

Media Accountability Practices Online in Syria

An Indicator for Changing Perceptions of Journalism

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Summary

Media Accountability in Syria is more a question of re-defining the role of media in society than working on transparency practices or establishing self-regulation. This is due to strong state control and the mobilisation role mass media has been playing in Syria for decades. Before opening its media market for private publications in 2001 Syrian media was controlled either by the state or the ruling Baath party. Media accountability institutions like press councils or ombudspersons were simply not necessary in this concept of media and therefore do not exist. The only professional organisation, the Syrian Journalists Syndicate, did not act as a representative of independent journalists but as a representative of the regime. Additionally, as all journalists and media outlets had to work for more or less the same purpose, norms for guiding individual or organisational decisions – such as a code of ethics – were superfluous.

Although these conditions still persist in major parts of the media field, news websites¹ have particularly contributed to a shift in society's perception of the role of media by paving the way for media accountability practices in the field of responsiveness. Even though instruments for responsiveness might be part of an economic strategy of news websites to enter and survive the news media field, news websites have introduced an audience oriented journalism approach by providing collaborative story writing or possibilities for the audience to comment on news. This is a fundamental change in role perception as mobilising media was merely meant to serve the Baath elite and its ideas. Thus, the audience as a neglected actor of accountability seems to have entered the field.

In addition, news websites have added new topics to the traditional news agenda by taking the audience into account, and thus have contributed to holding the media accountable for aspects the old media does not cover. Thus, at least in some cases, media has played the role of being a watchdog over political decisions, which role media has never previously adopted.

Yet, media accountability as a strategy to become independent from the regime is not thinkable at the moment. Other than one non-governmental organization (NGO), neither institutions nor individuals point systematically to press freedom violations or occurrences hindering independent media. Discussions have not taken place either on issues such as the establishment of an independent press council or ombudspersons. At the moment, the state still restricts the development of a diverse field of media accountability, but is slightly losing control.

¹ The term news websites is used for those websites that are net-native and do only exist online. All news websites that have a print counterpart are referred to as newspapers online.

1. Context Factors in the Development of MA Online Practices

1.1 Social Context

Syria is a totalitarian “hereditary republic” since Bashar Al-Assad followed his father Hafez Al-Assad in 2000 as President of the Syrian Arab Republic. The Arab Baath Socialist Party dominates the political life in Syria which is characterized by emergency laws being in effect for more than 40 years even though it has come under discussion recently (HRW 2010).²

News media had been totally under state control until 2001 when private newspapers were allowed to operate. Private radio and television stations had to wait another five years but until the present, operating is still risky as suspensions and closing down of media outlets are common (Media Sustainability Index 2008). Despite the opening up of media markets, 3 of the 5 main daily newspapers are published by the Ministry of Information (Al-Tishreen & Al-Thawra) and the ruling Baath Party (Al-Baath). News broadcasting is only allowed for governmental radio and television stations, but several private radio and TV stations have been operating since 2006 providing mainly entertainment content.

The official introduction of Internet operations started in 1998 but has still not reached the majority of the population (Openarab.net 2006). At the end of 2000 only few Internet cafés existed in Damascus and were closely watched by the security services: Security officers stood behind the computer screens when users were surfing the net. At that time, Internet cafés were the only way to access to the Internet for ordinary citizens. Since 2000, Internet access for people has improved a lot (see section Internet User Culture) but the same is true for the technologies used to control the Internet.

In 2009, the Syrian Centre for Media and Free Expression (SCM) counted for 244 websites that were blocked, including many websites of human rights organizations but also media watch Pan-Arab websites like Menassat or SKeyes and social networking sites like Facebook and the Arab blogging host Maktoob.³ These are some of the reasons that Reporters Without Borders has ranked the country among the top ‘Internet enemies’ in the World.⁴ In February 2011, the Syrian government decided to lift up the ban on blocked websites which was perceived to be a big achievement for Syria though a pre-emptive policy vis-à-vis the revolutionary movements in the Arab World.⁵

² While writing this report in March 2011 news confirming and disclaiming Bashar Al-Assad’s announcement of the end of emergency law alternate daily.

³ http://www.scm.bz/?page=show_det&category_id=32&id=40&lang=ar

⁴ <http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-syria,36689.html>

⁵ <http://www.shukumaku.com/Content.php?id=23944> and http://www.elaph.com/Web/technology/-/2011/2/630321.html?entry=homepagemainmiddle&sms_ss=facebook&at_xt=4d518ab81572ba40%2C0

In this climate, using the Internet is limited and holding the news media accountable seems hardly achievable. Therefore, at the beginning the researchers were sceptical whether we would find interviewees ready to talk about media accountability in Syria. Our doubts of finding any accountability practices at all proved unfounded. Yet, to make them visible it is necessary to address media accountability in Syria from a slightly different angle than other Arab countries like Jordan or Lebanon that experience wider freedoms and have experimented with different forms of journalism for several years.

Rough (2004) classified Syrian mass media as “mobilization” tools for the regime, referring to a role media had been playing since the socialist coup of the Baath party in 1963. Mass media was mainly meant to serve the ruling elite to teach and convince all Syrians of the republic’s advantages and the Baath party’s program. Journalism focused predominantly on publishing protocols and announcements to support the regime’s domestic and foreign policies (Rough 2004). Due to state financing, media in Syria were not dependent on sales and therefore neglected badly the citizen consumers’ needs and interests.

This has been slowly changing since the opening up of the media market. Even though, private newspapers are closely watched by the government and do not differ too much from the state owned newspapers⁶, journalists working in the private sector have started to reflect on new professional role models (Fengler 2007: 25).⁷ This trend seems to be continued by journalists working in news websites⁸ that have appeared during the last five years. Social media, especially Facebook, has also brought to light that journalists do not want to serve the regime anymore but their society. One case, indicating this development was mentioned by all interviewees and was referred to whenever they wanted to point to the achievements of the Internet in Syria:

⁶ The two major private daily newspapers are owned by regime-conforming figures: Al-Waten is reported to be owned by President al-Asad’s cousin, Rami Makhlouf and Baladna by Majd Suleiman, the son of a former security chief General Bahjat Suleiman (HRW 2010: 12)

⁷ Even then-Information Minister Mehdi Dakhllallah (a former journalist) declared that Syrian media were in a transition from “dirigiste media” to “media with a purpose.” Though the expression “media with a purpose” leaves open for whose and which purposes the media should work, it can be interpreted as the official recognition of the end of an era of journalism (Kraidy 2006).

⁸ 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’.

Case 1: Personal Status Law

“In June 2009, a draft of a new personal status law was leaked. The new draft law was formed by a conservative Islamic committee, who in turn formulated the new draft based on Islamic bygone laws that do not fit with the societal diversity of Syria and modern laws. Intellectuals, scholars, and youth alongside with organizations specialized in media such as Etana Press and Syrian Women Observatory dedicated its efforts to expose the implications of approving such law, and signed many petitions that were presented later to officials in the government calling for disapproving the draft law. [...] The main activity of this campaign took place online through Facebook, Twitter and Etana’s website. The government re-proposed the law after minor alterations in November 2009, and the campaign was fiercer this time taking place online too and TV and cinema celebrities were involved this time. The campaign managed again to suspend the new law after it had lobbied religious authorities, governmental officials, and 130 Syrian celebrities.” (Confidential Source)*

* Citations of ‘confidential source’ refer to our interviewees, whose identities we agreed not to disclose due to the insecure situation in Syria.

“The tumult that was produced by activists online pushed some journalists to pay account to the issue. The news about the draft law which the government had banned circulating was first leaked by Marsad Nisa’ Sooria [Syrian Women Observatory- SWO] who published it on their website [<http://nesasy.org>]. News was later picked up by electronic websites and print newspapers then to radio stations which played a positive role vis-à-vis televisions which played a negative role. In this sense they [the news websites] were quite influential on the print media in this particular case.” (Confidential Source)

“The Syrian media does not see why it should cover any issue, meaning that censorship, imposed on the press and satellites, is much higher than that on the Internet despite the numerous blocked websites. [...]A message was sent by the electronic media to the president asking him to interfere. What followed is that radio stations took courage and managed to play the big role as compared to satellite stations [TVs] or even the press. They hosted official figures- In one of the interviews calls have been made with state officials to answer and comment on the issue.” (Confidential Source)

“For the first time, a life-felt issue of concern to all Syrians (mainly marriage, divorce etc.) was picked up by the electronic websites which managed to convey the issue and make of it a public opinion issue thereby forcing the traditional media, whether print (private and official) or even radio stations and less so with TV stations [...] to mention the issue despite an apparent disguise by the government against divulging of the issue culminated a decree by the cabinet banning the official tackling of this issue.” (Confidential Source)

The case reveals typical patterns of how the Internet contributes to media accountability in Syria. Criticising the media is difficult (see section Practices Outside Media) and in-house accountability practices are weak (see section Practices Initiated by the Media). As a consequence, news websites try to hold the (offline) media accountable for issues they do not cover. Having a greater margin of freedom than offline media, news websites try to push issues relevant to citizens and receive high response rates. Other media outlets are forced to follow if they do not want to lose credibility once and for all. To a certain degree, news websites try to overcome the bad performance of print media as representatives of the public opinion and therefore start thinking of media as public organs representing more than just regime elites.

Furthermore, they – maybe for the first time in decades – hold the government accountable to a certain degree and therefore act to improve their role as a watchdog of the government.

1.2 Media Legitimacy and Existing MA Institutions

The status law case is also relevant as it marks the first visible success of Internet activities on real policy. All the interviewees believe that news websites are becoming more trustworthy, but have to raise awareness of this valuable aspect among the public. In their opinion, involving citizens is a promising way to do so.

In contrast to offline media and their online counterparts, news websites try to go “into society” by using collaborative story writing with citizens as a distinctive feature to gain interest. Being economically obliged to maintain readers’ interests they successfully compete with the state owned media which does not rely on readers’ feedback. Despite the final resolution of the Baath Party-Congress in 2005 to “plan to modernize media work”, the regime has not yet succeeded in devising a strategy to do so.

“While structural reform appears to be gaining steam, efforts to improve the screen image have been largely cosmetic—literally. In March, the six thousand employees of the Syrian Radio and Television Commission received a memorandum detailing ‘international criteria’ for the physical appearance of television anchors, hosts, and presenters. Besides banning strong makeup for women, the guidelines stipulated that a television anchor’s weight could not exceed the last two numbers of their height, so that a 160 centimeters tall newscaster could not weigh more than 60 kilograms.” (Kraidy 2006)

Media legitimacy in Syria is hard to assess, as no comprehensive surveys or statistics on citizens’ perceptions of media exist. Yet, our experts’ assessments form the picture of a media system, which they and citizens deeply distrust mainly because of the decades long governmental monopoly over media outlets:

“The population knows the governmental monopoly on newspapers, and they do not trust the government’s newspapers. Thus they do not believe the media is transparent or accountable.” (Confidential Source)

MA institutions are almost nonexistent. The Syrian Journalists Syndicate (SJS), the only professional association in Syria, is dominated by the political elite and serves national rather than professional purposes. This is clearly underlined by a statement of Elias Mrad, Head of the SJS, in an interview with Omar Abdul Latif in 2009:

“It is not a professional but a national syndicate. I’m not ready to give any journalist who is not patriotic the card of a contributing or working journalist. If a journalist works inside Syria and criticizes, then there is no problem. But if you work for an external newspaper that fabricates bad news about our nation, I won’t protect you nor give you a card.” (Abdul Latif 2009)

This conception has been already demonstrated in the charter of the Syndicate, which states the character of the Syndicate to be “a professional syndicate believing in the goals of the Arab

nation in unity, freedom and socialism and is committed to accomplish these goals according to the decisions and directions of the Socialist Arab Baath Party.”⁹

The development of private media and online journalism seems to have forced the Syndicate to reflect on their role. Besides cautiously discussing the inclusion of non-state media practitioners and differentiating between journalists and other “media workers”, a committee has started to think about a new draft law for the SJS. But, whatever the outcome of this reflection will be, it will have to be approved by the parliament and the council of ministers (Abdul Latif 2009).

So far, the Syndicate has not initiated a national code of ethics for all journalists but has been working on a code of ethics for online journalists, which is – if it should turn out to be true – a major irony, but also reveals the idea behind “embedding” online journalists in the SJS.

The SJS is considered by some of our interviewees as another means of control as most of its members are public servants and the chairman of SJS was editor-in-chief of Al-Baath newspaper and the vice-chairman was the editor of Al-Thawra newspaper.

“They control everything and do not defend journalists. Training is weak with no reference to media accountability, and professionalism means not to slam the regime. The syndicate is even being used to sue some journalists and the draft code of ethics for online journalists is meant to pull the rug out from under the electronic websites and control them and restrain their getaway.” (Confidential Source)

One interviewee reported that at least state owned media had some kind of internal regulations; albeit they were not known by their employees and could hardly be called codes of ethics.

Other offline practices or institutions of media accountability do not exist in Syria. There is neither a press or media council, nor the institution of ombudsman and also media journalism is not regularly practiced.

1.3 Internet User Culture

Although the Internet penetration in Syria has been increasing and infrastructure projects have been initiated by the regime, rural areas are still underdeveloped in terms of Internet access and computer literacy is low. Yet, the most striking hindrance in Syria is the high cost of accessing the Internet, in a country, where poverty is widespread (UN 2009: 2ff).

Internet use per 100 inhabitants was 16.4 per cent in 2009 and 17.7 per cent in 2010 and the total number of Internet users was 3,565,000 in 2009 and 3,935,000 in 2010 according to ITU World Telecommunication/ITC Indicators database.

Internet advertising in Syria has always been negligible, as broadband penetration is very low at just 0.5 per cent. The Dubai Media Club expects Syrian Internet advertisement to grow

⁹ Charter of the Syrian Journalists Association cited by Abdul Latif is available in <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/6259-syrias-only-national-journalists-union-membership-has-its-privileges> [31.1.2011]

fast (46 per cent between 2010 and 2013). Yet, the report foresees the Internet advertising to remain at just 1 per cent of Syria's advertising market (Dubai Media Club 2010: 149).

Active Internet culture

Despite statistically pessimistic preconditions for Internet use, insights into the culture of Internet use show that those who are online are mostly also very active.

What is distinctive for the Internet user culture in Syria is the "cat and mouse game" of state blocking and users breaking the blocks.

"In Syria it's a cat-and-mouse game. They [the regime] develop blockage tools and the people develop tools to break this blocking such as changing the counter to get online (tools, options, communication etc. then changing the digits) in addition to much more complicated tools but this is not enough as accessing Facebook becomes not speedy or downloading heavy stuff from YouTube. The whole idea of media is to diffuse knowledge but blockage impedes access to such knowledge even with invented tool to circumvent." (Confidential Source)

Even though using the Internet is exhausting and Facebook was blocked until recently, Facebook use is on the rise in Syria. But some kind of "clandestine activity" is needed to access the site, which many find too risky.

"Facebook is becoming more and more popular. But Facebook is blocked and you need proxies to reach it. And if you don't really want it you won't do it. You need a new proxy every day. And I have many friends who have said, why bother? You always have to change the proxy, so why? Besides, the fact is that a lot of Syrians don't have appropriate Internet access at all." (Confidential Source)

Ironically, the President, Bashar Al-Assad¹⁰, and other prominent state figures such as Bothaina Shaban, Minister and Political and Media Advisor at the Presidency, have their own accounts on Facebook. Twitter accounts in Syria according to SpotOnPR number 320 in 2009.¹¹

As hosts for blogs are also blocked, the number of blogs remains minimal even though it is continuously increasing. While only 5 Syrian blogs were online in 2005, the number had increased to 35 in 2006 (Openarab.net 2006) and by the end of 2010, the Syrian blogger platform damsceneblog.com identified 86 blogs.¹²

Interesting results come also from a comparative content analysis of Arab blogs by Etling et al. (2010). The research team found "significant levels of political discourse within the Egyptian, Kuwaiti, Syrian, and the Levantine/English Bridge clusters. Bloggers discussing politics are overwhelmingly concerned with domestic issues" (Etling 2010: 1231). The group of blogs indicated as the "Syrian" cluster is located almost exclusively in Syria and is characterized by "frequent, though typically mild, criticism of domestic leaders. Syrians are among the least likely

¹⁰ <http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=o.56730314485> [31.1.2011]

¹¹ <http://www.spotonpr.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/TwitterSurveyRep8Sep09.pdf>

¹² Damasceneblog www.damasceneblog.com provides a list of Syrian blogs which does not claim to be complete.

in our study to express support for domestic political leaders. This cluster also has the second highest proportion of male bloggers on the map, at 87 percent” (Etling 2010: 1233).

One of our interviewees estimated the number of Syrian blogs and websites combined to be 600 in 2010 while statistics from the beginning of 2009 state that the overall number of Syrian electronic sites to be 2,500 with about 140 being information websites¹³ (UN 2009: 14).

In contrast to the risky and limited use of Facebook, using and interacting with news websites is popular. All4Syria, one of the most interactive news websites in Syria, publishes an impressively long list of citizens’ complaints on its website (see section Practices Initiated by the Media). As there are not many channels that enable users to anonymously and safely express their concerns, one interviewee describes the Internet as being “a platform to vent your frustration” (Confidential Source).

1.4 Professionalism in Journalism

Even without the existence of MA institutions citizens or journalists could theoretically hold the media accountable. But what are the principles media should be held accountable to?

As the media market in Syria has only been opened up recently for private publications and – in a limited way – for radio stations and TV channels, journalism has to struggle with a high degree of insecurity. There is not a clear state media policy. Censorship is arbitrary, which makes working in journalism more risky. Codes of ethics are not available. Senior journalists who might act as role models usually grew up in the socialist era, are mostly state employees, and are rarely involved in the changes that take place in the journalism field (Fengler 2007: 25).

One of our interviewees describes the situation vividly:

“Baladna newspaper was stopped for three months. Later it was agreed through middlemen connected to the security that someone called Samir who work in Al Hayat will pass by every night to carry out a security check on the edition. He might cancel a whole report, which we need to find a substitute for, or cancel slight news or a word. It goes like this- once he enters the newspaper he does not entangle with us about the newspaper's course of action; [...] You may write an article which the editor will cancel in its entirety, or you may choose a subject or an opinion which will be rejected at all. This censorship is not always security-based; it could as well be based on personal motives. For example if I carry out a report on cinema in Syria and I would inquire the opinion of a producer disliked by the editor or himself ... so censorship is governed by personal likes and dislikes... Other censorship practices are ridiculous. We should not conduct a report about the deteriorating services in Al Assad district because of the name, so we would rename it with the neighboring district of Harasta. You know that at one time the cartoon film Lion was banned in Syria [Lion is “Assad” in Arabic and could be referred to President Al-Assad]. Another case was about garbage collectors (in Syria we do not have recycling). This garbage is fragmented then redistributed and sold through big companies to abroad, so we cannot call them zabbaleen [garbage collectors] as this hampers the image of national economy, but hygiene labor.” (Confidential Source)

¹³ An extensive overview of Syrian websites can be found at <http://www.esyria.sy/dir> [31.1.2011]

Unclear “rules of the game” make it hard for journalists and citizens alike to be held accountable and to hold accountable.

“We wish there is an official to tell you where to draw the line, then things will be clear and this is why there is variance in levels. A new and somehow enlightened editor assumes the post, things get better, then he leaves and things deteriorate.”
(Confidential Source)

Political influence on news media is also prevalent in terms of employing staff. Posts of chief editors are mainly assigned to the Baath elite and sometime even become issues of party internal struggles (Perthes 2004: 105)¹⁴ As a consequence, journalists lack reliable and predictable rules of how to practice their job.

Another problem for Syrian journalism is the lack of access to information. The official communication policy towards the media is weak and sometimes selective besides the fact there is not an access to information law in Syria. Thus, information and validations are both difficult to access. The advent of the Internet in Syria, followed by citizens’ contributions on websites, has provided important alternative news sources.

1.5 Online Journalism Development

News websites were able to establish new news topics concerning mainly social or – as in the case of Damaspost – economic issues. They are supported or brought in by readers and as a consequence have added to the “old” news agenda an “alternative” agenda closer related to citizens’ needs.

“Now, a certain website covers the issue of drug consumption or homosexuals. Then newspapers (Al-Thawra or Baladna) would pick it up [...] Electronic websites opened eyes and pinpointed to the importance of psychological issues such as violence against women, the effect of child abuse. Issue such as drought in Aljazeera district is covered for example by Baladna which is a private newspaper and whose ceiling [of press freedom] is not high.” (Confidential Source)

Local issues have come onto the agenda for the first time. Previously, news was mainly protocol news on a national basis or focusing on the capital Damascus. The only local newspapers for the major Syrian cities, Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Latakia have also been controlled and run by the Ministry of Information. Thus, news websites contributed to recognizing all parts of the country and non-governmental viewpoints.

“The websites focused on local news. And even if it was something like someone killed his sister for honor. But I would consider this news as very important because if you gather all those cases in which men killed women for honor. And I think this news made statistics which guided to a huge campaign. It started online as well. And the president was forced to make a law that puts the killer in jail even if it is only two years instead of two months. It is small but he had to do something.” (Confidential Source)

¹⁴ Perthes (2004) describes the relationship between the Baath elite and the media by referring to the case of Al-Thawra chief editor Mahmoud Salamah in 2001.

News websites also started republishing and translating articles from international and other Arab news portals which even extended to articles from the Israeli news media (e.g. Ha'aretz) even though it is from the perspective of "knowing your enemy".¹⁵

Furthermore, online journalism has contributed to basic professional rules such as taking another point of view than the official one and at the same time filling the black hole of official information with additional sources from "experts".

"In the last five years a tendency to consult experts has become apparent, [News websites] would consult experts and principals in hospitals on certain issues; a thing we would not see in the past nor practiced by the print press except after being seriously contested by the electronic websites. [The major] newspapers now tend to seek the viewpoint of experts, then they would inquire the irrigation official that so and so says the expert and such action ought to have taken place; you as a principal what do you say!?" (Confidential Source)

Interaction with citizens is also seen as the main achievement of, and for, online journalism as one interviewee explains with two examples of interaction by readers: The first is interviewing parents who would attend court hearings for their prosecuted sons. The interviewee reports that at first, parents were reluctant to speak up, but little by little they got used to non-state media covering their plight, partly thanks to new media discussing these issues online. The second example is electronic websites and blogs openly discussing news and rumors about arrest campaigns by the regime in Aleppo and people commenting on this news. Our interviewee took up rumors, went to interview people and investigated the matter further. Thanks to the fact that news websites through citizens had sparked attention to what's going on in Aleppo, the interviewee produced an investigative report. The news had initially spread from citizens' observations about state officers not coming back to their homes for three consecutive days, a sign of a wide arrest campaign by the regime.

All interviewees were enthusiastic about the changes online journalism has already caused in Syria:

"Internet is the heavenly gift which has descended from the creator to slightly pierce this hard seclusion which Syria lives." (Confidential Source)

"The Internet has always been a catalyst in Syria with regard to freedoms in general and freedom of the press in particular; the difference is incomparable." (Confidential Source)

Yet, they clearly see the limits of Internet and media to induce change as

"Change is a comprehensive process but for sure in countries like us it is the political will which can induce change." (Confidential Source)

¹⁵ Syria and Israel still have not signed a peace treaty and anti-Israeli coverage in Syrian news media is a rule of thumb.

2. Practices Initiated by the Media¹⁶

2.1 Actor Transparency¹⁷

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.

In Syria, codes of ethics do exist neither on a national nor on an organisational level. But All4Syria, a privately run news website, publishes rules for writing on the website addressing mainly citizen writers, which is in accordance with the website's strong focus on citizens' contributions.

Two of the three state owned online newspapers publish the names of all their journalists and columnists. The privately owned Al-Baladna presents names, photos, e-mail addresses and positions of its entire staff. Among the analysed news websites, only Damaspost mentions at least the names of their staff.

Table 1: Actor transparency in Syrian online newspapers and news websites

Practice	Online newspapers state owned (n=3)	Online newspapers privately owned (n=2)	News websites (n=3)
Published mission statement	0	1	3
Published code of ethics	0	0	0
Profiles of journalists	2	1	1
Public information on company ownership	1	1	1

As the offline media market in Syria is very limited, Syrians usually know who owns which media. This is not true for websites, as ownership structures are more complex. From the three news websites only All4Syria publishes its ownership.

¹⁶ The content of the following chapters refers to several research strategies by the authors. Apart from expert interviews, we analyzed online versions of the 5 most important daily newspapers in Syria (Al-Tishreen, Al-Thawra, Al-Baath, Baladna & Al-Watan) as well as the 2 most used Syrian news website (Syria-news.com and damaspost.com) according to Alex ranking and 1 news websites (All4Syria) that was mentioned by several experts to be a special case in terms of media accountability. The analysis included a quantitative content analysis on existing internal MA practices and was expanded by partly open website observations and short telephone interviews with some of the websites' chief editors. Most of the interviews were conducted in Arabic. Quotations in this text are translated by the authors. Our Syrian interviewees were on and offline journalists, Internet activists, bloggers and researchers living in and outside Syria. Due to the dangerous political climate for many of them, we agreed to keep their identities disclosed.

¹⁷ 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.

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.

In Syria, using by-lines is common in all newspapers, as it is obligatory by law to make clear who is legally accountable for the article. Besides being a “legally encouraged” practice, Syrian journalists consider by-lines as a professional duty. In some cases, journalists prefer to stay anonymous but this is not because of the government but because they are reporting about influential private people.

For the category ‘Precise References’ we have indicated ‘0’ for all websites because using precise references occurs sometimes but is not the rule. Hyperlinks – be they internal or external – are not used at all.

Table 2: Production transparency in Syrian online newspapers and news websites

Practice	Online newspapers state owned (n=3)	Online newspapers privately owned (n=2)	News websites (n=3)
Authorship stated by each story	3	2	3
Precise reference	0	0	0
Links to sources in stories	0	0	0
Journalists’ personal blogs discussing production	0	0	0
Strategy for collaborative story writing with citizens	0	0	2

The most distinguishing feature that separates news websites from online newspapers in Syria is the practice of collaborative story writing with citizens. As this is more relevant for the category “responsiveness” we will expand on it in the following section.

2.3 Responsiveness

Responsiveness denotes news organizations’ reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance.

Table 3: Responsive practices in Syrian online newspapers and news websites

Practice	Online newspapers state owned (n=3)	Online newspapers privately owned (n=2)	News websites (n=3)
Strategy for collaborative story writing with citizens	0	0	2
Comments in news	2	1	3
Button to report errors	0	0	0
Polls	1	1	0
Twitter account	1	0	2
Facebook account	0	1	3

Comments in news and reporting errors

Even though 6 of the 8 websites under scrutiny have the technical option to send comments to each article, the practice varies a lot. Al-Thawra (state owned) offers a working comments button, which is either seldom used or comments are seldom published. This is different with the privately owned Al-Watan and the 3 news websites All4Syria, Syria-News and Damaspost. All 4 show vivid activity by their readers even though comments have to be edited (censored) by the newsrooms:

“There is a very strict policy of comments. [...]. Because sometimes the commentators use anonymous links and write comments that go beyond the red lines. In this case, they have to monitor everything. They monitor mainly political and sexual limits and then other limits. As you have to monitor forums for 24 hours, they normally hire people for only monitoring the forum.” (Confidential Source)

Whether comments are noticed and responded by the media outlets depends on the individual journalists. Two of our journalist interviewees gave different reasons why they do not reply back to comments:

“As many of my articles deal with women’s issues and Islamic things I get really bad feedbacks. So I tend not to reply back.” (Confidential Source)

“As for me I tend to ignore 80percent of the [comments]. Given the anonymity of e-mails I don’t know who is behind it.” (Confidential Source)

Although corrections are not published openly, mistakes noticed by citizens and voiced via e-mails are taken into account by the newsrooms.

Strategy for collaborative story writing

Collaborative story writing is used to widen the pool of sources in an environment in which access to official information is difficult. Only the news websites follow this strategy, but do it successfully. Citizens’ interests which had been neglected for decades are being heard through this practice.

Polls and evaluation of articles

The very popular feature of readers' polls on news websites throughout the Arab World can be found in two Syrian websites only, the state owned Al-Baath and the private Al-Baladna. This might be because polls on political topics - most popular on other Arab news websites - are running the risk of going beyond the "red lines".

Another possibility of requesting users' feedback is a "readers' count". The state owned Tishreen publishes a readers' count for each article while the privately owned Al-Baladna only presents a readers' count for the whole website. The news website Damaspost has a section on its homepage indicating the most read and the most commented article.

Facebook and Twitter account

Twitter accounts are offered by the private Al-Watan and the 3 news websites. As tweeting is practised by fewer than 500 people, Twitter is not influential (see section Internet User Culture). It is not surprising that state owned online newspapers do not offer Facebook accounts, as Facebook was officially blocked for a long time. Nevertheless the private Al-Watan and the 3 news websites are sufficiently bold as to offer Facebook accounts, but discussions on the media's Facebook profiles are not common. Damaspost, for example, showed only one comment on all its articles available on Facebook. Interactivity via Facebook seems to take place more often on individual Facebook sites.

Apart from that, media Accountability via Facebook is a situational practice:

"A year ago or so some youth formed a group on Facebook demanding freedom of the press. Media accountability is not being pursued systematically; some individuals write and publish whenever a certain case comes up." (Confidential Source)

Practice 1: Responsiveness in News Websites All4Syria and Syria News

As previously mentioned, news websites in Syria have tremendously changed both journalism and the way of dealing with the audience. Two websites which successfully practice a high level of responsiveness are All4Syria and Syria News.

Both news websites publish comments by readers in separate sections but also below the articles. Even though not everything that is commented is going to be published or responded to, comments are a new interactive experience for both journalists and citizens and make journalists more accountable to their readers.

Apart from the comments by readers both websites run a “readers’ complaints section”, in which readers can post their complaints about everything mainly with reference to their social lives. Besides the motive of “venting frustration” readers can notice that their complaints are taken by journalists to investigate further on it.

One of our interviewees describes how this works:

“I take up a complaint and call the person who sends it. Mostly the complaints are social issues. It is very useful because sometimes you run out of ideas and you receive them from your readers. So, I check out the complaints list and some you can use to start an investigation on it. It is really powerful. I call the person who did the complaint. They normally leave their telephone numbers. Me, personally, I did it three or four times and I called the person and they gave me numbers of others. Because, the people who complain are mostly not the people in the news. Most of them are uncles or relatives of a girl who was treated badly in hospital, for example. I contacted them and they guided me through the main event. I interviewed them and the official part and so the investigation is done. But honestly, we are not used to be involved in anything governmental or in authorities. The complaint boxes in government institutions are just for nothing. I have never ever seen anybody putting complaints against an officer or even a cleaner. We are not used to make complaint and even you complain you won’t get any response, so. I think this is one reason why the websites are attracting attention. It is something we are not used to and the people like it. The involvement of the people had a huge effect.” (Confidential Source)

Another popular tool of responsiveness is the use of Facebook. The two news websites use it for distribution purposes but also to evoke readers’ reactions:

“Let’s say one interesting article is published on the website let’s say on al-Watan. And it is a very interesting article and let’s say 500 people will read it. Out of these 500, 50 have Facebook profiles. Out of these 50, 25 would repost the article on their Facebook profiles. These 25 reposts will evoke comments and people become interactive. And each comment will generate another. And it becomes like a debate. So if you have like 25 comments on your wall it makes it interesting for other people. And, if you receive articles on your wall when you open your Facebook profile, it evokes more interest than the article on the website.” (Confidential Source)

Facebook gives the opportunity to act around editorial self-censorship:

“In the case of Facebook, the editors cannot watch the comments, because the comments are private. They cannot interact. If you go to All4Syria, for example you can see like 8 to 10 comments for every article. The average number of comments is like 7. But on Facebook, it would be 70 or 80. But on Facebook those articles are private, you cannot access the comments.” (Confidential Source)

Facebook in general is perceived as being safer to voice one’s opinion than on websites:

“Say I have two friends, one has religious concerns and the other has secular concerns. The first will see what the second posts although the other is not his friend. So Facebook is the most useful platform to tell people of issues of high relevance. [...] Commenting on these issues gives a sense of being. Sometimes they create their own account or even more.” (Confidential Source)

3. Practices Outside the Media

Many media outlets in Syria belong to the regime and consequently criticizing them is challenging but possible, as long as the media outlet or its journalists are the targets of the critique. But statements like “media is a vehicle for the government” would cause problems.

Apart from the system’s inherent reasons for a lack of media critique, the interviewees gave other motives for not openly going against colleagues.

“We try to find any sense to form independent media from the government. So if anyone comes and says for example, this story was rumor, it would be like doing the governmental crack on the media. This is the main reason, why people would refrain from monitoring media.” (Confidential Source)

Personal reasons might influence whether you criticize your colleagues or not.

“For example one writer won a contest, others would question the quality of this prize, the jury and his right to win then retaliation follows. It usually starts on the Internet then the print media follows suit.” (Confidential Source)

The interviewee who criticizes colleagues does not care about their reactions in the state owned media because first the interviewee does not have friends there and secondly, is convinced that it does not matter to them anyway as:

“The journalists who work in governmental media are not competitive. They just publish things and get money. Many of them are working with private things besides their governmental work. Because you are not going to gain more money if you make a scoop, you just fill pages that you have to fill. It is somehow a communist mind. It is not creative, no efforts. And what you do is not going to make any difference.” (Confidential Source)

Nevertheless, few people do publically criticize media be they state or privately owned. There are no portals that monitor media or hold media accountable exclusively in terms of professional rules. On the news website Damaspost, Mohammad Mansour used to write a column “Black Box” harshly criticizing Syrian television but the latest entries date back to May 2009.¹⁸

Only the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression monitors media but from another perspective. It watches over the independence of media from the state being an advocate for free media:

¹⁸ <http://www.damaspost.com/الصندوق-الأسود/>

3.1 Non-Governmental Organizations and Academia

Practice 2: Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Speech (SCM)

The Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Speech is a non-governmental organization (NGO) established and licensed in France in December 2004. The first activity of the Centre was to issue a daily electronic newspaper (Almash'had As'Souri). The Center aims at collecting and reporting acts against freedom of media and freedom of expression. Another objective is to provide protection to journalists. The Center publishes data: showing blocked websites; monitors blocking and development of censorship; monitors media coverage in certain issues etc. Another field of activity is supporting citizen journalism through trainings, workshops or blogger contests.

To disseminate the findings, the Center uses three strategies: (i) publishes its work on the SCM website; (ii) sends the data via email to online and traditional media, as well as journalists and citizen journalists and (iii) prints hard copies for distribution. The Center has a group profile with approximately 1100 followers on Facebook, which is utilized for all issues.

Even though the Internet website of SCM was blocked – and has now moved to another domain www.scm.bz – it reaches journalists and even officials by other ways, e.g. by honouring the best coverage of parliamentary elections in a restaurant with 70 invited journalists and several officials including the Deputy Minister of Information.

Other activities such as the annual report on media freedoms are not supported openly. Instead, editors and journalists report grievances secretly or thanks for support via e-mail anonymously.

Another achievement of SCM which relates to media accountability was an initiative against the monopoly of distributing publications. The distribution institution holding the monopoly is used by the Ministry of Information to monitor publications as prior-censorship, though this is forbidden by law. The Ministry directs the distributor not to deliver certain issues, which occurred approximately 40 times per year. The SCM started an advocacy campaign – using online channels – and more than a year later a law was endorsed, which privatized the distribution. In 2010, only eight cases of 'withholding' have been reported.

In countries where a majority of media is owned and run by the state, media accountability goes hand-in-hand with freedom of speech issues. The SCM is a good example for an institutionalised MA practise that not only monitors media online and offline, but also tries to give incentives to journalists and citizen journalist to become accountable, such as competitions or providing communication technologies such as iPods.

3.2 Bloggers and Social Media

Practice 3: Journalist Facebook Activist

Closely related to the Personal Status Law Case is the activity of a journalist blogger holding the media accountable by writing and organizing Facebook groups against the draft law. This activity can be characterized as a media accountability practice because the blogger and colleagues created pages on Facebook writing and gathering articles and original documents on the subject so that other journalists could easily draw on that material to produce more transparent coverage.

Another reason for using Facebook was that the journalist blogger was unable to publish articles in the media outlets, for which they worked.

“The official media did not publish anything about [the personal status law]. And even the news websites refused to publish three or four articles I had written. This was new for me. So I came up to publish it on my own media. And it was a very professional investigation not just an article. When I had been stopped to publish my material I published it on Facebook. And a lot of people put it on their profiles and websites. And now, when I google my name, this topic comes more often than my original topics. So, they spread a lot.” (Confidential Source)

After experiencing the freedom and distribution possibilities via Facebook, the journalist blogger and two other journalists started investigating displaced people who escaped the droughts in Al-Jazeera [the North-East region of Syria] and currently live in camps in Damascus and Homs. The Minister of Media announced that whoever publishes anything about the droughts embarrasses the government. Besides publishing an intensive investigation for a Lebanese newspaper, the blogger also published a photo gallery about the drought and the displaced people on their Facebook site and wrote in media outlets about that gallery, indirectly talking about the disaster and leading readers to the background information on Facebook.

Apart from the Facebook activities, the blogger has proved to be a media critique by other ways, for example, writing columns on newspaper clichés giving marks for each media outlet.

4. Conclusion

The elaborations on media accountability practice online in Syria have demonstrated how media accountability is spelt out under autocratic regimes. Several contextual factors have hindered a sound development of media accountability practices off and online:

- State regulation and laws are so strong that independent MA practices off- and online seem to be impossible if not unnecessary.
- Ownership structures and the lack of a competitive offline market prevent most media outlets from establishing MA tools for economic reasons.
- The commanded social function of journalism to be regime advocates does not allow for a stakeholder concept in which media has to be accountable to more actors than the regime, particularly the public.

These obstacles have evoked the very specific goals of media accountability in Syria, on which some actors such as journalists or media activists have recently started to work. Given the orchestrated monologic news agenda in Syrian news media, MA actors aim at holding the official media accountable to what they do NOT publish by creating an alternative agenda related to the interests of citizens. The potential of reaching this goal has tremendously increased with the advent of the Internet. News websites have particularly contributed to this goal when they introduced instruments of responsiveness such as readers' comments or user generated content and thus contributed to challenge the existing definition of journalism. Individual actors outside the media have triggered cases, in which activists forced official media via Facebook to follow on topics they previously ignored.

Limited freedoms in official and offline media have triggered the call for widening the margin of press freedom in the country as another goal of media accountability which has not benefited as much from the Internet as the previously mentioned goal. Although the internet is perceived to be a relatively free space, the regime's crack down on activists particularly bloggers and journalists hold many Syrians from becoming more active. The case of SCM exemplifies that the Internet alone does not make a big difference. Activities to strengthen the independence of the journalistic field still need to be carefully communicated offline incorporating the regime.

The low number of Internet users still limits MA practices to involve a critical mass. Yet, it is questionable whether Internet access alone is a powerful explanation as courage to stand up for one's beliefs is strongly needed to become active. Still, reaching the main goals of MA in Syria was almost impossible before the advent of the Internet in Syria. The development of online journalism – though in its early stages – has changed the context for MA tremendously. Competition is available and user involvement has become a seemingly successful economic trigger for news websites to practice media internal transparency. Though Facebook was blocked for a long time it has become a tool for ad hoc initiatives as the case of the Personal Status Law illustrates.

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