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the Child in Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates**

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Children’s access to beneficial information in Arab states: Implementation of the CRC’s Article 17 in Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract (190 words)

In theory, the multiple platforms and transnational nature of digital media, along with a related proliferation of diverse forms of content, make it easier for children’s right to access socially and culturally beneficial information and material to be realised, as required by Article 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Drawing on data collected during research on children’s screen content in the Arab world, combined with scrutiny of documents collated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors compliance with the CRC, this paper explores how three Arab countries, Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, presented their efforts to implement Article 17 as part of their periodic reporting on their overall performance in putting the CRC into effect. It uncovers tensions over the relationship between provision, participation and protection in relation to media, reveals that Article 17 is liable to get less attention than it deserves in contexts where governments keep a tight grip on media, and that, by appearing to give it a lower priority, all parties neglect the intersection between human rights in relation to media and children’s rights.

Keywords

Right to information; media provision; protection; participation; media diversity; legislation

Children’s access to beneficial information in Arab states: Implementation of the CRC’s Article 17 in Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates

Even allowing for its repeated use of the phrase ‘mass media’, Article 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) reads today as fully relevant to the digital era, in which media can reach a mass audience without being restricted to the minimally interactive mass media models of old. Conceived and developed in a pre-Internet age, the first 1979 draft of what would eventually become Article 17 took a very different approach from the version finally adopted in 1984.¹ The lengthy text that emerged from the redrafting negotiations ended up enshrining both children’s right to access beneficial content from diverse national and international sources and their right to be protected from harmful content, which have proved central to contemporary discussions around the benefits and risks of digital media. Yet, as these discussions have intensified over the years, they have rarely made prominent reference to Article 17. Meanwhile the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN body of independent experts created to monitor implementation of CRC by states that are party to it, is said to have taken an uneven approach to monitoring, let alone promoting, adherence to Article 17 (Sacino 2012: 44; 53-55).

Digital media have arguably amplified states’ ability and reasons to carry out all six courses of action listed in Article 17. In light of this, the present research examines the way three Arab states have reported on their compliance with this article of the CRC as part of the five-yearly reporting procedure mandated by Article 44 of the Convention, and the feedback they have received from the CRC monitoring committee. It does so by reference to differing views about the relative importance of each of the three principles — provision, participation, protection — encompassed not only by the CRC as a whole but also by Article 17 itself.

Provision as a pre-requisite for protection and participation

The extensive scope of Article 17 is reflected in the different ways its provisions are summarised. Some authors call it the article on access to appropriate information. But a specialist study (Sacino 2012), published as part of a multi-volume commentary on the entire CRC, points out that its essential element is access to — implying availability of — a diversity of mass media sources. That is because the first sentence of the article is worded

¹ See the CRC’s legislative history (Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights 2007: 480-485).

more strongly, in terms of the duty it imposes, than the sub-paragraphs of the second sentence. It asserts that States Parties

‘shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health’.

Sacino points out (2012: 15) that the phrase ‘shall ensure’ is the ‘highest imposition of duty known in human rights law’. In contrast, although each duty set out in the second part of the Article is seen as supporting the first², these are couched in the least demanding term, ‘encourage’. Here the focus is on encouraging the mass media to disseminate beneficial material that accords with the spirit of the CRC’s Article 29, which directs education towards respect for human rights and freedoms, and encouraging international cooperation in disseminating beneficial content from diverse sources. The last three commitments pertain to children’s books, minority languages and development of appropriate guidelines to protect children from content that is ‘injurious’ to their ‘well-being’. The State is required to ‘encourage’ development of guidelines, not impose them itself.

The multiple clauses of Article 17 not only distinguish it from other CRC articles dealing with children’s civil rights and freedoms, including Article 13 on freedom of expression, but render it unique among the array of human rights treaties because of the way it elaborates on what is implicit in making freedom of information a reality for children (Article 19 1999: 23; Sacino 2012: 5). This elaboration brings into play the ‘three Ps’ — provision, protection and participation — that underlie the CRC. For diverse media sources to be accessed, they need to be provided (Livingstone and Bulger 2014: 321). The CRC Committee itself has linked this provision to both protection and participation. In a General Comment in 2003, citing Article 17’s reference to ‘physical and mental health’, it asserted that the right to access appropriate information is crucial for protection from harmful practices, including ‘early marriages, female genital mutilation and the use of alcohol and tobacco and substances abuse’ (CRC 2003: 3). In 2009 it drew a similar link with Article 12 of the CRC on the child’s right to be heard, stating that

‘[F]ulfilment of the child’s right to information, consistent with article 17, is to a large degree, a prerequisite for the effective realization of the right to express views. Children need access to information in formats appropriate to their age and capacities on all issues of concern to them (CRC 2009: 19-20).

² The Article’s second sentence begins ‘To this end, States Parties shall...’

Other commentators have shown that, where media are concerned, participation is linked to protection, in the sense that without the 'agency needed to participate and exercise rights, children can neither take advantage of the opportunities digital media afford nor develop resiliency when facing risks' (Third, Bellerose et al 2014: 8).

However, interdependence of the three Ps in Article 17 is not a matter of international consensus, not least because protection from content deemed unsuitable is often prioritised over provision and participation. It has been argued that the 'discursive shift' that took place in drafting the whole CRC, from a 'purely protective approach' to one that respects children as individual rights holders, resulted in the Convention embodying, overall, idealised notions of children and childhood that emerged mainly in the Global North (Holzscheiter 2010: 85-86; 90). Because of this, child's rights advocates tend to see implementation of the CRC as a simple matter of States Parties' 'political will', without addressing 'value conflicts and societal resistances' arising from the idea of the child that the CRC enshrines (e.g. Holzscheiter 2010: 87). A study of legal obstacles to CRC implementation in Algeria says these are typical of difficulties encountered in many African and Arab states practising forms of Islamic law (Filali 2015: 157). Thus, for example, Algeria placed an Interpretative Declaration on Articles 13-17 of the CRC, aligning their application with restrictions in domestic law, including a ban on any published item that is 'contrary to Islamic morality' (Filali 2015: 163).

Arab input has been conspicuously absent in CRC-related discussions about children and media. The CRC Committee holds periodic Days of General Discussion about aspects of the Convention, for which it invites submissions from advocacy groups, and to date it has held two on children and media, the first in 1996 and the second in 2014. UN bodies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the Global North led the event in 1996 (Williams 1997) while the list of 29 written submissions to the 2014 discussion included items from countries in the Global South such as Mali, Costa Rica and Brazil, as well as Latin American regional documents, but nothing either individually or regionally from Arab states.³ A dearth of Arab contributions can be attributed not only to tight constraints on Arab civil society and media but also to a particular dynamic whereby Arab national and regional institutions have been able to pay lip service to obligations that come with membership of international bodies promoting media freedom and development, without being forced to apply them in practice (Sakr 2016: 187-188). Van Hüllen suggests (2015: 133) that Arab states' relatively swift adoption of the CRC was part of their selective response to global initiatives on human

³ See the list at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRC/Pages/Discussion2014Contributions.aspx> (accessed 3 March 2016).

rights. Far from signalling a departure from authoritarianism, the supposed transfer of global governance norms to Arab states was designed to 'deflect or mitigate the "normative power" of the global human rights regime', allowing international actors to 'legitimize their cooperation with authoritarian regimes' without exerting pressure for formal commitments to be translated into behavioural change (Van Hüllen 2015: 139).

Arab governments' grip on media systems and communications infrastructure has been named as one of the biggest obstacles to creating a knowledge society in the Arab world (UNDP 2009: 22). Article 17 of the CRC addresses the need for that grip to be relaxed. But pressure on Arab states to implement it has been further forestalled by a tendency, evident in the Days of General Discussion, for the article's primary requirement on diversity to be overlooked. The 1996 event considered media reporting about children and recognised that children themselves could share their individual experiences internationally online (Williams 1997: 265), but neglected to highlight the State's duty to ensure that children have a diversity of mass media sources available to them (Sacino 2012: 40; 42). The same could be said of the discussion in 2014, held under the title 'Digital Media and Children's Rights'. This highlighted issues of technical access and participatory empowerment and mentioned the duty to provide for diversity, but its only relevant recommendation was to 'promote linguistic and cultural diversity of digital content' (CRC 2014a: 21).

All the above influences have implications for implementation of Article 17. So too does an appreciation that a rights-based understanding of children's participation need not be dominated by 'minority world' conceptions (Liebel and Saadi 2012: 163; 177-78). Where children participate alongside adults as family breadwinners, street protestors, or witnesses of police brutality, this does not lessen their right as children to diverse and appropriate information. Various types of participation are observable in the three countries discussed below, namely Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates (UAE – a federation of seven emirates that includes Abu Dhabi and Dubai). Collection of data on legislation and media provision in these states took place through fieldwork interviews and document analysis as part of a research project on screen media for Arabic-speaking children funded by the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC).⁴ In the present article, information on both child-related laws and media provision in each state is presented in light of the state's engagement with the Committee on the Rights of the Child, through its periodic reporting in compliance with Article 17 of the CRC as documented by the Committee's own online archive. In addition to the reports of Egypt, Morocco and the UAE, the Committee scrutinized those of seven other Arab countries during the five years from 2011 to 2015,

⁴ Grant number AH/1000674/1.

including Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Yemen (which have experienced deep civil conflict) and Algeria, Jordan and Kuwait (none of which was studied in depth for the AHRC-funded research project). Although the detailed data presented here concern only three countries, the next section takes account of the way the Arab region's shared language, Arabic, has contributed to regionalisation of the media landscape and therefore reviews the regional context for compliance with Article 17 of the CRC in terms of media provision and child protection and participation.

Digital media and the struggle for diverse media sources

Article 17 refers to 'mass media', but contemporary legal interpretation extends this to the open platforms of digital media, where anyone with access to technology is able to 'reach the masses' (Sacino 2012: 2). Indeed, Article 17 features prominently in one authoritative consideration of how the CRC applies to today's 'digital, convergent and networked environment' (Livingstone and Bulger 2014: 321). In the Arab world, where low literacy rates have been compounded by disruption to schooling through conflicts across the region, and where the literary Arabic used in print media differs from the colloquial Arabic spoken at home, television — streamed, uploaded to YouTube or simply viewed on the family set — has most attraction for children, provided there is something interesting to watch. Satellite television spread steadily across the region from the mid-1990s, as cross-border digital transmission enabled an expanding array of privately-owned broadcasters to compete with former government monopolies. In this expansion, private sources of children's content were slow to appear and the first few that did relied heavily on dubbed imported cartoons. From 2004 onwards the options diversified somewhat, so that locally-produced animations, talk shows and magazine shows for children became available on pan-Arab channels that were mostly based in the Gulf countries of Qatar and the UAE. But, precisely because they were aimed at a pan-Arab audience, these channels opted for the literary Arabic that is a lingua franca for the Arab world. It was not until private networks targeting national audiences — already established in Lebanon and Palestine since the 1990s — emerged in other countries like Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco in the 2000s, that locally-relevant content combined with use of local dialect to create a potent mix of interest to audiences of all ages, including under-18s. That mix included issues relating to child protection, such as child marriage, child labour, street children, clandestine migration of minors, violent discipline of children and child abuse. These developing national conversations may be seen (Sakr 2013) as part of the slow build-up to the uprisings of 2010-11.

Alongside this process, social media and video sharing were also making it possible for teenagers to become proactive in producing and distributing their own content online, first

through blogs and later through satirical and other kinds of video on YouTube. But the opening up was short-lived. When a political backlash from the 2011 Arab uprisings brought new controls on media and 'cybercrime' across the region and a tighter grip on distribution networks, the spaces for open discussion grew increasingly narrow. Statistics from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) show rapid increases in the number of journalists imprisoned in Arab countries— from 12 to 23 in Egypt alone between 2014 and 2015 (CPJ 2015). At the same time cases emerged of children being prosecuted for acting freely on social media. In 2013, three Moroccans aged 14-15 were arrested, held for three days, threatened with five-year prison sentences (and eventually acquitted), after posting pictures on Facebook of two of them enjoying a heterosexual kiss (Al-Arabiya 2013). Four Egyptians aged 16-17 were arrested in 2015 and convicted of contempt for religion after they made a private video against so-called Islamic state militants in which they performed a make-believe prayer (Human Rights Watch 2016).

By this time, however, the incarceration of children had become commonplace in Egypt, with hundreds arrested during protests, some as young as 11 years old (Shams El-Din 2014) and some subjected to beatings and torture (Human Rights Watch 2012). Egyptian child's rights advocacy bodies documented escalating ill-treatment of children in 2014-15, through abductions, military trials, death sentences and even a call in the private newspaper, *Al-Masry Al-Youm* (The Egyptian Today), to control rising numbers of street children by killing them (*Mada Masr* 2014). In these circumstances, children learned what was happening to their relatives and classmates through word of mouth or mobile phones, not mainstream media sources. During this period the Egyptian authorities avoided reporting on their compliance with the CRC altogether. Blaming the CRC Committee's delayed feedback on their previous report, they informed the UN in 2014 that the report due in 2012 would be delivered in 2017.⁵

Egypt: Dead end for a decade of activity

Egypt ratified the CRC in 1990, the same year it entered into force. It initially placed reservations on articles relating to adoption (20 and 21) but withdrew them in 2003. The government first reported on its compliance with the Convention in 1992 and 1998. Its third report, due in 2002, was only delivered together with the fourth in 2008.

The combined 2008 report devoted three substantial paragraphs to Article 17 under the heading 'Access to appropriate information'. The first stated that '[e]xcept for pornographic

⁵ See paragraph 101 at <https://www.crin.org/en/library/publications/egyptchildrens-rights-references-universal-periodic-review>

sites there is no restriction on web access' but that families were being encouraged to monitor children's internet use to protect them from sexual exploitation. It affirmed a commitment to the 'right of the child to have access to information', stating that there are 'no restrictions' on children's access to 'satellite channels which broadcast both liberal and conservative programmes'. It went on to itemise efforts made to encourage publishers to produce children's books and children to read them (CRC 2010: 33). The second paragraph cited legislation adopted under the 1996 Child Law to 'satisfy the cultural needs of the child' and said 'child-dedicated programmes' were available on Egyptian radio and television. It said computers were being introduced in schools 'at all levels' to encourage children to access the web and noted the existence of 'free internet services'. The third paragraph bemoaned persistent obstacles to children gaining access to information, among which it identified poverty and illiteracy, but named the government-run National Council of Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) as the key repository for relevant data (CRC 2010: 34). Discussing the report with the CRC Committee in 2011, the Egyptian delegation indicated that the NCCM coordinated not only the work of Egyptian ministries but also that of NGOs, research centres and civil society (Child Rights Connect 2011: 5).

This reporting on Article 17, while reflecting the government's extensive reach through the NCCM, avoided misinterpreting the article as justification for government censorship in the guise of protection. Its tone can be attributed to developments in Egypt at a particular moment in time. June 2008 saw the Egyptian parliament adopt several amendments to the 1996 Child Law. These raised the age of criminal liability from seven to 12 years and the legal minimum age for marriage from 16 to 18, abolished punitive measures against children at 'risk of delinquency', criminalised female genital mutilation (FGM) and promised the creation of local child protection committees — all measures welcomed by rights campaigners. The changes had been preceded by nearly ten years of action on children's rights by the NCCM's secretary general, Moushira Khattab, who had familiarised herself with child rights advocacy while serving as Egypt's ambassador to post-apartheid South Africa. On returning home in 1999 she worked to challenge a widespread reluctance in Egypt to acknowledge, let alone tackle, severe problems facing Egyptian children, at the same time making Cairo a base for Arab and African regional meetings on child rights (Khattab 2015). As vice chair and rapporteur of the Committee on the Rights of the Child from 2002 to 2010 and author of a PhD thesis on CRC implementation, she nurtured a network of professionals who were ready to 'open all the files' on sensitive topics like child labour, street children, trafficking and FGM. Frustrated at the patronising and moralising tone adopted by the majority of Egyptian broadcasters when dealing with children (Khattab 2015), she was also

instrumental in getting an innovative show about children's rights onto Egyptian state TV in 2008 under the title *Esma3oona* (Hear Us Out).⁶

Esma3oona was not intended only, or even primarily, for a child audience, as its main purpose was to raise public awareness of the need to revise the 1996 Child Law. But its creators definitely saw it in terms of children's participation, as explained in the section of the government's 2008 report to the CRC dealing with Article 12. Acknowledging that recognition of the child's right to be heard was 'still in its early stages' in Egypt, being implemented only in 'certain areas on certain occasions by certain groups', the report described *Esma3oona* as one of numerous initiatives to promote children's participation, in this case through their role as producers and presenters of a television series dealing with their rights (CRC 2010: 31-32). Overall, 2008 probably marked a high point in Egypt's efforts to implement the various elements of Article 17. Khattab was appointed as a minister in 2009 but her post was abolished in the turmoil that followed Egypt's January 2011 revolution and the NCCM, which used to report directly to the prime minister, was put under the Ministry of Health. Human rights defenders would later face a major crackdown as the presidency changed hands. Children's programmes on Egyptian television ground to a halt, with private channels showing no interest in serving child audiences (Nasser 2013). Two long-running locally-made children's animations from the 1990s, resurrected in 2015, were the exception that proves the rule.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child was anyway not impressed by the government report. Giving feedback some years later, in 2011, it expressed concern at children and adolescents' limited access to health information, especially reproductive health, suggesting that child-dedicated programmes on television were not up to this task and urging more attention to be paid to the information needs of children in rural areas and locations of high illiteracy (CRC 2011: 11). Egyptian children also questioned the report's claims. According to a study of children's views of their digital rights, based on workshops held in 16 countries in 2014, children from Egypt complained about a lack of computers at home and at school (Third, Bellerose et al 2014: 32).

Morocco: Diversification of sources under-reported

Morocco signed the CRC on 26 June 1990 and ratified it in 1993, placing a reservation on Article 14 (on freedom of religion) but withdrawing this in 2006 and replacing it with an Interpretative Declaration noting that Moroccan law guarantees freedom of worship for all and stipulates that parents owe their children the right to religious guidance. Morocco's first

⁶ The '3' in the programme title represents the Arabic letter 'ain'.

two reports on compliance with the CRC were submitted almost on time in 1995 and 2000. The third and fourth reports were not submitted until 2012, three years after the fourth had become due, and were not examined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child until September 2014, eleven years after the previous examination. By that time, the king of Morocco had ordered a new constitution, in response to public demands for reform in 2011, giving greater recognition to universal human rights; its Article 32 pledged equal legal protection for all children. In 2012 Morocco signed the Optional Protocol to the CRC on a Communications Procedure (OP3CRC), allowing children or their representatives to bring violations of their rights directly before the CRC Committee if no national legal remedy has been found. At the time of writing, Morocco had not ratified the protocol, while neither Egypt nor the UAE had signed it.

Morocco's report to the Committee in 2012 said next to nothing on compliance with Article 17, noting only that there had been 'no change' on this since the previous report (CRC 2013: 22-23). This was surprising, given that information given back then referred almost exclusively to 1999, including a calculation that 5.3 per cent of programmes on state television had been devoted to children's programming in the first ten months of that year, nearly three-quarters of which was of foreign origin (CRC 2003b: 39). Seven of the ten paragraphs on Article 17 in the 2000 report detailed individual items and packages carried by one regular children's television show on state television during 1999, involving varying degrees of participation by children in talk shows, coverage of Morocco's Children's Parliament, a theatre festival and so on (CRC 2003b: 39-40). The last two paragraphs in the section dealt with protecting children from harmful content. Instead of reporting that the authorities had encouraged the development of appropriate guidelines for children's protection, as required by Article 17, these paragraphs spoke of legislation enacted and penalties imposed (CRC 2003b: 40). The monitoring Committee was silent on this misinterpretation in its 2003 Concluding Observations.

That the report submitted in 2012 referred back to its predecessor in relation to Article 17 was surprising not only because of the long interval between them but because of major changes to media during that time, both globally and in Morocco. The 2012 report's first and only mention of the internet, on the 46th out of 51 pages, was linked to liability for hosting pornographic websites, in a section addressing Article 34 of the CRC on sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (CRC 2013: 46). There was no reference to social media, despite estimates that more than half the total population are 'internet users'⁷ (UNICEF 2015: 62) and independent assessments that the spread of internet access was a breakthrough for

⁷ Those using the internet from any device, including a mobile phone, in the previous 12 months.

Moroccan children's access to information (Manara Network 2011: 45). As for changes specific to Morocco, 2002 saw the start of a liberalisation process that led to private radio stations gaining licences, including music stations like Hit Radio, launched in 2006 and targeted at ages 15+, featuring local rappers and interviews. That these stations increased the diversity of material available to Moroccan teens is demonstrated by the Moroccan broadcast regulator's attempts to control their content through suspensions and fines for bad language and, in one case, airing a child's account of suffering sexual abuse (Bugs and Crusafon 2014: 388). Media sources were also diversified through the state broadcaster's introduction of the Tamazight Channel in 2010, operating in the language of Morocco's Berber population but with Arabic subtitles for other viewers. As a generalist channel Tamazight carries animations and children's films as well as a regular children's show by the name of *Assarag n Imezyanen* (For the Young Ones), hosted by young presenters and covering science, arts, sports and games. Morocco's report mentioned the new channel (CRC 2013: 48) in relation to Article 30 of the CRC, on children belonging to a minority or indigenous group, but not Article 17.

In its Concluding Observations to the 2012 report, the Committee on the Rights of the Child followed the report's own lead and said nothing about access to a diversity of media sources. Instead, understandably prompted by the dozen supplementary reports submitted by NGOs campaigning on corporal punishment, street children, domestic workers and early marriage, the Committee expressed regret at lack of progress towards adopting a Children's Law and lack of effective enforcement of existing legislation relating to children, due to 'lack of resources, capacities and supervision' (CRC 2014b: 3). Under Civil Rights and Freedoms (Articles 7-8 and 13-17), the Committee focused its recommendations on registration of births, transfer of nationality and establishing paternity (CRC 2014b: 7). It noted concerns that shortcomings in measures to promote children's participation were preventing their views from being heard (CRC 2014b: 6-7).

UAE: A long-standing reservation attributed to 'cultural traditions'

The UAE acceded to the CRC in January 1997. Whereas Egypt and Morocco signed the Convention and then ratified it, the UAE indicated its agreement to be legally bound by the CRC in one step, by acceding without signing first. In the process it placed reservations on four articles. Three related to nationality (Article 7), freedom of religion (Article 14) and adoption (Article 21). The fourth reservation was on Article 17. It stated that, 'based on the State's 'desire to avoid violating cultural traditions and values of society', the UAE 'protects children from cultures and information that harm their upbringing and expose them to deviance' (CRC 2014: 13). Responding to the UAE's first CRC report, submitted in 2000, the

Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed regret that the document had failed to follow the reporting guidelines and omitted important information (CRC 2002: 1). Stressing that, under international law, domestic law is supposed to be aligned with the Convention once signed, the Committee recommended that the reservations on Articles 7, 14 and 21 should be withdrawn or narrowed. It did not mention the reservation on Article 17 (CRC 2002: 2-3).

When the second UAE report, due in 2004, was finally submitted in 2012, it devoted six sentences to Article 17 under the heading 'Access to information from a diversity of sources'. The first repeated the wording of the Convention about access, diversity, well-being and health. The second and third asserted that national libraries offer the 'latest cultural publications for children' and that internet services are 'widespread' throughout the UAE, permitting access to information from international sources (CRC 2012: 30). The remainder read as follows:

In addition, television and radio channels, magazines [sic] provide children access to various types of scientific and cultural information. There is also a trend to publish periodicals concerned with children's affairs, e.g. in the form of annexes to police periodicals published by the various general commands of the police in the United Arab Emirates. The media ban applies to children only in respect of media materials that harm children, threaten their safety and security and endanger their upbringing.

In its vague wording, this submission on Article 17 gave a far more austere picture than the colourful listing of children's libraries, books, magazines, theatres, websites, prizes for creativity and recreational centres set out later in the report in relation to Article 31 of the Convention on leisure, play and culture (CRC 2012: 45-48). It likewise did less than justice to initiatives in co-production of television for young children at Abu Dhabi's media free zone, twofour54. But it also avoided any reference to extensive internet censorship in the UAE, whereby numerous websites and forums discussing political reform and social issues have been blocked along with around 500 search terms (Freedom House 2013: 5-7). It said nothing about harsh penalties imposed under the 2012 Cybercrime Law for criticising the country's rulers and religion. Arrests and detentions had by then included an 18-year-old held in Abu Dhabi in July 2010 for passing along a message about protests against gasoline price rises and another held in solitary confinement in Sharjah in 2012 for blog posts deemed supportive of political detainees (Freedom House 2013: 2; 11-12).

Only two alternative reports supplemented the government's submission, neither of them from NGOs based in the UAE and neither focused on access to information and its link to children's well-being. The first, dealing with corporal punishment, mentioned the case of a teenage girl sentenced to flogging by a court in Al-Ain in 2007 for an offence committed

when she was 14. The other came from the International Centre for Justice and Human Rights (ICJHR), set up in Geneva in 2014 but mostly linked, according to its self-description, to the UAE. That report, concerned with rights violations affecting children of political detainees in the UAE, attributed the State's reservation on Article 17 to a fear that access to information would reveal to children 'the extent of corruption in the country'. It said the State 'wants the child to hear one voice' (ICJHR 2015: 13).

By 2015, when the Committee on the Rights of the Child issued its Concluding Observations on the government's report of 2012, the UAE had introduced the draft of a Child Rights Law. Originally dubbed Wadeema's Law, after an eight-year-old girl of that name was starved and tortured to death by her father and his girlfriend in 2011, the law instituted nationwide provision for childcare specialists to prevent similar abuse. Eventually passed in December 2015, the law promised under-18s basic rights to health, education, freedom from economic and sexual exploitation, and freedom of expression (Salama 2015). Three months later the UAE's newly appointed federal Minister of State for Youth Affairs, 22-year-old Shamma Al-Mazrui, called for government departments to improve their channels of communication with young people via digital media. Based on the CRC's Concluding Observations, however, it seemed the Committee had doubts whether children attempting to express themselves in the UAE would actually be heard. It called on the authorities to 'promote the meaningful and empowered participation of all children within the family, community and schools, including within the children's parliament, paying particular attention to girls and children in vulnerable situations' (CRC 2015: 6). This comment had resonance, for example, in the case of the UAE Children's Rights Conference held in Dubai in April 2015, for which children were contacted through schools to submit 'papers' that were then selected by a panel of adults according to 'preset criteria' (Barakat 2015). The Committee was also concerned that the information it received was lacking, not least because of the 'very limited number' of independent NGOs specialising in UAE children's rights (CRC 2015:4). Under Civil Rights and Freedoms, it restricted its remarks to the issues of birth registration, name and nationality, including the situation of stateless children in the UAE (CRC 2015: 7). Its only mention of Article 17 was at the beginning of the report, in a paragraph recommending that the UAE should 'consider withdrawing' its reservation.

Conclusion

Like all CRC signatories, the three Arab states reviewed here have been obliged under the terms of the Convention to try to document what they have done to ensure children have access to appropriate and beneficial content from a diversity of media sources. Scrutiny of their reporting on compliance with all CRC obligations shows it to have been extremely

tardy, with delays ranging from six to eight years, disguised by submission of a combined report covering two successive reporting periods. In regard to Article 17 the reports are also, for the most part, ill-considered and under-researched, displaying a failure to think through its full implications or to distinguish the duties it entails from others in the CRC. That Egypt's 2008 report was somewhat of an exception in this regard highlights the unsatisfactory wider picture. In other cases the relationship between provision, participation and protection was overlooked and the idea of collaborative development of 'appropriate guidelines' to protect children from harmful content was remote. A UAE report implied that children's media are more a question of play and leisure than access to information. A report by Morocco omitted to mention the internet or notice the link between language and diversity in relation to Article 17. When evidence of action on Article 17 is limited to programmes on government-run television channels or magazines published by the police, it is apparent that the reporting party could benefit from listening to local activists and advocacy groups about what it means to ensure access to a diversity of sources.

Reporting delays during the period under review were compounded by delays in feedback from the CRC monitoring Committee, caused by the high volume of monitoring work. That the Committee mostly glossed over deficiencies in observing Article 17 may be a corollary of the amount of attention paid to the many other rights abuses affecting children in Egypt, Morocco and the UAE. But the omission contradicts the Committee's own pronouncements on the importance of children's access to information for their physical and mental health and their ability to make themselves heard. Such an omission vis-à-vis the intersection of rights relating to media and rights for children adds to existing evidence that Arab states have been able to 'deflect or mitigate' the normative power of the global human rights regime (Van Hüllen 2015). Neglect of Article 17 in the Arab world and beyond demonstrates the importance of holding on to human rights as a critical dimension of children's access to digital media.

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