims are to build up knowledge of the media profession and to keep track of developments and changes in the field of journalism. Thus, it paves the way for well-grounded media analysis and criticism (Sahafi.jo, n.d.).

4. Perceptions of media accountability practices

The following section outlines the results of a survey conducted on behalf of the Erich Brost Institute in July 2020. We sent out the pre-designed questionnaire via e-mail to 21 people, of whom 10 answered. The list of potential respondents included journalists, representatives from different media organizations and NGOs as well as bloggers who are all involved in practices of media accountability. The sample is not representative. The authors of this report have been studying media accountability practices in Jordan for more than ten years and have published extensively on the issue (Hawatmeh & Pies, 2010; Madanat & Pies, 2022; Pies, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Pies & Madanat, 2011). We had interviewed the most important actors in the field of media accountability in Jordan in semi-structured face-to-face interviews already in December 2019 for a research project. This is probably the reason why we witnessed a certain "survey fatigue" among potential respondents for the recent project. Despite that, those answers we received mostly underline tendencies we had found already in December 2019.

2.1 Self-censorship is considered high

One crucial result refers to self-censorship among journalists (Q3), which is perceived high by most respondents. 6 out of 10 said the impact of self-censorship is very high, 2 said it is rather high and only 2 consider it to be average. As main reasons for that, respondents mentioned harassment, prosecutions and imprisonment of journalists and media workers as well as "censorship imposed by the editorial departments". The culture of fear and legal uncertainty (particularly in terms of vague terminology of laws) is therefore mentioned by all respondents as an important factor limiting the news media to act freely (Q2). Only one respondent confirmed that media outlets have editorial independence (Q10), 4 rejected and 5 said it was partly available.

While 9 out of 10 respondents see a difference in media accountability practice between private and official media[25], the questionnaire did not ask in which way. From earlier research we know that the main actors holding the media to account differ while different powers within the political system (e.g. security apparatus, government, royal court) directly hold official media to account, economic actors intervene much more into private commercial media. Yet, we cannot draw a clear line between official and private media in terms of media accountability practices tackling the interests of the audience or citizens. Only the private non-profit media are being held to account by their audiences to a great extent.

2.2 Efficiency of media accountability instruments is evaluated low

The "fatigue" does obviously not only refer to the survey on media accountability but on media accountability instruments itself. In a representative survey among journalists in

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[25] We changed the term "state-owned media" in the original questionnaire to "official media" because it is the locally used term that better describes the differences in media ownership in Jordan.

Jordan on media accountability in 2010, the following media accountability practices were evaluated as having a high or a rather high impact on journalists' behaviour: laws regulating the media (58%) and company editorial guidelines (72%). Further media accountability instruments such as regulatory rules, journalism education, criticism on Twitter or Facebook, professional codes of ethics and journalists' blogs were perceived influential by more than a third of the respondents (Pies, 2014).

In our recent survey we find only one instrument, Media NGOs, which evokes at least a certain optimism of impacting media to be accountable in Jordan. Media NGOs received 4 times a "rather high" efficiency evaluation, once "average" and 5 times very or rather low efficiency (see Figure 1)[26].

Figure 1: *Evaluated Efficiency of Media Accountability Instruments in Jordan*

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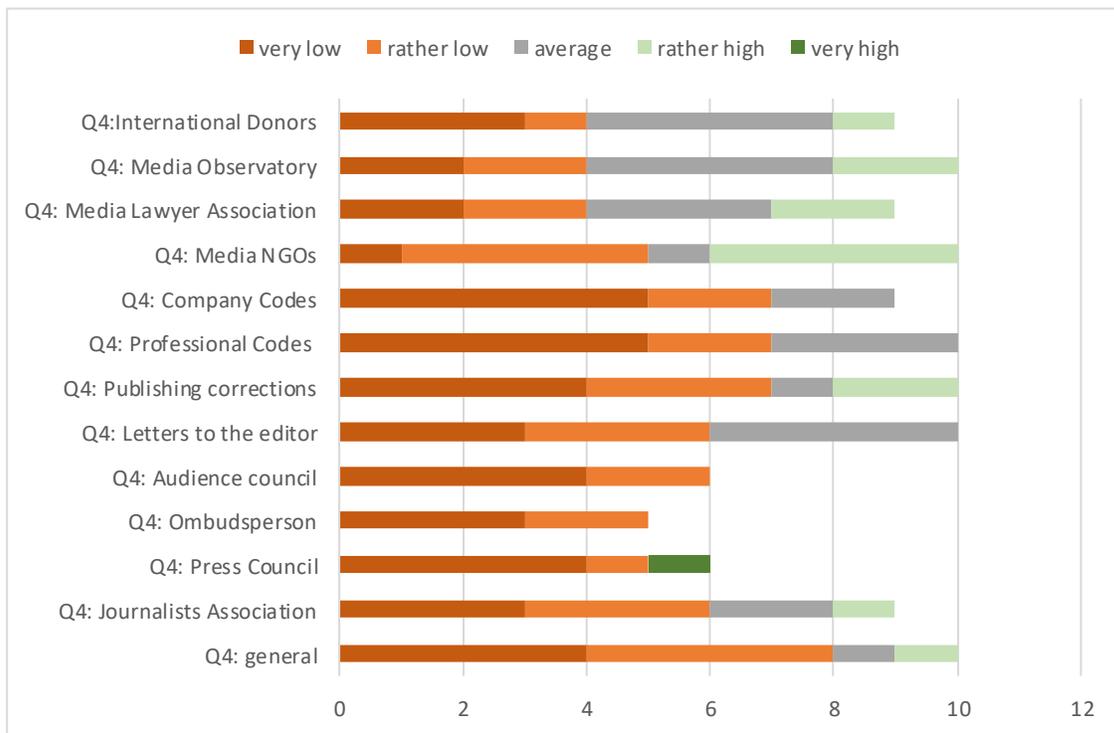
[26] Missing votes to 9 are "No answer"

Media Lawyer Associations', Media Observatory's and Correction Publishing's efficiency were evaluated "rather high" by only 2 out of 10 respondents, and received average evaluation by 3, 4 and 2 respectively. The "very high" efficiency rating of Press Councils by one respondent refers to the non-independent Media Commission (MC), which cannot be considered a self-regulatory body (see Chap. I.1 on Press Council). All in all, the evaluated efficiency of media accountability instruments is very low or rather low.

This might be related to a generally low evaluation of already established self-regulatory procedures in the country (Q13): 3 respondents evaluate them very weak, 4 rather weak and 2 average. But that does not mean that future initiatives for strengthening media accountability are in vain. In contrast to the low evaluation of yet established self-regulatory procedures, most respondents certify Jordanian journalists having a mind-set and professional culture, in which media accountability plays a very important (6) or rather important (2) role. Only two respondents doubt that (rather unimportant = 1, unimportant = 1). The traditionally responsible culture of journalism in Jordan is also mentioned as an enabling factor for media accountability practices.

2.3 Social media: An important enabling factor for media accountability

8 respondents out of 10 affirm the statement that "Social media are important as a forum for debate on quality or misconduct of the news media", only one disagrees and another says they are "partly" important. Social media is explicitly mentioned in an open question asking for enabling factors for media accountability culture in Jordan. One respondent wrote, "Social media is a tool for citizens to practice freedom of speech". Individual media observers and critics use Facebook to criticize media content, media policy and editorial

decision, for example (Madanat & Pies, 2022). In the case of the unpublished Pandora Paper investigations, Facebook was the place to criticize not only state-pressure but also media organizations.

Media monitor Ahmad Abu Hamad (2021) exclaimed:

> No Jordanian press organization, including those with a different voice (7iber, Ammannet, Jo24) published anything about the Pandora Papers' investigation. Even the Jordan-based ARIJ network that worked on six investigations related to the documents never published anything about the aspect related to Jordan. The situation is terrifying; the Jordanian journalist is imprisoned in a prison without walls or bars". Investigative journalist Musab Shawabkeh (2021) wonders "What is the meaning of 'reformist' outputs when the local media are terrorized, and people are secretly whispering what the foreign media is reporting about #Pandora Papers and the king's estate? There is no reform without freedom of expression, press and publication, transparency and good governance, oversight and accountability. Freedom is a need that cannot be postponed (Hamad, 2021).

What is exemplified by the two Facebook posts is also reflected in the respondents' perception: Social media is mentioned as an open space for displaying the diversity of Jordanian society, which is neither reflected in news media content nor valued. A generally high literacy rate and wide internet accessibility support this optimistic view.

First results from an ongoing exploration of media accountability practices via Facebook reveal another site of the story (Madanat, 2021). Facebook posts written mostly by journalists and media critiques show cynicism as a common feature. Another is that the comments defend the government's crackdown on the freedom of press/speech when it comes to religious issues. Another observation is the users' penchant to tackle the subject

of the news or article instead of referring to journalistic practices such the selection of arguments, transparency of sources, accurate information etc. This is a tell-tale of the lack of basic knowledge and education about professional norms in the media, something - ironically - the government is up to mend by inducing media literacy into school curricula.

2.4 Restrictive and vague laws are the most limiting factor for media accountability

More than ten laws directly affect the performance of news media in Jordan. Although the constitution guarantees freedom of the press, it falls short of international standards. Laws are restrictive and use vague terminologies causing uncertainties and anxieties among journalists. This is why respondents mentioned laws as the most effective instrument of holding the media to account *to the political system* and at the same time the most limiting factor for any practices of holding the media to account *to citizens or the audience.* Harassment and prosecution of journalists by security forces, politicians and tribesmen intensify the culture of fear, which goes along with a mostly restrictive editorial culture. One respondent called it the "editorial censorship" in contrast to the "state censorship". As a consequence, respondents strongly call for a reform of laws effecting the media.

Another important factor mentioned by the interviewees that still limits professional and hence ethical reporting is the problem of accessing information. Despite an access of information law, state institutions still practice a culture of hiding information instead of making them transparent to the public. Therefore, the spread of rumours and

false information - particularly via social media - is a problem for journalists as their means of investigating such information are limited, too (Al Qadi, 2014).[27]

Laws do not only have an effect on the media content, but they also cause a structural marginalization of non-official, e.g., private media. Interviewees see that a law regulating a fair and open competition is missing. This is why funding of private media organizations is another important obstacle for media accountability practices in Jordan. One idea mentioned in the survey to improve the situation is to convince media outlets to take audience feedback seriously. Furthermore, a strong journalists association - that could press for true reforms - is missing. The existing Jordan Press Association rather increases imbalances instead of levelling them out. This is why one respondent suggests to form a second "powerful" journalists' organization.

On the journalists' side, some respondents criticize a lack of professional competence. This is why some of the ideas how to improve media accountability practices in Jordan refer to the individual level of journalists, such as promoting professional ethics or rising awareness of ethical issues. Establishing a true self-regulatory media council could be of help for that as one respondent suggested. It should not only be independent but should also be staffed with professionally experienced and widely respected members.

Finally, one respondent pleaded for cultural awareness of accountability within the Jordanian society as a whole. He criticizes the hypocrisy of people who demand powerful people be held accountable but assault the government when one of his own relatives is apprehended. The co-opted and contained practices of media accountability in the interest

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[27]The CDFJ reported a decline in media freedom violations from 2017 and attributed it primarily to self-censorship and the government's denial of access to journalists in covering sit-ins and protests during the year

of a certain political fraction have also let the audience doubt about the normative relevance

of media accountability as a whole or see it as a tool to fight for their own interests. As one

interviewee mentioned: "The public who praises our work for verifying a news is the same

who later on publishes another with the pre-knowledge that it was fake. But they do it

because it contains a political stance that they stand with. They also attack us for correcting

a news whose outcome is of the benefit of the government. They say, leave it uncorrected!"

(I. Sawalha, personal communication, December 2019).[28]

Figure 2: *Overview of Enabling and Limiting Factors for Media Accountability*

Enabling Factors Mentioned by Respondents	Limiting Factors Mentioned by Respondents
- The tradition of journalism to operate in a responsible manner - High literacy rate - Wide internet accessibility - Fundamental journalism training, but missing culture of lifelong learning - Diversity in society, though it is neither reflected in media content nor valued - Social media as a tool to practice freedom for citizens	- Laws do not respect media freedoms and use vague terminology - Harassment and prosecution by the security apparatus, politicians and tribesmen - Imprisonment - Restrictive editorial culture (editorial censorship) - Marginalization of non-official media - Lack of continuous funding that allows for a certain margin of editorial independence - Lack of competence of journalists - Information monopolies by state institutions despite the access to info. law - Weak professional organization (the Jordan Press Association) - Lack of accountability culture in Jordan

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[28] Interview in December 2019 with Islam Sawalha, Editor of Saheh Khabarak.

5. Conclusions and ideas

When the Arab Uprisings reached Jordan in 2011, social media had become a tool for political transformation and revealed the challenge for traditional mass media to regain trust. In the ensuing years, the relationship between the media and regime were under negotiation and so were new ways for independent instruments of media self-regulation (Pies, 2014).Yet, a few years of prospects for political emancipation following the Arab Uprisings in 2011 did not produce any noticeable advancement in holding the media to account. Concerning media legitimacy in Jordan, nothing structural has changed since 2011. Factors behind citizens' lack of trust in traditional media since the onset of the Arab Spring remain the same, namely the perception of media as being under control of the regime. Another reason is the lack of users' inclusion in the production of news.

Our research draws a rather hostile environment for media accountability practices that aim at media accountability mechanisms beyond non-state means. Restrictive legislation, excessive harassment and prosecution as well as other limiting factors prompt our media accountability experts to call for media freedom in the first place. Media accountability is rather seen as an accompanying process thereof. All in all, the underlying structure of media accountability mechanisms is still the same as a decade ago, yet the co-opted practices and the publics' valuation of media accountability have changed.

Nevertheless, future activities for strengthening media accountability practices may build on journalists that support the idea and a variety of experts and organizations that have been active in holding the media to account - some already for more than ten years (section 3 of this paper). Non-state, independent media accountability initiatives do mostly depend on funding from international actors. For their endeavors we recommend focussing

on the organizational level of private media (commercial and non- profit), on social media initiatives (either by media experts or citizens) or on media NGOs to promote or coordinate media accountability issues in Jordan. Some practical measures that could be taken are:

1. Strengthen financial sustainability of private media organizations by providing research on "hard facts" and making it available to media owners, e.g., by answering the following questions:

   - Why do media accountability practices pay off for media organizations in an authoritarian context like Jordan? (e.g., less prosecutions, less harassment, more satisfied staff, more trust of audience, higher visibility, better chance to get funding from international donors …)

   - How do you learn about your audience quantitatively as well as qualitatively? e.g., habits, reactions and preferences, trust etc. all with regard to media accountability practices), and how do you transfer these data into a strategy that increases responsiveness and economic sustainability?

2. Sustain and develop coordinated media accountability activities on social media by individual influencers or by expert groups, for example. This includes content analysis, statistics, studies, polling and surveys of social media activities.

3. Work out strategies how to do responsible reporting under conditions of information uncertainties and fake news, e.g., by

   - establishing local or regional information verification units open for editorial departments because many private media organizations do not have the money to pay for their own unit

- supporting universities to prepare first-year-students in media colleges to verify information and not only to teach the laws or the basics of the profession

- enhancing the role of NGOs that monitor the media itself or NGOs offering training for citizens to monitor the media

- providing trainings for private media outlets on researching local information and coping with powerful people.

4. Improve networking among journalists and media workers from different media organizations (members and non-members of the JPA) as well as among columnists and media owners from different organizations.

Nominally speaking, in lieu of the Western definition of media accountability (any non-state means of holding the media to account), the authors call for a judicious context-sensitive definition of in a region where the state is but one of the actors that hamper media accountability practices. Others may include the business sector, a lacklustre parliament, and even commoners whose culture lacks accountability principles in other walks of life.[29] Finally, as social media use is becoming increasingly relevant for news consumption and public communication in general, future research should focus on individual citizens' activities on social media and community-based media instead of institutionalized practices of media accountability. It should analyse cases and conditions, under which calls for media accountability succeed in Jordan.

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[Not a single Jordanian media outlet, including the one with an alternative voice - including 7iber, AmmanNet, Jo24 - published anything about the investigation of the Pandora Documents. Even the Jordan-based ARIJ network that has worked on 6 investigations related to the documents has never published anything about the Jordan aspect; Facebook post]. Retrieved November 26, 2021, from https://www.facebook.com/ahmad.abuhamad.3781/posts/925656278358104

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The quest for accountability in the absence of sustainability: The case of Lebanon's media sector

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Abstract

The case for media accountability in the MENA context raises several questions about its very essence and definition, especially as this is being studied in a region affected by statist repression and co-optation. This case study on the concept and application of media accountability in Lebanon attempts to not only define and map media accountability instruments in Lebanon, but also examines perceptions of the term/phrase "media accountability" in Lebanon which can potentially play a negative role vis-à-vis the autonomy and liberty of media workers and journalists, especially when tackling regulatory state bodies utilizing "accountability" as a slogan in order to justify forms of repression or censorship. Based on the secondary research and qualitative data, we locate several findings about the nature of these instruments in the Lebanese context, whether in terms of their impact, various types, and relation to key matters such as free speech, self-censorship, and financial sustainability.

Keywords: Media accountability, media accountability instruments, journalists, free speech, self-censorship, financial sustainability

The case for media accountability in the MENA context raises several questions about its very essence and definition, especially as this is being studied in a region affected by statist repression and co-optation. Hence, one ought to begin with some defining features, particularly from a non-state perspective which takes into account a self-regulation mechanism from within the profession itself. Nevertheless, this paper not only examines this definition of media accountability, but also examines perceptions of the term/phrase "media accountability" in the Lebanese context which can potentially play a negative role vis-à-vis the autonomy and liberty of media workers and journalists,

especially when tackling regulatory state bodies utilizing "accountability" as a slogan in order to justify forms of repression or censorship.

In other words, in Lebanon, "media accountability" is defined as the practice and framework through which journalists, media agencies, and media managers reassess their practices, discourse, and behavior vis-à-vis the specified feedback received. Nevertheless, this definition is contested given which side is presenting such feedback: the state or the general public? While there are models through which official bodies in liberal democracies may provide direction and/or penalty in response to irresponsible behavior or violations committed by media players, state intervention in Lebanon (justified in response to these supposed violations) has taken a route often criticized by pro-democracy and pro-free speech actors in the country.

Our analysis first begins with a mapping of media councils, regulatory bodies, journalist associations, and media development organizations, and then looks into the prevalent legal framework pertaining to the media in the country. Afterwards, we provide a qualitative analysis of the interview content and the participant perception of the status of media accountability and freedom in the country. Accordingly, a set of findings and recommendations for media workers, CSOs, and governments are concisely presented at the end of the report.

Section I: Mapping

This section aims to expand on a relatively comprehensive (yet not necessarily exhaustive) mapping of organizations, syndicates, associations, and official bodies involved in the question of media accountability, press freedom, and the institutional framework of official/non-official instruments for media regulation in Lebanon. The purpose of this first

section is to outline the actors and groups whose actions and positions are analyzed in the following sections, based on interviews and primary data collected for the purposes of this study. The process of deriving this mapping primarily benefited from the information provided by the interviewees, in addition to the secondary research structurally used to expand on similar and/or familiar organizations and media accountability instruments.

1. Press and/or media council(s)

A press council is universally understood as an official institution constructed primarily to promote a particular journalistic ethical code of conduct amongst networks, journalists, authors, and several other media workers. This ethical code generally revolves around a responsible and reliable form of journalism through which workers can practice the profession in a truthful, inclusive, and pluralistic setting. The power held by these councils is contingent on the context in which they were created and the form of governance with which they are associated. In liberal democracies, these powers conventionally include fines, broadcasting regulations, and public accountability/condemnation (UNESCO, 2013).

In the context of Lebanon, regardless of whether official functions generally result in a concrete application, the primary objectives generally sought by press councils universally are *officially* attributed to the National Media Council. Created in 1994, the Council's consultative roles generally revolve around distributing licenses, regulating media coverage/content, and setting the criteria for the establishment of new radio and television companies. Nevertheless, considering that the Council is made up of ten members appointed based on sectarian and political alignment, and that it lacks any effective powers, many have grown skeptical about its actual utility (Samir Kassir

Foundation and Reporters Without Borders, n.d.). The general lacking of democratic structure and consistent follow up renders the Council incapable of pursuing the role of an effective press or media council.

2. Ombudspersons

An "ombudsman in the newsroom" is universally understood as a body aimed at gathering complaints of readers and viewers and forwarding them to the institution/state in order to reassess journalistic content and hold media workers accountable for what is displayed on particular platforms (an example would be the Swedish Press ombudsman). Nevertheless, virtually no primary or secondary data indicated the presence of an ombudsman in the Lebanese context, particularly with the little-to-no transparency and participatory connection between citizens and the state (Hillogoss, 2014).

3. Professional journalists associations and unions

Journalists' associations and trade associations are understood as bodies through which media workers can negotiate and bargain with either the state and its official bodies, or media owners, businesspeople, and investors with regards to issues pertaining to wages, finances, editorial independence, and common journalistic ethics.

Lebanese Press Order

Created in 1941, the Order exclusively represents owners of a variety of print publications within its membership and executive board, primarily distributed amongst political partisans. In addition to monitoring the accountability mechanisms applied to journalists and giving out press cards, the Order pursues negotiated settlements between the state and newspapers with regards to particular cases or financial liabilities (Trombetta, Pinto, & Renino, n.d.; Chehayeb, 2019; Hamdan, 2020). This reinforces the conclusions of former

scholarship which has characterized the political economy of the media in Lebanon as affected by "hybrid structures of ownership where political, economic, and media power converge" (Voltmer, Seltvik & Høigilt, 2021, p. 855).

Press Editors' Syndicate

Created in 1962, it is primarily composed of print press editors, particularly non-owners supposedly given a space to bargain for their rights. Nevertheless, the Press Editors' Syndicate regularly coordinates with the Lebanese Press Order and is henceforth incapable of pursuing any direct and/or contentious action. Even membership of the Press Editors' Syndicate is dependent on an approval from the Lebanese Press Order (Trombetta et al., 2018).

Club de la Presse

Created in 1993, the association is registered as a non-governmental organization that first aimed to compensate the weaknesses of the Press Editors' Syndicate. Its influence has been decreasing over time, jeopardizing its ability to inform transformative change in the media sector. It has however attracted funds from wealthy donors and opened up a space for regular press conferences and media training in order to raise awareness about journalists' rights and ethical and professional concerns (Trombetta, 2018).

Alternative Media Syndicate

Created in 2019, it was established as an alternative association for journalists coming from a variety of subfields. While still new and with few resources, the Syndicate aims to create a parallel structure that challenges the status quo of the aforementioned Lebanese Press Order and Press Editors' Syndicate, both seen as ineffective and incapable of liberating

themselves from sectarian associations and protecting the rights of journalists and press workers (Azhari, 2020; Chehayeb, 2020).

4. Broadcast regulator

With airwaves being a finite resource, broadcast regulators become crucial to monitor and allocate what stations air on television or radio; this becomes particularly important to avoid stations with power transmitters flooding the space. Regulating this space is one of the main functions of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA). Created in 2002, its role is to liberalize and regulate a plethora of telecommunication networks (ACE, n.d.; TRA, n.d.a).

With its duties outlined by Law 431 enacted in 2002, the *official* primary functions of the TRA include facilitating competition within the telecommunications industry, amplifying transparency with the market, regulating any form of non-competitive behavior, mediating disputes regarding license distribution, and signifying a complaints procedure through which these regulations can be pursued normally (TRA, n.d.b). However, the TRA has de facto been suspended since 2011 following disputes between the Authority and the Ministry of Telecommunications, in which the latter prevailed and is now the sole institution given the authority to enable new rules, regulations, and guidelines for the media sector (Samir Kassir Foundation and Reporters Without Borders, n.d.; CommsUpdate, 2011).

5. NGOs and media-related organizations

Like many other domains and sectors, Lebanon is home for several media-oriented civil society organizations that have produced several documents listing journalists' rights and

duties. Groups have also been advocating for the establishment of standardized journalist codes and amplifying the wider political, socio-economic, and security conditions with which such an agenda can be pursued. This particular NGO sector significantly flourished following the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005 (Geha, 2016, p. 80).

Maharat Foundation

Created in 2004 and recognized as an NGO in 2006, Maharat has worked on a variety of social, political, and legal functions. On the one hand, Maharat provides training programs in order to develop the skill set of young journalists hoping to acquire media standards that are rarely shared in academic set-ups. On the other hand, it recurrently challenges the legal and political limitations on media transparency and freedom of expression by contributing to bills in parliamentary committees and monitoring state and/or non-state violations vis-à-vis the press (Daleel Madani, n.d.).

Samir Kassir Eyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom (SKeyes)

Created in November 2007 as part of an initiative within the Samir Kassir Foundation, it primarily focuses on monitoring violations against media and culture professionals and holding the perpetrators accountable. These violations are documented by its social media pages and website. In addition, SKeyes also concerns itself with the professional rights of media professionals in relation to the platforms they work for, and provides technical and financial support to independent media and journalists in distress (SKEyes, n.d.).

Social Media Exchange (SMEX)

Created in 2008, the organization is primarily concerned with creating an autonomous regulation of information societies in Lebanon, particularly with the growing influence of social media. This function includes access to information and internet services, free

expression on multiple platforms, and critically assessing and monitoring acts of violation of online freedoms and digital rights (such as surveillance) (SKEyes, n.d.).

Media Association for Peace (MAP)

Created in 2011, MAP is an NGO primary concerned with advocating for peacebuilding strategies within the journalistic domain. The organization primarily fixates on the concept of "peace journalism" defined as a news standard, discourse, and ethic suggested to be conducive to aspects of peacebuilding and liberal human rights (MAP, n.d.a).

May Chidiac Foundation - Media Institute

Created in 2009, the Foundation was named after journalist, former LBCI TV anchor and former minister May Chidiac, who survived an assassination attempt in 2005. The foundation primarily focuses on developing and enhancing the skills of Lebanon's media organizations to catch up with the progress taking place on a global level, with a special focus on maintaining democratic and free channels of expression (Daleel Madani, n.d.b).

AFEJ (Association Francophone de Journalisme)

Created in 2012, the association pursues a variety of activities and set goals, representing hundreds of French-speaking Lebanese journalists in Lebanon. On the one hand, it proclaims an associative role, e.g., it concerns itself with the rights and duties of journalists as professional employees. On the other hand, it calls for amplifying the values of free speech and professional ethics via critical assessments of authority and training workshops (AFEJ, 2013).

6. Relevant media laws

Media laws are an essential focus point when assessing the relevance of accountability in the country; this primarily relates to the spirit and wording of the law and the extent to which it is applied in specific contexts. A number of laws pertinent to the media include but aren't limited to the 1962 Press Law, the 1994 Audio-Visual Law (Law 382), the 1994 Satellite Broadcast Law (Law 531), and the 1947 Cinema Law (Sciacchitano, 2015, p. 16). The three laws scrutinized in this subsection are the Audiovisual Media Law, the Broadcast Law, and the Press Law.

Audiovisual Media Law

Finalized in 1994, the purpose of Law 382/94 is to regulate the ownership, licensing, and categorization of a variety of radio and TV channels. On the level of ownership, the law *officially* stipulates that one individual or legal person cannot own more than 10% of shares for a media channel. On the level of licensing, the licensing categories of the law are primarily divided into political and non-political content (Category 1 for the former and Category 2 for the latter) (Sciacchitano, 2015, p. 16).

The Satellite Broadcast Law

Passed in 1994, Law 531 differs from Law 382 in its focus; while the latter concerns itself with ownership and licensing for local broadcast, the former focuses on technical conditions required for satellite broadcast, including the need for media channels to maintain the "good relations" their country has with other countries. Law 531 also stresses the extensive authority of the Council of Ministers to pre-censor certain networks, with no mention of judicial methods to counter this authorization (Dabbous-Sensenig, 2007, p. 56).

The Press Law

First put forth in 1962, the Press Law was amended on several instances (including legislative decrees number 104 of 30/6/1977, number 330 18/5/1994, and number 382 4/11/1994). Whilst the law proclaims the protection of freedom of expression, there remain restrictions on licensing of publication platforms and publishing of content it deems inappropriate with regards to issues concerned with moral public ethics and ideas pertaining to "national unity." Considering that these restrictions may push for criminal sentences in certain events, some have raised questions about the productive role the law provides in terms of amplifying journalistic accountability (El Meouchi, Dib, & Badri and Salim El Meouchi Law Firm, n.d.). In addition to amendments and restrictions, the law has organized particular bodies such as the Higher Council of the Press and the Disciplinary Council, the Lebanese Press Order, the Lebanese Editors' Syndicate, and the Lebanese Press Union (Trombetta, 2018), most of which only exist on paper.

7. Judicial bodies

For the purposes of this project, judicial bodies are particularly imperative as they implement rulings with a function supplemented by state force and executory power. Such powers are not relevant to the advisory role performed by the councils elaborated above.

Publications Court

The Court is a chamber within the Criminal Appeals Court. Its role has officially revolved around issues of libel, defamation, and slander when concerned with print publications. The court's jurisdiction has first been expanded to include audiovisual media and news websites. Later, while some rulings also expanded the jurisdiction to social media posts

and other forms of online expression, the Cassation Court ruled otherwise later on. The court has rarely issued imprisonments, focusing instead on fines and other disciplinary measures (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Saghieh, Saghieh, & Geagea, 2010, p. 73). Nevertheless, recent reports have generally noted the hefty fines imposed by the court on journalists attempting to investigate corrupt files or express certain derogatory terms to describe high-rank state officials (SMEX, 2019, p.11).

The Single Criminal Judge

This court generally intervenes on the level of social media. In recent times, this has increasingly become relevant as media platforms invest heavily in the social media sphere. Contrary to the Publications Court, the Single Criminal Judge has not only issued fines, but also prison sentences to counter defamation. In the past few years, journalists formed a large portion of the defendants (SMEX, 2019, p.13).

Judges Sitting for Urgent Affairs

This body of judges, formally made in the pursuit of taking "interim or precautionary measures to preserve rights and prevent damages," has recently been known for monitoring and censoring "offensive material" published online. Nevertheless, little is said to delimit or specify what "offensiveness" entails in this context (SMEX, 2019, p.13).

Section II: Analysis

The survey utilized for the key informant interviews and data-gathering process primarily took place over the month of July 2020. It is crucial to highlight the context in which the interviewees are speaking. Subjective perceptions of this context revolve around high feelings of social and economic insecurity, amid an unprecedented economic crisis and

purchasing power collapse in Lebanon, which generally disfavor media freedoms and conventional standards. In addition, the defining features of media accountability are also subject to the subjective moral and political priorities of the interviewees. While some look at "accountable journalism" quite highly, the vast majority believe that it is a luxury in the midst of the current educational and security-based context of the country. A total of ten offline and online interviews were conducted; these constituted the testimony and opinions of newspaper and TV editors, heads of syndicates, syndicate rank and file members, and different forms of associations and NGOs' leaders and members. It would be quite far-fetched to suggest that the interviewee pool reflected a representative or generalizable sample. Nevertheless, it is rather reasonable to suggest that the research process was robust enough to help locate the parameters and dimensions of the issue under study.

With regards to the content of the questionnaire, participant feedback includes open-ended answers to questions, multiple-choice ranking schemes, and yes/no answers. Ranking schemes, for instance, can be defined by a set of options including *very* low, *rather* low, average, *rather* high, and *very* high.

Overall assessment: Enabling factors versus inhibiting factors according to respondents

Figure 1: *Enabling and inhibiting factors according to interviewees followed by number of participants reiterating a factor*

Conditions supporting media accountability	Conditions inhibiting media accountability
1. Larger margin of freedom of speech relative to neighboring countries (7)	1. Financially and administratively co-optation of media by prime political forces within the country (ex: bribes, political financing) (7)

2. Great deal of accountability resulting from contradictions between Lebanese political elites (2)	2. Occasional repression and exploitation of inconsistent "accountability" rhetoric to further repressive measures (2)
3. Relatively high degree of "social accountability culture" (especially on the level of activists) (4)	3. Deactivation of vibrant regulatory institutions (similar to OfCom in the UK) (4)
4. Relatively high degree of "inter-connected journalistic solidarity" (1)	4. Little-to-no culture of fact-checking (1)
5. Media competition induces popular critical response amongst viewers (2)	5. Lack of sustainable business models (3)
6. Decent degree of self-censorship on a cultural level (1)	6. Low levels of media literacy (2)
N/A	7. Absence of a unified law for media regulation and standards (3)
N/A	8. Little-to-no influence for junior journalists (1)

Different types of media outlets respond differently to accountability

Eight of 10 respondents (80%) suggested that there are large differences between the ethical standards of private and public media outlets. For instance, the National News Agency (NNA) is a press medium owned by the government and is suggested to be generally directed towards propping the narrative and rhetoric of the state apparatus. One interviewee suggests that the overwhelming neutrality of official state-owned media is not allowing it to effectively produce sustainable and creative journalism. Meanwhile, another interviewee highlights that the competitive aspect prevalent among private media channels within the country allow them to develop their capacity.

Nevertheless, in terms of ethical and journalistic standards, one interviewee posits that the competitive and overly investigative nature of private media seemingly misses the more formal and "textbook" application prevalent in the public media. In other words, racing towards news, scandals, and exclusive information incentivizes little-to-no application of formal journalistic standards within the private media sphere. However, another interviewee disputes this "textbook" application by referring to his personal experiences revolving around deliberate censorship by state-owned media.

Media accountability instruments: NGOs compensate for syndicate weakness

A significant and noticeable finding within this study is that there is no significant contestation amongst media experts, professionals, and syndicate organizers with regards to the generally poor quality of official bodies of media accountability in the country. There is also a virtual consensus that these official bodies hardly resonate with journalists nowadays. On the other hand, 5 interviewees gave NGOs at least a "rather high" score as media accountability instruments with another two framing them as "average". Moreover, media lawyer associations were given a "rather high" score by 8. It is however worth noting that such associations do not exist in the country; participants may have a subjective understanding of what these associations may entail, referencing the increasingly popular activist-leaning think tank and civil society organization "Legal Agenda".

While taking note of the unclear definition of what a "media lawyer association" entails, these categories are generally understood as bodies which compensate for the poor quality of the country's official bodies. A decent amount of attention also seems to be given to user engagement, with five giving "letters from readers" a "rather high" score, despite this role not being performed by the traditional concept of an "ombudsperson", but by staff

locating critiques and suggestions within the comment section of different posts and articles. Assessments of international media organizations were far more nuanced and complex, with interviewees equally split between "high" and "low" scores. Items like the standardized code of ethics of journalists and organizations also remain disputed, with six interviewees giving them a "rather low" effect. On the opposite pole, eight and nine interviewees gave journalistic associations and journalistic unions respectively a "rather low" score at most. Moreover, all interviewees gave "press councils" either a "very low" or "rather low" rating.

Figure 2: *Participant evaluation of media accountability instruments in Lebanon.*
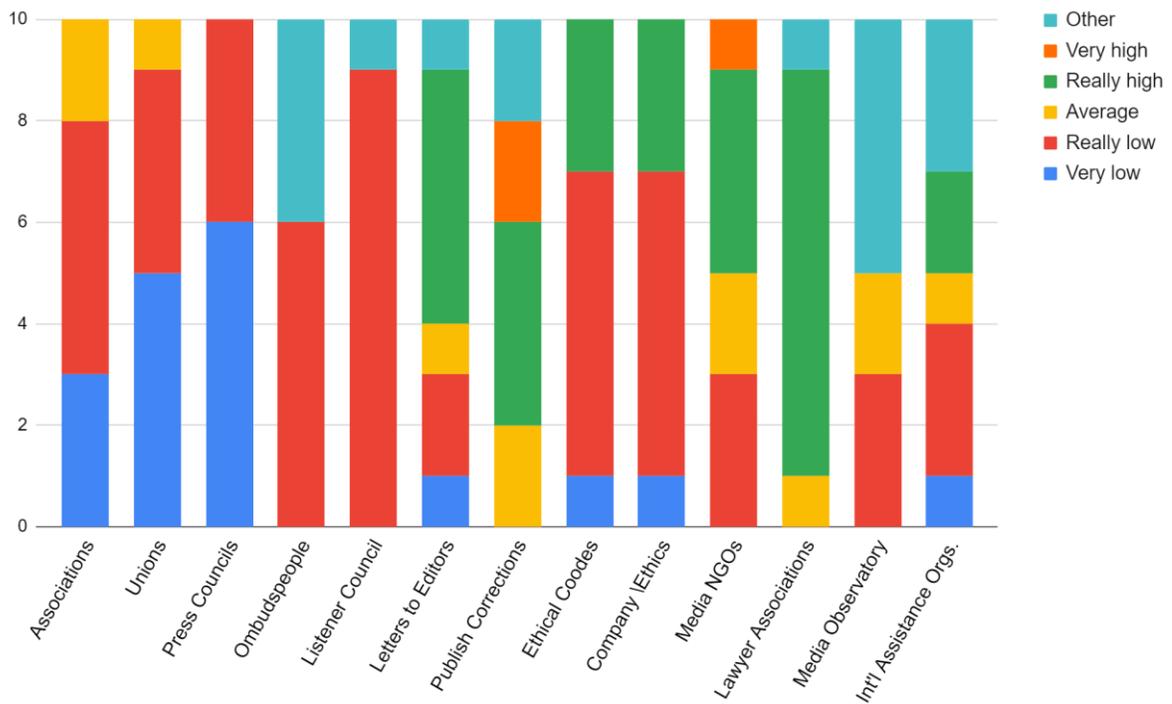
Note: Lawyer associations, in the graph, and as mentioned in the interviews, primarily relate to NGOs such as Legal Agenda - it is however ambiguous whether such an NGO can be counted as a legal association; regardless, the subjective perception of the interviewee was taken into account. Similarly, "Ombudspeople" was included in the data to illustrate the perceived ambiguity behind the term.

Role of the press council: Inactive and co-opted

In the case of Lebanon, the press council is called the National Media Council, and its role supposedly revolves around monitoring the media for violations against journalistic standards and other formal settings; for more information, refer to the mapping presented in the prior section. In addition to the extensively low score attributed to the National Media Council, there is a consensus amongst participants that the body is hardly an independent one. In other words, many have referred to the immense influence exerted on the council by the wider political context, particularly as it was created at a time when the Syrian regime controlled most aspects of Lebanese political life.

Consequently, 8 participants concluded that the council's lack of autonomy further induced a lack of interest in implementing a standardized and clear ethical code of conduct on media outlets, journalists, media workers, and syndicate members. On the contrary, many referred to ways in which the council was utilized to further particular political interests in the name of maintaining Lebanon's conistitution and accommodating discourse, particularly by censoring voices accused of "inciteful" rhetoric.

Digital (non)accountability: Social media as a contested force

The growing role of social media is exemplified by its ability to mobilize certain tools and tricks in favor of explosive political and social phenomena in the country for the past few years. Participants had mixed feelings about ways in which social media platforms can forward the cause of media accountability, especially as 6 participants evaluated social media as "partly" important for debates on journalistic misconduct (as opposed to three interviewees stressing the immense importance of social media with regards to these debates).

One participant referred to the absence of a moderator capable of coordinating the debate on these issues; "freedom on social media is generally uncontrollable: this is primarily due to the prevalence of harassers and immense number of insults." Alongside these statements, the attitude towards social media's role vis-à-vis media accountability has been rather negative due to the prevalence of chaotic criticism, bullying, and little-to-no capacity to orient criticism into something tangible. Meanwhile, another participant argued that despite the ability of sectarian forces to utilize these platforms for their own purposes, a massive amount of critical and hard-hitting input was directed at conventional local media networks' supposedly unethical coverage of the 2019 popular protests via their personal and public social media pages.

Interestingly, one could hypothesize that social media is one of the few platforms, alongside some independent media, engaging in direct "media criticism", e.g. criticizing the performance of more "dominant" types of media, specifically television stations.

Other key findings

Self-censorship

First and foremost, it's important to clarify that self-censorship was interpreted differently amongst participants. While most gave it a negative connotation (relating it to the idea of journalistic fear of repression and assault), others understood it quite positively (relating it to journalistic self-control, sober judgement, and objective, incitement-free reporting). Taking into account these variations, 6 interviewees gave "self-censorship" at least a "really high" mark.

In condemnation, one participant stressed that "this is primarily an issue due to the censorship imposed by political and community-based forces." However, another

participant dissociated self-censorship from the political context and "individualized" the way it functions from one media outlet to another. Despite these discrepancies, it is unambiguously clear that subjective participant evaluation of self-censorship is relatively high, given the statistics displayed in the table below.

Figure 3: *Participant evaluation of applied self-censorship of journalists in Lebanon*
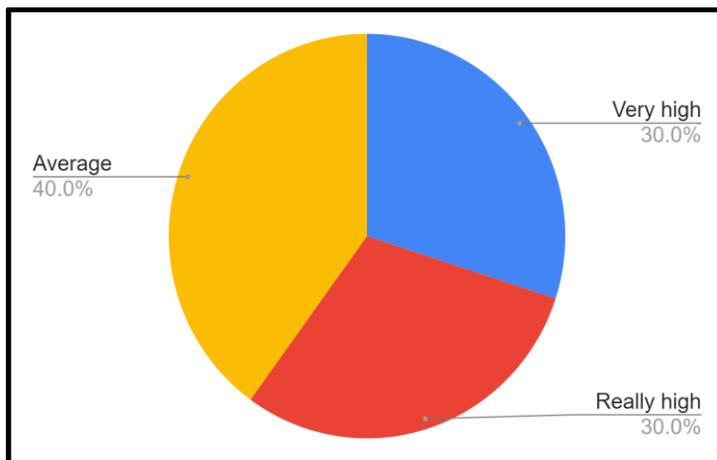
Editorial independence

The question of editorial independence is extensively linked to media accountability, particularly taking into account the concessions made by media outlets on an ethical level in exchange for cash flow and sustainability. Most participants were highly sceptical of editorial independence in Lebanon, with 6 interviewees suggesting that most media outlets had "partial" independence, and another two claiming they had absolutely no independence.

Authority's openness to media

The openness of the government, parliament, and courts to the media is essential when determining the extent to which journalism in Lebanon is investigative. In a very clear

choice, nine participants suggested that these pillars of authority are not whatsoever open to the media in a fair manner. When explaining this reality, the interviewees elaborated on issues of double standards (e.g. preference for one media outlet over another when holding press conferences and answering questions) and almost nonexistent access to public files.

The biggest challenge to media accountability: No financial sustainability

When commenting on the biggest challenges, seven interviewees believed that the lack of a sustainable financial plan for the vast majority of outlets paved the way for editors and journalists prioritizing urgent cash flow at the expense of sustaining their ethical standards. This is primarily due to the fact that media funding may as well be conditioned on demonstrating half-truths or hiding truths crucial to public knowledge. Moreover, 8 participants took note of the very weak "culture of accountability" and few applicable standards with which a journalist or media outlet can be held accountable. Even if written standards exist, six participants attribute limited to no role to ombudspersons in the newsrooms, meanwhile the other four hardly are aware of any such regulatory systems. This was accompanied by seven participants giving "internal company Code of Ethics" at most a "really low" rank.

Meanwhile, one interviewee particularly stressed the lack of state protection, especially as journalists risk their lives in turbulent areas. "The primary issue is the lack of protection; in other words, the state is dysfunctional in terms of making sure the lives of journalists are safeguarded," said the participant. On a separate note, one participant condemned the prevalence of "critical demagoguery," in which social media bullying and destructive criticism do not add to the conversation on journalistic accountability, but instead enforce a chaotic atmosphere of debate.

The next step: Sustainable business models, protection, and standardization

With regards to what could be done to shift the aforementioned reality, three participants went ahead to specify the need for sustainable business models constituting ads, subscriptions, consultancy, and other means to keep their outlets standing. In the Lebanese context, this idea of financial independence relates to this idea of liberating institutions from the polarized political reality of the country. On another note, eight participants highlighted the need for a standardized and strictly applied code of ethics. It is however unclear whether they believe that these measures ought to be enforced by the state or the market for media outlets.

For one participant, there is a great need to reinvest in journalistic education and media literacy, e.g., using our school and university system as a way to train journalists to build a sense of self-responsibility, and regular citizens to have more critical consumption of media content. The interviewee further emphasized the need to link this educational process to the concept of citizenship; only then could journalists dissociate themselves from sectarian politics. For others, the prior points revolve around an innovative reform or overhaul of the system, which should commence with state support: "The Ministry of Information needs to have a new law, alongside providing necessary subsidies to media channels and journalists, in addition to supplying them with material/equipment. This could also be done by relieving taxation in the pursuit of incentivizing the creation of new media."

Two interviewees stressed on the need to maintain a space for journalistic freedom in the country. "As for the solutions facing us, they generally involve preserving the small margin of freedoms; this ought to be accompanied by a collaborative struggle with all

journalists to make sure we maintain our freedoms. Basic rules of the game need to be retained," said one of these participants.

Section III: Results

When carefully and cautiously scrutinizing the results provided by the survey, it is first and foremost important to reiterate issues relevant to sampling, representativeness, and bias when approaching a sample of ten interviewees. Nevertheless, this does not negate the power and direction which may be provided by these in-depth conversations with regards to the fate of media accountability instruments in Lebanon. Many of these interviewees have years-worth of experience in the media field and have shown to be relatively opiniated in the conversation, putting forth a set of suggestions which, alongside the secondary scholarship, provide the basis for the recommendations outlined below. This direction revolves around the following points:

1. *Official* media accountability instruments in the country are likely to be institutionally weak and incapable of accommodating the needs of conventional professional standards espoused by a subset of journalists and the media community. This has been primarily attributed to aspects of clientelism and corruption and their direct ramifications on the shape of these institutions and/or instruments.

   - **Recommendation:** Strengthen initiatives to overcome passive syndicate bodies by supporting and amplifying independent associational and syndicate campaigns detached from wider political and confessional considerations.

2. The contradictions induced by the nature of Lebanon's consociational political system has allowed for a larger margin of freedom for activists to engage in a critical debate concerned with the state's lack of capacity to implement adequate accountability measures and/or co-optation of media outlets. This is often articulated on online platforms (such as social media

networks), whose role and utility is still contested, especially when little-to-no constructive criticism has reportedly been used to tackle this situation on these platforms.

- **Recommendation:** Instead of regulating social media, civil society organizations and media related NGOs are encouraged to launch coordinated online and offline fora that specialize on issues concerned with media freedom, journalistic accountability, media workers' rights, and journalistic ethical codes and standards.

3. Non-official media accountability instruments spawning from the NGO/CSO sector and other alternative communities have attempted to compensate for the absence or weakness of state-sanctioned syndicates, regulatory institutions, and judicial bodies in terms of assessing the role of the media and standardized journalistic rules.

- **Recommendation:** On the one hand, supporting initiatives to strengthen and embolden *official* state-related accountability instruments by providing technical and research-related support is crucial to put forward a sustainable approach to maintaining these instruments. On another hand, on the short-term, there is an urgency to strengthen ties with local NGOs so that they proceed with their evaluative research, advocacy, and awareness-spreading activities.[30]

4. Little-to-no financial sustainability has paved the way for political capture of media outlets, subsequently forcing editors into conceding on basic journalistic standards in favor of satisfying their financiers and restrictive support base.

- **Recommendation:** While participants have encouraged government subsidization of media outlets, other alternatives include training programs focusing on adapting innovative models of media financial sustainability inspired by international best practices and stronger financial and entrepreneurial capacity building of media owners/managers.

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[30] It's important to take note that the authors of this subsection are well-connected to a variety of local media development organizations, and work directly with the Samir Kassir Foundation.

5. Issues of repression, self-censorship, lack of editorial independence, and lack of authority openness have most likely impacted the degree of media accountability in a downwards sense, henceforth obstructing the role of potential of instruments.

- **Recommendation:** There is a need to internationally and domestically hold Lebanese authorities accountable for repressive and/or authoritarian tactics imposed on media outlets as the political and social situation grows increasingly turbulent. This is exemplified by the recent emergency law approved by the Lebanese parliament on 13 August 2020; the law granted the military exceptional powers vis-à-vis authorized media outlets around Beirut and its wider vicinity following the 4 August 2020 blasts in the port of Beirut (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2020).

It is far-fetched to proclaim that these findings and recommendations are ultimately conclusive. Regardless, this study provides an opportunity for researchers to observe and examine media accountability outside the *official* guise of authority in countries where such authorities' weak legitimacy or short-sighted policies deplete the public capacity to hold the media accountable.

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Dim chances for media accountability in times of violent conflict? An exploration of

practices and perceptions in Syria

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, the Syrian media system has dramatically changed. The war has left a ruinous impact on the social and economic life in Syria. Its territory is fragmented and so is its media landscape in terms of audiences, regulations and production. Therefore, this paper sheds light on the question whether media accountability has had any chance to further develop in Syria and if so, where and in what form it appears. Reflecting on context factors for media accountability, mainly on political and economic accountability mechanisms, the paper spells out the potentials for public and professional media accountability practices inside and outside a war-torn country. An explorative survey allows to evaluate the status quo of accountability practices in Syria and the perceptions on such practices among media professionals in different roles and regions. While inside Syria, the situation is far from being safe and stable, several organizations outside Syria have started to practice media accountability. In the future, they might be qualified to transfer their experience in reflecting and practicing media accountability to those inland.
Keywords: Syria, exile media, media landscape, media accountability, media governance, media regulation, war, conflict, freedom of expression, expert interviews, survey

1. Introduction

The need for media to be responsible towards the society is never as high as in times of

violent conflicts. Intentionally or unintentionally, spreading rumors or fake news can

become a matter of life or death. Instrumentalization of media organizations by conflict

parties is an often-observed pattern that goes hand in hand with missing information or

misrepresentation, stereotyping or hate speech. Thus, it needs mechanisms to remind media

organizations of or let them live-up to their social responsibility. The concept of media accountability looks into such mechanism that are defined as "voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication" (McQuail, 2005, p. 207). While this definition spells out the media organizations' social responsibility as a normative principle, it leaves open what the society is and to whom they should be held accountable. In times of conflict, this is particularly unclear as views about the society's future differ tremendously among conflict parties.

Additionally, the hostile environment for media in a conflict may suggest that media accountability has no chance to develop or to be strengthened. Safety of journalists is in constant danger; division along conflict lines among the profession effects the functioning of self-regulatory institutions as in the case of Lebanon where the war factions all started their own broadcasting stations during the civil war and until today have not agreed on a national media council (Brownlee, 2020; Nötzold, 2009, 2015a; Pies, Elsässer & Madanat, 2011; Richani, 2016), for example. A lack of financial resources for independent media organization is another hurdle besides problems of fundamental infrastructure, e.g., power supply as in the case of Iraq (Wollenberg, 2019, 2021). For media accountability, conflicts - be they violent or not - means: the actors holding the media to account can change dramatically and norms and groups to whom journalists feel accountable to may shift.

Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004a, 2004b) use a model that distinguishes four 'locations' of media accountability mechanisms: political accountability, market accountability, public accountability and professional accountability. While political

accountability relates to media regulations and laws as a means for holding the media to account, market accountability is an economic perspective on accountability referring to the "system of demand and supply" (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004a, p. 9). Apart from these systemic powers of the state and the market, media accountability is pursued through mechanisms of professional self-regulation, like codes of ethics or editorial guidelines. However, public accountability refers to the relationship with the public and it is practiced through discussion and dialogue (Bardoel & d'Haenens, p. 18). Bardoel and d'Haenens' model is valuable because it allows discussion about media accountability practices in different political orders, and thus provides us with a useful framework for researching media accountability in times of conflict and transition.

Pies (2014) identified media accountability practices as an "element of the transitional re-definition process" of journalism and journalists' perceptions on media accountability as an "indicator for the status quo" of this process (pp. 198-199). In this respect, violent conflicts can be considered as a trigger point for media accountability mechanism. Whether this implies a voluntary or involuntary transformation process to more professional or public accountability instead of political or market accountability, needs to be researched.

Research on Syrian media is scarce in general and on media accountability. Before 2011, Syrian media were research object mainly in a comparative perspective, in which the restrictive and mobilizational character of the media system had been frequently mentioned (Boyd, 1993; Dajani & Najjar, 2003; Khamis, Gold, & Vaughn, 2011; OPIC, 2005; Rugh, 2004). Self-regulatory instruments such as press councils with the aim of holding the media to account by the own profession were not existent. Media critique hardly became public

as criticizing the media was almost the same as criticizing the ruling elites, which could bring you to prison. Since the Arab Uprisings starting in Syria in 2011, a growing international (academic) interest in Syrian media can be observed. A particular focus has been set on the role of social media and their potentials for creating alternative publics vis à vis "official" media that mainly ignored or criminalized the initial protests (Badran & Smets, 2018; Brownlee, 2020; Khamis et al., 2011). In 2010 the authors had empirically researched media accountability in Syria for the first time and had noticed contesting practices on social media that held the media to account to what they do not cover. Apart from that, limited freedoms in official and offline media had triggered the call for widening the margin of press freedom in the country as another goal of media accountability (Pies & Madanat, 2011). Since then, the Syrian media system has dramatically changed. The war has left a ruinous impact on the social and economic life in Syria. Its territory is fragmented and so is its media landscape in terms of audiences, regulations and production (Badran, 2021).

Therefore, we want to shed light on the question whether media accountability has had any chance to further develop and if so, in what form it appears. We do this by reflecting on context factors for media accountability, mainly on political and economic accountability mechanisms (section 3). Then we explore the status quo of professional and public accountability practices in Syria (section 4) before asking for perceptions on media accountability among media professionals in different roles and regions (section 5).

2. Methodology

The research presented here is part of a wider comparative project initiated by the German Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism (EBI) on media accountability in the

MENA region.[31] In a first step, the authors explored in a desk study conditions for media accountability and organizations interested in or practicing media accountability. Additional expert interviews within and outside Syria helped to identify such organizations. The analysis was informed by the aim to find practices "both offline and online, performed by both media professionals and media users, which intends to monitor, comment on and criticize journalism and seeks to expose and debate problems of journalism" (Fengler, Eberwein, & Leppik-Bork, 2011, p. 20). Following Fengler and colleagues' categorization of media accountability instruments (2011), we searched for practices with high and low degrees of institutionalization but limited our research to practices taking place outside media organizations. We did not further explore practices inside media organizations, although it would be important to get a full picture of the landscape. But media organization are working under extremely different conditions due to the territorial fragmentation and the situation is far from stable. This is why we left this part of the media accountability landscape for future research and explored the potentials of initiating media accountability practices with a survey instead.

This explorative survey aimed to identify perceptions and evaluations among media professionals on the issue of media accountability. The survey was conducted on behalf of the Erich Brost Institute in July 2020. The authors of this report sent out the pre-designed questionnaire via e-mail to twenty-five people from different networks, of whom seventeen answered. The list of potential respondents included journalists, representatives from different media organizations and NGOs as well as bloggers who are involved in practices of media accountability. As many of them live outside Syria, the group of exiled Syrians

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[31] For more information on the project see Fengler, Eberwein, and Leppik-Borg (2011), and Fengler, Lengauer, and Kurkowski (2021).

is disproportionate to the number Syrian citizens in general and media professionals in general. We translated the questionnaire into Arabic to reach out for a wider sample. Though the sample is not representative it allows to draw first assumptions for future research.

The questionnaire included open as well as closed questions asking for the respondents'

- evaluation of context factors enabling and limiting media accountability practices such as ownership patterns, professional independence, political or legal measures to hold the media to account,

- evaluation (from very low to very high) of the efficiency of existing media accountability instruments such as press councils, ombudspeople, audience clubs, professional journalists' code of ethics, media NGOs etc.,

- perception of media councils and other regulatory instruments,

- perception of challenges and opportunities for establishing media accountability institutions.

3. Context factors for media accountability

1.1 Professional autonomy

The war in Syria is in its eleventh year in October 2021 and violence is still prevailing. The Assad regime and its allies control more than two third of the Syrian territories again. Yet, a few parts remain under the Kurdish control (Northeast), and the jihadist Nusra control (Idlib area). In addition to a multitude of internal and external militias, five regional and international powers show military presence in Syria: Iran, Israel, Russia, Turkey and the US (Asseburg, 2020).

While the media in the contested areas have been constantly working under war conditions, the media in the Assad-controlled territories face the stiff authoritarian harassment and violence well known from the 2010 pre-war era. Even journalists working for the pro-governmental media organizations have been harassed frequently in recent times, particularly for touching issues of corruption within the Assad-held regions or the rising of fuel prices. The regime cuts off Facebook-pages, arrests journalists and even forces them to delete posts on these issues that were published already a while ago. Journalists are more critical on Facebook but have started to delete articles fast after publication (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

In the Kurdish self-administered area in North-Eastern Syria conditions have been relatively stable for a few years apart from inner-Kurdish rivalry. How this will continue after the Turkish military intervention in late 2019 is not yet clear. As many Syrian journalists and media activists had to flee from Syria in the last ten years, a Syrian exile media landscape has emerged in the neighboring countries particularly Turkey and in Europe. According to a recent media map by the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) exile media make up 34% of all Syrian media organizations (SCM, 2020).[32]

Flight and territorial separation have also left its mark on media use. Audience research from international organizations have found different media usage patterns related to the place and structural conditions under which people live. The German organization Media in Cooperation and Transition (MICT) for example, divides audiences into seven areas in and outside Syria, that in some points make a difference for media use (MICT,

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[32] For more details on the media landscape in the Kurdish-held areas of Syria see De Angelis & Badran (2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2019d).

2014, 2016). The areas are government held areas, contested areas, rebel held areas, refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, refugee camps in Turkey, people living outside refugee camps in Turkey (MICT, 2016). One could add Syrians living outside neighbouring countries.

The different and sometimes fast changing working conditions for the Syrian media as well as divided audiences have to be taken into account when analyzing the status quo of media accountability practices in the different "Syrias". Media accountability in Syria has been researched already before the war (Pies & Madanat, 2011), we take these earlier findings as a starting point to see how ten years of war has changed the situation in terms of holding the media to account.

Several contextual factors have hindered a sound development of media accountability practices off- and online in Syria before the war: State regulation and laws were so strong that independent media accountability practices were impossible. The commanded social function of journalism to be regime advocates did not allow for a concept, in which the media have to be accountable to more actors than those representing the center of political power, e.g., the public or their audience. Ownership structures and the lack of a competitive offline market prevented most media outlets from establishing media accountability tools for economic reasons (Pies & Madanat, 2011).

Yet, some online activities in late 2010 already signalled that a younger generation of Syrians was ready to contest the old socialist-Ba'athist concept of journalism. Given the orchestrated monologic news agenda in the Syrian news media, some actors started to hold the official, state-owned media accountable to what they do NOT publish. They created alternative agendas and introduced instruments of responsiveness such as readers'

comments or user generated content and thus contributed to challenge the dominant definition of journalism. Individual actors outside the media have triggered cases, in which activists forced the official media via Facebook to follow on topics they previously ignored (Pies & Madanat, 2011).

After 2011 there has been a true explosion of media platforms promoting a "break-with-the-past attitude", which often goes hand in hand with a political party affiliation (Trombetta & Pinto, 2018). The turmoil of war has been hindering media activists and journalists to focus on stronger professionalization and institutionalization until today. A study by SCM shows that most media outlets that existed by the end of 2019 have developed "institutional visions, missions and goals of their work" on an administrative and organizational level but were suffering from a lack of financial resources (SCM, 2020, p. 61). This is another important precondition which needs consideration when analyzing the media accountability practices in Syria of today.

1.2 Media legislation and regulation

Syrian media legislation is one of the most restrictive in the world. International press freedom reports such as Freedom House categorise Syria as "not free", and Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) maps Syria as in "very serious situation" ranking it at 173 out of 180 countries (Repucci, n.d.; Reporters Without Borders, 2021). Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 2020" report ranks Syria's global freedom score at 1/100, and its Internet Freedom Score at 17/100 (Freedom House, 2021).

When the Ba'ath Party took overpower in Syria in 1963, it developed a new constitution that was enacted ten years later in 1973. Therein the media are defined as mobilization and propaganda tools for the ruling Ba'ath Party. Journalists are obliged to

show absolute loyalty to the state and the Ba'ath Party. Until 2001, only state media were allowed (Nötzold, 2015b).

When Bashar Al-Assad followed his father, Hafez Al-Assad, as president in 2000 he initiated some halfhearted reforms. Among them were the Publications Law No.50, which modified Law No. 35 of 1949 and allowed private ownership of the media. Although it succeeded in licensing more (online) media outlets than ever before, it did not allow for independent or free media. Too many old and new restrictions remained. Among them provisions of the 1949 Penal Law that directly restricts media content or the newly introduced duty for journalists to reveal their sources, a dangerous endeavour for all people talking to journalists in an authoritarian context such as Syria. When the first private, commercial television and radio were allowed, only businessmen close to the regime received licenses and broadcasters were only allowed to publish entertainment and advertisement, but no political content or news. Three years later, the regime decided to apply the Publications Law on online media, too, for having a closer control on online content. In addition, social media such as Facebook and YouTube were blocked until a few months before the Uprising (Internet Legislation Atlas, n. d.; Taki, 2012; Trombetta & Pinto, 2018).

After having come under pressure in 2011, Bashar Al-Assad issued a new constitution and a new media law. While the media law granted in article 35 the right to establish a media outlet for everyone, it also established the National Media Council (NMC) that worked as a restrict license and censorship system. It was abolished five years later in 2016 and regulative authority relegated back to the Ministry of Information (see section I.4).

Internet legislation comprises nine different laws, of which the Cyber Crime Law is of relevance (Internet Legislation Atlas, n. d., SCM, 2020). The law was issued in 2016 and amended in 2018 by designating specialized courts of first instance for cybercrime-related cases. Watchdogs like the Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR) contend that "the Law thus unfairly criminalises online freedom of expression and opinion; and the creation of specialised courts further threatens the status of online freedoms in Syria" (GCHR, 2018). It provides a legal basis for website filtering and blocking as well as collecting traffic data on private internet use (Internet Legislation Atlas, n. d.).

In 2001, the Publication Law gave way for the licensing of private media. First private broadcasting started on 2006 with a satellite channel. Broadcasters were allowed to broadcast entertainment only, no news. Private owners were businessmen close to the political power center, among them at first place Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of the president Bashar Al-Assad (now ostracized by his former supporters). In 2011, president Bashar Al-Assad approved the new media law, which established a National Media Council (NMC). It sets conditions for private media licenses, issued them and specified rules for financing. Monitoring its rules was also among its duties. It was not independent and served as a mouthpiece for the government including the spread of propaganda (Nötzold, 2015b; SCM, 2020; Trombetta & Pinto, 2018). It was abolished five years later in 2016 and regulative authority relegated back to the Ministry of Information.

In the Kurdish-ruled area, the Kurdish Supreme Committee (the governing institution for the Kurdish majority area in Syria) commissioned the Union of Free Media (UFM) to facilitate media operations. It is the only body overseeing media organizations that want to work in that area. Some reports refer to it as a kind of "Information Ministry"

(Reporters Without Borders, 2016; Trombetta & Pinto, 2018), though the UFM strongly rejects such a categorization and stresses its independence.[33]

4. Media accountability practices

4.1 Press Council/Media Council

In 2011 President Bashar Al-Assad approved a new media law, which established a National Media Council (NMC). It set conditions for private media licenses, issued them and specified rules for financing. Monitoring its rules was also among its duties. It was not independent and served as a mouthpiece for the government, including the spread of propaganda (Trombetta & Pinto, 2018). It was dissolved again in 2016 (see chapter I.6). An independent self-regulatory media council does not yet exist.

But there is Mithaq Sharaf (Arabic for: Code of Ethics) - also translated as Al-Methaq, a Syrian network that currently encompasses 32 Syrian media institutions, which commit themselves to the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media. Mithaq Sharaf supports member organizations in ethical issues and non-members to join the network. The Charter Commission aspires to consolidate the principles of the Ethical Charter in the Syrian media scene. Among its duties is the "reception, investigation, and handling of complaints against media outlets content of member foundations" (Al-Methaq, n.d.a). Whether this can be called a media council in a self-regulatory sense needs further observation in the future.

4.2 Ombudspersons

The concept of ombudspersons as an accountability instrument on the organizational level, requires an advanced process of institutionalization of media organizations. In Syria, this

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[33] For a detailed answer by the UFM to a Reporters Without Borders report accusing the UFM to be a "Ministry of Information", see Azad, Yekîtiya R. (2014).

process is still in its early stages as an analysis of the post-2011 media organizations by SCM illustrates (SCM, 2020). Legal certainty and financial sustainability are among the main obstacles to the establishment of media accountability practices on an organization level. At least, 90% of media outlets established after 2011 have a "clear vision, mission, and goals" available to their employees as well as the public (SCM, 2020, p. 59). And most offer a communication channel for the audience (SCM, 2020, p. 61). But no outlet employs an ombudsperson or works with a listeners' or audience' council as in Jordan, for example.

4.3 Professional Journalists Associations and Unions

The Union of Journalists in Syria (UJS) was established in 1974 as part of the General Federation of Trade Unions. All these nominal independent unions are controlled by the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. In its charter it states 16 aims among them traditional trade union issues but also settling professional disputes. Instead of being an instrument of media accountability the Union of Journalists has been providing the government another tool of state control. Working in Syria as a journalist requires the membership of the UJS, for example (Trombetta & Pinto, 2018).

After the beginning of the Uprising in 2011, Syrian journalists opposing the Assad regime established the Syrian Journalists Association (SJA) in 2012. It is registered in France and intends to oppose the Assad regime controlled UJS. The founding principles state that the association promotes multi-ethnic routes to journalism, e.g., membership is open to all minorities (Trombetta & Pinto, 2018). Their mission is to "enable the professional and ethical journalism and to create an independent environment for the Syrian media sector through continuous training, the abolition of laws that restrict the press and affect the performance of Syrian journalists with a view to developing social dialogue

and enhancing awareness of the press as a fourth authority responsible for development without hindrances."(SJA, n.d.b). The association is mostly run by journalists in exile. The newly established SJA has initiated the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media. By October 2020, 32 media outlets (out of 162 according to SCM, 2020) have joined and accepted this code according to the website that promotes the issue of compromising on a joint codex (Al-Methaq, n.d.b).[34]

In 2013, the Erbil-based Kurdistan Journalist Syndicate (KJS) established a branch in the Kurdish-controlled area of Northern Syria intending to represent journalists from the Iraqi Kurdish and the Syrian Kurdish territories. Its acceptance among Syrian journalists is unclear as is its future after the Turkish military intervention in 2019. The Facebook-Page is still active unlike its website (Kurdistan Journalist Syndicate, n.d.).

4.4 NGOs and media related organizations

Since 2011, several initiatives to monitor the media have come into existence to track the media's adherence to professional standards such as transparency, conflict sensitivity, representation of women's issues, xenophobia etc. They also monitor violations perpetrated against media freedom and the freedom of expression. The Lebanon based organization SKeyes tries to bring them together by reposting violations against journalists (SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, n.d.).

Other organizations

Accuracy Press Syria

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[34] Al-Methaq publishes the names of the organizations that have signed the charter as well as the charter itself. There is also an English version of the website available online (see Al-Methaq, n.d.c).

Accuracy Press Syria monitors the state of the Syrian media and the role they play in supporting or hindering the development of peace and a democratic society. It offers training to experienced and non-experienced Syrian journalists in Syria and abroad, provides training materials and has established a national award for Syrian journalists (Accuracy Press Institute, n.d.).

Mithaq Sharaf (Ethical Charter for Syrian Media)

Mithaq Sharaf (Arabic for: Code of Ethics) is a Syrian network that currently encompasses 32 Syrian media institutions including newspapers, printed magazines, radio stations, a television channel, news websites and news agencies. It aims to "enhance the ethical and professional dimension of the cadres of member practices, with the aim of producing media content free of hate speech, rich in the values of gender equality, accuracy, credibility, integrity, and fairness" (Al-Methaq, n.d.d). The Charter Commission is currently licensed in Turkey and supports member organizations in ethical issues and non-members to join the network.

ASML/Syria

ASML/Syria is a French Syrian organization that supports the development of independent journalism and media in Syria. Among its aims is to support journalists to "to help them create informative, engaging, and impactful media in collaboration with local organizations from across the spectrum of civil society" (ASML, n.d.). Their activities include capacity building projects for media organizations, research on media audiences and community, or support programs for women's carriers in journalism.

Journalists for Human Rights

Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) is a Canadian-based organization that has been working with Syrian media organizations in the Middle East since 2017. Its mission states: "Improve the skills and capacity of Syrian journalists and independent Syrian media to cover human rights issues" (JHR, n. d.). JHR offers capacity building activities for journalists, training, and networking to bring the issue of human rights onto the media agenda.

Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC)

The Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) is a human rights organization. It monitors and documents human rights violations and makes data available for journalists. It also trains on human rights including media freedom and freedom of expression (SJAC, n.d.).

Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)

The Syrian Center for Media Freedom of Expression is one of the few organizations that was already active in media accountability practices before 2011 (Pies & Madanat, 2011). Established in 2004 and registered in France its mission is "to defend oppressed individuals due to their beliefs or opinions, as well as promoting human rights and supporting and developing independent, critical and professional media" (SCM, n.d.a). SCM monitors freedom of the media and is also engaged in combatting hate speech and incitement to violence. It provides research on the media situation in Syria and draws recommendations from it for legislation and practical media work (SCM, n.d.b).

Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN)

The Syrian Female Journalists Network is registered in The Netherlands since 2013. It seeks "to build bridges between media and the Syrian women's movement" and "to realize a positive social change in thinking and behavior with respect to matters surrounding gender justice and equality" (SJFN, n.d.a). Their activities strive to empower particularly women working in the field of media and raise awareness for gender equality and women's issues in the media (SFJN, n.d.b).

Syrian Journalists Association (SJA)

Syrian journalists opposing the Assad regime established the Syrian Journalists Association (SJA) in 2012. It is registered in France and based in Paris and Istanbul. Its aim is to "enable the professional and ethical journalism and to create an independent environment for the Syrian media sector" (SJA, n.d.b). It publishes members' articles, initiated the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media, provides annual monitoring reports and supports members (SJA, n.d.a).

5. Perceptions on media accountability by media professionals

According to the outlined conditional differences in Syria, we aimed at reaching out for potential respondents from all areas relevant for Syria's media landscapes. For safety reasons, journalists and activists inside the Syrian territories were much more hesitant to answer than those outside Syria. One potential respondent wrote back: "I am in Syria and for me to participate in such an activity [the survey] cost me to visit the Mukhabarat [secret service]". Due to such safety risks, we decided to cite all interviewees anonymously.

As the sample of respondents is not big enough for considering all conditions, we only differentiated between respondents

a) inside the Assad regime-controlled Syrian territories (four respondents),

  b) outside the Assad regime-controlled Syrian territories including the Kurdish-ruled North-East and the Idlib area (two respondents),

  c) outside the Syrian territory, e.g., exile media including exiled outlets in Turkish refugee camps, in Turkey and other European countries (eleven respondents)

Whenever answers differ along the three groups, we consider that in our analysis.

Different media realities - Differing perceptions of media accountability

There is one question on which almost all (16 out of 17) agree: They don't think that "the government, parliament and the courts are open to the media in a fair and equal way under the current situation" (Q8). This corresponds with what media observatories regularly report. Violence, prosecution, harassment and threats are practiced by the Assad regime to control media outlets - even with those in favour of the regime (see Preface of this paper). The evaluation of editorial independence is also quite similar. Out of the seventeen respondents ten think, there is no editorial independence and six say it exists only partly and only one thinks there is something like editorial independence.

  It is obvious that the different media realities evoke differing perceptions of media accountability. In some cases, data is hard to interpret because it is not clear to which reality the respondents refer to. Although there is a regulatory framework for audio-visual media (Q7) in the Assad regime-controlled territories, which ten respondents confirm, four say there isn't, three choose "no answer". There are two ways of interpreting: Either the

respondents don't know about it, because they live abroad or in non-Assad-regime-controlled areas or they refer the "no" to their working conditions, e.g. in the Idlib area.

Other responses differ but not along the different "Syrias". Why do four respondents say that the media council is a self-regulatory body, while twelve say it is not and one picked "no answer"? Respondents differ in their rating of whether media accountability is important in the journalists' mindset in Syria. Four say yes, it is important, five say it isn't and six say it is partly important. They don't agree on the evaluation of differences between private and state-owned media either: Ten say, yes, there are differences, seven say there are not. They are not even united on the rating of whether media-related laws support or inhibit the news media to behave in an accountable way. Eight say the laws fully or rather support media accountability, two say they don't and seven say they neither support nor inhibit it.

First experiences with media accountability are promising

All in all, the efficiency of media accountability instruments in Syria is evaluated low, that means the majority of respondents says the respective instrument's efficiency in holding the media to account is very low or rather low (see Figure 1). The only exception are company codes. Only seven respondents rate them rather or very low, while eight think their efficiency is average and one says it is rather high. In addition, there are a few instruments that two or more respondents evaluate rather high or very high: professional codes, media NGOs, lawyer associations, media observatories and international donors. All these instruments have been partly practiced in the last years particularly in the non-Assad-regime-controlled areas. Therefore, we suppose that those respondents who have

experienced such initiatives rather evaluated these media accountability instruments in the

survey as having a "high" efficiency.

Figure 1: Evaluated Efficiency of Media Accountability Instruments in Syria
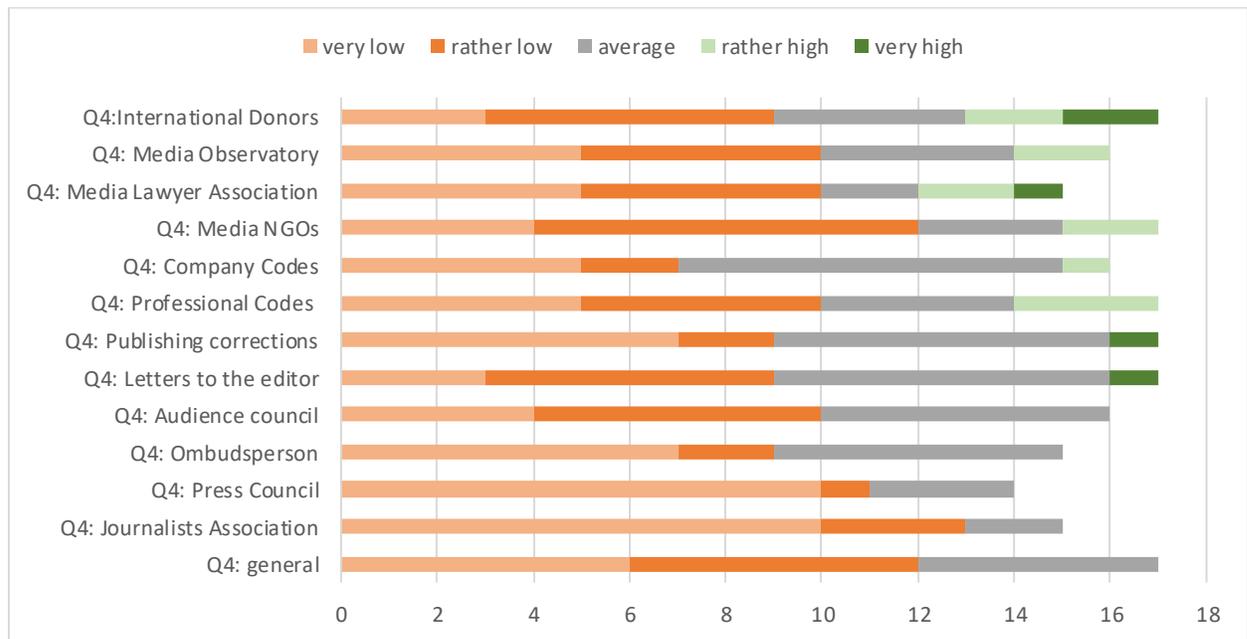
Q4: How would you rate the efficiency of the following media accountability instruments

in holding the media to account?

This interpretation is supported by the answers on question one: "What are factors that

support media accountability in Syrian news media?" (see Table 1) Respondents mention

among others, that partnerships with international organizations and donors' conditions for

funding, e.g. to avoid hate speech or to respect gender issues, enabled the media to act more

accountable. Furthermore, the initiation of a process for working out a professional code

of conduct during the last ten years is mentioned as a fruitful way towards more media accountability.

Social media and the relation to the audience

According to the SCM study (2020), 90% of media outlets established after 2011 have a "clear vision, mission, and goals" available to their employees as well as the public (p. 59). This is a clear sign that a majority of outlets feels obliged to spell out their mission to their audience.

In our survey, 5 respondents said, their outlet provides feedback options for the audience and ten said they would partly. Only one said, that the outlet he/she is working for doesn't provide a feedback channel and one said "no answer" (Q12b). The same answer pattern can be found for the perception of social media. 5 respondents say yes, when they are asked: "Do you think that social media are important in your country as a forum for debate on quality/misconduct of the news media?" Ten respondents answered social media was partly important and only one said, it wasn't at all (Q14). The findings allow to conclude that a certain awareness for responsive practices does exists against all odds.

Limiting factors are overwhelmingly high, though enabling factors exist

Not surprisingly, the respondents rank the ongoing war and violence paired with a lack of political stability as the most important factor limiting media accountability in Syria. Daily work isn't safe, and the economic situation of journalists and media organizations alike is scarce. The fight for survival limits the priority of media accountability practices.

In those areas controlled by the Assad regime, the restrict legislation for the media is still a problem. In the other areas the missing legislation causes insecurity and limits the institutionalization of media outlets and hence, the development of media accountability

measures. Respondents point out that missing freedoms on all levels, such as freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of move hinder them to work professionally. Although the Uprising and the anarchy that has followed opened the way for the establishment of many media outlets, the respondents point out that it rather supported partisan media than objective reporting. One respondent said: "Partisanship among media outlets, journalists and its audiences and a lack of acceptance of independent reporting limit the establishment of media accountability in all parts of Syria". Financial shortage and a lack of technical equipment is another heavy burden for journalistic work.

On the site of enabling factors, respondents mentioned partnership with other (international) organizations, the development of capacities in exile and the experience of freedoms during periods of decreased regime-control. They also realized that they could win back trust by respecting objective reporting and by increasing their sensitivity for audience needs. At the same time, they noticed that the audience's awareness for true and false information has increased.

Table 1:

Overview of Enabling and Limiting Factors for Media Accountability

Enabling Factors Mentioned by Respondents	Limiting Factors Mentioned by Respondents
Partnership with other (international) organizations	Chaos in the shadow of war and revolution
Development of professional capacities (in exile)	Political and ideological power over media
	Financial uncertainty on an individual and organizational level
The huge number of media outlets that came up after the revolution in 2011	Lack of political stability and peace
Experience of freedoms during periods of absence of Assad regime-control	Lack of laws and regulation and legal certainty (rule of law)
Initiation of working out a professional code of conduct during the past ten years	Lack of safety in daily work
	Lack of technical equipment
Winning back trust and respect for objective reporting from people after decades of state-orchestrated media	Lack of freedom on all levels (to move, to speak out, to publish, to access information)
	A dominant culture of fear
Awareness for people's information desire among journalists	Poverty and the poor national economic situation
Increased sensitivity among the audience for true and false information	Dependency on foreign relations, money and conditions
	Lack of "follow-up" initiatives for developing professionalism

Q1: Which are context factors that support/enable in your country news media to act in an accountable way? (Could be political, social, cultural, economic factors, as well as factors located within the media system itself)

6. Conclusions and ideas for future research

Except for Mithaq Sharaf, none of the non-governmental organizations has solely specialized in media accountability practices, but many have missions and activities relevant for such. Most are registered outside Syria or are branches of international organizations such as the Journalists for Human Rights. While the main goals of media accountability practices in 2010 were limited to holding the media to account to what they do NOT cover and to observe press freedom violations, they have contributed to a greater variety of social responsibility issue. They strive for a self-regulatory body as in the case of Mithaq Sharaf, combat hate speech and incitement to violence as in the case of SCM or train journalists on professional norms and media ethics. Through a variety of organizations, the issue of media accountability is being set on the agenda of media professionals in all parts of Syria.

Although the questionnaires' outcomes are limited in representation (also given the reportedly rampant Corona epidemic in Syria-main), it reveals controversial perceptions and evaluation on media accountability within the targeted group of media professionals. Pies (2014) interprets such differing perceptions on media accountability as an indicator for a change in the normative basis of journalism. This would support the conclusion by Pies and Madanat (2011), when they researched media accountability in Syria in 2010: "Media Accountability in Syria is more a question of re-defining the role of media in society than working on transparency practices or establishing self-regulation. This is due to strong state control and the mobilization role mass media has been playing in Syria for decades" (p. 2). Nevertheless, one should be cautious as the questionnaire was not sensitive enough towards the current context to justify such an argument statistically. Still, several

organizations, that are active in such a process and have started to practice media accountability, operate from outside Syria. They might be qualified enough to transfer their experience in reflecting and practicing media accountability to those inland.

Respondents' perceptions of the enabling factors seem reflective to their liminal state following a decade of conflict, and more generally to the resulting world view. These factors can best be understood vis-a-vis the limiting factors - the belligerent situation in Syria is both a challenge and an opportunity. The enabling factors are the tell-tale of what a situation of "creative anarchy" (to avert the politically laden "creative chaos") begets when the boat is being rocked. Not simply because journalists are ipso facto in their liminality, but also because of their awareness of the people's appetite for factual information. Apparently, the factors speak of a need for a "third party" such as international organizations as a scaffold for more awareness and empowerment to reach a more media accountability responsive culture.

Before taking concrete measures, we recommend more in-depth research. First, the situation is still not stable and if exiled initiatives will be forced to stay in exile, their ability to emit with their knowledge, experience, and competence to media organization inside Syria main, will be probably limited. So further research should address discourses and exchange between media accountability enthusiasts in the differing Syrian media spaces. Another field of research should focus on media accountability practices inside media organizations. How do they guarantee transparency about their working processes, their ownership structure, sources etc.? And how do they allow for responsive practice for the audience. While responsive practices and intensive social media communication are already on the agenda of media outlets, they might strive for further institutionalization.

Media observatories that currently campaign for media freedom and against violence and harassment of media workers, may play a stronger role in the process of negotiation professional norms in the future. We again recommend a deeper analysis for both aspects, responsive practices from inside newsrooms as well as media accountability activities from outside, to provide us with a more nuanced picture of the media accountability landscape in Syria.

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