



Egypt's Broadcast Media Code of Ethics: Navigating Government Views and Professional Needs

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Introduction

Media codes of ethics are developed to support ethical journalism by setting out the core values that ensure honesty and integrity in reporting. While media codes of ethics are not mandatory like media laws, they support the public's right to receive accurate and balanced information (Dajani, 2012). Different mass media organizations globally have been working toward establishing professional standards and an acceptable code of conduct for media practitioners to apply in their coverage, transmission and dissemination of news. Information is a tool of development, a tool that could easily be misused.

Concern about media violations came to the fore following the Second World War when the British government appointed a special committee to investigate the performance of the press in the UK. The committee recommended the establishment of the British Press Council that was developed in 1953 with the purpose of maintaining high ethical standards in journalism. (Jones, 1980)

Another important landmark was the Hutchins Commission. Formed in 1947 to study the function of the media in the US, the commission's report emphasized the principle of social responsibility of the media, maintaining that ethics should be imposed on media professionals.

It encouraged the development of regulation that is independent from the government and would hold media professionals

accountable (Dajani, 2012; The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947).

A Changing Media Landscape: A Pressing Demand

In recent years, there has been a pressing need for a broadcast code of ethics in Egypt given the increasing advancements in technology and the rapidity of news coverage. The highly competitive environment, the pressure to publish first, and the increasingly speedy gathering of news have all led to flaws in news coverage and dissatisfaction with media performance. Some of the violations of media practices include: relying on anonymous sources, interfering in private lives, telling unbalanced stories, and providing opinionated news. Out of this chaotic landscape came the need for a set of standards. Media codes of ethics act as guidelines for journalists and media practitioners with the aim of providing balanced content.

With the technological advancements and the emergence of modern media, most media outlets and media professionals began to look for exciting news that would attract audiences to increase the number of readers, listeners and viewers and thus increase the number of advertisers and profits. Therefore, with the increasing violations in media practices, a code of ethics containing general guidelines for media professionals was introduced.

Egyptian Journalists' Association & Codes of Ethics:

The Egyptian Press Syndicate is the official body governing those working in print media only (<http://www.ejs.org.eg>). Established in 1963, the syndicate is controlled by the Egyptian government. According to the latest figures, the registered members of media professionals are 8951 members; 6127 of which are males and 2824 females. There are 642 trainees who have the right to apply for membership after one year of training (if the journalist is a graduate of journalism), or after two years of training (if he/she is non-journalism graduate).

Broadcasters have never had a syndicate; the only body that brings them together is the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), which was converted into the

National Media Council (NMC) a governmental body whose personnel are considered government employees. With the introduction of a multi-channel service, an initiative has been put forth to establish a broadcast syndicate.

Among the different proposals submitted for the creation of a broadcast syndicate, one called for establishing a quasi-labor union for those working in the NMC. Another aimed to have a large-scale syndicate to include anyone whose job relates to radio and television, including those working in satellite television from an Egyptian base (Alam El Din, 2018).

Yet it was established only in 2017 after many calls from broadcasting professionals seeking a syndicate that would preserve their rights. According to the syndicate, only Egyptian media professionals have the right of membership to the union which defines the broadcaster as "the contact person who carries out the communication process and creates the content of the media message and works in an organization that disseminates these messages to the public." This definition encompasses media practitioners, translators, illustrators, debuggers, collectors, archivists, reporters, and delegates on the condition of high qualification and fixed contracts with public, private or cooperative entities. The General Assembly may add other professions related to the field of media depending on professional development (Al Sayyed, 2018).

A broadcast code of ethics has been a demand for long time, and many proposals were submitted since the launching of the satellite broadcasting system where thousands of channels became available to audiences without a framework of reference that sets out their obligations as well as protects their rights. The main aim behind the development of a code of ethics is the protection of both the communicators and those to whom communication is made.

The development of a broadcast code of ethics stemmed from the belief that broadcast media is in need of being held accountable to a body that prioritizes the public's interest.

As more and more broadcasters tap into social media to leverage its high usage, it became important as well to put more emphasis on maintaining ethical use of social media and engaging its users appropriately.

By outlining such issues, codes give trailheads to industry newcomers by defining the minimal expectations of moral activity, the ideal standards of conduct, and the accepted conventions of behavior (Elliott-Boyle, 1985).

Broadcast Landscape of Egypt:

Egypt has a dual system of public and private broadcasters. The government has an absolute monopoly over the terrestrial broadcasting system. Egypt's public broadcasting system was introduced after the Egyptian 1952 Revolution and is located in the capital, Cairo. The predominant reason for the centralized broadcasting system in Egypt is the government's desire to use it as an arm to guide and mobilize the public, and keep it out of "hostile hands", (Amin, 2000) since radio and television can overcome illiteracy. Although the NMC charter reflects the remits of public broadcaster, yet in practice they are not; it operates as a state broadcaster instead (Abdulla, 2013). Licenses for private radio stations are given on an exceptional basis and private television stations operate only on the satellite platform.

Radio broadcasting, as part of the state-run media in Egypt, began the process of privatization through the launch of Nilesat and the introduction of private radio as part of the overall transnational body of media in Egypt. The second phase of privatization took place in 2003 with the introduction of private terrestrial FM radio stations to Egypt, namely Negoum FM 100.6, an all-Arabic music format, and Nile 104.2 FM, an all-English music station broadcasting 24 hours a day. Both popular stations actively seek advertising and have given a tremendous boost to the radio advertising industry. Other stations were launched later such as Radio 9090 (2011), Radio NRJ (2017), and Radio DRN (2017).

Television is the most popular media platform in Egypt. The state owns two national terrestrial channels, six local channels, and a network of satellite channels, known as the thematic channels (Abdulla, 2013). The television sector operates *under Law 92 for 2016* that stipulates for the establishment of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) to regulate public and private media sectors. The National Media Council (NMC) is responsible for all state radio and television broadcasting. The National Press Council is responsible for national newspapers and magazines (Allam, 2016).

Private satellite television is very popular in Egypt with a high percentage of reach and a major player in the broadcasting sector in the Arab world. *Dream TV* and *El Mehwar* are the first two Egyptian privately owned satellite television stations. They were launched in November 2001 and February 2002 respectively. Both offer a wide variety of programs including political programming that deals with sometimes controversial subjects. Other private satellite stations that were launched few years later are Sada El Balad and Al Hayat TV, and they apply almost the same programming format.

Other private channels were launched after the January 25 revolution, such as the Cairo Broadcasting Corporation CBC (2011), On E (2016), and DMC network (2017). Most of the Egyptian private networks are almost a replica of each other, with a general station that broadcasts the main evening talk show and specialized ones for the niche audiences including news, drama, sports, and cooking. Almost all private stations provide a news bulletin, which was not allowed before 2011 as it was limited to the state radio and television to give the government control over the news agenda. All private stations claim to adopt a political liberal stance, yet the government has its direct and indirect ways of interfering in their content (Abdulla, 2013).

Code of Ethics' Values and Policies Implementations

The Egyptian broadcast code of ethics lays out the core values that broadcasters should abide by to protect society from misinformation. The code prohibits any content that could be considered an incitement to discrimination of any kind, violence, or blasphemy. All religious values and beliefs in the Egyptian society are to be respected.

It urges broadcasters to commit to providing balanced information, ensuring the right of reply equally to all citizens, and refraining from practices that are criminalized by law such as slander, defamation and the violation of the privacy of the individuals. It also urges broadcasters to refrain from ideas that would promote witchcraft, superstition and absenteeism.

The code also reinforces the separation of news and personal opinions, and emphasizes the importance of not confusing the media and advertising material in any form of media content. In addition, the code refers to the promotion of piracy and the commitment to the intellectual property rights.

The broadcast code of ethics includes principles and guidelines that ensure a professional broadcasting platform. As stated before, it was developed after several demands from audiences and media professionals to curtail the unprofessional practices that began to spread after the 2011 revolution with the launch of many private satellite channels.

Noteworthy is that the code of ethics is formulated in a way that prioritizes the welfare of the general public (the listeners and the viewers), over the benefit of advertisers and media professionals. This is unlike other codes that give advantages to media professionals.

Yet, although codes are very clear in setting the values that protect the public interest and ensure a content of public benefit, the fierce competition between media

entities brings about unfavorable outcomes.

Many models of the media code of ethics in developed countries work in collaboration with the regulatory body for a better regulated market. Regulations are mandatory to the broadcasters, and violation of policies expose the broadcasters to cumulative levels of sanctions ranging from warning to license-revoking. Although the code states that the syndicate works with the regulatory body in ensuring the importance of rating the adult programming and providing clear reference to their classification, the two bodies should be integrated on broader issues to embrace all areas of the code of ethics.

Egypt is a transitional democracy where the media has been operating under an authoritarian system for some decades. The establishment of the regulatory bodies is one step towards the independence of the media. However, the mechanism enforced by the regulatory bodies will determine the degree to which the broadcasters will abide by the principles outlined in the code of ethics and the freedoms guaranteed by the constitutions.

It is worth mentioning that although the code of ethics serves the public interest, this requires turning the state broadcaster into a real public service broadcaster. To achieve this the National Media Council (NMC) requires a set of policies: an independent board representing the public; accountability to the legislature rather than government; clear terms of reference for the board which are set out in law; transparent mechanisms for appointing members of the board that are neither controlled by government nor a political party; and a clear public service mandate.

Although the code of ethics is not compulsory, and there are daily breaches and violations every day, they can be more effective when it works in collaboration with the regulatory bodies. The rules, policies, and regulations for all media activities in Egypt are clearly detailed; the relation between the syndicate and the regulator is also defined, yet the scope of power given to the authorities is still wide, which affects the independence of both bodies. A code of ethics does not offer a remedy or solution for all ethical issues, and there is no blueprint to apply. Each country has its own philosophy behind its ethical codes or regulatory body, which is affected by the social, economic, political and legal frameworks. It is important to have a code of ethics, but what is more critical is its application.

At any rate, the arrival of the Broadcast Code of Ethics late is better than never. It is also a positive sign that the published code was presented after it was put up for debate by the expert committee formed to draft it.

It is important to note that the existence of a Broadcast Code of Ethics is directly related to the existence of a Media Broadcast Syndicate, something that many

generations of radio and television workers have fought for decades, and which has finally been achieved. This paves the way for the development and evaluation of media workers' performance and accountability.

It is very hard to believe that the introduction of a code of ethics will completely end the chaos, ineffectiveness and professional decline in broadcast media. Otherwise, the Press code of Ethics, which has been in force since the 1990s by the Press syndicate, would have succeeded in achieving this goal with regard to journalists. However, such a charter can significantly reduce harmful practices although this must come hand in hand with the activation of disciplinary measures in the union, the promotion of social accountability, respect for the law, and activating the role of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation in performing and evaluating media performance.

The critical view of the published Broadcast Code of Ethics indicates that a good effort has been made in its preparation and it is clearly consistent with many of the charters adopted by media groups and/or media syndicates in many countries around the world.

There are, however, certain items that need to be addressed and reviewed so that the code is more consistent with international standards of public information practices. This would lead to a non-politicized code that, rather than remain rooted in a specific political and social context, takes its context as a point of departure for improvement and into one that is more responsive to the current conditions and future benefits.

In the "General Principles" section of the code, the draft refers to the media as a "message." This term has been repeatedly revoked in the world literature and replaced with "industry and profession" because endowing it with an "apostolic" nature places it above the proper accountability and control mechanisms thus opening the door for unprofessional practices.

The preamble also refers to the role of the media in "supporting the internal policies of the state," which reinforces the propaganda function of the media in favor of the executive, which can pursue sometimes controversial national policies.

In the "Obligations" section, the draft charter says "the obligation not to broadcast any news concerning the armed forces or the police except from their official sources" should be replaced with from "reliable sources," because there are many sources that are considered useful other than official sources.

The code has also restricted the media's right not to disclose its sources of information, by adding the phrase "except in relation to national security." This is not mentioned in any code of ethics charter, especially since the term "national security" entails some manipulation of its interpretation, which deprives journalists of this

right completely.

In conclusion, the Broadcast Media Code of Ethics is a kind of media policy. It is a necessary and positive step, and by modifying these controversial clauses, we can have a respectable code of ethics that helps us to reduce the unprofessionalism that comes almost every hour via the unlimited number of radio and television channels that employ thousands of media personnel. These entities and their staff now need to learn about the code of ethics as a new policy governing their performance and protecting their industry.

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