Report on the regional MENA workshop

"Media Accountability – Involving the Audience"
20-23 December 2021 in Tunis

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Media Accountability mechanisms are stepping up in the MENA region – the audience plays an important role in this process

A three-day workshop entitled "Media Accountability – Involving the Audience" took place in Tunis on December 20-23, 2021. The Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism (Germany) organized the event in cooperation with MENA Media Monitoring (Tunisia) and the Media Development Center (Tunisia). Media representatives such as publishers, representatives of self-regulatory bodies and regulatory bodies, ombuds people, journalists and editors-in-chief, as well as representatives from academia and NGOs attended the event. The 35 participants and experts came from Algeria, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Germany, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Poland, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey.

The aims of the workshop were twofold. First to explore the current standards and practices related to applied Media Accountability in the overall MENA Region. Secondly, to investigate the relevant audience involvement in the media accountability process as an interactive component in reflecting news, demanding corrections as well as in shaping programs and sending complaints in cases of breaches of relevant ethical codes.

Ms. Elisa Özbek from the political department at the German Embassy in Tunis, opened the conference, emphasizing that Freedom of Expression and Press Freedom are fundamental human rights, which are necessary for the evolvement of democracy. Ms. Özbek emphasized that Tunisia has undergone substantial changes in media development and is currently valued as the freest country related to Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press in the MENA region.

Prof. Abdelkrim Hizaoui, President at the Media Development Center in Tunisia, stated that despite positive changes in Media Accountability such as establishing a new Tunisian Press Council in 2018, introducing ombuds people in 2014 in newsrooms, establishing the independent regulatory body HAICA in 2013, nothing can be taken for granted. Taking care of Media Accountability mechanisms should have the highest priority, especially under current challenges like the higher self-censorship of journalists and dissemination of online hate speech. Hizaoui further emphasized not only the important role of good will from inside the media community to achieve such changes but also the presence of international funding in Tunisia, which was key to starting the process: "The authentic will of the overall media community in each of the MENA Region countries is a relevant first step in order to start the introduction of Media Accountability as a genuine instrument of transparency and accuracy".

Mr. Amirouche Nedjaa, Executive Director of MENA Media Monitoring, highlighted in his welcome speech that the best practice models such as the implementation of ombuds people in Tunisian newsrooms can be duplicated in MENA region countries such as Libya. The consultancy and experience are in place and can be transferred immediately with the support not only of international funding but also of the Erich Brost Institute, which in 2014 implemented ombuds people in Tunisia. Mr. Nedjaa said MENA Media Monitoring would welcome opportunities to cooperate with the Erich Brost Institute in the MENA region in the future.

Prof. Dr. Fengler, Head of the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism, provided a comprehensive overview of existing applied Media Accountability projects of the institute in the MENA region and mentioned the important role of academia and research to be included in this process. She highlighted the important role of Tunisia, which is the first country in the MENA region to have successfully established Media Accountability structures, such as the presence of ombuds people in newsrooms in 2014 with the support of the Erich Brost Institute and funding

from the Federal German Foreign Office. Dominik Speck, a researcher at the Erich Brost Institute explained the key results of the comparative study "Global Handbook of Media Accountability", which was just published in January 2022 (Routledge publishing house). He explained in detail that besides media professionals, other stakeholders in the media industry such as the audience, scholars and NGOs, as well as the political framework have key roles in applied Media Accountability. Isabella Kurkowski introduced the outcomes of the pilot study "Media Accountability in the MENA region" conducted in 2021 by the Erich Brost Institute, which explored the state of media accountability structures in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Syria.

Media Accountability experts from throughout the MENA Region as well as from Germany, Bosnia and Hercegovina and Poland provided examples of challenges and best practices from the region for new approaches in Media Accountability by involving the audience. The panelists, on the session entitled "The State of Media and Accountability after the Arab Spring: Tunisia – a Best Practice Case?", each gave best practice examples. Mr. Iheb Chaouch, journalist and Programs Producer at Tunisia's National TV stated that due to public demands new formats have been developed for the station's audience to provide a space to discuss media related issues and media accountability structures, which are in many cases new to the public. Narjess Mkhinini, Ombudswoman at Radio Jawhara FM (Tunisia) and Mr. Hédi Senoussi, Ombudsman of Radio Mosaïque FM (Tunisia) discussed the importance of audience interaction. A key point in their discussion was that both positive and negative feedback from the audience are important for editorial policy and for the broadcasters to know the needs of the audience, not only for resolving their complaints, but also for transferring the audience's suggestions to senior media management. To date, Tunisia is the only MENA country to have introduced, albeit with the support of the Erich-Brost-Institute and its partners MENA Media Monitoring and Media Development Center, ombuds people in radio newsrooms. Isabella Kurkowski, Erich Brost Institute MENA Region coordinator of the project emphasized that the implementation in 2014 of ombuds people in newsrooms is not expensive and requires only a well-trained and experienced journalist, who is familiar with both the Code of Conduct as well as with media legislation. Such positions can be easily implemented in newsrooms, while it is much more complicated to establish independent Press Councils, which require a management structure, a secretariat, office space and several complaint commission members. However, Press Councils are usually set-up on the national level and are backed by a sizeable media community or journalist association. This support allows the Council to perform in a way completely different from ombuds people, as for example in its key role of being a media watchdog of all media on both the national and local level. However, as Narjess Mkhinini stated, an ombuds people network was formed in Tunisia in 2016, to speak with a forceful voice towards the audience. In this vein, Narjess Mkhinini announced she would go on air, at Radio Jawhara in January 2022, with a 1-hour program that will be dedicated as the first radio show in the MENA Region to media accountability. Both Narjess Mkhinini and Hédi Senoussi, explained their

detailed work as ombuds people responding to complaints from their audiences. Both abide by the rules of the Code of Ethics, but do also, if necessary, develop the Code. They keep an eye on the quality of content and also hold trainings that enable journalists to distinguish between opinion and commentary. Both keep in touch with editorial teams concerning corrections, and also collect suggestions from the audience and publishing them online. Last but not least both take part in monthly meetings with the management, at which they provide analysis of resolved cases. Narjess Mkhinini, Ombudswoman at Radio Jawhara FM (Tunisia) and Mr. Hédi Senoussi, Ombudsman of Radio Mosaïque FM (Tunisia) made a joint statement: "Since ombuds people are implemented in the newsrooms, our media outlets receive less complaints." Trust from the public is essential to have any connection with media outlets, which generally take care of their professional internal standards. However, a common occurrence is that colleagues who are not familiar with the functions of ombuds people view them as spies. A suggested resolution was to provide more trainings for overall newsroom staff to make them acquainted with the important role of ombuds people and that resolving ethical breeches means that the journalists will have less court cases.

The situation of applied Media Accountability is completely different in other countries such as Algeria, Libya and Iraq. Prof. Redouane Boudjema from Algeria explained that the regulatory system faces criticism and that there is no mechanism implemented in relation to Free Access to Information for journalists, so in this sense there is no mechanism given to communicate with the audience in making them aware of their rights. Boudjema said: "Dependence of Freedom depends on where you live in the MENA Region and in how far it is connected to the journalists' associations engagement in watchdog activities". He also said that the engagement of audience in media is costly and that most media cannot afford it especially in the current economic crisis. However, the public does already exercise, through unregulated social media, their right to criticism, and at some point the media will realize the importance of engaging the audience despite the economic crisis. Fatma Louati, project manager at MENA Media Monitoring gave a deep insight into an important media accountability instrument, Media Information Literacy (MIL), which is necessary for making ordinary citizens aware of their rights. The problem is that most MIL projects in schools in the MENA region are dependent on international donor funding and do not include MIL in their curricula. In Tunisia, most MIL activities were covered by trained schoolteachers, who worked as volunteers in their free time. Still, most ministries of education in the MENA Region do not support MIL activities at all. As Fatma Louati argued in her final statement: "To create knowledge about the audience is not enough! To create a whole community with profound knowledge to apply Media Information Literacy as part of Media Accountability is necessary". Dr. Khaled Gulam from Libya, a pioneer of Media Accountability efforts in that country, argued that in contrast to Tunisia, media accountability is not included in university level curricula. In the aftermath of the three-day event, the workshop highlighted as a 'first step of

change' an initial information exchange, about possible future support in developing a media accountability curriculum, which occurred between the University of Tunis and the University of Tripoli.

Of huge relevance during the 3-day regional workshop was the input of Mr. Mannoubi Marrouki, Member of the independent Press Council in Tunisia. The independent Press Council is the only established independent Press Council, which emerged after the Arab Spring revolution in the MENA region. The independent Press Council is a role-model for many other MENA Region countries, which currently lack any such independent self-regulatory bodies. Mr. Marrouki explained that the bylaws of the Press Council in Tunisia were developed in a participatory manner by the representatives of all journalists' associations. The self-regulatory body was established in a formal process involving media publishers, journalists' unions as well as journalists' associations. The complaint commission consists of nine members (representing print media, online media and radiobroadcasters, a judge, a university professor and several journalists). In the establishment phase, three Committees were created to deal with complaints from the public, professional issues as well as with public relations. The decisions and statements of the Press Council in Tunisia are currently published only on Facebook as the proposed funding has yet to be approved by the dysfunctional parliament. The original funding model (following those models of financing of the German Press Council and the Press Council in Belgium) would have provided 50% funding from the government. However, the draft law could not be adopted as national political changes have rendered the parliament inoperable. This problem of an unadopted bylaw causes huge problems for the self-regulatory body, because at the moment it does not have any of the following: a legal existence, a financing structure and a venue for its regular complaint commission meetings.

Mrs. Ljiljana Zurovac, former Executive Director of the Press Council in Bosnia and Hercegovina gave a detailed example on how to establish Press Councils in post-conflict settings. She emphasized that a dialogue with media owners, publishers, journalists' associations, parliamentarians and international donors is essential in order to have a clear road map about the self-sustainable and independent functioning of an effective self-regulatory body on national level. She also emphasized the dialogue with justice is a very important tool, as Press Councils resolve complaints very fast and cost-free by arbitration procedures, without the interference of courts. With the existence of a Press Council the work of judges is often significantly disburdened. The holistic approach of an independent Press Council is helpful in transitional countries on their way towards democracy. In the case of Bosnia and Hercegovina, the Press Council has gained a very strong position and is widely accepted by the media as well as the public. The Press Council annually receives 1000 complaint cases from the public. The Press Council is therefore an important connection between the public (readers, users and audience), the media outlets and journalists. However, the competencies of a vital and functioning Press Council also fulfill the

criteria of being a watchdog, which can in times of crisis make public statements and find large scale solutions. However, the self-sustainability and financial functioning of Press Councils is a huge challenge, which must be well considered and budgeted for prior to establishment. In many cases, Press Councils are functioning simply through donor support, which is not sustainable and will fade away one day. Some countries, such as Germany, Belgium and Tunisia have a model in which the state budget can support a Press Council by up to 49% or 50%, while the balance should originate from the fees of members of the Press Council, journalists' associations and international funding support. "Such important mechanism of media self-regulation can be only achieved by a well-established and long-lasting dialogue with all stakeholders as well as good consultancy of already well experienced Press Councils from abroad", said Zurovac. Kurkowski, a former media expert advisor to the Executive Director of the Press Council in Bosnia and Hercegovina, added that the German government provides a unique long-term consultancy mechanism by the Centre for International Migration and Development (https://www.cimonline.de) which is also extended to Media.

The very complex situation in Iraq was explained by Prof. Dr. Ahmed Al-Sadiq who stressed the polarization of media outlets in Iraq as well of the overall media community, which suffered from the division and defragmentation after the revolution. He emphasized that there is a need for an objective lens in an ideological process of political change and that it is of utmost importance to educate media outlets and their staff to be a part of the criticism in a constructive way on the road towards democracy. Media Accountability instruments in Iraq should therefore urgently be implemented following best practice models, which took already place for example in Tunisia, which was able despite a hostile environment after the Arab Spring revolution to establish a Press Council, implement ombuds people in newsroom and establish an independent regulatory body. Dr. Al-Sadiq argued that media departments of media outlets as well as the educative sector at universities in the MENA region should have a comprehensive and accurate knowledge of the role of mediators and their importance in opening channels of communication with the public. Dr. Al-Sadiq called in this sense also for an extended international donor support related to Media Accountability activities in Iraq.

Dr. Michał Chlebowski, Programming Standards Manager at TVN Discovery Group in Poland made clear by his own research and statistics within the Polish media that in media newsrooms more than 50% of the editorial staff were not aware about the details of the Codes of Conduct – this is why Standards and Practices departments or ombuds people definitely should be implemented in newsrooms. In his case the standards manager has access to the production process at any stage in order to connect with editorial staff and prevent ethical breaches. The TVN Discovery Group in Poland has furthermore its own fact-checking platform for the audience, where they can make editors and the public aware of fake news content. Moreover the TVN24 (news channel) has a Twitter account on which mistakes are corrected and apologies send out. Such instruments of audience involvement are indeed effective as Mr. Salam Mlik, a member of the Tunisian Union of Associative Radios, stated: "We have developed an online app for our Community Radio via which the audience can in real time send their comments as well as complaints. This tool enables editors to step into direct contact with their audience and for example provide corrections of misleading content immediately."

The regional workshop explored on the 3ʳᵈ day a set of recommendations of three Working Groups with experts and international consultants which might be of relevance to be implemented in the near future in the MENA region:

I.   "ESTABLISHING PRESS COUNCILS":

1. Needs and Challenges in the MENA Region:

Tunisia
Needs of the Press Council in Tunisia:
Funding and international expertise; establishment of a paid Executive Director position; involvement of publishers related to the funding structure of the Press Council; educating the civil society on Media Accountability structures; consideration of a possible future establishment of a media commission in the parliament.

Morocco
Needs of the Press Council in Morocco:
Membership conditions at the Council are outdated and the relevant legal bylaw articles should be reviewed by experts related to international standards, accompanied by a broad advocacy for the change; reporting procedures on press code violations and the relevant

decisions of the Council should be made transparent towards the public; in matters of high public interest the Council should react through public statement as an active and accountable self-regulatory body.

Iraq

Needs and challenges for the Press Council in Iraq:

The existing oversight body for print media, journalists' associations, media outlets and journalists are in most cases influenced by political representatives of different parties and do not act independently.

The legislation allows for the creation of an independent Press Council in Iraq, however the law enforcement is a challenge.

Very often criticism is not accepted by the journalists themselves related to code of ethics breaches.

Civil Society Organizations (CSO) as media watchdog institutions are in most cases weakly represented.

2. **Recommendations for the future:**
   - establish an independent Press Council in Iraq with willing journalists
   - organize meetings with journalists all over the country
   - organize meetings with media owners related to a possible establishment of an independent Press Council
   - organize study visits for the relevant stakeholders to well established Press Councils abroad, e.g., to Germany

II. **"IMPLEMENTING OMBUDS PEOPLE IN MEDIA OUTLETS":**

1. **Challenges in the MENA Region:**
   - absence of the culture of Media Accountability.
   - lack of complete clarity on the concepts MA mechanisms, such as the role of the ombuds people
   - absence of legal and administrative frameworks.
   - the effect of political instability
   - the fragility of the Economic Structure
   - instability in decision-making positions and management managers.

- lack of competent experts

2. Opportunities for the MENA Region:
- develop a culture of MA among the public
- availability of binding legislation (Tunisia)
- media programs for ombuds people (Tunisia)
- merge MA instruments in Education Curricula
- establishing an online platform for ombuds people

3. Solutions for future steps:
- Intensification of meetings and networking between media actors in the region to introduce MA instruments
- Training support for interested journalists as ombuds people can be easily implemented in newsrooms and the costs for the positions are not high
- Meetings with media managers, owners and editors in chief

III. "INVOLVING THE AUDIENCE":

1. Challenges in the MENA Region:
- political challenges due to political influence
- pandemic Covid-19 with harsh and restrictive legislation
- credibility of decisions
- transparency in reporting ethical breaches
- lack of proper communication within editorial rooms and about the role of ombuds people
- communication between the public and the media outlets

2. Opportunities for the MENA Region:
- fast development of technology and the social media
- building bridges between the news technologies and the social media
- to turn accountability to sustainability
- the needs and demands of audiences and media
- Covid-19
- digital media

3. Possible solutions and future steps for the MENA region:

- create an interactive relation between media outlets and audiences by preparing critical programs for the media
- provide a platform to report abuses and mistakes in the media content

The participants agreed furthermore to share these recommendations through the Erich Brost Institute's Media Accountability Network for the MENA region (consisting of 53 members and 10 countries), as well as to step into dialogue with the Global Forum for Media Development related to the above issues in order to integrate the MENA actors' views in international funding policies.

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