

New Media – Old Problems

Online Practices of Media Accountability in Lebanon

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Summary

Lebanon's media has been envied for its press freedom and high quality by many Arabs from the region for decades. After 15 years of civil war the media had quickly started to flourish again. Yet, internal and external observers have been concerned about the close links between the media and political and religious groups that have led to highly politicized journalism. There is no professional organisation that could unify journalists from the various fractions and set in force binding rules like a code of ethics. A media council does not exist, journalists unions are not involved in media accountability practices and a state's ombudsman has never been instituted.

Yet, internal accountability practices are relatively well developed. As political affiliation of media outlets is openly handled (e.g. staff is mainly recruited from each media's particular political group, party emblems are published prominently, mission statements and ownership information are partly available), Lebanese normally know how to interpret the news. Accountability practices that were already in evidence in offline media have been adopted by the majority of websites, such as by-lines, precise references in stories and letters-to-the-editor. Internet specific practices have only been partly adopted. While allowing comments on each article is available on half of the analysed websites, practices strongly integrating the audience in production processes like collaborative story writing can only be found on one TV website.¹

Pure Internet practices like media accountability (MA) Facebook groups or watchblogs do not exist in Lebanon and if users of Facebook and Twitter or bloggers do appear, they seem to follow the same sectarian lines as Lebanon's society and media audiences. The only Internet practice solely dedicated to watching the entire media field and its independence is the relatively new website of SKeyes. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) play the most important role in initiating discussion about media accountability and in building MA capacities by focusing on media literacy. Here again, the Internet is not a pre-requisite but a tool for supporting or easing their activities.

¹ The term 'news websites' is used for those websites that are net-native and exist only online. All websites providing news that have a print counterpart are referred to as 'newspapers online', while websites belonging to television stations are referred to as 'TV websites'.

1. Context Factors in the Development of MA Online Practices

1.1 Social Context

Lebanon's society and political system are shaped by high social and political tension which is also reflected in the media. The civil war, which lasted for fifteen years from 1975 to 1990, is still evident in all parts of society including the media. War and inter-party rivalries during the last six years, such as the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 followed by the withdrawal of Syrian troops, the war with Israel in 2006 and violent internal events during the course of the month long political deadlock in 2008, have revived and widened sectarian cleavages.²

Ownership patterns of media outlets – most visible in television – follow mostly sectarian lines constituted by the different denominations (e.g. Shiites, Sunnis, Maronites, Greek Orthodox and Druze). Since Hariri's assassination in 2005, two political streams, March 14 and March 8³, form further lines of sectarian political division, which are also reflected in the media field. Some of the best known news websites, according to Alexa's Lebanese rankings, do obviously represent political forces, such as the most famous Lebanese news website tayyar.org (Alexa rank 7), which reflects view points of the Free Patriotic Movement and lebanese-forces.com (Alexa rank 11), which is the official website of the Lebanese Forces⁴.

While the press law dates back to 1962, the audiovisual sector is governed by the Media Law of 1994, which codified the circumstances stemming from the civil war, such as confirming the existence of militia's media. Apart from these two media specific laws, only general laws regulate the media in Lebanon (see Internews 2003, Nesemann 2001). Several attempts have been made to reform media law in Lebanon, the latest in 2010, but all have failed.

In 2010, public debate focused for the first time on legal regulation of the Internet in Lebanon. A group of NGOs including the Maharat Foundation successfully delayed a decision by the Lebanese parliament on a "New Information Technology" law, which according to its critics would have eroded the freedom of online journalism. A few months later, an MP introduced another draft media law for parliamentary debate based on a proposition by the Maharat Foundation.⁵ This draft included the establishment of an independent press council and the

² For an overview of the latest political crisis see Sirois 2011.

³ The March 14 alliance is named after the day of "Syria out!" rallies in the aftermath of Hariri's assassination. The March 8 coalition of Hizbollah and its allies, is named after a day of protests designed to "thank" Syria before its withdrawal of forces from Lebanon (Sirois 2011).

⁴ While the Free Patriotic Movement lead by Michel Aoun has allied with the March 8 coalition, the Lebanese Forces lead by Samir Geagea is aligned with the March 14 coalition. Both leaders are Christians and both groups have their origins in civil war militias.

⁵ For an extensive discussion of the draft law cf. Article 19 2009.

abolition of laws stipulating that only Lebanese can be media owners. This initiative also failed (Kraidy 2011).

Although the sectarian division of Lebanon is a heavy burden for Lebanon's society to bear, it is also one of the reasons that Lebanon has always enjoyed more freedom, including press freedom and freedom of speech, than any other Arab country. These particular freedoms have provided a healthy environment for the development of media outlets and the current liberal and pluralistic media market in Lebanon. Entry to the media field for new outlets is difficult to achieve through revenues based solely on either or both advertising and subscription due to the limited size of the market (Dabbous 2010: 729). As the state is quite weak, subsidies to guarantee the existence of a pluralistic media market come from political or religious parties. Therefore, limits on press freedom stem from the country's media alliances of political and sectarian groups rather than from state laws, regulations or interference.

1.2 Media Legitimacy and Existing MA Institutions

Statistics in Lebanon are often highly political, not only in the context of the sectarian composition of society but also media research. As Nötzold (2009) points out data on media performance, audiences etc. have been withheld or have been accused of being biased. Thus, reliable quantitative data on trust in media is difficult to acquire but observers have mentioned that the character of audiences in Lebanon do follow sectarian lines (Nötzold 2009, Dajani 2006). The second most important reason (47 per cent) for reading a certain newspaper is "its opinion / analysis is closest to my opinion" according to the Dubai Media Club (2009: 94).

From statistics not allowed to be published Nötzold and Pies conclude: "Audience figures from IPSOS or Information International suggest a connection between the sectarian identities of large parts of the audience with that of their chosen news medium. Many Lebanese switch to other channels for news only in times of crisis, in order to find out what 'the other side' is saying." (Nötzold & Pies 2010: 51) Thus, trust in one's "own" media is presumably higher in contrast to the "others" media. Whether this assumption is also true for usage of news websites cannot be proven by statistics as the necessary data do not exist.

Whether media might break this political-sectarian congruence between media producers and users by focusing on a more independent journalism is unclear. Two examples that might serve as indicators point to different directions: While state broadcaster Télé Liban is not very popular, the "rising star" of news websites, Al-Akhbar, might be seen as a positive sign.⁶

⁶ The discussion about both media outlets reveals that it is almost impossible to escape from being labeled as a mouthpiece of one or another group. For an overview of the discussion on Télé Liban see Nötzold (2010), for Al-Akhbar see Worth (2010).

The social context described above also deeply shapes the field of traditional instruments of media accountability as well as those online, as Case 1 illustrates:

Case 1: Ghada Eid

The presenter Ghada Eid of the program Al-Fasad [corruption] on New TV hosted a parliamentary deputy via telephone but the discussion winded up into a settlement of accounts between the two as the media critical blogger Ibrahim Arab describes:

“She defied the MP and addressed him in an unmannered way and vice versa as each belonged to a partisan group. So they turned the program from discussing corruption to a settlement of accounts. This in itself is akin to media corruption and this media professional considers herself unaccountable and a saint who exposes corruption but this is all illogical.” (Ibrahim Arab)

The issue was then discussed on the Internet in different forums, blogs and Twitter accounts referring to the program, which was uploaded on YouTube.

“[...] but unfortunately users of social media means are also divided. Each party would back either side according to their own political alignment and instead of curtailing this difference in opinion it has been expanded; it used to be between a program presenter and a deputy and ended up between the people. So a forum would assault another and a group would slam another and Twitter account assaults another Twitter account and a blog assaults another blog; from corruption per se to media corruption!” (Ibrahim Arab)

The case underlines the problem that occurs when common professional principles, to which the media could be held accountable, are substituted by individual or sectarian interests on a societal level. This is despite the Lebanese Journalists’ Association having adopted a code of ethics in 1974. However, our interviewees do confer the code is ineffective, which as Braune (2005) points out is due to the low regard journalists have for the journalists’ association, which is unable to oversee abidance to the code.⁷ Initiatives aimed at producing a new code of ethics for all Lebanese journalists have not been successfully implemented even though proposals have been made e.g. by a workshop on media ethics in 2002 (Abu Fadil 2002).

Some media outlets have experimented with ombudspersons (An-Nahar and As-Safir) but the concept is hard to bring in practice if you want to reach out to different parts of society. Magda Abu Fadil doubts that it is possible to find an ombudsperson accepted by all political and sectarian groups.

The same problem of finding consensus among the denominations and parties is true for the composition of a media council that was under discussion in 2009. All interviewees see a strong need for such an institution because:

⁷ The heads of the two associations, the journalists and publishers union, again follow sectarian lines. The head of the journalists’ union has to be Christian, the head of the publishers’ union is Muslim. (Internews 2003)

“All codes of ethics are nonbinding therefore no matter how many codes you come up with no one would adhere to them, and we do not want to see curtailment and abuse of freedoms and obscuring [of facts] but things have to be controlled, when publishing sources ought to be archived and verified and in case of infringements the media outlet should be held accountable.” (Ibrahim Arab)

The idea of a press council was to cancel the authority of the Ministry of media and to:

“organize the profession by creating a council where all the outlets are represented and which runs and oversees the work of media institutions and their workers.” (Roula Mikhayel)

The media council proposal was part of a reformed media draft law promoted by Maharat Foundation and Article 19 (2009). Even though many groups have been involved in working on the new law it has so far failed to develop.

1.3 Internet User Culture

Only few statistics can be found that throw light on the Internet culture in Lebanon. All interviewees pointed to the grievous state of affairs of missing statistics and data on the media market in Lebanon, ranging from ownership information to user data and financial support especially in terms of news websites.

According to International Telecommunication Union (ITU) approx. 1,000,000 Internet users exist in Lebanon, which is 24.2 per cent of the country’s population. Internet penetration has been constantly rising since 2007 (18.7 per cent), to 2008 (22.8 per cent) and 2009 (23.5 per cent). The UN study on Lebanon’s national information society profile provides different statistics from the same source with an Internet penetration rate of 38 per cent (UN 2009: 13).

Accessing the Internet, in a domestic context, in Lebanon is difficult because the requisite infrastructure is either unstable or missing, such as a lack of broadband connections or electricity supply, a lack of computer literacy among the population and fairly high fees for Internet access. Internet cafés are, consequently, an important place to access the Internet (UN 2009).

In comparison to other Arab countries, Lebanon has the third largest number of websites in its country domain (Warf & Vincent 2007: 86), which does not automatically result in a highly advanced online journalism (see section on Online Journalism Development). Another feature, the use of multiple languages, mainly Arabic, English and French distinguishes the culture of Internet submissions in Lebanon from its neighboring countries. This becomes visible in the percentage of Facebook users logging in to the English version (82 per cent) in contrast to the Arabic version (29 per cent) (Dubai Media Club 2009: 99) and is among the reasons for Lebanese bloggers being characterized as a “bridge cluster” to Europe and the US in a comparative study on Arabic blogs (Etling et al. 2010: 1234). Furthermore, 82 per cent of

Internet users prefer to browse using the English language, as against 56 per cent who prefer to use Arabic⁸ (Dubai Media Club 2009: 99).

In general, Internet users in Lebanon tend to use the Internet mainly to obtain information (41 per cent) followed by chatting (26 per cent) and being active in social networks (17 per cent) (Dubai Media Club 2009: 99). News websites have not become a priority source of news with only 2 per cent of Internet users saying they used only Internet news and 11 per cent saying they used the Internet media more than print media. Close to a majority of Internet users rely on print media for their news (46 per cent), while 20 per cent rely on the print media more than the Internet and 21 per cent use both formats (Dubai Media Club 2009: 95).

Social networking is a popular activity of Internet users with daily users (40 per cent), and weekly users (30 per cent) and infrequent users (30 per cent). Interestingly only 23 per cent of Internet users say they do not use social networks at all (Dubai Media Club 2009: 100). Among the social networking sites used most often in Lebanon are Facebook English and Arabic, Hi5 and Maktoob (cf. table 1).

Table 1: Social networking sites used most often among Internet Users in Lebanon

<i>Social net working sites</i>	<i>%</i>
Facebook English	82
Facebook Arabic	29
Hi5	5
Maktoob	4
Twitter Arabic	2
Twitter English	2
Netlog	2
Arab Friendz	2
MySpace	2

Source: Dubai Media Club 2009: 100

The Facebook community, 1 223 940 Facebook registered users, is 30 per cent of the population and 122 per cent of Internet population⁹ according to www.facebakers.com (15.02.2011). While 78 per cent of 16-34 years old in Lebanon have a Facebook profile (facebakers.com), Twitter users for an elite group with registered Twitter accounts of 819 in 2009 according to SpotOnPR.¹⁰

The “birth of the blogosphere” in Lebanon has been dated to the aftermath of Hariri’s assassination in 2005, as a result of booming civil activism. A second wave came with the Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006. Lebanese bloggers do not represent the average Lebanese but belong

⁸ Respondents were allowed to vote for both which is the reason why percentages make up more than 100%. The percentage of those who do prefer both is not available.

⁹ The 122 per cent is due to Facebook users being able to have more than one account.

¹⁰ <http://www.spotonpr.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/TwitterSurveyRep8Sep09.pdf>

mainly to the Middle and Higher social classes (Haugbolle 2007). They are also greatly politicized, which is reflected in a strong focus on national politics using Lebanese websites, blogs and political party websites as their main sources (Etling 2010: 1234).

1.4 Professionalism in Journalism

Lebanon has a long tradition of high quality print and television journalism often cited as role models for other Arab countries. Due to their experiences gained in technologically well advanced newsrooms and high educational standards for journalism at universities, many Lebanese journalists have been welcomed at Pan-Arab media like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. Yet, Lebanese journalism is frequently set in context with the country's fragile political situation (e.g. Nötzold 2009, Dajani 2006, Dajani & Najjar 2003) and as a consequence a lack of "proper professional and ethical structures" (Dajani & Najjar 2003: 307) is at the core of any criticism.

One problem our interviewees observe is that journalists consider themselves not accountable to anyone and do not consider ethical issues:

"I think the media have become very thick-skinned here, thick in that *ya jabal ma yhizzak reeh* (Oh mountain, no wind can ever shake you off)". (Magda Abu Fadil)

"Traditional media here has their own sectarian or factional or political-based alignment but no media for the sake of media; each group has its people and spokespersons therefore a journalist views himself as unaccountable and this is a grave issue." (Ibrahim Arab)

One reason for the lack of citizens' accountability practices is considered to be their lack of Internet literacy, which has led to bottom-up initiatives focusing on media literacy, like Social Media Exchange (see section Practices Outside Media).

Another reason is seen in the lack of state regulation. The Lebanese state is weak and the political system is based on a consensus democracy. Implementations of regulations often fail because of political or sectarian disputes. Therefore, media in many instances is a ball played between the different political leaders. In this context, some of the interviewees think Lebanon has "too much freedom" and too little editorial independence.

During recent years many steps have been made to introduce new laws based on consensus of all media stakeholders, but all like the cases of an IT regulation or a new media law have failed to produce any concrete legislation. Calls for a law on access to information, which is difficult due to a lack of official information policy and sectarian restraints, have not been heard. Nötzold (2009) concludes after an in-depth analysis of television newsrooms that news journalists tend to work in those newsrooms which match their individual political and sectarian convictions. Furthermore, most journalists, despite their claims of objectivity, did not see a problem in following editorial decisions made by their broadcaster's owner.

As MA is so highly interwoven with societal and political disputes even the call for media freedom is silenced. But this might also stem from the fact that the problem of media freedom in Lebanon is not so much a problem of state intervention but of intervention by different social players that have already ended in violence against journalists from media outlets by followers of their respective opponents.¹¹

1.5 Online Journalism Development

As offline media have a high professional quality and were economically healthy for a long time, they did not put too much effort into developing online presences. They mostly republish content already available from the offline newsrooms. Yet:

“there is sort of a growing awareness in mainstream media of the potential for the Internet and I think they're starting to pay more attention to it, they are starting to develop their online presence, they are starting to engage more and maybe have a Facebook page or a Twitter account.” (Jessica Dheere)

The opportunity of the Internet to interact with the audience has not yet attracted media outlets. Even the news websites do not focus on citizens' involvement as they do, for example, in Jordan or Syria.

“Some of the media they're building their own presence in the same mentality as they do it as a newspaper or TV channel. They just want people to take from them. They do not want to create interaction with the audience because they do not understand the power of the social media, the power of the Internet and collaboration. They still think of the media as a one-way information.” (Mohammad Najem)

From an economic point of view, online versions of print media are not viable, which is another reason for online journalism not being as well developed as traditional offline journalism in Lebanon.

“The web is a sort of afterthought, it's an accessory it's something odd and they haven't adapted yet and with good reason because of our Internet infrastructure the fact that the web does not work very well or very quickly here and we have a very low Internet penetration. I mean I'm not just criticizing the media companies but with good reasons they haven't yet adopted this [online journalism] because they don't see it a likely potential yet. But it creates a sort of a strange environment because the online community here is very active and yet you don't have the same sort of interplay between the people and the media or as that the media comment this.” (Jessica Dheere)

¹¹ see Reporters without Borders on <http://en.rsf.org/lebanon.html>.

2. Practices Initiated by the Media¹²

2.1 Actor Transparency¹³

Actor transparency involves practices where media organizations offer contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories.

Table 2: Actor transparency in websites providing news in Lebanon

Practice	Newspapers online (n=6)	TV websites (n=2)	News website (n=4)
Published mission statement	4	1	1
Published code of ethics	0	0	0
Profiles of journalists	0	0	0
Public information on company ownership	3	0	2

Although published mission statements are online in 6 of the 12 analyzed Lebanese websites and information on company ownership is published on 5 of 12, the interviewees criticized the vagueness of this information. The basic elements of media ownerships are knowledge in the public domain but are based on rumor, “For example people know that Al-Mustaqbal belongs to Hariri while the real owner might not be Hariri himself who might only be supporting the production, or Al-Manar belongs to Hezbollah or LBC to a certain party or OTV to Michel Aoun...” (see Mohammad Najem, section 3.1 for full quote.) But, because of the twin aspects of the Lebanese media market of only Lebanese being allowed to establish media outlets and the major influence of foreign investors, opaque ownership information is quasi-legally encouraged.

“You have to see where these media are coming from; first of all who owns them, I mean if you take the main newspapers here they are mainly family-owned so the family isn't going to open up its books and tell you come on and look at all our inside workings of my organization, what they say is this is none of your business! And the TV stations were set up except for the one that is the state-run TV. They're mainly set up by different militias or political groups during the civil war and they have their own access to brand so you know what their interests are; it's not in their interest to divulge their operations to you or anyone else. I mean they'll only divulge as much as they have to within the law or what is expected of them but they're not going to go the extra mile.” (Magda Abu Fadil)

¹² The content of the following chapters refers to several research strategies by the authors. Apart from expert interviews, we analyzed the twelve most popular Lebanese news websites according to Alexa ranking in November 2010: 4 news websites (Tayyar, Elnashra, Now Lebanon and nna); 6 online newspapers (Al-Akhbar, Annahar, Naharnet, Assafir, Lorientlejour and Almustaqbal); and 2 TV websites (LBC and MTV). The analysis included a quantitative content analysis on existing internal MA practices and was expanded by partly open website observations.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Arabic. Quotations in this text are translations by the authors.

¹³ The typology of practices has been defined by the research team in the Work Package 4 of the MediaAcT project. We reproduce an excerpt of the definitions in each section, but the reader is invited to see the introductory document for this collection of country reports for more details.

Some of the news websites even carry the emblems of their respective parties and thus do not attempt to conceal their political-sectarian affiliation. Editorial lines are easy to identify and journalists seem not to be ashamed of this as May Chidiac’s statement underlines: “Journalists are entitled to disclose their political views” (May Chidiac quoted in Dabbous 2010: 25)¹⁴

It is striking that none of the websites publishes a code of ethics or profiles of journalists. Some do give e-mail addresses but this is exceptional.

2.2 Production Transparency

Production transparency denotes practices where media organizations disclose to users information about their sources and the professional decisions made in the process of producing news.

Table 3: Production transparency in websites providing news in Lebanon

Practice	Newspapers online (n=6)	TV websites (n=2)	News website (n=4)
Authorship stated for each story	5	0	1
Precise reference	6	2	4
Journalists’ personal blogs discussing production	1	0	1
Strategy for collaborative story writing with citizens	0	1	0

While 5 of 6 Lebanese online newspapers use by-lines, only 1 news website uses them and neither of the TV websites. Using precise references is practiced by all websites analysed even though it does not necessarily mean that they use links. This is less common than references within the text. These findings underline the acceptance of quality criteria of newspapers in Lebanon that had always been praised throughout the whole Arab World.

Yet, only three websites experiment with Internet specific tools, like authors’ blogs or collaborative story writing. Two journalists do link their blogs to their respective news websites but without discussing media accountability relevant issues. During the Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006 a team of several journalists from the daily newspaper Daily Star, contributed to a blog called “Siege of Lebanon”¹⁵ adding background information on the war and initiating discussion about it (Haugballe 2007: 15). Among other issues the blog also criticised the media’s performance – including blogs – during the war but was stopped on September 2006.

Only LBC, the most popular television station in Lebanon, has so far introduced a strategy to include citizens in their production by publishing citizens’ articles and videos on their website.

¹⁴ May Chidiac is a renowned presenter at LBC and survived a car bombing in 2005.

¹⁵ www.siegeoflebanon.blogspot.com

2.3 Responsiveness

Table 4: Responsive practices in websites providing news in Lebanon

Practice	Newspapers online (n=6)	TV websites (n=2)	News website (n=4)
Strategy for collaborative story writing with citizens	0	1	0
Ombudsperson with online presence	1	0	0
Letters to the editor	5	2	3
Comments in news	3	1	3
Button to report errors	0	0	0
Polls	1	1	1
Twitter account	1	0	2
Facebook account	3	1	3

Responsiveness denotes news organizations' reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance. The daily newspaper *As-Safir* employs an ombudsman, Adnan Al-Saheli. He replies to questions by readers and publishes both questions and answers on the website as PDF documents. The website also has a section that deals with feedbacks to articles. But mostly the comments by readers state their general opinion and do not hold the authors accountable for what they wrote. Yet, the ombudsman is responsible for answering such comments.

A similar strategy of publishing readers' questions and newsrooms' answers is practiced by the most popular news website *Tayyar*. The *Daily Star* publishes letters-to-the editor but not any replies. All the other websites provide the tools for sending letters-to-the-editor but are not transparent in their way of processing those letters.

Comments in news are quite usual as 3 online newspapers, 3 news websites and 1 TV website offer this tool whereas a button to report errors does not exist.

Using polls is not as common as on other Arab news websites for example in Jordan.

Twitter accounts are not common, but Facebook is used by 3 news websites and 3 online newspapers but interaction and responsiveness do not seem to be high.

Case 2: Kalam An-Nas Episode

In 2010, the most famous program on Lebanese TV called *kalam an-nas* [people's talk] aired footage about the political situation in the country and how citizens reflect on it. Reporters interviewed people about their opinions, which showed a society on edge. After the airing, all political parties objected to this episode being broadcasted. They called for the arrest and fining of the responsible journalist.

But the program's Facebook group* defended him and the episode by pointing to the clear summary of opinions he had shown in his material. They said "this is our actuality and we should expose it and face reality instead of bluffing the truth on TV." (Mohammad Najem)

Even though it is not clear what impact the Facebook group finally had, it enabled citizens to defend the independence of this particular newsroom.

"This is the thing what we cannot really grasp- was it the Facebook group which pushed to halt the stoppage of program and the fine, or was it something else under the table we know nothing about. This is something no one can explain- how on earth has the destiny changed, but for sure Facebook participated in fending off a potential harm to the journalist and the program." (Mohammad Najem)

* <http://www.facebook.com/LBCFanClub>

3. Practices Outside the Media

3.1 NGOs and Academia

The interviewees agreed that critical thinking in Lebanon is often limited by sectarian thinking.

Therefore initiatives critical of the media are seldom:

"Unfortunately this critical thinking is not yet found in Lebanon. For example, people know that Al-Mustaqbal belongs to Hariri while the real owner might not be Hariri himself who might only be supporting the production, or Al-Manar belongs to Hezbollah or LBC to a certain party or OTV to Michel Aoun... In Lebanon sectarian and partition-based thinking influences people too much to the extent they would not delve into this minute inquiry to ask the question because they think they already know the answer, that it is politics which backs this station or newspaper, therefore this kind of discussion is not too ubiquitous on the Internet." (Mohammad Najem)

Some of the interviewees were also critical that constructive criticism is being manipulated into political issues as the following case underlines:

Case 3: IT Regulation Criticism

The Social Media Exchange (SMEx), an NGO, criticized an IT Regulation that was about to come out. They initiated an online call for a meeting between the active stakeholders and included the erroneous articles of the regulation in emails to their network of contacts in Lebanon and asked them to get in contact with their representative in parliament to vote against the law or to postpone the voting until the draft was amended. Traditional media took up the case and discussed the draft and SMEx created both a Facebook and a Twitter group. Even though most media outlets off and online supported the halt of the regulation, the case was nevertheless politicized.

“Anything ends up politicized. Because the law was proposed by a certain political faction it was picked up first by media which belongs to the counter political viewpoint and started writing on it politically though the whole issue wasn't political at all and I came to know from political people in that party that utter ignorance on the issue was prevalent. We did not interfere as our only goal was to halt the law, a thing which materialized later on. When people picked up the issue some tackled it from a political point of view while others technically, and this is the thing we cannot control in Lebanon- the power of politics and their impact on the media. Any news on the papers is prone to become politically manipulated; this is the problem.” (Mohammad Najem)

At the beginning of the new Millennium initiatives, workshops and conferences on media ethics mushroomed in Lebanon (Pies 2008). They aimed at pushing media outlets to practice more internal media accountability but also focused on the individual level of the journalist. One outspoken supporter and organizer of such events was Magda Abu Fadil who is now disillusioned about the outcomes:

“You know, you can have all the calls for transparency in the world but it doesn't mean that they're going to do something necessarily about it because they're so self-centered and so involved in their own issues that you know they just toss it behind them and keep clothing away. I personally don't think that it [the code of ethics] made that much of a difference. Otherwise we would have seen change in behavior to more ethical behavior and ethical standard which I think are lacking on a number of fronts.” (Magda Abu Fadil)

As many initiatives to foster media accountability in newsrooms or with individual journalists have failed, NGOs like SMEx have started to focus on media and Internet literacy or like Maharat to generate media laws.

Practice 1: SMEx

Social Media Exchange is an NGO that was established in 2008 and aims at:

“Encouraging media literacy and raising awareness about digital and social media, especially among youth and trainers, through concepts, case studies, and the translation of key materials into Arabic.”*

SMEx is not solely dedicated to media issues but contributes to the field of media accountability that the interviewees considered as the most promising way to establish MA practices online – media literacy.

Two of our interviewees are active in SMEx and described what they work on with people in their workshops:

“We train bloggers, Facebook or Twitter etc. to verify the validity and the license of what he publishes on the Internet. We try to help people become more professional in using the Internet especially if someone practices citizen media he should verify his sources. We try to question the source of several issues being published on news websites and check on the news making process which is unfortunately very vague.” (Mohammad Najem)

In their opinion traditional media – including the news websites – and social media have to be connected because they currently seem to be working on different premises:

“The type of speech on Internet is different than that on traditional media, it is much more developed and open, issues discussed are not found in traditional media. A movie called Shoo Saar [what went on?] mentioned the political parties involved in the civil war by their names. The General Security banned this film but the Minister of the Interior disagreed, so the people showed proof the film was actually banned and demanded that the Minister of the Interior resign, they also called over the Internet for a sit-in and made one on the street in front of the Ministry where the Minister talked to them and promised to change the decision.” (Mohammad Najem)

* Mission statement on SMEx’s homepage <http://www.smex.org/>

Practice 2: Maharat

Maharat Foundation is active in another important field of media accountability. As our interviewees emphasized, sensitive regulations – towards media freedom and independence – by a national authority have to be strengthened.

Therefore, “getting involved in reforming and developing legal frameworks related to journalism and media” is one of the main goals of the organization.* The campaign for a new media law including the establishment of a self-regulative media council is still ongoing.

Even if they use the Internet to promote their campaigns, the Internet has not a sufficient level of results to be relevant. One of our interviewees, who is active within Maharat admitted that they have neglected the potential of the Internet in reaching out for the “non-traditional” media:

“We did not launch a discussion group on Facebook that would invite for dialogue, but the Internet was being used to request journalists to send over their suggestions on reform as also did the Minister of Media who on his website asked the journalists to suggest reform ideas. But if you ask about the Internet, you mean something live, no. [...] We still call for face-to-face meeting. We do it in a more traditional fashion. We sit somewhere and talk it over...” (Roula Mikhayel)

Finally, we have to conclude that Maharat is not directly relevant for media accountability practices online but is an indicator for developments in Lebanon that shift media accountability from citizens’ and media practitioners’ to the state’s responsibility. This is due to the situation, in which the state is seen as the only institution able to cope with media accountability related problems in the media field. The paradox is that state institutions are traditionally weak in Lebanon.

* Mission statement on Maharat’s homepage <http://www.maharatfoundation.org>

The only initiative that has the potential to work as a real media watchdog or media criticizer is the Samir Kassir Eyes (SKeyes) organization. Yet, it is too new to make final conclusions about its impact.

Practice 3: SKeyes

Samir Kassir is probably one of the best known journalists in Lebanon, despite or because of his assassination in 2006. He wrote in the daily newspaper An-Nahar and had been an outspoken critique of the Syrian presence in Lebanon. In addition, he broke many taboos in criticizing the situation in Lebanon and other Arab countries. After he was assassinated a foundation was created called Samir Kassir foundation, which also runs the Samir Kassir Eyes (SKeyes) project. SKeyes is a website* that follows media developments in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. Currently it watches media more from the perspective of counteracting interference of the state in media affairs than from a media (self)-critical perspective. But as it has only recently started it has the potential to become more relevant for media accountability in Lebanon.

* <http://skeyes.wordpress.com/>

3.2 Bloggers and Social Media

Facebook plays a role in media accountability where it is used as a communication tool for campaigns (e.g. Maharat's campaign against a draft IT law), as a discussion platform for criticizing media (e.g. Ghada Eid case) or as voicing support for media content under fire (e.g. Kalam An-Nas case). But systematical media accountability through Facebook cannot be found. Although Facebook is omnipresent in Lebanon's Internet culture, a group solely dedicated to holding the media accountable does not exist yet.

The same is true for blogs: there is no blog which might be labeled as a "media watchblog". Many blogs are political and every now and then media coverage or behavior of media staff comes under discussion as the case of Ibrahim Arab, writer of the blog ArabTalk,¹⁶ exemplifies. In his blog he questioned the relevance of Arab media conferences or criticized Al Arabiya's media icon Maysoon Azzam for her appearance in a commercial ad, for example. But again, it is only a small part of the blog's content and not the main goal. Yet, a more thorough analysis of the vivid Lebanese blogosphere is necessary to prove whether or not occasional media criticism on blogs does play an influential role in holding the media accountable.

4. Conclusion

As for many other fields of society, the sectarian twist is an important factor for the development of MA practices in Lebanon. On the one hand, it is a main obstacle for the establishment of MA

¹⁶ <http://www.ibrahimarab.blogspot.com>

practices outside the newsrooms as supra-sectarian interests are few. Many initiatives that aim at holding the media accountable be it through self- or state-regulation have failed. On the other hand, sectarianism is an important factor why transparency is partly available in news outlets. Actor transparency, for example, is well developed because group affiliation of an outlet is part of an economic – and political – strategy. Ironically, sectarianism is also a major incentive for MA activities taking place in the Internet as news outlets are regularly criticised for being impartial. Yet, activities rest at the level of cases without implementing their activities although Facebook and blogger communities in Lebanon – which might be the place for practices to be consolidated – are vivid.

High professionalization of journalism can be interpreted as a reason why production transparency is widely recognized in most news rooms. Yet, media activists blame journalists and news outlets to live and work in their closed professional circles without considering their audiences. This criticism seems appropriate as media outlets have widely neglected to implement or incorporate Internet specific practices to encourage and profit from user generated content and consequently, have added to the relatively low significance of responsiveness. Traditional media accountability instruments as part of the professional culture do either not exist such as press councils and ombudspersons or are toothless like the journalists' association and its code of ethics. Thus, activities outside the news rooms have focused on establishing or strengthening such instruments but without meaningful success.

In contrast to other Arab countries such as Syria or Jordan, press freedom is not an important factor to trigger MA activities in Lebanon not at least because infringements of press freedoms are normally not executed by the state but by social actors backed by considerable parts of society. Therefore, common ground to base criticism on does not exist. As consequence of a relatively high press freedom, Lebanon's offline media market is multifaceted to which online media have not contributed a lot in terms of alternative views. Thus, holding media accountable for what they do not cover is not an issue for media accountability activities in Lebanon unlike in other Arab countries (cf. Pies & Madanat 2011a, 2011b). Criticism exists but it is not a driving force to become active with a few exceptions such as SKeyes.

By contrast, Internet culture in Lebanon is a factor that has prevented Internet specific MA practices within news outlets. Media outlets have pushed ahead their online presences only hesitantly due to low Internet penetration which, consequently, allows only a small economic profit. Therefore, online journalism taking into account Internet specific MA tools has not developed as much as TV or print journalism has. Actor and production transparency which is quite well developed dates already back to pre-Internet practices replicated on online versions of newspapers or TV stations. At the same time, the Lebanese blogosphere is very active but

does not care much about media accountability issues. Initiatives like SMEx aim at changing this situation by improving media and particularly Internet literacy.

In a highly politicised media field such as Lebanon, focusing on media internal MA practices has been the more successful way than establishing MA practices outside the news media as they might end up in further sectarian practices as is illustrated in the Ghada Eid case. Furthermore, it has to be concluded that the Internet has not played a significant role in expanding or enriching MA in Lebanon.

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