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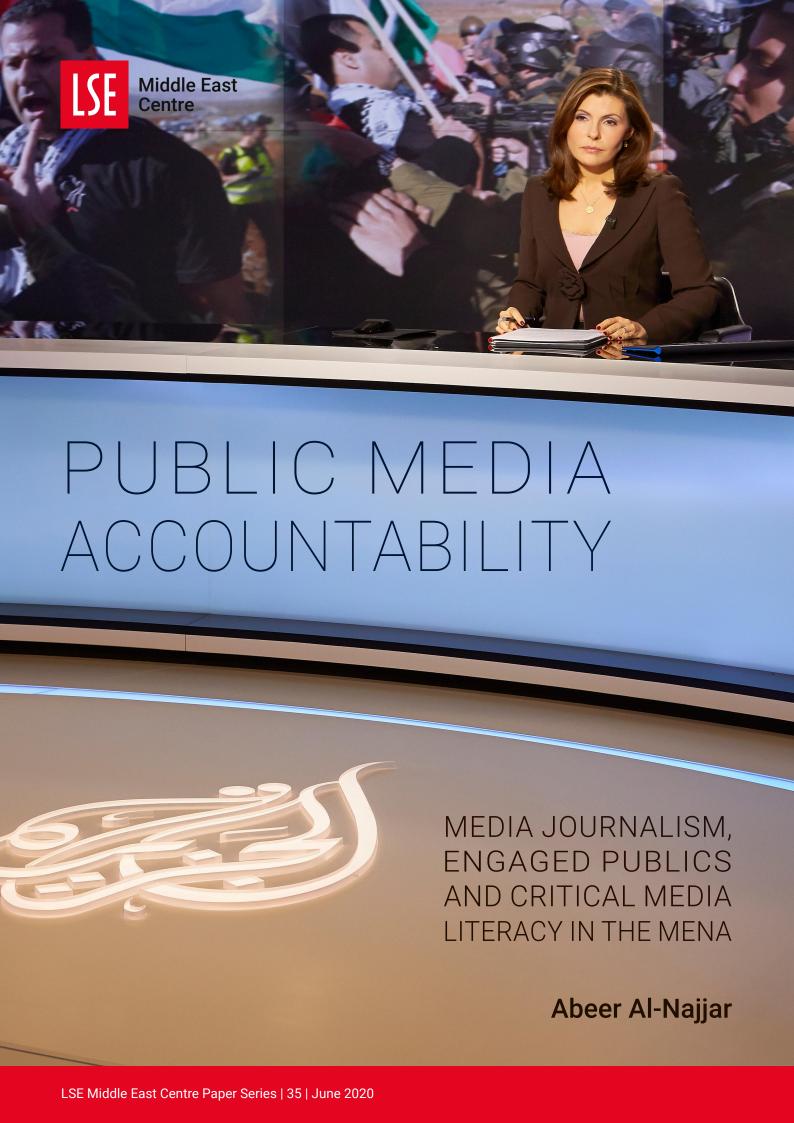
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PUBLIC MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY

MEDIA JOURNALISM, ENGAGED PUBLICS AND CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY IN THE MENA

Abeer Al-Najjar

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Public Media Accountability: Media Journalism, Engaged Publics and Critical Media Literacy in the MENA

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About the Author

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Abstract

The flow of information, news and views in the Arab world is expanding exponentially, with countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran increasing their presence through a new wave of multiplatform journalistic networks. This proliferation of news channels makes it challenging for Arab publics to navigate the available information sources and form informed views. This study examines the ways in which Arab citizens, as media users, could be enabled to influence news media conduct and thus enhance media practicioners' commitment toward ethical journalistic practices and standards, particularly accuracy, balance and fairness. It aims to explore the possibilities of making pan-Arab news media accountable to their publics, refocusing their attention on citizens rather than sponsors and governments. The first section provides an overview of the current state of accountability of the pan-Arab news media with a focus on state-funded broadcasters. Section two looks at the current and emerging media practices and internet-based forms of professional and public accountability in Arab countries. Section three investigates the role of critical media literacy in bolstering the value and effect of current forms of public accountability. Arab media are facing new forms of professional and public accountability and, although in its infancy, critical media literacy is a central factor in fostering and shaping this. This is both essential to the development of constructive and engaging forms of critique and questioning of media performance, role, content and conduct; and in widening the practice of critical media questioning and criticism to other members of the public.

Acknowledgments

The world seems on the brink of suicide, and the ultimate catastrophe can be avoided only if the adult citizens can learn how to live together in peace. It will not be enough to educate the rising generation; the time is too short. The educators have the enormous task of trying to make peoples of the earth intelligent now. It is fortunate that as their task has grown greater and more pressing, technology has given them new instruments of incredible range and power.[1]

The State of Accountability of Pan-Arab News Broadcasters[2]

Pan-Arab media, including those heavily financed by regional or international regimes, are arguably the most trusted and organised sources of news for more than 500 million Arabic speakers around the world. The exact amount of financial investment in pan-Arab news media is difficult to gauge, yet *Al-Jazeera* was launched in 1996 on an initial budget of US$150 million.[3] The minimum assumed annual budget of any other pan-Arab news channel is about US$50 million. These channels function in 'one of the most competitive news markets.'[4] Pan-Arab news channels broadcast the news about and for people of the Arab region, where many countries are going through political instability, civil war, or are arenas for regionally and internationally sponsored wars. Many Arab countries have witnessed the rise of armed oppositions, militant Islamist insurgencies (both Sunni and Shiʿa), mercenary groups and the destruction of economies, institutions and lives. 'While Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have been particularly impacted, no Arab country has been unscathed. These conflicts—fuelled by regional competition, unfettered brutality, and skyrocketing arms sales—have created tremendous headwinds for efforts to address pressing domestic challenges.'[5] With a massive flow of more than 25.9 million refugees, of whom around 70 percent are settled within the MENA,[6] the media environment is increasingly fertile for political and religious manipulation as well as misinformation and disinformation. In this atmosphere, Arabic-speaking news channels that are committed to accurate, balanced and fair reporting are extremely valuable for a healthy public sphere.

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[1] Robert M. Hutchins, *A Free and Responsible Press: A General Report on Mass Communication: Newspapers, Radio, Motion Pictures, Magazines, and Books* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1945) p. 99. Available at https://archive.org/details/freeandresponsib029216mbp/page/n5 (accessed 4 October 2019).

[2] This paper was written during the author's visiting fellowship at the LSE Middle East Centre in 2016–17.

[3] Jodi Enda & Emily Guskin, 'Al Jazeera America's Biggest Challenge: Getting people to Show Up', *Pew Research Center*, 28 May 2013. Available at https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/05/28/al-jazeera-americas-biggest-challenge-getting-people-to-show-up/ (accessed 20 March 2019).

[4] Owen Gibson, 'BBC enters a crowded marketplace as it unveils new Arabic TV channel', *The Guardian*, 4 March 2008. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/media/2008/mar/04/bbc.television (accessed 5 June 2016).

[5] Perry Cammack, 'Summary', in Joseph Bahout, Nathan, J. Brown, Perry Cammack, Michele Dunne, Intissar Fakir, Marwan Muasher, Maha Yahya, & Sarah Yerkes (eds), *Arab Horizons: Pitfalls and Pathways to Renewal* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), p. 1. Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ArabHorizons_report_final.pdf (accessed 5 January 2019).

[6] Emi Suzuki, 'The Number of Refugees has Increased 70% Since 2011', *World Economic Forum*, 5 September 2019. Available at https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/newly-released-data-show-refugee-numbers-at-record-levels/ (accessed 3 October 2019)

Although Arab news media fall short of holding politicians accountable for their actions or lack thereof, and 'remained timid' in relation to their governments and private businesses,[7] pan-Arab news media, notably *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*, have contributed, at the time of their appearance (1996 and 2003 respectively), to introducing the practices of accountability and the notion of responsibility to Arab politics, although modest in scope.[8] Framed as 'a transnational media system,'[9] pan-Arab news media remain prominent regional and national actors. In addition to the influential roles played by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, the 24/7 Arabic speaking news channels in MENA also include a wider set of regional and international players, including Iran, Israel, Turkey, Britain, the US, France, Russia, China and Germany. Although many of these channels function within different media systems, they still lack accountability mechanisms when it comes to addressing Arab audiences, notwithstanding the power these channels have in narrating their story and shaping their views of surrounding events.

Why Media Accountability?

The media holds too much power to be left to its own devices. Media systems have the power to help construct our reality, shaping the ways in which we perform our social, political, cultural or religious roles and duties. Global news media 'actively interconnects the local with the global.'[10] Hence, such outlets are

> permanently in need of control, direction and limitation in order to protect the interests of others, maintain the normative status quo, and advance some version of the public good. This would involve treating media in their organized forms as less entitled to the rights of a citizen to communicate freely and as having more obligations.[11]

Traditionally, the larger and more globalised the media organisation is, the less contact it will have with its potential audience, and contact with the audience is only kept through 'sales figures, ratings, and market research.'[12] McQuail suggests, nevertheless, that a connection is still possible, as journalists can listen and attend to (real or imagined) audience feedback, and audience members can still choose to tune in to different sources of news. This listening exercise is becoming increasingly available as a result of social media and

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[7] El Mustapha Lahlali, *Contemporary Arab Broadcast Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 48.

[8] Ibid., p. 30.

[9] Marwan Kraidy, 'The Rise of Transnational Media Systems: Implications of Pan-Arab Media for Comparative Research', in D. C. Hallin & P. Mancini (eds), *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp. 177–200.

[10] Sarah Van Leuven & Peter Berglez, 'Global Journalism Between Dream and Reality: A Comparative Study of the Times, Le Monde and De Standaard', *Journal of Journalism Studies* Vol. 16 (2015), pp. 667–83, p. 667.

[11] Dennis McQuail, *Media Accountability and Freedom of Publication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 10.

[12] Ibid., p. 15.

other technologies through which news organisations and their constituencies are able to listen to their publics.

Conceptually, although media accountability is elusive,[13] it is often viewed in relation to notions of responsibility and control, and repeatedly anticipated and practised as a restraint to press freedom. Even in a well-established democracy such as the United Kingdom, society 'constantly has to walk a tightrope between ensuring ethical behaviour in the media while safeguarding' press freedoms.[14] Accountability 'often collides with commercial interests of media owners; legal issues, such as the constitutional right to the freedom of the press in the US; and governmental concerns about public security and order.'[15] The challenge of reconciling journalistic freedom and responsibility has been an issue since the early nineteenth century.[16] US President Thomas Jefferson (1801–9) highlighted this challenge by stating, 'It is possible to have a press that is both free and responsible [...] It is not possible, however, to have a press that is both totally free and accountable.'[17] Two centuries later and this reconciliation remains 'a daunting process.'[18]

In advocating public accountability, the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of a Community in a Democracy asserts that 'public accountability is an obvious case. People behave better if they think they are being watched.'[19] Journalists should go about their daily routines knowing that they will be called to give an account of what they do.[20] Primarily, they should be answerable to their audiences. Media should be held accountable for not only what they do but also for what they fail to do. In the Arab context, the public accountability that safeguards people's right to know, and holds the media responsible for what they do and fail to do, is scarce.

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[13] Louis Hodges, 'The Journalist and Professionalism', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* Vol. 2 (1986), pp. 32–6; Patrick Lee Plaisance, 'The Concept of Media Accountability Reconsidered', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* Vol. 15 (2000), pp. 257–268, DOI: 10.1207/S15327728JMME1504_5; Susanne Fengler, 'From Media Self-regulation to "Crowd-criticism": Media Accountability in the Digital Age', *Central European Journal of Communication* Vol. 2 (2012), pp. 175–189; Susanne Fengler, Tobias Eberwein, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Colin Porlezza & Stephan Russ-Mohl (eds) *Journalists and Media Accountability: An International Study of News People in the Digital Age* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2014); Lahlali, *Contemporary Arab Broadcast Media*.

[14] Fengler et al., *Journalists and Media Accountability*, p. 85.

[15] Ratnesh Dwivedi, 'Public Accountability and Media: Its Success and Failure in Performing the Role as a Force for Public Accountability', *Souvenir of Press Council of India*, 2011. Available at http://works.bepress.com/ratnesh_dwivedi/2/ (accessed 4 October 2019).

[16] Plaisance, 'The Concept of Media Accountability'.

[17] Ibid., p. 258.

[18] Lahlali, *Contemporary Arab Broadcast Media*, p. 47.

[19] The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of a Community in a Democracy, 'Informing Communities, Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age' (Washington: The Aspen Institute, 2009), p. 14. Available at https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/pubs/Informing_Communities_Sustaining_Democracy_in_the_Digital_Age.pdf (accessed 5 June 2016).

[20] von Krogh, *Media Accountability*, p. 9.

Media accountability should be 'broadly understood as a dynamic of interaction between a given medium and the value sets of individuals or groups receiving media messages.'[21] Fengler suggested conceptualising media accountability in 'the context of institutional economics as a meta-theoretical perspective, and consider both press laws and journalistic codes as institutions, which serve to build a trust relationship between journalists and their public by laying open what rules journalists are expected to operate under.'[22] Current knowledge of media accountability largely addresses national cases within a democratic context rather than transnational media and semi-democratic and authoritarian contexts. Two models of accountability can be considered: state accountability and self-accountability. Formal manifestations of these types of accountability include media regulations in the country of origin and/or the country of the organisation's headquarters and that of operation. Professional accountability on the other hand is practiced through the use of press councils, codes of ethics or other modes. These models for media accountability are problematic in the Arab context. On the one hand, Arab regimes have for many years tailored and used the legal system as an instrument of exerting political pressure on news channels, and on the other, the effectiveness of codes of ethics on journalists' work is not guaranteed and practised on a voluntary basis.[23] Furthermore, press councils are rare in Arab countries, and where they exist they function on a national level only.[24]

There is ample evidence of the problematic nature of dependence on journalistic codes of ethics as a model for professional accountability in the Arab context. The news channel *Al-Jazeera Arabic* (AJA), for instance, has frequently violated its own code of ethics. *BBC Arabic* has its journalistic principles and standards set by the BBC Trust and like many other international broadcasters such as *Deutsche Welle* (DW), *France 24 Arabic*, *RT Arabic*, and *Al-Hurra*, is partly committed to serving constituencies in the home country. Some, such as *France 24* and *BBC World*, also disseminate worldviews of their countries. BBC Arabic's model of accountability safeguards the interest of their licence payers in Britain and not the broader audiences who receive and interact with their messages. *France 24* Arabic, for instance, has a weekly news show Hawa Masr [Egypt's Air], focusing on current affairs in Egypt. However, since its launch in 2014, it has rarely interviewed any opponent of the Egyptian regime, presenting only one side of any issue. In July 2019, the channel was criticised by Salam Kawakibi, the Director of Research at the Arab Reform Initiative, for failing to bring any real critical perspectives into Egyptian current affairs.[25]

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[21] Plaisance, 'The Concept of Media Accountability', p. 257.

[22] Fengler, 'From Media Self-regulation', p. 177.

[23] Stephen J. A. Ward, 'Global Media Ethics', *Media Morals: Supporting Responsible Journalism Around the Globe*, 2013. Available at http://mediamorals.org/global-media-ethics/ (accessed 5 June 2016).

[24] After the Arab Spring both Tunisia and Morocco established press councils; the first functions as a self-regulatory body whereas in Morocco it is government controlled. Abdelkrim Hizouai, 'After the Arab Spring: Two (Different) Press Councils', *European Journalism Observatory*, 26 May 2016. Available at https://en.ejo.ch/media-politics/two-press-council-projects-tunisia-morocco (accessed 13 May 2020).

[25] Salam Kawakibi, 'Media: A Mouthpiece for Tyranny', *Syria TV*, 23 July 2019. Available at https://www.syria.tv/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%

Moreover, *Al-Jazeera*, *Al-Arabiya* and *Sky News Arabia* have been engaging in mutual battles since the Gulf crisis of 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain boycotted Qatar for allegedly 'supporting terrorism'. Since then, *Al-Arabiya* and *Sky News Arabia* have consistently broadcasted negative news about Qatar while *Al-Jazeera* continued its unceasing critical, personalised and aggressive campaign against Saudi Arabia and the UAE and their crown princes. The three channels have been clearly and systematically biased in their coverage. Their reporting has fallen far short of accepted ethical news conventions. Although, *Al-Jazeera* issued two journalistic codes in 2006 and 2010,[26] and Sky News Arabia claimed in its mission to present 'the most impactful' news, to become the region's 'trusted media source' and to maintain the 'highest professional standards',[27] their reporting of the 2017 Gulf crisis included systematic violations of basic journalistic standards.

Therefore, Fengler et al.'s model of public accountability is problematic in the context of pan-Arab news broadcasting, especially for the channels sponsored by Arab and Middle Eastern regimes, including the (Turkish) *TRT Arabic*, (Iranian) *Al Alam* and (Israeli) *i24 News Arabic*.[28] What further complicates media accountability for international and transnational Arabic speaking news media is geography-based accountability, as the dominant media accountability modes predate the globalisation and regionalisation of news media. This nation-state model is complicated for both Arab-funded and globally-funded and located news organisations. In both cases, the channels are held accountable by states whose taxpayers are not necessarily the intended public of their news. Hence, national accountability of the pan-Arab news media, whether governmental or public, falls short of serving the best interest of the Arab public, since their broadcasts are global yet their accountability is national.

Similar to the nation-state based governmental mode of media public accountability, many of the Arab governments that sponsor or host the headquarters of media organisations or their bureaus have imposed restrictions on these channels, offices, and journalists in anticipation of their impact on public opinion in their own countries and the wider Arab world. Journalists within the transnational pan-Arab news media have been arrested, interrogated and imprisoned or have had their licences revoked after allegations of

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D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF (accessed 3 October 2019).

[26] 'AlJazeera Anounces its "Professional Ethic Code"', *Arab 48*, 31 October 2010. Available at https://www.arab48.com/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1--%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/2010/10/31/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%87%D9%86%D9%8A (accessed 3 October 2019).

[27] 'About Sky News Arabia', *Sky News Arabia*. Available at https://www.skynewsarabia.com/about-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%8A-%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B2-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9 (accessed 3 October 2019).

[28] Fengler et al., *Journalists and Media Accountability*.

jeopardising state security, for violating state regulations and laws or for breaking news that could impact regime stability. The Arab Spring was an important turning point that increased the use of legal action against the bureaus or correspondents of these channels, particularly after 2012 when the increased securitisation of many Arab countries enabled governments to grow more authoritarian in discourse, regulation and practice.

State Accountability

Traditionally, in the Arab countries media is held accountable to both the state and to some extent the market, although the market is largely political in the region. Common mechanisms of control include economic pressure, mainly via direct funds, advertising and subscription revenues; or policy mechanisms through the judicial system and state regulations in addition to sporadic threats and harassment tactics. As for professional and public accountability, both stem from an assumed degree of journalistic independence from both the state and the market.[29]

Due to the high level of state control, social conservatism, self-censorship and other limitations on media freedom in the Arab countries, discussing accountability is not very common or favourable among liberals and scholars who believe in media freedom, as they see accountability as one more challenge to this freedom, in addition to social and religious taboos. As security and stability deteriorated in many Arab countries, and as their sensitivity to unfavourable reporting and their notion of 'national interest' and 'national security' broadened, regimes in the region have increasingly placed restrictions on freedom of the press.

Governments in the region are mostly authoritarian and in a continuous state of controlling information and engaging in misinformation and disinformation (intentionally spreading inaccurate and misleading news) to their publics, hence, their modes of media accountability cannot safeguard the public interest in the news.[30] According to the 2018 Freedom House report, out of 17 Arab countries only Tunisia was assessed to have a free press, with four others considered 'partly free'. Despite this, 'even in places where the press is partially free [....] journalists face constraints including harassment, jailing, and legal limits on speech online.'[31] Notably, all the Arab financiers of pan-Arab news broadcasters are rated as 'Not Free'.[32]

[29] Heikki Heikkilä, David Domingo, Judith Pies, Michal Glowacki, Michal Kus & Olivier Baisnée, 'Media Accountability Goes Online: A Transnational Study on Emerging Practices and Innovations', *MediaAct Working Paper* 14, 2012. Available at http://www.mediaact.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/WP4_Outcomes/WP4_Report.pdf (accessed 13 May 2020).

[30] 'Freedom in the World 2018', *Freedom House*, 2018. Available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2018_Final_SinglePage.pdf (accessed 20 March 2019).

[31] Intissar Fakir & Sarah Yerkes, 'Governance and the Future of the Arab World' in Bahout et al. (eds), *Arab Horizons: Pitfalls and Pathways to Renewal* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), p. 40. Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ArabHorizons_report_final.pdf (accessed 5 January 2019).

[32] 'Freedom in the World 2018: Democracy in Crisis', *Freedom House*, 2018. Available at https://freedom-

Reporters Without Borders asserted in 2018 that 'the region continues to be one of the most dangerous for journalists' and describes the region as 'characterized by repressive regimes that control their people in order to hold on to power and protect their image.'[33] State accountability is of limited value to safeguarding the interests and rights of Arab publics as many regimes have no free press and constantly attempt to control the media to enhance their image. Internationally funded media serve their own publics, taxpayers or advance the best image of their countries, meaning that their priorities, considerations and mandate do not necessarily echo the interests of Arab publics, even though a few of them enjoy dramatically higher levels of freedom.

Professional and Public Accountability

Digital media shifted the dynamics of social connections and practices in media organisations to the extent that it requires resetting the means and models of accountability, entailing an 'adaptation or extension of the relevant [accountability] mechanisms.'[34] An important aspect of public and professional accountability is the widening of spaces for interaction and engagement among journalists, and between professional journalists on the one hand and members of the public on the other, enabling mutual listening and often answerability. In addition to maintaining the 'overall quality of news reporting', accountability in practice entails media organisations providing explanations for their behaviour in all decisions related to their daily practices and products, correcting errors and sending apologies when they are due.[35] A study of international trends in media accountability in 20 countries in Europe, MENA, and the US found that, in the Arab context, 'efforts toward media accountability are mainly led by those citizens and journalists that also struggle to democratise society.'[36]

Journalists and citizens in Arab countries are increasingly critical of the state of the media. Journalism is 'so central to the society's sense of self'[37] and carries much weight. Bardoel and d'Haenens add 'professional' and 'public' accountability as two more mechanisms in addition to the traditional state and market-based mechanisms.[38] Common media accountability instruments include press councils and ombudspeople,[39] media journalism,[40] or 'media criticism in trade journals and the popular press.'[41]

house.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018 (accessed 15 March 2019).

[33] 'Middle East North Africa', *Reporters without Borders*, 2018. Available at https://rsf.org/en/middle-east-north-africa (accessed 20 March 2019).

[34] McQuail, *Media Accountability*, p. 16.

[35] von Krogh, *Media Accountability*, p. 9.

[36] Heikkilä et al., 'Media Accountability Goes Online', p. 3.

[37] Mark Deuze, 'Understanding Journalism as Newswork: How It Changes, and How It Remains the Same', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* Vol. 5 (2008), p. 4.

[38] Johannes Bardoel & Leen d'Haenens, 'Media responsibility and accountability: New conceptualizations and practices', *Communications* Vol. 29(1), pp. 5–25.

[39] Plaisance, 'The Concept of Media Accountability'; Fengler et al., *Journalists and Media Accountability*.

[40] Fengler, 'From Media Self-regulation'.

[41] Fengler et al., *Journalists and Media Accountability*, p. 86.

'Professional [media] accountability stems from the attempts of media practitioners to establish themselves ethical and quality standards that would render their work useful and viable for the society.'[42] In addition to codes of ethics and public and civic journalism initiatives,[43] NGOs or civil initiatives that focus on monitoring media content and provide regular feedback and assessment could also perform as platforms for public media accountability.

Media journalism is relatively new in the region, yet there are a few emerging shows which mainly criticise news media and politicians and cover public participation on social media. They include 'Fawq al-Sultah' (Above the Authority) on *Al-Jazeera*, 'DNA' on *Al-Arabiya*, and 'Al-Sultah al-Khamesa' (The Fifth Estate) on *DW Arabic*, among others. 'Al-Sultah al-Khamesa' stated in its first episode that the show is driven by 'people's participation in social networks, news coverage, and investigative reporting.'[44] 'Muntada al-Sahafah' (The Press Forum) is a specialised weekly show on *France 24* that specialises in media coverage of important global stories from the perspective of Arab journalists. Although these media journalism shows fluctuate in their focus, professional merit and the margin of freedom, their emergence has led to the creation of a new space on TV to discuss media conduct, weaknesses, and criticism. Criticism is carried out by a mix of formulas, formats and budgets, yet with obvious value for the viewers, news literacy, and mutual media criticism and answerability.

Public knowledge of media practices enhances citizen's chances of setting better expectations of the media and seeing the limitations of media output, enabling a better understanding of how imperfection is the norm. Accountability is usually measured by the presence of 'indicators of fallibility corrections'[45] and answerability.[46]

Professional Media Criticism

News bias is an everyday accusation that pan-Arab news media face, and more so after the Arab Spring in 2011. Prominent journalists resigned their positions and left *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* over claims of bias, whether merited or otherwise. Accusations of slanted reporting targeting the Syrian regime, for example, included global news broadcasters like *France 24* and *BBC Arabic*. The list of journalists who resigned with statements against media bias includes the bureau chief of the *Al-Jazeera* Tehran office (from 1997–2004) Ghassan Ben Jiddo, and *Al-Arabiya* news anchors Hafez Al Mirazi and Zeina Yazigi. Al Mirazi, a veteran Egyptian journalist, was critical of the channel's selective coverage of the protests, pledging on live TV to resign if Saudi protests were not covered in the the same

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42 Heikkilä et al., 'Media Accountability Goes Online', p. 7.

43 Chad Painter & Louis Hodges, 'Mocking the News: How The Daily Show and Jon Stewart Hold Traditional Broadcast News Accountable', in William Babcock (ed.) *Media Accountability: Who Will Watch the Watchdog in the Twitter Age* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 1–18.

44 [هكذا قدم يسري فوده أول حلقة من حلقات السلطة الخامسة], *DW Arabic*, 4 August 2016. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmr8xTvLjvQ (accessed 13 May 2020).

45 Plaisance, 'The Concept of Media Accountability', p. 258.

46 McQuail, *Media Accountability*; Bertrand, 2017.

way as protests in Egypt and other countries.[47]

Ben Jiddo left *Al-Jazeera* in April 2011 due to its coverage of the Syrian crisis and charged the channel's reporting with 'mobilizing, and instigating [sectarian] strife' in which *Al-Jazeera* 'abandoned all journalistic professional standards.'[48] Ben Jiddo subsequently worked for an Iranian-supported TV news channel in Lebanon, *Al-Mayadeen*, where his uncritical coverage of the Syrian regime, Hezbollah and Iran failed to live up to the journalistic ideals he preached as the motivations for his resignation from AJA in 2011. These critiques are important as they are based on professional knowledge and shared by segments of the Arab public, although they may have been made as a result of the ideological affiliation of the journalist and his/her own biases, as in the case of Ben Jiddo.

In 2012, Ali Hashem wrote a commentary for *The Guardian* criticising Arab media for supporting some revolutions and abandoning others. He blamed the channels for focusing on the protests in Syria and neglecting protests in Bahrain. Hashem reports that he left his previous channel, *Al-Jazeera*, for interfering with journalists' work, intentionally excluding footage and news that 'didn't fit the required narrative of a clean and peaceful uprising.'[49] Albeit these resignations did not change the course of coverage by either *Al-Jazeera* or *Al-Arabiya*, they exposed the channels' biases and helped to hold them accountable to the profession and the public on the basis of journalistic principles.

Despite the fairly limited power members of the Arab public can exert toward pan-Arab media organisations, the continuity and relevance of these organisations depend on this public and the collective or individual decision to switch to a particular channel, follow its social media or use its services. Arab media executives recognise the centrality of a channel's viewership to its very existence and legitimacy, hence they commission research companies to conduct audience research for them.

News media are expected to disseminate information on important events and issues of public interest and thus provide guidance and direction to the public. This role is 'mutually beneficial' to media and their publics and sets an unavoidable expectation even from privately-owned media organisations since these organisations gain their social and political weight from this 'normative function.'[50] As the main source of news and views and a catalyst of much of the public debates among the Arab public, the Arab media should be held accountable for their 'soft reporting and association with organisations and governments that are against freedom of expression and the freedom of the press.'[51] They should be answerable for promoting hate speech, sectarian discourse, justifying or failing to cover

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[47] Hafez al Mirazi, 'Cairo Studio: Interview with Hmadi Qandeel', *Al-Arabiya*, 13 February 2011. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfpxihevF3M (accessed 13 May 2020).

[48] 'Bin Jiddo & Al Jazeera: the Blackout in Egypt and Coverage in Syria', *Shabab Assafir*, 28 April 2011. Available at http://shabab.assafir.com/Article.aspx?ArticleID=3994 (accessed 13 May 2020).

[49] Ali Hashem, 'The Arab spring has shaken Arab TV's credibility', *The Guardian*, 3 April 2012. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/03/arab-spring-arab-tv-credibility (accessed 13 May 2020).

[50] McQuail, *Media Accountability*, pp. 6–7.

[51] Lahlali, *Contemporary Arab Broadcast Media*, p. 48.

regimes' brutality, for their selective reporting and for maintaining strong ties with dictators and security apparatuses that abuse human rights and freedom of speech. Both journalists and citizens are growing more active in their critical engagement with media.

Media Literacy and Public Accountability

Technological changes and their practical, professional, and market implications mark the end of journalism as we know it, as the boundaries between journalism and many other types of public communication are shrinking. This will be the case unless 'a new "network journalism" adapts itself to changing social and technological realities.'[52] Digital media technologies should lead journalism as a profession to 'the process of redefining and reinventing itself.'[53] More importantly, '[i]n transforming [journalistic] practice, the [digital] revolution reconstructs journalism ethics.'[54] Complexity is the new normal in the advanced media landscape[55] and journalism is 'fast-changing'[56] as 'we are living at a moment of profound and prolonged media transition: the old scripts by which media industries operated or consumers absorbed media content are being rewritten.'[57] An important aspect of this unceasing change is the new possibilities brought to public engagement with media organisations and journalists.

The former General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, Aidan White, argues that journalists should inspire users to engage with the media and observes that 'some citizens are already transforming the news by supporting new forms of media. Web-based opportunities are being used everywhere – in all countries, no matter how authoritarian and oppressive the government.'[58] In the Arab context, political satire reemerged in 2011 as an individual initiative on YouTube before it was picked up by mainstream channels and became a familiar programming genre.

Essential in the literature on accountability are the questions of both the party to which the media is accountable and the mechanisms through which this accountability is operationalised.[59] Responses to these questions are shifting within the new digital journalism

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[52] Deuze, 'Understanding Journalism as Newswork', p. 4.

[53] Mark Deuze, Axel Bruns, & Christophe Neuberger, 'Preparing for an Age of Participatory News', *Journalism Practice* Vol. 1 (2007), p.1.

[54] Stephen Ward, 'Digital Journalism Ethics' in Tamara Witschge, C. W. Anderson, David Domingo, & Alfred Hermida (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Digital Journalism* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2016), p. 68.

[55] N. Manning, 'Media Transparency – A Visual Overview', *Ebiquity*, 2014, p. 4. Available at https://www.ebiquity.com/media/1424/media-transparency-a-visual-overview.pdf (accessed 13 May 2020).

[56] Thomas Hanitzch, 'Deconstructing Journalism Culture: Toward a Universal Theory', *Communication Theory* Vol. 17 (2007), p. 371.

[57] Henry Jenkins & Mark Deuze, 'Editorial: Convergence Culture', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research Into New Media Technologies* Vol. 14 (2008), p. 5.

[58] Aidan White, 'Media Accountability: Setting Standards for Journalism and Democracy', *Bali Democracy Forum Workshop* (2009), p. 8.

[59] Steven Maras, 'Media Accountability: Double Binds and Responsibility Gaps', *Global Media Journal: Australian Edition* Vol. 8 (2014), p. 2.

field: 'A person can be held responsible for an action [...] only when that action can be directly 'attributable' to that person's so-called judgment-sensitive attitudes.'[60] Viewers and readers have direct access not only to journalists, but also to senior editors, producers and news executives in addition to the owners and managers of media organisations.

Post-structuralist and post-modernist views of media constructionism envision individual and collective world views that are largely influenced by the media as a mediating educational social institution:[61] 'what one knows and what one thinks one knows are both shaped by the communication process.'[62] In education, literacies develop and change to adapt to the changes in the environments and to the competencies necessary for the learner to actively participate in their cultural and social contexts. Educators work toward cultivating multiple literacies in a technology-driven environment.[63] In addition to technical competencies, intellectual and critical competencies are necessary for everyone in society nowadays.

In the MENA region, internet penetration in early 2020 was at 69.2 percent of the total population, 12 percent higher than that of the rest of the world.[64] In 2018, Arab users spent 'an average of 4:58 hours online daily', and 17.3 percent of them were using the internet for 'more than 10 hours' daily.[65] The internet is a 'contested site of competing discourses' which enables disseminating messages of both the dominant and the dominated,[66] although with unequal reach and echoes. Heikkilä et al. found that online media literacy was an important objective of media activism organisations, especially in Lebanon. The study also found that 'the internet can be an effective tool to promote ethical journalism by fostering transparency and responsiveness.'[67] Aidan White argues that education is an integral part of any media accountability efforts in the online environment and claimed that 'civic programmes based upon media literacy and promotion of public debate about the role of journalism and media can help build a vigorous environment for the future of journalism.'[68] Yet, the kinds of media literacy that enable good citizen engagement with news media and effective practice of news criticism are under-investigated.

Kellner and Share argue that 'critical media literacy aims to expand the notion of literacy

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[60] Plaisance, 'The Concept of Media Accountability', p. 261.

[61] Peter L. Berger & Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966).

[62] Karen S. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing: Constructing Political Reality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), p. 1.

[63] Douglas Kellner & Jeff Share, 'Toward Critical Media Literacy: Core concepts, debates, organizations, and policy', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* Vol. 26 (2005), pp. 369–86.

[64] Internet World Stats, 2020. Available at https://internetworldstats.com/stats.htm (accessed 15 May 2020).

[65] 'The Arab World Online', *Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government*, 2017. Available at https://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/d01358ac-8557-4954-b27f-95ddc5caef5f/The-Arab-World-Online-2017 (accessed 13 May 2020).

[66] Barney Warf & Peter Vincent, 'Multiple geographies of the Arab Internet', *Area* Vol. 39 (2007), pp. 83–96.

[67] Heikkilä et al., 'Media Accountability Goes Online', p. 3.

[68] White, 'Media Accountability', p. 5.

to [among other aspects] deepen the potential of literacy education to critically analyse relationships between media and audiences, information and power.'[69] Critical media literacy is not limited to the individual's ability to decode, access or create visual and linguistic media signs, but extends itself to enable the individual to detach the image from the real object or person/category signified in it and contextualise the media message. Advocates of advancing critical media literacy through formal educational institutions argue that 'individuals are often not aware that they are being educated and positioned by media culture, as its pedagogy is frequently invisible and is absorbed unconsciously.'[70] Hence, White urges public officials and policymakers to promote media literacy and considers it a 'public duty that requires public spending.'[71]

In addition to the ability to recognise important and credible mainstream and alternative sources, critical media literacy requires cultivating the skills necessary to know where to look for news, how to surf through large amounts of information, and learning how to practice critical assessment of the source, their financing, agenda, political affiliation, and possible motivations for publishing. The growing interest in both formal and informal media literacy is 'needed for all citizens to become meaningful participants in this new culture and to make informed choices in their relationship to commercial media producers.'[72] There are technologically empowered instruments to advance the communication and space for user participation, 'including users' blogs, comments and complaints applications, webcasts of meetings of press councils and, media regulators and of course audiences criticism through Facebook and Twitter.'[73] Similarly, and despite their restrictive environment, Arab citizens have been using alternative sources of news such as 'communication apps and blogs—to access and spread information.'[74]

Conclusion

Pan-Arab news media, whether regional or global, still plays a key role in information circulation for and about the Arab public. With their presence on social media networks, news platforms, and applications, it is essential that they maintain professional principles in their conduct and are held publicly accountable in relation to their content. Holding them accountable is an increasingly sensitive issue as threats and risks associated with practising journalism in the region are growing due to rising political authoritarianism, surging regional militarism and decreasing press freedoms. Regional political and military turmoil further intensifies the risks and potential benefits of the media as the main social

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[69] Douglas Kellner & Jeff Share, 'Critical Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of Education' in Donaldo Macedo & Shirley R. Steinberg (eds), *Media Literacy: A Reader* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007).

[70] Ibid., p. 4.

[71] White, 'Media Accountability', p. 5.

[72] Jenkins & Deuze, 'Editorial: Convergence Culture', p. 11.

[73] Fengler et al., *Journalists and Media Accountability*.

[74] Fakir & Yerkes, 'Governance and the Future', p. 37.

institution.[75] All of this takes place with no formal public accountability mechanisms and with news media focusing on meeting the expectations of their own sponsors, competitors and hosts rather than the pan-Arab public.

Although press councils, ombudspeople and arbitrations are rare in the Arab countries, media journalism, mutual journalists' criticism, political satire and a few other forms of public answerability are emerging. Both journalists and citizens are growing more active in their critical engagement with media. A few notable rising venues for news and journalistic criticisms and forms of journalistic accountability are observable in the region. These spaces include social media networks, television channels and news sources where the critical exchange of questions and critique is practised by journalists, citizens and opinion leaders. The effectiveness of these new spaces and modes is still to be assessed in future research. 'What is needed [in the Arab region] is a new, holistic approach based upon broader partnerships and citizen engagement at all levels.'[76]

As a priority, informed and constructive media criticism should be encouraged among Arab publics and international pro-democracy and peace NGOs should invest in critical media literacy programmes. Enhancing the quality and the effectiveness of social network mediated public criticism, basic knowledge of journalistic practices, ideals and expectations are fundamental in this process. Critical media literacy can be cultivated through formal and informal venues and programmes.

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[75] McQuail, Media Accountability.
[76] Cammack, 'Summary', p. 5.

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