

Beyond State Regulation

How Online Practices Contribute to Holding the Media
Accountable in Jordan

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Summary

Holding the news media accountable has traditionally been a task of the state in Jordan. Media laws and regulations are numerous and do not leave too much space for self-regulatory practices on a national basis. The Jordan Press Association (JPA) is the core of so-called established media accountability institutions. It conducted a law-like code of ethics in 2003 and runs ombuds committees (currently three) dealing with mishaps of the media to prevent journalists from legal liability. Though being a professional body, many journalists perceive the JPA as an extended arm of the government. Until 2010 the association was not prepared to deal with private broadcasting and online journalists in the same way as it does with press and state owned media journalists.

Most media outlets in Jordan are characterised by a lack of accountability awareness and practices especially when it comes to actor and production transparency. Only recently have some news organisations (mainly net-native) become aware of their duty to be accountable towards their audiences. New comers to the field of online news, in particular, have experimented with citizens' involvement and have established a high level of responsiveness in their newsrooms. Online versions of the traditional news media have not yet caught up with this development but will be most probably forced to do so for economic reasons.

Apart from economic strategies to better involve audiences, another driving force for media accountability practices in Jordan is the lack of media legitimacy mainly rooted in distrusting the media's independence from the state. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) point towards contempt of press freedom (e.g. Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists), lack of citizen concerned topics (e.g. AmmanNet, 7iber.com) and professional behaviour (e.g. Eye on the Media), or try to deepen the knowledge about the functioning of media (e.g. sahafi.jo). Blogs and social media play only a minor role because media criticism mainly gets louder when well-harboured taboos are tackled. Yet, blogs and social media might become the place to initiate discussion or to negotiate professional rules in the future of a fast changing media field.

1. Context Factors in the Development of MA Online Practices

1.1 Social Context

“Is Jordan the latest enemy of press freedom online?” asks Kamil Labidi in an article of The Guardian Online¹ referring to several developments in the country in 2010, which set up the frame for the current public debate on the Internet in Jordan.

Among the occurrences causing heated debates was a ruling of the highest appeal court in January 2010, which allows news websites and electronic media to come under the jurisdiction of the country’s press and publications law.² Discussions also arose when the government decided to block websites in public working spaces – including a high number of news websites – with the intention of making public officers’ work more efficient.³ The preliminary peak of the debate was reached in August when the government announced a new draft law called the “Jordan Information Systems Crimes Law”, also referred to as the “Cyber Crime Law”, which was finally revised in favour of Internet freedom after pressure from online journalists and Internet activists.⁴

Apart from the issue of how these developments really limit the freedom of online journalism in Jordan, the debate about them reveals a high emotional involvement when it comes to Internet freedom. The greater part of discussion is about who should hold online media accountable; and the main actor under discussion is the government. Accountability instruments within either the journalistic domain or the public sphere are not explicitly part of the discussion. This is probably because traditional media are widely perceived as being part of the regime and institutionalised accountability instruments such as a code of ethics or ombuds committees are initiated and directed by the regime (cf. section on Legitimacy). A young growing scene of national news websites is the big hope – at least for the Internet savvy part of the population – of overcoming these dependencies through the relatively free Internet space.

Within the last three years the quantity of news websites covering Jordanian issues has enormously increased. In 2007, apart from online versions of traditional print media (online

¹ Available <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/21/jordon-cyber-law-press-freedom-online>, other blogs and websites picked up these developments like the most popular English blog on Jordan, Black Iris <http://www.black-iris.com/2010/08/29/on-jordans-cyber-crimes-law/>, and the Pan-Arab Media Watchdog Menassat <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/7436-cyber-crime-law-attacks-free-expression-jordan>, all [20.12.2010]

² For further information see Reporters without Borders: <http://en.rsf.org/jordan-court-ruling-poses-threat-to-16-01-2010.36120.html>, and Jordan Times <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=23196>, all [20.12.2010]

³ Cf. Jordan Times <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=29503> and <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=29641>, all [20.12.2010]

⁴ Cf. Jordan Times <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=29101>, <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=29630>, and Reporters Without Borders <http://en.rsf.org/jordan-new-law-allows-government-to-12-08-2010.38135.html>, all [20.12.2010]

newspapers) only 2 news websites⁵, AmmanNet (the first Internet radio) and Ammonnews (the first Jordanian news website) existed. Today, there are more than 20 online-only news websites (news websites)⁶. In the 2010's parliamentary election, websites played a major role in presenting information about candidates and consequently the election campaigns were more extensively followed than ever before in Jordan. A look at the Alexa rankings on the day of election and on a normal day shows that 4 Jordanian news websites and 2 online newspapers were among the top 20 websites in Jordan competing with world's top sites like Google, Yahoo!, YouTube etc.⁷

Yet, news websites still have to fight against accusations of being not professional and not accountable. Especially, in terms of credibility and transparency of sources some of them still have to go a long way, indeed (see section Practices Initiated by the Media) as the "McKain Case" exemplifies:

Case 1: McKain Case

In June 2008, some highly frequented news websites – followed by many other news outlets – published a headline saying "John McCain [at that time a US presidential candidate] will declare Jordan part of a Palestinian state" and attributed the quote to an advisor of McCain's called Kagan.* This sensitive statement caused uproar in Jordanian society and among the diplomatic corps. As became clear later, however, the information the news was based on had appeared on a website called *Filkka Israel*. This website has the open aim of "Destroying the kingdom of Jordan peacefully and bringing back its land to its normal situation as a part of Greater Palestine".** Clearly, the Jordanian media outlets that carried the news had neither checked the information with Kagan or John McCain nor voiced any doubts about the source. Yet, some voices from within the journalistic field were heard and were among those who made the mishap public (for details see section Practices Outside the Media).

* Ammonnews online on 15 June 2008, cf.
<http://www.ammonnews.net/article.aspx?articleNO=25147> [20.12.2010]

** <http://www.filkkaisrael.blogspot.com/> [20.12.2010]

Nonetheless, online journalism is on the track of being officially accepted. In September 2010 the Jordan Press Association's (JPA) Executive Council adopted amendments to the association's law that would open membership to practitioners in online media. Once the general assembly of the JPA implements these amendments, applications for membership by online journalists will follow the same rules that govern the print media journalists (Hawatmeh / Pies 2011). This would mean the end of a discussion which has been ongoing since the establishment of the first news website.

⁵ The term *online newspaper* is used for those websites that editorially belong to traditional print media, while the term *news website* is used for online-only news websites. This is for analytical reasons but also because Jordanians make a linguistic distinction between the two.

⁶ The ten most used are: Ammonnews, Assawsana, Sarayanews, Jordanzad, Allofjo, Khaberni, AmmanNet, Samaalordon, Rumonline, Ejbed, Marayanews (JMS-I 2010).

⁷ Alexa Ranking for Jordan accessed on Nov. 9, 2010 & December 14, 2010 [www.alexa.com].

1.2 Media Legitimacy and Existing MA Institutions

Media legitimacy in Jordan is hard to assess statistically, as no comprehensive surveys or data on citizens' perceptions of media exist. Yet, several available data, in addition to our experts' assessments, do form an image of a media system, which is evaluated critically by citizens and journalists alike.

Although the opening-up of the government ruled media market has been ongoing since 1989, citizens still associate media with control by the government. This is reflected in data from the annual survey on "Democracy in Jordan", in 2008, by the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS), in which respondents were asked to identify which institutions "absolutely cannot criticize the government". Among the institutions mentioned, the media – including the Internet – received the highest score (71 per cent) revealing a deep distrust towards the independence of media.

Table 1: Public perception of Jordanian institutions unable to criticize the government

| <i>Institutions</i> | <i>Percentage of Public Perception</i> |
|--|--|
| Demonstrations, sit-ins and protests | 69 |
| Meetings, seminars and lectures | 68 |
| Media outlets including the Internet | 71 |
| Petitions and letters | 70 |
| With family, relatives and tribe members | 56 |
| With friends, acquaintances and colleagues | 57 |

Source: CSS 2008

In an updated survey on democracy in Jordan, high media distrust was underlined again with only 21 per cent of the respondents saying they were not afraid to voice criticism of the government through the media including Internet (CSS 2010).

Another indicator for this interpretation is the lack of credibility for the government TV monopoly of Jordan Television (JTV), which becomes apparent in the context of those topics where JTV has to deal with tough competition as demonstrated by data on trust in broadcasting news (CSS 2008). JTV is only perceived more credible in local political news (38 per cent), in which it holds the monopoly. Whereas in Arab political and international political news, in which it faces competition from the two top Pan-Arab Satellite stations Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, JTV receives only 11 per cent respectively 9 per cent of trust.

Table 2: Trustworthiness of TV stations in Jordan

| <i>Kind of Topic</i> | <i>Rank 1</i> | <i>Rank 2</i> | <i>Rank 3</i> |
|------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Local political news | JTV (38%) | Al-Jazeera (18%) | Al-Arabiya (3%) |
| Arab political news | Al-Jazeera (59%) | JTV (11%) | Al-Arabiya (10%) |
| International political news | Al-Jazeera (60%) | Al-Arabiya (10%) | JTV (9%) |

Source: CSS 2010

The low degree of satisfaction with JTV is also mirrored in a survey of journalists by the Al-Quds Center in 2009. Only 6 per cent of journalists are satisfied with the performance of the local television station, i.e. JTV. Generally, Jordanian journalists perceive private media in Jordan as being more professional (73 per cent) than their public counterparts (53 per cent), i.e. JTV, many radio stations, and two major daily newspapers, giving more evidence of the distrust in governmental media.

Concerning the relationship between online and offline media Rouman Haddad, columnist in the newspapers Al-Ghad and Al-Rai assumes: “Jordanians trust in print press is still higher than in the news websites”;⁸ although he admits that there are no polls on credibility available. Daoud Kuttab, an outspoken Internet enthusiast, predicts a further diminishing trust in newspapers vis-à-vis news websites after their coverage of a violent football match in Amman on December 15, 2010 (see Case 2).

The only data that we can draw on stem from the Jordan Media Survey (JMS-I 2010), in which news website users were asked for their reasons for consulting news websites. The data show that beside the reason of timeliness, credibility of news (57 per cent) and the perception that “news websites publish news that daily newspapers don’t publish” (66 per cent) are the main reasons for reading news websites. Yet, credibility of news has been declining rapidly from 76 per cent in 2009 to only 57 per cent in 2010.

Table 3: Reasons for users accessing news websites in Jordan, as percentages of Internet users

| <i>Reasons for Using news websites (multiple answers)</i> | <i>2010</i> | <i>2009</i> |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| Timeliness | 67% | 84% |
| Credibility of the news | 57% | 76% |
| News daily papers don't publish | 66% | 56% |
| Opportunity to comment and interact | 44% | 41% |
| News not subject to censorship | 38% | 33% |

Source: JMS-I 2010

For the comparison between off and online media, a journalists’ survey by the Al-Quds Center (2009) points to a slightly different direction with those satisfied with the performance of news websites (22 per cent), daily newspapers follow with (21 per cent), radio (11 per cent), weekly newspapers (8 per cent) and JTV (6 per cent). Only the official news agency Petra (24 per cent) received a higher satisfaction score than the news websites.

⁸ Interview with Rouman Haddad, 23.10.2010

Table 4: Satisfaction with Jordanian media outlets among Jordanian journalists

| <i>Jordanian Media and Press Institutions</i> | <i>Degree of Satisfaction (%) with Performance</i> |
|---|--|
| Petra | 24 |
| News Websites | 22 |
| Daily Newspapers | 21 |
| Radio | 11 |
| Weekly newspapers | 8 |
| JTV | 6 |
| Partisan Press | 3 |

Source: Al-Quds Center 2009

Ironically, many accountability instruments – that might increase trust in media – are still ‘under the patronage’ of the regime, which directly contradicts the concept of self-regulation. For example, the Higher Media Council’s Freedoms Committee, as part of a basically governmental institution that was abolished in 2009, was not a genuine ombuds committee due to the by-laws restricting its activities. The JPA’s code of ethics is mentioned in the Press and Publications Law as having the force of law and indeed other laws form the bases for every article in the code. As a consequence, these media accountability instruments have limited force in terms of strengthening the independence (and freedom) of journalism in Jordan. Instead, they reveal a deep distrust by the regime of journalists and their ability to be self-accountable. The legal mandate of some media accountability instruments and calls for ‘responsible freedom’ by the regime discredit the whole idea of media accountability as another means of regime control (Hawatmeh / Pies 2011).

Another problem of media accountability instruments such as the code of ethics and the ombuds committees of the JPA is that they follow a defensive strategy towards the regime. They mainly have the purpose of preventing journalists from being sued. Other forms of accountability like newsroom codes of ethics aim at giving orientation to journalists and legitimizing newsroom decisions – more often in the context of the regime than the public (Hawatmeh / Pies 2011).

From the current situation we can conclude that instruments of media accountability, which aim at limiting the regime’s interference in the media field, will most likely not be fully developed without involving the regime in establishing them. Instead, the Internet might be the only chance of practicing citizen and media based accountability and thus shifting the focus of media accountability from a defensive strategy towards the regime to an offensive strategy towards the public.

1.3 Internet User Culture

When Queen Elizabeth II joined Facebook in November 2010 the yellow press speculated about the advice Queen Rania of Jordan, an expert user of social media, would give her. The Jordanian queen not only has had a Facebook profile for several years but also uses Twitter and YouTube to spread her royal visions, as if it was normal for every Jordanian to follow her on these channels.

Although statistics underline the importance of social media services like Facebook, YouTube etc. among Jordanian Internet users, the actual number of people using the Internet is still limited. Statistics vary a lot as in some cases they underlay development indices and thus, are used for political purposes. Furthermore, the statistics for Internet usage differ according to data collector, JMS-I or the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), because of methodological differences, e.g. including or excluding Internet use in Internet cafés. In 2010, the JMS-I (2010) found that 40 per cent of the Jordanian population uses the Internet, but only 42 per cent of this proportion are daily users, which varies to ITU's World Telecommunication and ICT indicators data base of only 27.2 per cent of the population using the Internet in 2010. Although the statistics infer a constant increase in Internet users as percentages of population, 20 per cent in 2007 (ITU); 26 per cent in 2008 (ITU); 36% in 2009 (JMS-I), the totals are still low compared to European countries. In comparison to other Middle East countries, Jordan's Internet usage lies between the top ranks of the Gulf States and the bottom ranks of Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Palestine.⁹

Even though the government is successfully running initiatives to widen Internet use and to even push Jordan to become the IT hub of the Middle East (cf. UN 2009), a number of reasons still limit these efforts: One is definitely the gap between Amman and the rest of Jordan: 47 per cent of Jordanian Internet users live in Amman, another 30 per cent in the second and third biggest cities Zarqa and Irbid, which means only 23 per cent of the Internet users come from the rest of Jordan – mainly rural areas. This is primarily because technical developments such as wireless Internet access or fixed telephone lines have yet to expand beyond these major urban areas. Another reason is the low GDP per capita, a generally weak economic situation of many Jordanians and the high rate of computer illiteracy (cf. UN 2009).

As Queen Rania probably knows about these facts she addresses mainly young people through her various Internet channels. Among the youth, Internet use is more common than among older people: 61 per cent of all Internet users in Jordan are younger than 30 years. But especially the group between 30 and 50 years are starting to catch up: in 2009, only 26 per cent

⁹ According to data for 2009 by Internetworldstats.com <http://www.middleeastdirectory.com/int-usage.htm> [2010/12/07].

of Internet users were between 30 and 50, whereas in 2010 they make up already 34 per cent (JMS-I 2010).

Table 5: Age groups as proportions of Jordanian Internet users

| <i>Age</i> | <i>2010</i> | <i>2009</i> |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 15-19 years | 27% | 34% |
| 20-24 years | 21% | 21% |
| 25-29 years | 13% | 12% |
| 30-39 years | 22% | 17% |
| 40-49 years | 12% | 9% |
| 50 years and more | 5% | 13% |

Source: JMS-I 2010

The culture of using the Internet at Internet cafés is one reason why Internet use among young people is so high. Internet cafés are relatively cheap and visiting them has become a daily life social activity for many young people (cf. Wheeler 2006, Braune 2008). For a long time, one of the myths of Internet held that Jordan holds the World record of Internet café density with one street in Irbid having more than 130 Internet cafés (Openarab.Net 2004). Statistics from 2002 indicate that Jordan had a total of 500 Internet cafés (Wheeler 2006: 8). While the Internet home users are rising (40 per cent in 2009, 49 per cent in 2010) Internet cafés, the second most used place for Internet activities, are losing importance (35 per cent in 2009, 25 per cent in 2010) (JMS-I 2010).

Culture of Internet Communication

Abdulla (2007: 144) concludes from a study on Internet use among Arab students in Egypt that

“Social interaction [...] scored the lowest means across the Arab sample. This might be due to the more conservative nature of the Arab culture when compared to its Western counterpart. Meeting “strangers” through media is also very new to the Arab world, where other more traditional media such as the telephone or print media are not used for purposes of meeting new people.”

Data on social networking media in Jordan give evidence for the contrary. In August 2010, Internet worldstats counted over one million (1,061,080) Facebook users in Jordan (Internetworldstats.com), Facebook itself mentions 990,160 users in October 2010 for Jordan (facebakers.com). This is approximately 16 per cent of the Jordanian population and thus comparable to the penetration of Facebook in Germany (16.6 per cent in November 2010). The number of Twitter users is much lower with 445 in 2009 according to SpotOnPR¹⁰. Nevertheless, the proportion of people using any social network is about 23 per cent (JMS 2010), which is

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

more than half of those who use the Internet. The following social networking activities are mentioned among the most popular:

Table 6: Proportion of Jordanians using different social networking websites

| <i>Social networking website</i> | <i>%</i> |
|----------------------------------|----------|
| E-Mail | 18% |
| Chat (Yahoo, MSN etc.) | 15% |
| Facebook | 11% |
| Social forums | 7% |
| Tagged | 6% |
| Islamic Forums | 5% |
| MySpace | 5% |
| Blogs | 4% |
| Hi5 | 2% |
| Twitter | 2% |
| Linkedin | 0.4% |
| Others | 0.3% |

Source: JMS-I 2010

Commenting and interacting are not the primary reasons for visiting news websites. Nevertheless, the percentage of Internet users who say they visit them for those reasons is still high at 44 per cent (JMS-I 2010). According to a newly introduced variable in the CSS Democracy Poll 2010, 12 per cent of the Jordanians use the Internet to express their political views, 21 per cent to know about political activities in Jordan and 19 per cent to know about counter political viewpoints (CSS 2010).

In addition, observations on news websites and online newspapers show that commenting on news is very common, which the interviewees in our sample emphasized. Basel Okour, publisher and managing editor of Ammonnews, says: “We receive between three to five thousand varied comments by readers on a daily basis [and] we have six journalists solely dedicated to dealing with comments” (Basel Okour, 13.11.2010). While in traditional print media, the “readers’ comment” section was an insignificant part of the newspaper, news websites caused a clear shift in media user culture and established a characteristic feature of news media in the Internet age in Jordan (cf. Hawatmeh / Pies 2011). A very recent accountability relevant case – which will be referred to later again – shows how a specific issue causes high involvement by news readers:

Case 2: Football Match

On December 13, 2010 Ammonnews displayed an article by a prominent columnist, Tareq Masarweh from Al-Rai, who comments on riots following a football match between the two main contender clubs Al-Faisali (mostly Jordanians) and Al-Wihdat (representing Jordanians of Palestinian origins). The writer criticizes the way Al-Arabia and Al-Jazeera covered the incident and spinned it to maladies inflicting Jordan's society and political system.* The reprint of the article had already evoked more than 200 comments by 6pm on the day of publication. It was followed on Ammonnews by an opinion piece by one of Ammonnews' columnists** and news about a Facebook group which calls for the closure of Al-Jazeera bureau in Amman.***

On Al-Jazeera's website an article about the football match provoked more than 150 comments, a lot of which were from Jordan. Jordanian bloggers like Osama Romoh, news websites like Khaberni.com and the citizen website 7iber.com took up the case and criticized either Al-Jazeera's coverage or the Jordanian media's behavior.****

It is noteworthy that this case reveals more interesting insights into how media accountability in Jordan works and how the Internet contributes to it:

Wide spread media critique is more often to be found when it blames Al-Jazeera. The relationship between the most well known Arabic satellite station and the Hashemite Kingdom has been problematic for years. Very roughly summarized, Al-Jazeera is critical of the regime and touches taboos being absolute in Jordanian media, like criticizing the King or – in this particular case – touching upon the societal fracture between Jordanians from the East and West banks of the Jordan River, whereas Jordanians complain about the overall negative image of Jordan created by the channel (cf. Mikhlafla 2006). Therefore, criticism of Al-Jazeera is in line with the regime's position and "safe" to express.

* The piece is available in English on Aljazeera.net English <http://english.aljazeera.net/video/middleeast/2010/12/20101211142020685574.html> and an article on the incident on Al-Jazeera.net Arabic <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/5B30C6D4-F719-45D8-AEDB-76E3D2F17901.htm>, all [20.12.2010]

** <http://ammonnews.net/article.aspx?articleNO=75730> [20.12.2010]

*** <http://ammonnews.net/article.aspx?articleNO=75798> [20.12.2010]

**** Cf. <http://osamaa.com/the-wehdat-and-faisali-war.php>, <http://www.7iber.com/2010/12/عندما-تأعب-الصحافة-خوارفي-اخفاء-الحقا>, or <http://www.khaberni.com/more.asp?ThisID=46380&ThisCat=30&writerid=1039>, all [20.12.2010].

1.4 Professionalism in Journalism

A debate about the professionalization of journalism in Jordan has been on-going since the 1980s. Since the regime imposed martial law in 1957, the regime has found it convenient to argue that it has to be tough with the country's journalists – not only because of internal as well as external threats to national security but also because the journalists were not sufficiently professional to handle any kind of freedoms granted to them by the regime. Critics could have argued that since the state either owned or controlled most of the media outlets, the regime should have expected journalists to behave and perform more like government employees than independent professionals (cf. Hawatmeh / Pies 2011).

Nowadays, journalists, as well as the regime, widely recognize the need for further professional development, but are still skeptical to some of the developments interrelated with media accountability not imposed by the regime and inclusive of the audience.

The relationship between readers and producers was almost nonexistent before the advent of news websites: no audience research by media outlets or independent research institutions; hardly any voices from the street; low response rates, and mainly protocol news. Only recently has a shift in perspective at the institutional level started: The old elite oriented and Amman centrist perspective has been challenged by media outlets trying to use the concept of localism and user involvement such as AmmanNet. Even though this strategy has been also applied by Jordanian TV stations to compete with their Pan-Arab counterparts, journalists' attitudes are still very skeptical about the ordinary citizen (cf. Nötzold / Pies 2010: 59); an argument represented by columnist Rouman Haddad:

“When the Jordanian is unable to read for sometime, or when a European reads in a year what 28,000 Jordanians read in the same period, the defect is not in the means but in the formula of the Jordanian citizen [but in]the culture of the Jordanian citizen who does not read or embrace a genuine critical mentality. Yes he does have a mentality of complaining, but it is not a mentality of critique. Complaining might divulge the fissures but this can be a matter of bargain on a personal level. Therefore this is not a self critical mentality. We often mix between popular criticism and popular grievance. A critique-based mentality accepts criticism, but someone who complains does not accept self-criticism.” (Rouman Haddad, 23.10.2010)

News websites in Jordan have successfully speeded up the development of citizen involvement (see section Practices Initiated by the Media) which proves Jordanian media users – at least Jordanian Internet users – are interested in interacting even if they might be not interested in media critique.

Parallel to the long lasting lack of taking the readers into account is the absence of awareness for accountability. Media ethics was not a regular subject in institutionalized journalism training until 2006. But during recent years more and more NGOs have been tackling issues of media ethics and organized workshops or conferences like the Centre for Defending the Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ) or the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) (cf. Pies 2008). The newly established Jordan Media Institute and some of the other university institutions now offer courses on media ethics and law, which shall raise awareness of the professional dilemmas of journalists.

A study by Mohammad Abu Arqoub (2010) found out that the majority of Jordanian journalists have seen the code of ethics (87.8 per cent) and more than two third (72.7 per cent) have participated in training workshops relevant to press law and ethics. Despite the fact that most journalists said that they participated in training, most of them expressed clear signs of lack of knowledge towards the code and its relationship with the Press Law. Another striking finding for the acceptance of accountability practices by journalists is the high percentage of journalists (74.1 per cent) who agree with the linkage between the code of ethics and the Press

and Publications Law. They accept a code of ethics with quasi-legal status and indirectly support a strong role of the regime and laws in holding the media accountable. Only 38.8 per cent of the surveyed journalists think that the existing code should be an alternative to the law whereas 47.5 per cent oppose this opinion. The study also showed that journalists with long experience in the profession had much clearer attitudes towards the code of ethics in comparison to some of their younger colleagues (cf. Abu Arqoub 2010).

Despite the fact that journalists seem to ignore the importance of self-responsibility and accountability towards the public, Sawsan Zaidah, director of Eye on the Media, is optimistic in being able to create a culture of accountability among her colleagues – especially from the news websites:

“Yes I [expect the news websites to become more receptive to criticism in the future] due to a couple of factors – first they will get used to it by time; secondly I believe that in general openness to criticism is related to professional maturity. The more mature the more receptive to evaluation and the opposite is true; if one is not open it is because he feels professionally saturated, always right and rejects accountability. This is an all-inclusive principle; not limited to journalism. The second and more important achievement of the program [Eye on the Media] is the fact that Jordanian journalists in particular got used to the idea of becoming accountable. Journalists feel they are immune to criticism given their career's historical closeness to politics and decision makers, sitting on the seat of judgment and holding others accountable. This has built a sense of arrogance and high prestige among journalists when compared to other professions which ultimately generates personal benefits to them. As journalists hold deputies accountable so they are; no one is exempt of accountability!” (Sawsan Zaidah, 27.10.2010)

1.5 Online Journalism Development

The innovative aspect of online journalism in Jordan is well summarised by Rouman Haddad:

“Whether we like it or not the Internet has widened the margin of freedom, and electronic sites enjoy freedom higher than that in the print. They can tackle issues the traditional media cannot; they can test the pulse of the street and delve into the unknown, how the Jordanian citizen thinks.” (Rouman Haddad, 23.10.2010)

Haddad also mentions an example how news websites – in this particular case Ammonnews – have contributed creatively to journalism in Jordan:

“When Queen Rania received medical treatment in USA, the official news was published and was dealt with accordingly [in all media outlets]. It was not discussed nor were external sources of news to what might have happened been sought. The news tackled with utmost caution without inquiring the credibility of those statements. In spite of the rumors we’ve had nothing to rely on except the official news. This connotes that in certain issues the media deals very cautiously with taboos or red lines imposed.¹¹ [In the ensuing period news about Queen Rania’s birthday

¹¹ Many articles in various Jordanian laws concern the way of covering the King and the Royal Family: For example, distributing “false or exaggerated news” about the king and the royal court is punished with no less than one year in prison by the Penal Code’s §132(2) and the same is true for the one (Who) “falsely accused His Majesty of an act or a say or circulated such accusations among the people” (§195(1d)).As a consequence of this, journalists normally never publish any other information than the official news from the Royal Court.

party in Wadi Rum appeared. The official announcement was published on Ammonnews without elaborating on the extravagant and expensive style of the birthday party] The danger in the news on Ammonnews was not in the news per se; but in what ensued a few days later on news about the UK's Queen Elizabeth postponing a bi-annual birthday party costing only 50,000 pound sterling. The Queen decided to call off the event this year in sympathy with the British people who suffer the economic crisis and her feeling that Britons will not positively deal with this celebration which usually breaks monarchic protocols and its cost is not that high (25,000 pound/year; worth a handbag of a beautiful woman in Amman, and nothing to what we heard about in [Wadi] Rum!) Here I think lies Ammonnews' issue; in this very news. News about Queen Rania usually passes on calmly, but [...] usually Ammonnews would precede or follow news about Queen Rania with news on [former] Queen Noor [who is covered much more critically than Queen Rania], or in our case Queen Elisabeth. In other words, it [Ammonnews] somehow frames this concept of comparison without saying anything. Here lies the issue!" (Rouman Haddad, 23.10.2010).

The evaluation of widening the margin of freedom by news websites points again to the emotional relationship towards Internet freedom and is further underlined by the high degree of attention that reports on the status of freedom of speech and press receive. All international and national reports on freedom of the press mentioning Jordan are regularly perceived as news worthy in Jordanian media. Although the matter of media freedom is important, media accountability seems not to be associated with a way of widening or securing media freedom.

This is definitely a field where awareness among media practitioners has to be raised in the future as Sawsan Zaidah emphasizes:

"In a country like Jordan (where media is still restricted with legal and other regulations, be they state-oriented or society-based such as religious or tribal constraints and pressures), the more the media commits errors and mishaps the more it opens up for external forces to intervene. This is exactly what happened with the electronic websites where the government's continuous attempts to enforce restricting regulations was the pretext that websites were not professional, and those accusations were in that case true. So the website gave the government the tool to interfere so that it would allegedly protect people from the media slandering them. So the whole idea of safeguarding self-regulation, which stems out of the media body itself, mitigates against the effects of external restrictions and attempts of interference" (Sawsan Zaidah, 27.10.2010)

At the same time, hopes for freeing the media from state control through media accountability practices should not be raised irresponsibly high. The unsettled history of revising media legislation has never brought up the idea of abolishing media specific laws like the Press and Publications Law (PPL) (cf. Najjar 2008, Kanakriyeh 2010); even though the PPL repeats a lot of regulations that regular laws such as Penal Code or Copy Right Law already cover. Until today, it is not foreseeable that this might change in the near future and give way for a less state regulated or even self-regulated system on a national basis. Apart from that, so called "soft containment" policies like grants, exemptions or donations are still vibrant and would – even without stricter legislation – keep a certain dependency of the media on the regime (cf. Al-Quds Centre 2009) as it is the case with "traditional" forms of media accountability usurped by the regime (cf. Hawatmeh / Pies 2011).

As a consequence, accountability practices will have a chance to develop mainly on individual (e.g. bloggers or journalists) or institutional (e.g. media outlets or initiatives) levels. Furthermore, the Internet becoming a freer space with more citizens being involved will have better chances to contribute to media accountability as the following sections will demonstrate.

2. Practices Initiated by the Media¹²

While conducting our research we telephoned managers of the main online newspapers and news websites to ask about their internal media accountability practices. We had a list of 16 practices, many of which did not appear on most Jordanian websites. After the interviews, three managers of online newspapers asked if they could get the list of practices as they were re-launching their websites in the near future including more transparency features. They were obviously aware of their lack of transparency and looking for new ideas.

This anecdote from our research exemplifies the growing awareness of transparency as part of an editorial strategy to cope with the growing competition on the online news market. But it also points to a relatively unorganised way of building up this strategy as a look at their competitors would have already opened their eyes to many interesting features.

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.

In Jordan, one has to differentiate between news websites and online newspapers as they are running under different jurisdictions. Online newspapers are an integral part of their print outlet and have to consider the Press and Publications Law (PPL) which states, for example, that the names of the proprietor, the chief editor, the manager and the printing house have to be published clearly (Art. 22, PPL). Furthermore, publications are required to disclose their ownership to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, “which makes it accessible to anyone upon

¹² The content of the following sections refer to several research strategies by the Jordanian MediaAcT team. Apart from expert interviews, we analyzed online versions of the five most important daily newspapers in Jordan (Al-Rai, Al-Ghad, Ad-Dustour, Al-Arab Al-Yawm, Jordan Times) as well as the six most used Jordanian news websites according to Jordan Media Survey 2010 (Saraya, Ammonnews, Khaberni, Assawsana, Allofjo, Jordanzad) and one website that was mentioned by several interviewees to be a special case in terms of accountability (AmmanNet). 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.

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.

request” (Global Integrity Report 2009). The PPL also states that the chief editor (who is legally accountable for everything written in the paper) has to know the name of the author of an article and shall not publish an “article for any person under a pseudonym unless its writer has supplied him with his real name” (Art. 30, PPL). Consequently, on all five major online newspapers public information on ownership and by-lines are available whereas only half of the news websites carry the ownership and only two out of seven use by-lines.

Ammonnews’ chief editor Basel Okour explains the reasons behind not publishing company details:

“According to Jordanian law you cannot register a website. Our problem lies not with us but with the state. The Ministry of Industry and Trade and the Press and Publications Department say there is no law for registering an electronic website in Jordan. We went around this obstacle by registering a company, which has the right to manage the advertising part of Ammonnews. [...] This company has nothing to do with the journalistic work of Ammonnews and you cannot say that your work is journalistic given the Press and Publication Law defines what is journalistic. Whereas there is no legal person behind Ammonnews there exist the publishers who can be held accountable whether to deal with complaints or to stand in the courts. We can be held accountable by the public opinion or the officials. We do have court cases and we appear in front of the courts in our natural capacity as editors whose names are published online. So our issue is legal - they either deal with us as with any other company, or as a journalistic entity. We publish our names [and telephone numbers] as editors Samir Hiyari and Basel Okour [...] most of the other website might not do so. We were the first electronic website in Jordan to publicly declare the editors’ names and their telephone numbers.” (Basel Okour, 13.11.2010)

Apart from these “legally encouraged” accountability instruments, Jordanian websites have a lot to offer: Seven out of twelve websites publish a mission statement (Al-Ghad displays it on its website as an anthem), eight of them publish ownership information, two journalists’ profiles and only Ammonnews makes its code of ethics online available.¹⁴ The findings reveal that there is a general need for further accountability practices that can be categorized as “actor transparency” and take place before the production process.

Table 7: Actor transparency in Jordanian online newspapers and news websites

| <i>Practice</i> | <i>Online newspapers (n=5)</i> | <i>News Websites (n=7)</i> |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Published Mission Statement | 2 | 5 |
| Published Code of Ethics | 0 | 1 |
| Profiles of Journalists | 0 | 2 |
| Public information on Company Ownership | 5 | 3 |

¹⁴ AmmanNet has its own code of ethics which was published on their website for a long time, but has currently vanished. Al-Ghad’s online manager announced the future publication of the newspaper’s code of ethics once the re-launch is complete (Lara Ayoub, 13.11.2010)

Nonetheless, three news websites are on the right track: Khaberni, AmmanNet and Ammonnews. While Khaberni presents photos and e-mails of journalists, who exclusively wrote for Khaberni, AmmanNet offers e-mail addresses of high ranking staff only. Ammonnews does not show journalists' profiles at all. All three websites have published a mission statement and public information on ownership although they are not obliged to do so.

Practice 1: Ammonnews' Code of Ethics

Although AmmanNet has a code of ethics and also used to publish it, currently, Ammonnews is the only news website publishing its code of ethics online (<http://ammonnews.net/covenant.aspx>). This code is used as a reference for journalists to defend their decisions and base it on common rules and thus, contributes to being more transparent before the news production.

“These are general rules which we as journalists abide by. [...] If some colleagues differ on a certain issue, we solve it by going back to this only written reference. For example, I was contesting a journalist who published a certain comment. He referred back to the code which has become our apparent point of reference.”
(Basel Okour, 13.11.2010)

Readers can check these rules and refer to it when criticising the website. The chief editor reports that “in the beginning, clicks [on the code of ethics] were very intense but now they have seemingly got used to it but unfortunately it is not on the rise” (Basel Okour, 13.11.2010).

The code of ethics is divided into two parts: one presents rules for journalists the other rules for contributors, like “We refrain from offending religious symbols and religious philosophies in order to protect individual and societal particularities” (Code of Ethics Ammonnews). Whereas some of these rules are highly interpretative, like the one mentioned above, others give clear instructions like the obligation to mention a name, a pseudonym or an e-mail address.

Ammonnews requests from its readers to adhere to these rules when commenting or contributing articles to the website. As comments on news and collaborative work between journalists and readers are distinctive features on Ammonnews and other Jordanian news websites these rules for contributors serve as an important practice of actor transparency even if the actors are not professional journalists.

At the same time, the rules are used to defend editorial decisions about including or rejecting comments and articles. As such, they have to be analyzed as production transparency. In Jordan as well as in other Arab countries, the practice of editing comments or moderating forums is often perceived as another form of self-censorship. Chief Editors in Jordan, for example, can be held legally accountable for comments by their readers, for which reason they look closely at the content of comments.

One example is the case of AmmanNet in 2008: In a phone-in program on Balad Radio – republished on AmmanNet – a listener had disrespectfully commented on the parliament. From the regime's logic, the journalist – who had given the listener a forum – had acted irresponsibly and the channel and website were banned from reporting from the Parliament for a short period. Some regime representatives even called for closing the station, which fortunately did not happen (cf. Pies 2009: 37).

Such cases cause insecurity among journalists about how to handle comments. By implementing rules for contributors, Ammonnews invented an innovative form to support journalists when editing comments. With regard to users, the rules make sure that comments are not selected by individual taste or pure censorship but by written and common rules. Thus, editing of comments has become more transparent through these rules.

“Readers got used to the fact that their comments will not be published if they break the rules. They used to complain, why did you not publish my comment or column? Our upright response is that you had violated the code, so they take it for granted that their unpublished comments were trespassing and not in compliance with the code” (Basel Okour, 13.11.2010).

Nevertheless, commentators complain about Ammonnews’ one-sidedness in terms of selecting comments every now and then as was the case with the re-publication of a critical piece on Al-Jazeera’s coverage of a Jordanian football match (see Case 2).^{*} Comment No. 31 directly assails Ammonnews’ comments policy:

“the problem is that Ammonnews and others will not publish any comments outside of the permissible general framework’ whether by government or the website directors, thereby preventing several readers from deliberating the writer and clarifying a counter viewpoint, and all this due to ‘a concealed objective in Jacob”.

Interestingly, allowing the commentators’ critique of Ammonnews on its websites disproves the content of this comment. Other comments critical of the website appeared: Comment #46 says, for example: “I blame Ammonnews for publishing such a bad article and I blame Al-Rai for allowing such pens”.

Similar comments were posted while comment No. 54 states:

“First of all Mr. Masarweh [author of Al-Rai article], the Jordanian media was totally absent from the event; secondly, before you assault satellite stations we should reform our weak and non-fact-and-knowledge-based media; thirdly, the president of Al-Wihdat Club used his authorities and responsibilities to seize the club’s activities following the calamity which took place in the stadium; fourthly Mr. Masarweh, why didn’t you say the truth without hypocrisy especially after the footage by satellite stations and some amateurs proved that the extremist and hateful riot police cracked down by beating and kicking the crowd”

Websites have been active in establishing a culture of responsiveness (see section Responsiveness). By introducing some kind of transparency through its published rules of editing comments, Ammonnews has integrated its internal media accountability practices into this culture. Even if comments in accord with the rules might be prohibited from time to time, Ammonnews pioneers in holding its website accountable including citizens’ contributions. Ironically, Ammonnews’ relatively high transparency does not automatically increase the site’s popularity. Sarayanews, which lacks many of the compared transparency instruments, is according to Alexa and JMS-I 2010 the most visited Jordanian news website. Sawsan Zaidah thinks that this is due to

“Saraya started early as well and reserved a good slice of the audience cake. They are good in scoops, they concentrate on crimes with news value, they also focus on controversial local political issues and disputes among politicians. They know what appeals to the public – excitement but credible news from credible sources” (Sawsan Zaidah, 19.12.2010).

^{*} Here, you find all comments listed below the Ammonnews article <http://ammonnews.net/article.aspx?articleNO=75626> [20.12.2010]

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.

Production Transparency in Jordanian online newspapers and news websites is not as well advanced as the other categories. While all online newspapers mention the authors' names only Ammonnews and AmmanNet use this practice regularly among the news websites. This discrepancy can be explained by the "legal encouragement" for online newspapers mentioned above. Obviously, news websites have not yet taken over the professional logic of traditional print media journalism, which might be a reason for the lack of credibility of news websites.

Rouman Haddad, expert on media accountability and publisher of a newly established news website HKJToday.com, refers to a particular case being a common practice within the highly competitive market of Jordanian news websites:

"I want to allude to the infringement of copyrights in Internet in Jordan, and it is rampant. A website with high traffic might steal a news on another less popular website and assume its reference. This is being done without the Internet users discovering or discussing the case. And here, I refer to a news on my website about a candidate [for the parliamentary elections] secretly backed by the US ambassador. This scoop appeared first on my website which is not widely read by users, but this does not mean other website owners do not read it. So this news was being quoted and published on two websites, namely jafranews and allofjo.net. It is still in their archive without reference to my website - HKJtoday.com" (Rouman Haddad, 23.10.2010).

This practice becomes even more problematic in terms of accountability when analysing other practices of production transparency. Only three news websites use precise references in their stories and not a single website (neither news websites nor online newspapers) uses links. While Ammonnews and AmmanNet pioneered the former practice, they interestingly do not use links. Basel Okour, chief editor of Ammonnews gives an explanation:

"We have a technical problem with links. This was present in the past but it was a loophole in the database. These loopholes allow for a dodge in the script wherefrom hackers can infiltrate, and Ammonnews is one of the targeted websites for those who want to prove their ability to break in. These attempts happen on almost daily basis. So we are afraid that one of those links be penetrated and through it they can penetrate our site. So we have this technical sensitivity as our colleagues had clarified to us. We have no such problem but we are worried about this technical issue" (Basel Okour, 13.11.2010).

Fear of being hacked might come from being highly sensitive towards the regime – perceived as cracking-down on news websites regularly – and towards the competitors in the field and towards Israel, which many journalists perceive as being willing to infiltrate Jordanian news media.

A competitive market is also stated as the reason why blogs on news production have not yet appeared. The same is true for collaborative story writing with citizens which is practiced by

many news websites in various forms but is not made transparent to the public. Stories developing on citizens' complaints do not necessarily mention where the idea for the news came from and thus downplay the importance of citizens for the news production. That is why strategies for collaborative story writing exist, but do not foster production transparency. What one chief editor of a news website admits is true for many: "Most of the exclusive scoops [...] originate from citizens and this is an in-house secret I divulge to you herewith" (Mohammad Omar, 26.10.2010).

While online newspapers do not use collaborative story writing at all (or at least not visibly), on some news websites it is difficult to distinguish between content produced by readers and editorial content as news websites publish their website's name as the source. On *allofo.net* for example, contributions by readers in the section "News from the People" are often presented in the way of "Allfojo - Mr. XY reported to us that ..." ¹⁵. Yet, in the section "Backstage" where news from informal people or settings such as political Saloons are being proceeded, *allofo.net* regularly mentions sources of photos or information as being from citizens. ¹⁶ This practice helps to make the production process a little more transparent. *Ammounnews* in contrast to most other news websites clearly indicates the readers' articles through naming the section "Ammounians" ¹⁷.

Table 8: Production transparency in Jordanian online newspapers and news websites

| Practice | Online newspapers (n=5) | News websites (n=7) |
|--|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Authorship stated for each story | 5 | 2 |
| Precise reference | 5 | 3 |
| Links to sources in stories | 0 | 0 |
| Journalists' personal blogs discussing production | 0 | 0 |
| Strategy for collaborative story / writing with citizens | 0 | 7 |

2.3 Responsiveness

Responsiveness denotes news organizations' reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance. Entering the most popular news website in Jordan - *Sarayanews* - opens your eyes for one of the most striking media accountability practices in Jordanian news websites: Only three out of eleven sub-pages are pure editorial content, the main

¹⁵ (http://www.allofo.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=48&Itemid=248) [20.12.2010]

¹⁶ http://www.allofo.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=40&Itemid=249 [20.12.2010]

¹⁷ <http://ammonnews.net/Details.aspx?sectionID=41> [20.12.2010]

page, Jordanian news and Politics. All the others involve the readers in one way or another: sections that provide forms for writing and sending articles and news, sections where readers can post complaints (“Complaints” and “I want a solution”¹⁸) or a section where you just congratulate friends and relatives for birthday, weddings etc. (Occasions). Furthermore, readers can comment on each article and see the comments below the original piece of work.

Saryanews is just one example of the importance of interactivity in the Jordanian Internet news market, which might be a strategic position to create a unique selling point, as Lara Ayoub online manager of Al-Ghad online explains:

“Audiences can help us to reach out for more audiences through social networks like Facebook when republishing our content on their Facebook profiles” (Lara Ayoub in an interview with 7iber.com).

Or it might stem from an idealistic viewpoint towards the Internet that it causes more citizens’ involvement and therefore, is a tool for social interaction. Irrelevant for whatever reason, Internet activity has become an element of most news websites in Jordan and definitely is a contribution to internal media accountability under the label of “responsiveness”. In this category Jordanian websites are most innovative and well advanced. News websites are pioneering in the field and ideas are diffusing into online newspapers. Still, our analysis shows a clear distinction between online newspapers and news websites. While all news websites have a strategy for collaborative story writing and offer comments features in news, none of the online newspapers practices – at least openly – the former. The latter is practiced by four online newspapers. Noticeable differences also appear in using Facebook. Only 3 online newspapers compared to 6 news websites have Facebook profiles. Twitter accounts show minor differences between the two online news categories, 3 online newspapers and 5 news websites have accounts, and the practice of publishing polls is more often applied by online newspapers (5) than by news websites (4).

Table 9: Responsive practices in Jordanian online newspapers and news websites

| <i>Practice</i> | <i>Online newspapers (n=5)</i> | <i>News websites (n=7)</i> |
|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Strategy for collaborative story writing with citizens | 0 | 7 |
| Comments in news | 4 | 7 |
| Button to report errors | 0 | 0 |
| Polls | 5 | 4 |
| Twitter account | 3 | 5 |
| Facebook account | 3 | 6 |

¹⁸ “I want solutions” contains readers’ problems posed for other readers to comment on or suggest solutions for, like one guy is fed up with his mother-in-law. Response rates count from 100 to over 1000 comments on each problem, which is more than on any breaking news.

In order to explain the data, we will elaborate on the different practices showing their innovative aspects and how they relate to media accountability.

Comments in news and reporting errors

As became apparent already above, online newspapers focus more on editorial content while news websites strongly involve readers. Although all online newspapers have a “send a news button” it is not visible what happens to news sent in. There are neither dedicated sections for citizens’ news nor openly accessible sections where incoming comments and news are published, like the complaints sections on news websites. In 3 of the 5 online newspapers readers may technically comment on every article, but commenting does not seem to be as commonplace as with the news websites because the number of visible comments is much lower than at the news websites. The only online newspaper that frequently shows comments under their articles is Ad-Dustour. In Al-Arab Al-Yawm, comments can be found mainly on the columnist pieces but not on the daily editorial content. Al-Rai and Jordan Times do not even allow comments on single articles. Al-Ghad has the technical conditions for commenting on each article but comments are published very rarely. Yet, they receive and publish some comments on articles on their Facebook profile.

Still, these observations do not tell us if comments are not made by the users or not published by the news rooms. Rouman Haddad, who has been a columnist in several daily news papers, concludes from his experience that some online newspapers have the policy not to comment on readers and leave interaction to the level of replies to letters-of-the-editor, direct inquiries, or corrections of errors and not to reply on readers’ comments (Rouman Haddad, 15.12.2010).

In contrast to the online newspapers, all news websites receive comments on their articles and publish them online. While the number of comments differs between the various online news outlets and between topic and style of articles, the nature of comments is quite similar to the Chief Editor of Ammounnews, Basel Okour’s, description:

“We receive [...] some comments on the text wording, the content, erroneous grammar, inappropriateness between news and photo, unsuitable title, absence of some of the news elements from its content, while others would comment on the content and deliberate the idea or hinting to similar or related ideas.” (Basel Okour, 13.11.2010)

Websites deal differently with the various kinds of comments. In some news websites, chief editors take over the responsibility to answer to comments. At Ammonnews, six journalists are solely dedicated to proceeding and filtering comments:

“Slander is deleted, other comments related to the news itself and the writer are forwarded to the editorial management to revise the subject issue. [...] If it’s a grammatical error we correct it at once, if it is an absent element we deal with it, if unprofessional title we rewrite. Regarding formality or grammatical errors they reply “thank you and we’ve corrected the error”, other comments related to composition or

bias are referred to the editorial management who looks into it or ask another journalist to rewrite it.” (Basel Okour, 13.11.2010)

A contradiction in this practice is that although the readers hold the news media accountable through their comments and corrections, this accountability practice is not made transparent when the newsroom refers to commentators personally via e-mail or telephone instead of publically addressing the issues on the website. This is even more of a contradiction, as corrections or changes in articles cannot be followed by readers.

Anyhow, commenting and receiving feedback has been a new experience for readers and producers alike since reading news online has become more common in Jordan. Statements from both sides underline the importance of commenting for establishing a culture of responsiveness.

Lara Ayoub relates that journalists have learnt how to deal with critiques and how to deal with the readers after decades of one-way communication:

“At the beginning we didn't know how to deal criticism or how to prevent fireback, and then you realize that the more you accept readers' comments and look into them in a transparent way it calms their anger down and you can communicate better with them. So accepting their comments even on a private or public level, can harbour like marriages' criticism in a better way.” (Lara Ayoub, 13.11.2010)

Still some of the old “journalistic elite” thinking emerges when she explains how journalists are trying to direct the way of critique by readers:

“There is a thin line of what can be published and what cannot in the same context of the meaning, and it could mean the same thing, but if you say it in a proper respect it will go online, but if you go beyond the lines of respect it will not go online because we are trying to educate our readers to speak in a mannered way and to criticize in a mannered way. [Al-Ghad replies back saying] “sorry we cannot publish the content because if you want to say what you are saying you have to rephrase it in a proper way; this way it is being disrespectful, you are not respecting other ends or the person. They could talk about the journalist and can be very rude, and this was the problem at the beginning. Now they [the readers] are much better [and] they try again. We post it and they see it. But they are candid with them; we know them.” (Lara Ayoub, 13.11.2010)

But readers also make clear that they are not willing to accept rejections of their critique and comments by the newsroom staff as for the case of AmmanNet’s listeners’ club:

“I relay my comments on certain errors to the program presenters. I estimate their responsiveness at 80-90 per cent. In case the presenter does not heed our remarks we register this in our meetings' agenda for further recommendations for amendment or improvement.” (Mohammad Abdallah, 3.11.2010)

It is much easier for news outlets if they can refer to publicly accessible rules like Ammonnews’ code of ethics when rejecting comments. If the procedure of handling comments is not transparent to the readers at one point they might be “educated” but disappointed to be – again – excluded from the production of news up to now considered to be a great credit of news websites:

“We are open-minded with all the readers’ comment related to the content of the news which by return enhances their confidence that they are an integral partner of news making. Lately while covering the parliamentary elections we received comments on some official statements especially those portraying the election process as fair and positive, so tens of comments were reporting on acts of violence, riots and objections by citizens from different places. In addition to reports on inaccurate official statements on the process which we verify on the spot and publish counter reports on these objections as we follow up with the citizen-reporter by email or phone with reference this new source to information.” (Basel Okour, 13.11.2010)

Strategy for collaborative story writing

The use of comments for further investigations by newsrooms leads to another practice of transparency referred to as strategy for collaborative story writing. The gap between online newspapers and news websites is even bigger within this field. None of the online newspapers has sections publishing user generated content even though al-Ghad claims that it uses readers’ comments for further story writing (Lara Ayoub, 13.11.2010). But this is meant in a way different to how news websites deal with it. “Reader generated” as Lara Ayoub interprets it is all feedback - be it directly or indirectly – giving orientation on what readers want to read:

“the readers’-generated content is a whole world in its own that we analyse. We read it we go through the detail of the detail, we see what consensus in terms of new content, we take it as an indication that we should talk about this, we send people to ask about this content, so we tell the correspondent to come up with an article regarding this” (Lara Ayoub, 13.11.2010).

The way news websites – Jordanian as well as Pan-Arab – proceed with this kind of reader generated content is well described by Mohammad Omar, chief editor of the Pan-Arab news website Al-Bawaba.com, situated in Amman.

“The news about assassinating General Mohammad Sleiman (Syrian) came from several citizens from inside Syria with whom we interacted and followed up the news including his funeral etc., through social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. [...] there are several tools especially in the new media. When for example a witness living in the area where the assassination of Mohammad Sleiman took place, then you hear from others living in the same neighborhood who describe the arrangements for the funeral or of his own relatives. You can check the validity of the news if you combine the concept of citizen-journalism and the public as source of information. You start to feel there exist a tumult in the Dreikish area where the diseased general lived associated with several Facebook(ers) describing the funeral arrangements. This is similar to what we call the „crowd sourcing“. When tens of people start describing what they see – funeral arrangements, paving of streets, officials started appearing – you recognize something has happened. Or, neighbors in that area started tweeting or [putting messages on] Facebook. You start cross-cutting these information. You may also ask the officials. In one case we tried to get information from them but without avail so we did not publish the report because we failed to verify it with sources due to the lack of social networking at that time.” (Mohammad Omar, 26.10.2010)

Nonetheless, the way of presenting user generated content varies a lot from one news website to another. Many have a section called “Complaints by citizens” or similar, in which citizens can publish all kinds of complaints. Some publish such complaints with the contributors’ names, others like Allofjo do not mention the names but publish them as an editorial piece stating “Mr.

so and so called us saying ...” (Allofjo.com: “News from the people” section¹⁹). Jordanzad has established a section called “letters to responsible persons”. Here, citizens can address their complaints directly to the responsible persons and the websites tries to receive a reply by those officials to integrates both into an article (jordanzad.com, “letters to responsible persons”)²⁰ This way of interacting with citizens as well as politicians had been successfully established by one of the most popular radio programs in Jordan, “bisaraha” (‘in all frankness’) on Fann FM, which was closed down recently.

Polls and evaluation of articles

Evaluation practices are often associated with economic strategies. Yet, they are also a form of responsiveness which has become more interactive through means of the Internet. In traditional Jordanian media, there were not any tools available measuring the popularity of certain topics, articles or the media outlet as a whole. Media data, as they exist for most Western media outlets, either do not exist or are not publically available. If media outlets commission a survey, it is normally only for internal use. So, published results of the daily or weekly poll on online newspapers and news websites were a first indicator for readers, what they as a group like or dislike.

“Content before there was interactivity online was never measured if it is popular or not. It was just something that was placed online that’s where it is ended. The minute we started allowing users to read our content and comment on it, [...] we were able to measure our content in a different way. Which is the most popular? Which is not popular? Which content should be added more to? Some articles we do not think they are popular but the readers say this subject is. We should put more into it and say journalists that he’s on the most read. They can help us to improve our content, improve our innovativeness [...]. When you realize that some content don’t work for you, you have to act upon it, improve it, make it more analytical, add better photos, use better headlines, engage the reader more. He is our guideline to improving our content.” (Lara Ayoub, 13.11.2010)

Whereas polls (available on all online newspapers and 4 news websites) mostly refer to political issues – and therefore shed light on political trends that otherwise would not be available due to a lack of public opinion polls – other instruments of measuring popularity directly shed light on the work of the media outlet. For example Al-Arab Al-Yawm publishes the “most read articles” on its homepage. On many websites you can evaluate articles by giving stars (1-5) to show your satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Facebook has given media outlets another way of evaluating their popularity. By deciding to “like” the website or the article, users show others and the media outlet their personal taste. Even if it is not yet possible to count those who distribute articles

¹⁹ http://www.allofjo.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=48&Itemid=248 [20.12.2010].

²⁰ http://www.jordanzad.com/jor/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=2&id=8 [20.12.2010].

from the news outlets through Facebook or Twitter, users get the chance to respond to articles in a more personal but still visible way.

Facebook and Twitter accounts

Although Twitter is not as popular as Facebook in Jordan, 3 online newspapers and 5 news websites have Twitter accounts which comprise just one less than Facebook (3 online newspapers, 6 news websites). None of our experts referred to Twitter as practice of accountability or transparency. Yet, Facebook seems to be playing a more important role, mainly as a way of evaluating news websites and articles and distributing news.

In some cases users comment more on the Facebook site as on the website itself, like in al-Ghad and sometimes use the opportunity to post their own content like photos:

“They paste photos on our [Facebook] web page; our friends post their content on our page and sometimes the content is not for our favor. Sometimes they put things shallow or silly or irrelevant, but I think in terms of visibility and credibility they like it. The whole purpose of these social media networks is to allow for you to interact with your local media and these networks are sometimes very liberal. You can’t stop them, like this is not true, you are exaggerating, you’re not being truthful. They say it but we do not remove or delete it.” (Lara Ayoub, 13.11.2010)

Another much more striking example on how to use Facebook to hold the media accountable is a Facebook group against Al-Jazeera’s coverage of Jordan. It became visible after the controversial Al-Jazeera piece on the football match (see Case 2). “Branches” of this group also exist in other Arab countries and therefore might become some kind of Pan-Arab accountability practice. In Tunisia for example, pro and anti Al-Jazeera groups have formed. In Morocco, there is also an “Al-Jazeera Transparency” account but only one person likes it! All in all, it seems that these groups are rather ad hoc groups and not very visible.

Practice 2: AmmanNet’s institutionalised citizen involvement

While the practices described above are characterized by more or less loose boundaries between news room staff and its’ readers, AmmanNet has institutionalised its way of interacting and collaborating with citizens in the news production.

AmmanNet hosted the first Internet radio in Jordan in 2000 and expanded to an FM radio station five years later. Today, AmmanNet is part of the Community Media Network (CMN), an NGO which runs AmmanNet website, Balad Radio off and online and several other projects like “Eye on the Media” (see Practice 3). Despite AmmanNet and Radio Balad (on and offline) having their own URLs, re-using the content is common and editorial staff as well as the Listeners’ Club work for both. That is why we deal with it as a cross media outlet and refer to it as AmmanNet, as our interviewees did as well.

As community media, the goal of AmmanNet is to focus on community issues of Amman and to involve the citizens as much as possible in producing the content of the website. The heart of citizens’ involvement is the so-called Listeners’ Club, which consists of approximately 200 members who gather in a general assembly once a year, which is organised and administered by a committee of 15 members whose General Secretary is Mohammad Abdallah. Mohammad Abu Safieh is chairman and acts as a kind of ombudsman between the Listeners’ Club and the newsroom staff. From the newsroom’s side, Mohammad Abu Arqoub acts as a Liaison Officer and is the contact person for the Listeners’ Club.

The main activities of the club are:

1. Supervising AmmanNet through presenting the Club's vision to the radio officials

"We are governed by the club's by-laws, which do not stipulate accountability measures against journalists except in case of infringement, in which case we write a report. It only happened once when we objected to a cynical program, which included an offense, so we recommended this program be stopped and they did."
(Mohammad Abdallah, 3.11.2010)

2. Creating awareness among people about the radio and urge them to convey their issues on air

"We have the station logo on our vehicles so people ask us about it." (Mohammad Abu Safieh, 3.11.2010)

3. Contacting the staff with ideas on how to develop the programme based on the pulse of the street

"We several times suggested new programs or to amend existing programs based on the choice of many listeners and more often than not the station would agree with them. Many citizens would ask us to carry out on-the-field visits to be on top of what goes on, and we do it. As per our internal by-laws we have the right to visit sites to verify news and relay our findings over to the station." (Mohammad Abdallah, 3.11.2010)

Apart from these activities, the involvement of citizen members of the Listeners' Club opens the way for:

4. Shedding light on topics and areas not touched by the main-stream media

There are several programmes on AmmanNet that deal with refugees like "Laji'un" and the mostly poor and neglected East Amman like "Shabab Amman". The youth is of vibrant interest to the media outlet and can be easily included through citizen reporters as an example from Mohammad Abdallah underlines:

"I was on my way to Madaba with a friend when I saw an event at Petra University so I called the station and some university students and asked them to take photos of a sit-in by students defying a regulation to raise the transportation fees. Students sent the information and the photos via their cell phones and on to the studio. We wouldn't have sent the news had it not been there and through witnesses."
(Mohammad Abdallah, 3.11.2010)

Mohammad's anecdote mentions that citizens are active in investigating and bringing up topics which is supported by the by-laws of the Club that make sure citizens can visit sites to verify information.

"We sometimes receive inquiries by the station reporters and presenters who ask for details about a certain issue. We interact with them as we save all their phone numbers. They would only broadcast or download the news after we have corroborated it and from sites some of which are not easily accessible."
(Mohammad Abu Safieh, 3.11.2010)

During the elections in November 2010, members of the Listeners Club went to different electoral directorates when events took place at the same time. So, they contributed to a more in-depth coverage of the election as AmmanNet staff would not have been able to visit all places that extensively.

"Last night five of us visited the electoral site of former Prime Minister Faysal Al Fayez, and three others visited the second electoral directorate. Not less than 10-15 of the general assembly members call us on daily basis. The site of AmmanNet in Wadi Saqra, Arar Street is our usual meeting point, any member can go there."
(Mohammad Abu Safieh, 3.11.2010)

5. Citizens acting as presenters and producers

Sawsan Zaidah, at that time Chief Editor of AmmanNet, gives examples how citizens are involved in the production of the programme and also become visible for the public as presenters and producers:

“At the same time, elements of the club, people who are willing and who are talented to work in radio, they work with us as volunteers. They produce and present for us programmes. For example, one member of our club is a psychological therapist and he is really talented and he has his own programme. And he gives psychological consultation for people who have problems. [...] We have another member who is a singer. She is specialised in singing, she studied music. So she has a very good education about music and she has her own musical programme. She has a host who is a singer like her and she conducts interviews and has a discussion with people calling in and talking to the singer and so on. We have another programme by our listeners club by university students. They have their own programme and it is a talk show. And students can call them and talk about a topic that they decide in advance. They can talk about whatever they want.”
(Sawsan Zaidah, 2.12.2007)

An important indicator for the success of the Listeners' Club accountability practice is the relationship between citizens and newsroom staff. In general, the representatives of the Club are satisfied with their impact on the newsroom staff:

“Usually news reported by our members in the field is broadcast without bias by the station staff, though it did happen that errors do occur (such as attributing a wrong rank to a military guest). We call the studio and report it.” (Mohammad Abu Safieh, 3.11.2010)

Yet, there are cases when citizens and journalists disagree:

“My number was being banned by a program presenter for a month so I discussed the issue with the station director and other journalists who resolved the issue.”
(Mohammad Abu Safieh, 3.11.2010)

Working as citizen journalists made our interviewees more aware of how media work in general, which is an important prerequisite to hold them accountable:

“It [the work with the Club] helped us stand on a firm ground, to know decision making mechanisms by the state, members of parliament and media outlets and how credible or transparent they are” (Mohammad Abu Safieh, 3.11.2010).

Despite this very elaborated and institutionalized way of collaborating with citizens in producing news – a unique practice in Jordan – two critical aspects with respect to innovative accountability practices online have to be mentioned:

First, the extremely advanced cooperation of producing could become more transparent in the product by, for example, marking the contributions of citizens more clearly.

Secondly, the role of the Internet appears to be weak. Most of the practices were already possible before, so technically the Internet did not play an innovative role in advancing the practice. Yet, without the Internet, AmmanNet would not have been on air as early as 2000 and would not have experimented with citizen involvement because at that time private radio stations were not allowed to broadcast and citizens played a minor role in news production. From this perspective, the Internet enabled the establishment of a media outlet and experimenting with citizen involvement by by-passing a restricted media market. The changing culture of news consumption and production as described above would not have occurred without the Internet as an unregulated free space in an otherwise controlled media landscape. Apart from that, Internet communication and technological applications made the work of the Listeners' Club easier and cheaper and might have affected the willingness of citizens to contribute.

3. Practices Outside the Media

In general, the state of media accountability practices outside the media in Jordan is weak. One reason is the lack of continuous observation of developments in the media sector. None of the online news media outlets has a specialised “media journalism”; media data by independent research institutes is not available, so periodical analysis and review of media is not common; trade journals do not exist and only one book that touches ethical issues in journalism is published by Suleiman Saleh (Mohammad Abu Arqoub, 16.9.2010). Media and communication research is not originated in the Jordanian university landscape which only recently saw a growth in journalism education (Pies 2009: 39).

As a consequence of this situation, transparency in areas like ownership patterns, numbers and structures of users and personnel policies is lacking. Audience research hardly exists in these domains where the real numbers of print runs are closely guarded secrets. Furthermore, the employment and exits of chief editors, as well as the buying and selling of media enterprises are mostly a non-transparent political game. So, the question is: where to base media critique on?

3.1 NGOs and Academia

The recent establishment of *sahafi.jo* exemplifies one direction of institutionalizing media accountability on the Internet in Jordan. The website is almost exclusively dedicated to reporting and analyzing issues related to the media scene in Jordan and the Arab World. The website is updated daily with aggregated material and more slowly with original information and offers its users an archive of over 60,000 articles on Jordanian and Arab media, which are useful for researchers as well as editors and reporters. The crucial aspect of *sahafi.jo* is that the website, as the first comprehensive resource about journalism and media issues in Jordan, has the potential to become an important pre-requisite for media accountability. The key aims of *sahafi.jo* are to build-up knowledge of the media profession and to keep track of developments and changes in the field of journalism. The *sahafi.jo* website tries to collate bits and pieces of information and to make them available for anyone interested in the ‘overall picture’. The website therefore may serve as an eye-opener on how the media deal with issues and constitutes a first step in monitoring journalists, but has not yet shown a strong impact since it was established only recently (cf. Hawatmeh / Pies 2011).

In addition, the number of projects and initiatives observing media coverage has been increasing. NGOs have started to analyze the coverage of specific topics like women in media within the “Global Media Monitoring Project” a research project, to which Jordan contributed in 2010 for the first time (cf. GMMP 2010). During the 2007 and 2010 elections, many initiatives

proclaimed to monitor media coverage during the election campaign and the Election Day like the “Commission to monitor media coverage of polls” under the supervision of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights, or a project on 7iber.com in 2010(see Practice 4) or the Urdun Al-Jadid Centre in 2007. Besides, the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) has trained young people in observing the media and the Center for Defending the Freedom of Journalists organized a workshop in 2007 from which journalists came out with their own code of ethics for covering elections.

Although these initiatives are a good starting point they lack systematic and coordinated follow ups. Most of them do not even make their results public. This is also true for a program by IREX called the Media Content Analysis Tool (MCAT), in which several Jordanian media outlets allow external observers to analyze their coverage for objectivity, accuracy, good structure/sound, creativity, relevance, investigative, and interviewing techniques. Although this is a long term project, which aims at revealing the improvement or none-improvement of media outlets’ coverage it is not accessible to the public and therefore lacks a decisive feature of media accountability as referred to in the MediaAcT project.

The only systematic observation and critique of media is done by the project “Eye on the Media” (EoM) on which we will focus here.

Practice 3: Eye on the Media

“Eye on the Media” is a project by the Community Media Network and runs a weekly radio program on AmmanNet (on and offline) which started in 2004. and is directed by Sawsan Zaidah. This weekly program monitors the coverage of controversial topics in all media outlets in Jordan and discusses them in terms of professionalism. The program itself is produced by professional journalists and guests are invited– some at least from the media field – to discuss the subject provided by the news room staff.

The goals of EoM are reflected in the topics and the way of dealing with it:

Initiating discussion among the profession about subjects of “professional ethics and standards such as objectivity, impartiality, accuracy, even coverage, relevance to the audience” (Sawsan Zaidah). A recent example for that is the episode on the disclosure of Wikileaks documents and the way journalists should handle the publication of such documents in the Jordanian context.*

One exemplary topic for building on media literacy was the relatively new phenomenon of disguising advertisements as editorial material under the title ‘company news’. “EoM” pointed out that this is a common practice among almost all newspapers in Jordan and hence, made listeners aware of this misleading practice.

Criticizing the coverage of media outlets in Jordan took place in one episode lately about money dictating the coverage of the election campaign in the way that advertisement and editorial content was not clearly distinguished.**

* <http://www.eyeonmediajo.net/?p=2752> [20.12.2010]

** <http://www.eyeonmediajo.net/?p=2560> [20.12.2010]

EoM is open to topics that are of citizens' and colleagues' concerns as Sawsan Zaidah underlines in an example.

"Fakher [an activist and listener of EoM] had called me regarding the media's dim coverage to the government arresting eighteen protestors who had barely stepped out in front of Prime Ministry; that this was not a customary incident in Jordan for the government to arrest peaceful protestors raising slogans against the elections, nothing to do with violence. So I stemmed my topic out of his remark – how balanced is media in covering governments calls to participate in elections vis-à-vis the stance of part of the opposition to boycott the elections." (Sawsan Zaidah, 27.10.2010)

Noticeably, she mentions that it is part of EoM's professional understanding to mention the source of the idea (i.e. citizens) thereby contrasting to what is mostly practiced by websites with collaborative news writing.

Apart from these goals reflected in the topics EoM tries to involve journalists and citizens in holding the media accountable. One recent project is to attract media and journalism students to carry out monitoring reports in addition to those created by journalists and chief editors:

"Then they [the students] would do monitoring reports but in a simpler fashion. So we have this hybrid of a weeklong report by students and another by journalists, because the latter embeds fact-based analysis into the report, a rather difficult task for the student whom the least we expect from is to carry out a hybrid of quantitative and qualitative observation." (Sawsan Zaidah, 27.10.2010)

Although the methodology of EoM is "more media-based than academic" they try to "cover all pertinent media and keep abreast of novices."

"We try to be as transparent as possible and publish everything we do. Never did we assume to have watched all the media outlets and all what they wrote about a certain issue because this is beyond our means. So we tend to choose samples; to monitor how the four daily newspapers have covered that issue, and the title of the program will be as such, or even how the columnists in these dailies tackled that issue. This is how we see our objectivity; we cannot perform a comprehensive survey so we choose samples." (Sawsan Zaidah, 27.10.2010)

The main achievement of EoM according to Sawsan Zaidah is that it got journalists and chief editors used to criticism and to the idea of being accountable:

"In the beginning of the program journalists were not yet used to come under criticism and were irritated as we would mention their names and the newspaper (otherwise what's the point behind criticism), but we also praise what is good. We used to receive a lot of angry comments which we also publish online." (Sawsan Zaidah, 27.10.2010)

"[Chief Editors'] interaction is very good and sometimes more than the others [journalists and citizens]. For example, most of the episodes host an editor-in-chief; unless the topic is directly related to editors-in-chief then they constitute most of the guests. Most of them interact in various degrees and, more than other guests, they later on put suggestions into action because our focus is on professionalism more than the political or legal underpinnings. So editors-in-chief are more concerned in developing their outlets." (Sawsan Zaidah, 27.10.2010)

Concerning the acceptance of critique within the different media types, Sawsan Zaidah sees a clear distinction between news websites and newspapers (online):

Both interact but websites are still green, so our relationship with them is akin to that with the newspapers when the program first started. They tend to be self-defensive and hyper-sensitive to criticism, contrary to the well-experienced editors of newspapers who are more receptive to criticism given the long practice and professionalism. Nevertheless, such was the case with newspapers when we debuted, so it is a matter of time and getting used to it." (Sawsan Zaidah, 27.10.2010)

With an external perception, Rouman Haddad certifies EoM as having a positive impact:
“Any influence [of media accountability in Jordan] was really limited. But one cannot ignore “Eye on the Media.” (Rouman Haddad, 23.10.2010)

Nevertheless he remarks critically that:

“Eye on the media” started successfully but [...] started to recede. In other words the interviewees are limited so the program remained a closed circle. Or, the fact that the editors of the program have had their premeditated viewpoints on several issues, this has eventually limited their ability to deliver a good critique. This might not affect its content but its ability to influence and change the course of things. I think they should have lately developed it to have more influence. This is our need as media professionals- a program capable of carrying out accountability as it gives us alternative tools for reading what goes around.” (Rouman Haddad, 23.10.2010)

3.2 Bloggers and Social Media

In addition to the institutionalised accountability practices of Eye on the Media, several cases can be cited, in which single and temporary accountability practices outside the media took place in the Internet.

One is the McKain case mentioned above: In terms of accountability and transparency it was an innovative step that some reactions to this professional shortcoming appeared online. Mohammad Abu Arqoub, at that time journalist at *AmmanNet* and member of the online platform *Menassat*,²¹ wrote a critical chronology of his colleagues’ shortcomings.²² Batir Wardam, a columnist at the daily *Al-Dustour*, shortly after the rumor came out, admitted on his blog *Jordanwatch*²³ that the story had fooled him, personally, and apologized to his readers. These two voices proved that there is ‘someone’ holding the news media accountable even though the two journalist bloggers only sometimes write about media issues and do not extensively cover media shortcomings. Wardam’s occasional questioning of certain media practices in his *Jordanwatch* blog indicates that Jordanian blogs may contribute to the field of media accountability, but need to focus on debating media practices and criticizing where necessary (cf. Hawatmeh / Pies 2011)

Another case, in which a blogger played a positive role in holding the news media accountable, was the alignment between news websites and political figures, the director of intelligence Department Mohammad Al-Thahabi and the director of the Royal Hashemite Court, Basem Awadallah, before the resignation of the latter in September 2008.²⁴ Websites aligned with either Awadallah or Al-Thahabi. The blogger, Mohammad Omar, published his view of what went on: Why demonize or angel(ize) certain people? Why not hold them accountable politically

²¹ “Menassat.com is a website focusing on news, trends and events concerning the media in the twenty-two countries of the MENA region” (cf. the ‘about us’ section on <http://www.menassat.com/>).

²² cf. <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/4024-jordans-press-loves-rumors> [20.12.2010]

²³ cf. <http://www.jordanwatch.net/> [20.12.2010]

²⁴ The two represent the “traditional” rivalry between the Royal Court and a certain group within the Secret Service.

away from bilateral alignment to either side! Apart from that he tackled the issue and published content

“away from trenching and premeditated stances by asking what information was available. Were there credible sources for the information or was it mere chitchat and rumors? So we came to find out that this information was mostly fabricated without credible reference. So, Mohammad Omar was taking a balanced stance in discussing those issues” (Rouman Haddad, 23.10.2010).

As mentioned above, patterns of accountability involvement can be seen when the “big issues” of Jordanian society, of which many are considered taboo in the Jordanian media, are covered, like the relationship to Palestine and Jordan’s integrity of the state vis-à-vis a Palestinian state (see Case 1); or question the integration of Palestinians into the Jordanian society, which was indirectly raised by clashes at a football match (see Case 2).²⁵ Another such issue is Israel’s behaviour towards the Palestinians and related to this the peace treaty and normalisation of Jordan with Israel.

In such cases, subtleties of media coverage become obvious as users are very much touched by the subject. It might also be true that such cases disclose “on which side the media stand”. Either they support the official standing, which is not necessarily the public point of view, or support the public point of view, which is not official and therefore a taboo topic.

Rouman Haddad explains the selectiveness of topics coming under critique by bloggers differently:

“We notice that Mohammad Omar does tackle the accountability of certain issues on his blog, but ignores others. So the matter is subject to someone’s temperament or taste. Batir Wardam also discusses issues on a case by case basis. So this issue is personally oriented, not professionally.” (Rouman Haddad, 23.10.2010)

An in-depth analysis of blogs and Facebook groups would be necessary to come to final conclusions. The same is true for an evaluation of the impact on journalists of what bloggers write. From Mohammad Omar’s statements we can conclude that reactions on critique are sometime harsh:

“[I wrote on] tracking fact-based and editorial errors in newspapers. For example, a prominent writer who erred twice in writing the name of Syria’s prime minister. It was apparent this was not a print mistake but in information, especially when it comes to a first-rank writer in Jordan. I knew he benefitted from this after having read my blog, in addition to other cases as well. Some people were angry and threatened to sue me, as one Ad-Dustour writer did after I had criticized his shallow knowledge about Netherland’s experience in water management. He demanded that Jordan emulates Netherland’s experience in agriculture, notwithstanding the vast disparity in the two countries’ reservoir of water! He took it as if I labeled him ignorant and threatened to sue me. Farfashet jarayed [newspaper’s leisure – a kind of column M.O.

²⁵ The Palestinian-Jordanian cleavage is a highly controversial topic that was also mentioned by panelists for Media Sustainability Index: “For example, the latest opinion polls on the performance of the lower house of Parliament have generated discussion. But user comments can sometimes trigger a war of words, especially over differences between Jordanians of local extraction and their compatriots of Palestinian origin. Authorities require website publishers to filter comments, but the authorities and the press have yet to tailor a regulatory code to provide proper guidance.” (Media Sustainability Index 2008)

used to write in his blog] attracted most of my blog's readers especially those in the press, but it has also caused some to antagonize me." (Mohammad Omar, 26.10.2010)

As Mohammad Omar is journalist and a chief editor of the Pan-Arab website Al-Bawaba, he is in the position of getting away with criticizing of his colleagues whereas a citizen might not. Instead, citizens are able to contribute to media accountability outside the media in another way as exemplified in the practice of 7iber.com.

Practice 4: 7iber.com's citizen journalism

7iber.com started in 2006 as a platform for contributions by citizens. The idea behind it was to present "something different than the mainstream media. We wanted something that joins some aspects of journalism, and spontaneity and authenticity found in blogs." (Lina Ejeilat, Co-Founder of 7iber, 6.11.2010). First, the website was published in English but now the editorial team tries to push for contributions in Arabic to "really reflect citizens" (Lina Ejeilat, 6.11.2010).

In a weekly meeting, ideas for contributions are discussed and issues such as photography, writing style or multimedia content are tackled. The website publishes all topics from local (Amman) stories to cultural and political issues. Although as an editorial team they bring in professional knowledge, they try to avoid producing content by them. Instead, they want to "empower" citizens to follow up on their stories themselves.

Three main features make 7iber noteworthy in terms of media accountability:

First, they initiated two monitoring projects on media coverage. One monitored the columnists' writing during the elections in 2010 in Jordanian newspapers and the other focused on clichés in the daily press "be they thought-based clichés or linguistic clichés" (Lina Ejeilat, 6.11.2010). In these practices their aims were to develop citizens' media literacy:

"[The impact was not] directly tangible but we tried to build on it so as to develop our writing approach and develop a critical eye when they [the citizens] read local press." (Lina Ejeilat, 6.11.2010)

Secondly, and even more important is 7iber's agenda of contributing to alternative media coverage or as Lina Ejeilat puts it:

"Sometimes you have to hold the media accountable for what they don't cover. Certain things that ought to have discussion" (Lina Ejeilat, 6.11.2010).

By giving several examples from 7iber's activities, Lina Ejeilat, depicts how this might work:

"It's interesting because you have the newspapers and websites but still certain events are not being discussed so we highlight [in our election monitor] what columns don't write about. For example when the young men were arrested [Muslim Brotherhood youth boycotting the elections], the absence of commentary by columnists was highlighted." (Lina Ejeilat, 6.11.2010.)

One of the systematic activities 7iber.com does is a round-up of blogs and thus allowing bloggers to be seen by a wider public:

"The aswat hurra [free voices] subject is a weekly roundup of blogs, which we've been pushing forward and getting good feedback, though not so many comments, but people say they see it so we have this sort of bridging." (Lina Ejeilat, 6.11.2010.)

Finally, the core of 7iber's work is to let citizens contribute stories of their interest and as a result come up with topics that have not been covered by mass media on or offline like the closure of shops during Ramadan:

"When they closed down books@net café and other shops during Ramadan, Madyan the owner was very upset about the way it happened. So someone told him why don't you write the issue and put it on 7iber, which he eventually did. This is what we are trying to promote. It is not a problem if someone wrote a story that is completely from one point of view. The other point of view will eventually follow suit. But what matters is that Madyan had written and the story got 250 comments, the most commented story on 7iber; a very heated discussion after which the story got picked up by the media. No one would dare write about the story but afterwards Jordan Times wrote about it; the Guardian had also written something, actually linked to our story." (Lina Eijeilat, 6.11.2010.)

Even though this example is probably not the everyday impact of 7iber.com, it alludes to what might arise. With just a few publically or media visible actions the citizens and contributors of 7iber let their voices be heard in a way that was not possible before and were thus pointing towards the lack of covering certain issues in Jordanian media.

4. Conclusion

Although the opening of the government ruled media market has been ongoing since 1989 in Jordan, citizens' trust in traditional media is still low. One major reason is the perception of media as being under control of the regime, another reason the lack of users' inclusion into the production of news. This is slowly changing thanks to news websites that have successfully introduced several features supporting responsive practices, such as commenting on articles or providing opportunities for user generated content. By accepting such practices users indicate that they wish the media to break with the regime-loyalist role, it has been playing in Jordan for a long time including the control of the official news agenda. A citizen journalism website such as 7iber.com illustrates that this wish may even come into practice outside newsrooms but does not necessarily need the Internet as the Listeners' Club of AmmanNet exemplifies. Nevertheless, for the question, which factors foster MA practices, low media legitimacy of traditional media has to be considered as one important trigger.

Relatively great freedom of the press – in comparison to other Arab countries – provides a positive environment for media accountability. Users and sometimes bloggers feel free to criticise articles and news production and a programme such as "Eye on the Media" does not hold off state media in their media critical coverage. Yet, ongoing discussions about state regulations of the Internet make justifications for MA difficult because criticizing online journalists or news websites can be interpreted as support for those who would like to see news websites closely observed. Such interpretations also limit critical assessment of professional failures though weak professionalism has been a stimulus to foster MA practices in some cases, for example the MacKain case, but has been less relevant than the (politically sensitive) context in which they occur.

Instead of reducing the discrepancy between the potential freedoms to criticise and making use of it, traditional MA instruments such as JPA's code of ethics or its ombuds committees have even furthered it. Under suspicion of being another regime control, traditional MA instruments have failed to prove MA as being a self-regulatory practice that might advance an independent journalistic field and to develop an authority of watching over professional quality.

Given this failure of institutionalised MA practices, the Internet may be interpreted as an opportunity to "restart" MA practices and it indeed has been used for that purpose but mainly by news rooms and not individuals outside the news rooms. Although infrastructural deficits for accessing the Internet still exist, the news website market has been flourishing for three years which fostered the development of MA practices inside news rooms by forcing even online newspapers to reassess their web presences for transparency and responsiveness features. Social networks such as Facebook have proven to be an important part of the Internet culture in Jordan and are playing a role in distributing, commenting on and evaluating news media. Yet, a focus on media criticism has not developed which is most probably due to the relatively small amount of systematic and active individual contributions in blogs, for example. Although, the Internet user culture still has to be considered as a limiting factor of MA formation in Jordan it also has the greatest potential of stimulating it in the future. Other factors may spring up in the course of the ongoing turbulent developments in the region.

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