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Navigating the Merciless Space: Hybrid Media Accountability and Professional Adaptation Among Moroccan Journalists

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ABSTRACT

The role of social media in promoting citizen-led media accountability is increasingly studied, however the perspectives of journalists who are the target of this scrutiny remain critically under-explored especially within non-Western, hybrid regimes. This article addresses this gap by investigating how Moroccan journalists perceive, navigate and adapt to the pressures of this new digital public sphere. This study used thematic semi-structured interviews with eight experienced journalists which uncovered a profound ambivalence. They perceived social media as a "double-edged sword": a vital space for dialogue and citizen-led scrutiny, but also a source of relentless pressure that creates a tension between speed and accuracy, challenges editorial independence, and blurs the lines between professional journalism and the influencer economy. The core finding is the journalists' own conceptualization of an emergent Hybrid Accountability Model, where informal, citizen-led pressure on social media acts as an "immediate trigger" that is most effective when it converges with and activates formal institutional mechanisms. This model is characterized by two defining dynamics: contingent convergence, the strategic interplay between informal public pressure and formal institutional power, and perpetual contestation, the ongoing struggle against internal ethical dilemmas and external structural constraints. This research provides a rare, grounded view from within the newsroom, contributing a crucial professional perspective to the de-Westernization of MA theory. It demonstrates how journalistic norms and identities

are being actively renegotiated in response to the complex dynamics of a contested digital ecosystem, which offers a significant empirical operationalization of emerging non-Western theoretical frameworks and a necessary complication of classical Western models of media accountability for the digital age.

Key words : De-Westernization, Hybrid Media Accountability, Journalism, Morocco, Social Media, Professional Identity, Platform Dependency

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital turn has fundamentally reconfigured the power dynamics between media outlets and their audiences, precipitating a paradigm shift in the mechanisms and culture of media accountability. Globally, platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube have evolved from peripheral communication channels into central public spheres for citizen expression. They enable individuals and networked publics to directly challenge, critique, and demand accountability from once-distant media institutions, bypassing traditional intermediaries and gatekeepers. This bottom-up, networked form of oversight represents a profound departure from the conventional, top-down mechanisms of press councils, ombudsmen, and state-sanctioned regulatory bodies that have historically defined the accountability landscape [1].

Yet, for every citizen empowered to speak truth to media power, there is a journalist on the receiving end of that speech. The professional, lived reality of navigating what many

journalists perceive as a new "merciless space" of constant, unmediated, and often vitriolic public scrutiny remains a significant blind spot in media studies, a gap that is particularly pronounced outside the established liberal democracies of the West.

This analytical gap is critically acute in hybrid political regimes, nations that combine the institutional façades of democracy with the underlying practices of authoritarianism. Within these complex political matrices, journalists are tasked with navigating a multiplex of pressures, balancing their professional duties against the constraints of state influence, economic precarity, and now, the unpredictable force of the digital public. Morocco presents a paradigmatic case for investigating this phenomenon. It operates within a media ecosystem historically shaped by significant state influence, a pervasive culture of self-censorship around established "red lines" (the monarchy, religion, territorial integrity), and a history of weak formal accountability institutions [2, 3]. The rapid and widespread adoption of social media has introduced a volatile new variable into this equation, creating both unprecedented opportunities for journalistic outreach and unparalleled exposure to public and state surveillance. This unique crucible makes Morocco a critical site for understanding how foundational journalistic norms and professional identities are being stress-tested, renegotiated, and fundamentally reshaped under the dual pressures of digital mediation and political constraints.

This article addresses this empirical and theoretical gap by turning the analytical lens inward, focusing on the subjective experiences and interpretive frameworks of Moroccan journalists themselves. It posits that journalists are not merely passive recipients of digital critique but are active agents in interpreting, managing, and theorizing their new professional environment. They are, in essence, reluctant ethnographers of their own precarity, developing pragmatic theories of practice to survive and maintain professional integrity in a contested digital ecosystem.

Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight experienced Moroccan journalists from a cross-section of the media landscape, this study reveals that they conceptualize social media through a powerful, ambivalent metaphor: the "double-edged sword." It is a tool that both empowers and endangers, a space for both democratic dialogue and populist mob justice. From their lived experiences, a coherent understanding of a new accountability framework emerges, what this study terms the Hybrid Accountability Model. In this model, the journalists argue, informal, citizen-led pressure on social media platforms functions as a powerful but contingent "immediate trigger." Its ultimate efficacy is not intrinsic but is dependent upon its ability to achieve convergence with the vertical power of formal institutional frames, such as press syndicates or state regulators. This act of convergence transforms diffuse, horizontal public anger into a tangible, institutional threat that media organizations can no longer afford to ignore.

By centering these professional voices, this study provides a rare "insider" view that complements existing macro-level systemic analyses. It empirically grounds and operationalizes emerging de-Westernized frameworks of media accountability, most notably the model proposed by Zaid et al. [4], by providing the procedural mechanics and lived realities that give their framework texture. Furthermore, it refines and extends classical Western processual models, such as Pritchard's [5], for the complexities of the digital age by introducing a new, critical stage of "amplification." Ultimately, this research demonstrates that in the digitally-mediated, hybrid context of Morocco, journalistic norms and identities are not static inheritances but are being actively and often arduously renegotiated. In doing so, it charts the difficult path of what it means to be an accountable professional in a world where everyone has a voice, but not everyone has the same power.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 offers a comprehensive literature review that traces the evolution of accountability theory from its institutional origins, through the digital turn, to the imperative of de-Westernization, culminating in the formal proposal of the Hybrid Accountability Model as the study's primary analytical lens. Section 3 details the qualitative, interpretive methodology employed, outlining the rationale for the research design, participant selection, data collection, and the reflexive thematic analysis process. Section 4 presents the core empirical findings, organized into three thematic clusters that reflect the journalists' experience: the new architecture of accountability, the renegotiation of professional norms, and the structural impact of digital platforms. Section 5 discusses the theoretical implications of these findings, articulating the grounded Hybrid Accountability Model in detail and placing it in dialogue with both Western and de-Westernized scholarship. Finally, Section 6 concludes by summarizing the study's contributions, acknowledging its limitations, and proposing an agenda for future research into the ongoing transformation of journalism's social contract

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF HYBRID ACCOUNTABILITY

The concept of media accountability is a cornerstone of democratic media theory, yet its form and function have been radically transformed by the digital revolution. To adequately frame the experiences of Moroccan journalists, it is necessary to construct a theoretical foundation that bridges classical models, accounts for the dynamics of digital participation, and is sensitive to the political specificities of a non-Western, hybrid regime. This review proceeds in four parts. It begins by examining the crisis of journalistic professionalism, the very identity under pressure. It then traces the evolution of accountability concepts from institutional to digital forms. Subsequently, it addresses the critical scholarly imperative to de-Westernize these concepts. Finally, it synthesizes these streams to formally propose the Hybrid Accountability Model

that guides this study's analysis.

2.1. Journalistic Professionalism Under Pressure: A Crisis of Legitimacy

Historically, journalistic professionalism has been anchored in a set of core tenets that constitute its jurisdictional claim over the production and dissemination of public knowledge: autonomy from external pressures, objectivity as a normative ideal, and a gatekeeping role in managing the flow of information [6]. This professional ideology provided a "strategic ritual" that both guided practice and legitimized journalism's societal function as the Fourth Estate.

The digital environment, however, has systematically eroded these foundational pillars. The rise of user-generated content and the disintermediation of information flows mean that citizens can now publish directly, bypassing journalistic intermediaries entirely [7]. This circumvention has profoundly challenged journalism's gatekeeping authority and has thrust the profession into what many scholars have termed a "crisis of legitimacy" [8]. In response to this existential threat, journalists often engage in "boundary work", discursive and practical efforts to distinguish their professional practices from those of amateurs, bloggers, and social media influencers [9]. This can manifest as a form of "defensive professionalism," a reassertion of traditional norms and values in the face of external challenges. However, it can also lead to normative adaptation, as journalists begin to incorporate new values like transparency, interactivity, and collaborative verification into their professional identities. The Moroccan context adds another layer of complexity, as this global professional crisis intersects with local pressures of state control and economic precarity, forcing journalists to perform boundary work not only against digital newcomers but also against state-aligned actors and the structural limitations of their own media system.

2.2. Conceptualizing Accountability: From Institutional Frames to Digital Flows

Media accountability (MA) refers to the multifaceted processes by which media organizations answer to society for their work and its consequences [1]. Early and influential scholarships sought to map the architecture of these processes. Denis McQuail's (2003) foundational work distinguished between voluntary accountability (driven by internal ethics) and involuntary accountability (imposed by law and market), and between a "liability model" (based on legal redress) and an "answerability model" (based on dialogue and justification). Claude-Jean Bertrand (2000) [10] further developed this by advocating for a rich ecosystem of non-state "Media Accountability Systems" (MAS), while Torbjörn Von Krogh (2012) [11] conceptualized accountability as an interactive process shaped by four constantly interacting "frames": the Political/Legal, the Market, the Professional, and the Public.

The digital turn has dramatically elevated the power and influence of Von Krogh's 'Public Frame' [11]. Participatory platforms have enabled a more direct, distributed, and accelerated form of public oversight, giving rise to phenomena like "ambient accountability" [12], where the constant potential for public scrutiny disciplines journalistic practice in real-time. To understand the lifecycle of these digital accountability demands, processual models are particularly useful. David Pritchard's [5] classic sequence of "Naming" (identifying a transgression), "Blaming" (assigning responsibility), and "Claiming" (demanding a remedy) provides a useful analytical spine for tracing a specific grievance. However, these linear models, developed in a pre-digital era, may not fully capture the recursive, viral, and intensely affective dynamics of digital outrage, which often relies more on emotional resonance and networked amplification than on deliberative procedure.

2.3. The Imperative of De-Westernizing Accountability

A significant and long-standing limitation of foundational media theory is its profound Western-centric orientation. Scholars like Curran and Park [13] issued a seminal call for the "de-Westernization" of media studies, arguing that concepts like the "Fourth Estate" or the "public sphere" are rooted in specific historical and political trajectories and cannot be uncritically exported as universal benchmarks. Applying these frameworks to non-Western contexts often results in a "deficit model" analysis, which measures these systems by what they lack (e.g., a fully independent press) rather than understanding them on their own terms and within their own political logic.

The conceptual model for MA in non-Western contexts proposed by Zaid et al. [4] is particularly salient to this study. Their framework, developed with the Moroccan case in mind, is built on three core insights that move beyond the deficit model. First, they posit a constant "dialectic of enabling and deterrent factors," recognizing that the same digital tools that enable citizen expression are also used by the state for surveillance and control. Second, they identify an "ascendant role of the public as watchdog," arguing that in contexts with weak formal institutions, the digital public often becomes the primary agent of accountability. Third, they highlight a unique "interplay of accountability frames" where the state's Political/Legal frame is not a neutral arbiter but often a dominant and coercive force that shapes the actions of all other actors. This article uses the Zaid et al. model [4] as its primary theoretical anchor, aiming to provide the qualitative, "insider" data necessary to operationalize their systemic framework, giving it empirical texture and procedural depth through the lived experiences of journalists.

2.4. A Proposed Theoretical Framework: The Hybrid Accountability Model

Synthesizing the insights from the crisis of professionalism, the evolution of accountability theory, and the de-Westernization imperative, this study proposes a **Hybrid**

Accountability Model as its core analytical framework. This model, which is empirically derived from the journalists' own articulations, conceptualizes media accountability in a context like Morocco not as a static set of institutions but as a dynamic, contested, and relational process. It is defined by the strategic and often tense interplay between the informal, horizontal power of the digital **Public Frame** and the formal, vertical power of the **Professional Frame** (press bodies, journalistic norms) and the **Institutional/Legal Frame** (state regulators, laws).

The model's central mechanic is **convergence**. It posits that the accountability process is typically initiated within the Public Frame, with citizen-led scrutiny on social media acting as an "immediate trigger." However, this informal pressure is often diffuse and ephemeral. Its power to effect meaningful change is contingent upon its ability to successfully bridge to and activate the formal mechanisms of the other frames. This convergence transforms public outrage into institutional action, creating a force that media organizations find difficult to resist. This entire process unfolds within a structural context shaped by the dual forces of state power and platform dependency, creating an ecosystem of **perpetual contestation**. This model provides the analytical lens through which the empirical findings of this study will be interpreted and understood.

3. METHODOLOGY

To explore the nuanced perceptions, lived experiences, and professional logics of Moroccan journalists, this study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design. The philosophical foundation of this inquiry is rooted in interpretivism, a paradigm that posits that social reality is not an objective, external entity but is actively constructed and interpreted by individuals through their interactions and lived experiences [14]. This perspective is particularly germane to studying media accountability, which is not a static set of rules but a dynamic, socially negotiated concept. The aim is to move beyond surface-level descriptions of social media's impact and delve into the intricate ways journalists make sense of their evolving roles, a goal best achieved through methods that prioritize depth and meaning. The ultimate objective is to generate what Geertz (1973) [15] famously termed "thick description": a detailed account not merely of behaviors, but of the layers of meaning, intention, and context that surround them.

3.1. Research Context and Design

The unique media milieu of Morocco profoundly shaped the research design. As established in the literature review, Morocco's system of "managed pluralism" creates a persistent tension between forces of liberalization and structures of control [4]. This complex environment, where a tweet or a post can lead to both public acclaim and state scrutiny, required a methodological approach sensitive to context and potential participant risk. The semi-structured interview was chosen as the primary data collection method, as it combines

the consistency of a pre-determined interview guide with the flexibility to probe for deeper meanings, follow emergent themes, and allow participants to elaborate on issues they deem important [16].

3.2. Participant Selection and Recruitment

Given the study's focus on generating in-depth, expert knowledge, a **purposive sampling** strategy was utilized to select participants [17]. The objective was not to create a statistically representative sample of all Moroccan journalists but to recruit a small, information-rich cohort whose diverse professional experiences could provide deep insights into the phenomenon. This non-probability sampling technique is a hallmark of qualitative research, prioritizing depth of understanding over breadth of generalization.

Inclusion criteria were developed to ensure the sample was both relevant and varied. To be included, individuals had to: (1) be currently employed or recently have been employed as a professional journalist in Morocco; (2) possess a minimum of five years of professional experience to ensure a longitudinal perspective; (3) be actively engaged with social media platforms as part of their professional practice; and (4) demonstrate a capacity for reflective and critical thought on their profession.

To capture the hybridity of the Moroccan media system, a **maximum variation** strategy guided the selection, ensuring a balanced sample that included journalists from:

Legacy Media Outlets: Including state-influenced broadcasters and traditional print newspapers (both Arabic and French-language).

Digital-Native Outlets: Including journalists from prominent online news portals.

Varied Professional Roles: The sample included reporters, senior editors, and media managers to capture perspectives from different levels of the newsroom hierarchy.

Potential participants were identified through a combination of methods, including reviewing author bylines in prominent Moroccan media outlets, consulting the researcher's existing professional networks, and employing a supplementary snowball sampling technique. Initial contact was made via professional email or direct messages on professional as well as personal networking platforms. Out of approximately 20 journalists who were approached, eight agreed to participate. The final sample consisted of eight highly experienced journalists, whose profiles were anonymized to protect their identities. While the sample size (N=8) is compact, it was determined based on the principle of 'information power' [18] rather than statistical representativeness. Given the specific aim to explore professional adaptation within a niche hybrid regime, and the high quality of dialogue established with experienced practitioners, the sample provided sufficient 'information power' to develop a robust theoretical model.

Furthermore, data saturation was observed by the seventh interview, confirming the adequacy of the sample size for this phenomenological inquiry.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted remotely via the encrypted messaging application WhatsApp between January and September 2025. An interview guide was developed based on the research questions and key concepts from the literature review (see Appendix A). The guide was structured around several key "domains of inquiry" rather than a rigid list of questions, including: general perceptions of social media's role, dynamics of audience interaction, ethical challenges, and the interplay with formal accountability mechanisms. The guide was pilot-tested with a journalism post-graduate student to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness. All interviews were conducted in either Moroccan Arabic (Darija) or Modern Standard Arabic, the professional languages of the participants.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the principles of **Reflexive Thematic Analysis**, following the rigorous, six-phase framework systematically outlined by Braun and Clarke [19]. This approach is ideal for this study as it values the researcher's active, interpretive role in the co-construction of meaning while demanding systematicity and transparency. The process was managed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA (Version 2020) and involved the following phases:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** Deep immersion in the data through transcription of the audio interview and repeated reading of all transcripts.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Systematic, line-by-line inductive coding of the entire dataset to identify features of the data relevant to the research question.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Collating the generated codes into potential broader themes and patterns of shared meaning.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** A two-level process of refining the themes, first by checking their internal coherence and then by validating the overall thematic map against the complete dataset.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Finalizing the name and scope of each theme and writing a detailed analysis.
6. **Producing the Report:** Weaving the analyzed themes into a coherent and persuasive analytical narrative, supported by compelling quotes from the data.

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Researcher Reflexivity

This research was guided by a commitment to the highest ethical standards of academic inquiry. The study's ethical integrity was ensured through several key protocols. Foremost

among these was informed consent; all participants were provided with a clear explanation of the research objectives and their rights before agreeing to be interviewed. To protect the participants, strict anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by using pseudonyms and carefully wording the analysis to avoid "deductive disclosure." All digital data were kept secure on encrypted, password-protected devices.

The study also incorporates the principle of researcher reflexivity. Recognizing our positionality as both "insiders" and "outsiders" to the context, we maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research. This practice served to document analytical decisions and consciously challenge personal biases, which reinforces the trustworthiness and credibility of the final analysis.

4. RESULTS: THE JOURNALISTS' VIEW

The thematic analysis of the interviews reveals a complex, ambivalent, and deeply nuanced relationship between Moroccan journalists and the social media platforms that now dominate their professional environment. Far from viewing social media as a monolithic force for either good or ill, the participants articulated a sophisticated understanding of its dual nature. The findings are organized into three overarching clusters that reflect the core dimensions of the journalistic experience: the fundamental shift in the architecture of accountability, the ongoing renegotiation of professional norms and practices, and the structural realities of platform dependency. A summary of the emergent themes is provided in Table 1.

Journalists' Perceptions of Hybrid Accountability

4.1. Cluster 1: The New Architecture of Accountability

This cluster explores the journalists' perception of a fundamental structural shift in the mechanisms of accountability, moving from a hierarchical, top-down model to an interactive, citizen-driven one.

Theme A: Dialogue and Feedback Loops: All eight interviewees identified social media as a primary, and often unmediated, channel for direct dialogue with their audience. This has transformed the communication model from a monologue to a continuous, reciprocal feedback loop. As Journalist 1, a senior editor at a digital-native outlet, explained: *"Before, you published the article, and that was the end. Now, the moment you publish, the conversation begins. Your comment section, your DMs... they become a live, breathing space."* This immediacy creates a sense of constant visibility and answerability.

Theme B: Citizen-Led Scrutiny and Corrective Pressure: This dialogue frequently escalates into active scrutiny. Six of the eight journalists emphasized that this public pressure is not merely conversational but has a tangible, corrective force, compelling media organizations to act. This ranges from

correcting minor factual errors to demanding apologies for significant ethical lapses. Journalist 8 recounted a potent

Table 1: Thematic Framework of Thematic Framework of Cluster & Theme

Cluster & Theme	Definition / Core Concept	Illustrative Quote (Translated)
Cluster 1: The New Architecture of Accountability		
A. Dialogue & Feedback Loops	The recognition of social media as a primary channel for direct, two-way communication.	"Social media platforms provide opportunities for the audience to interact directly... promoting two-way communication." (Journalist 1)
B. Citizen-Led Scrutiny	Audiences actively applying corrective pressure on media organizations.	"A culturally insensitive remark led the broadcaster to issue an apology after users demanded accountability." (Journalist 8)
C. Complementarity with Formal Accountability	The conceptualization of a process where informal social media pressure ("the trigger") converges with formal institutions.	"Social media is shaping a new form of public accountability but does not fully replace traditional mechanisms yet. Both must coexist." (Journalist 4)
Cluster 2: Renegotiating Professional Practices		
D. The Speed-Accuracy Tension	The core conflict between the pressure for immediate publication and the duty of thorough verification.	"Better to be second and right than first and wrong." (Journalist 7)
E. Editorial Autonomy	The assertion of the professional right to make final editorial decisions, independent of direct audience pressure.	"We listen to the audience, but final editorial choices remain ours." (Journalist 5)
F. Professional Identity vs. Influencer Economy	The boundary work to distinguish credibility-based journalism from the virality-driven influencer economy.	"The influencer is not a journalist and does not possess the required professionalism." (Journalist 2)
Cluster 3: The Duality of Platform Structures		
G. Affordances and Constraints	The perception of platforms as a "double-edged sword," offering tools for engagement while posing systemic risks.	"The platforms may sometimes be a 'directed electronic swarm.'... everyone is aware of this." (Journalist 2)
H. Analytics-Driven Pressure	The nascent use of platform metrics as quantitative feedback that informs editorial content.	"...through statistics, we can learn to what extent this media content has reached its audience..." (Journalist 6)

example: *"We had a guest who made a culturally insensitive remark. The backlash online was immediate and massive. Hashtags trended. By the afternoon, the pressure was so intense that the station had no choice but to issue a formal apology on its social media channels and on-air. The public acted as a collective force."* This demonstrates a clear power shift, where the public now actively wields the tools of social media to enforce its own standards of fairness and accuracy.

Theme C: Complementarity with Formal Accountability: Crucially, the journalists did not see this new citizen-led scrutiny as a complete replacement for formal institutions. Instead, five participants articulated a sophisticated

understanding of an emerging hybrid model. In this conceptualization, social media functions as an **"immediate trigger,"** an early warning system that brings an issue to public and institutional attention. However, its power is most potent when it connects with formal bodies, which provide the **"procedural follow-up."** Journalist 4, an investigative reporter, described this symbiosis: *"Let's be honest, a formal complaint to the CNP [National Press Council] can take months. But a viral hashtag can put an issue on the national agenda in hours. Social media creates the urgency. It forces them to pay attention. The public outcry is the spark, and the formal complaint becomes the procedural follow-up."* This theme represents the journalists' own grounded theory of how accountability now functions in Morocco: a contingent process reliant on the convergence of informal and formal power.

4.2. Cluster 2: Renegotiating Professional Practices

This cluster addresses how these new accountability dynamics are forcing a profound and often difficult renegotiation of core journalistic norms and professional identities. This is the internal, reflexive dimension of the hybrid model.

Theme D: The Speed-Accuracy Tension: The most significant ethical conflict, mentioned by six journalists, is the relentless tension between the demand for speed and the professional duty of verification. The 24/7 news cycle and the algorithmic rewards for immediacy create intense pressure to publish first. Journalist 1 described this as a "constant battle," leading his newsroom to adopt a clear recommitment to a core principle: *"The golden rule in this environment is 'verify first, publish second.'" But every fiber of the digital ecosystem pushes you to do the opposite. Resisting that urge is the single greatest ethical challenge we face."*

Theme E: Editorial Independence: While valuing feedback, four journalists drew a firm line at ceding ultimate editorial control, warning against the dangers of "over-responsiveness" to popular pressure. They articulated a need to defend their professional judgment against what one called the "digital mob." The veteran correspondent, Journalist 5, articulated this delicate balancing act: *"We listen to the audience, absolutely. We have to. But our final editorial choices must remain ours. Our job is not to reflect popular opinion, but to report the facts, even when they are unpopular. There is a real danger of journalism becoming a slave to the 'likes' and the 'shares'."*

Theme F: Professional Identity vs. Influencer Economy: Three journalists expressed deep concern over the blurring of lines between professional journalism and the influencer economy, which they view as a direct threat to journalistic credibility. The pressure to build a personal brand, to be performative, and to chase metrics like followers and views can conflict with traditional values of objectivity and public service. Journalist 2, from a state-influenced broadcaster, was adamant in his boundary work: *"The influencer is not a journalist and does not possess the required professionalism. Their goal is virality; our goal, or what it should be, is truth."*

This reflects a broader professional anxiety about the erosion of journalism's unique jurisdiction and identity in a crowded media landscape.

4.3. Cluster 3: The Duality of Platform Structures

This final cluster focuses on the journalists' perceptions of the platforms themselves, revealing a deep understanding of the structural context in which these accountability dynamics unfold.

Theme G: Affordances and Constraints: Five journalists explicitly framed social media platforms as a **"double-edged sword."** They are indispensable tools for engagement, sourcing, and reaching diverse audiences; however, they simultaneously pose systemic risks. Journalists are acutely aware that they are operating on terrain they do not control, subject to opaque algorithms that can suppress important work and amplify misinformation. Furthermore, they recognize that the same platforms used for legitimate public scrutiny are also weaponized for malicious campaigns. Journalist 7, a freelance analyst, warned of orchestrated **"directed electronic swarm"** campaigns (a local term for pro-regime online trolls) that create a "chilling effect," discouraging reporting on sensitive subjects for fear of attracting a coordinated attack.

Theme H: Analytics-Driven Pressure: A more subtle, emerging form of accountability was identified by two journalists, who pointed to the growing influence of platform metrics. Analytics dashboards, which provide real-time data on article views, engagement rates, and audience demographics, are becoming a powerful feedback tool. As Journalist 6 noted, "...through statistics, we can learn to what extent this media content has reached its audience..." While this can be used to better serve the public, it also introduces a market-driven pressure that can subtly shape editorial decisions, prioritizing content that is likely to perform well on platforms over content that is in the public interest but less "clickable."

5. DISCUSSION

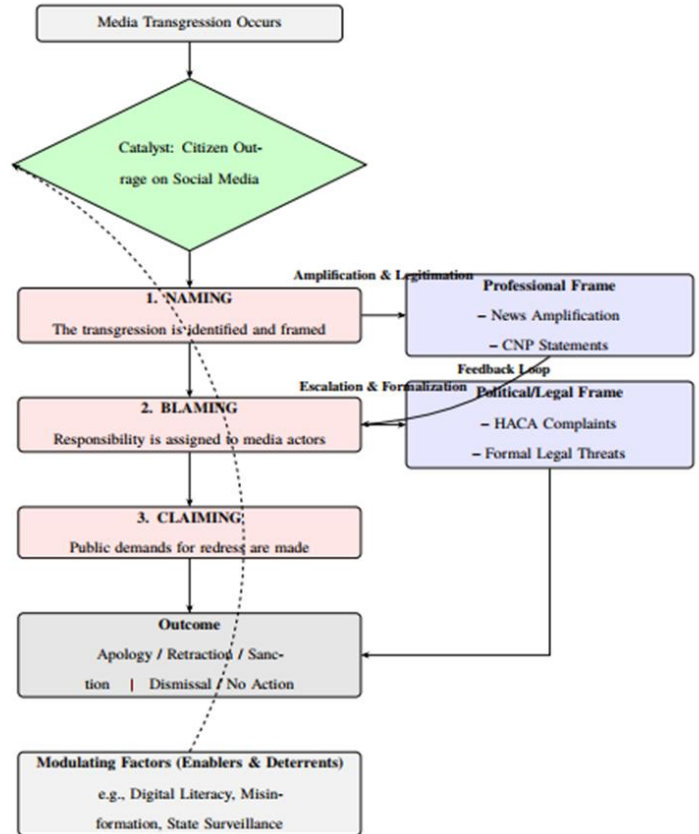
The empirical findings provide a rich, grounded basis for a nuanced theory of media accountability and professional adaptation in a hybrid regime. This discussion synthesizes the emergent themes to formally articulate the **Hybrid Accountability Model**, placing this journalist-derived framework into a direct and critical dialogue with broader media theory. It argues that the model offers three significant contributions: it provides a coherent, process-oriented framework for understanding accountability in a contested digital ecosystem; it serves as a vital micro-level "insider's" contribution to the de-Westernization of media theory; and it actively extends and complicates foundational Western-centric theories, adapting them for the digital and non-democratic age.

5.1. A Grounded Hybrid Accountability Model: Convergence, Contestation, and Amplification

The most significant theoretical contribution emerging from the interviews is the coherent articulation of a Hybrid Accountability Model, whose core mechanic is **convergence**. The journalists' narratives demonstrate a clear, predictable process. As depicted in the process model below (Figure 1), this cycle is typically initiated by a perceived media transgression.

The process begins with a **Catalyst**: citizen outrage that erupts on social media, functioning as what the journalists termed the "immediate trigger." This outrage performs the initial acts of **1. NAMING**, where the transgression is identified and framed, and **2. BLAMING**, where responsibility is assigned to specific media actors. However, this informal, horizontal pressure is often insufficient on its own. The pivotal moment, the core of the hybrid model, occurs during the **Amplification & Legitimation** phase. This is where a strategic "bridge" is built to formal, vertical power structures. This can happen in two primary ways:

Figure 1: A Grounded Process Model of the Hybrid Media Accountability Process in Morocco (This model, developed for the current study, is an adaptation of a framework first proposed in the doctoral dissertation of the first author [20].)



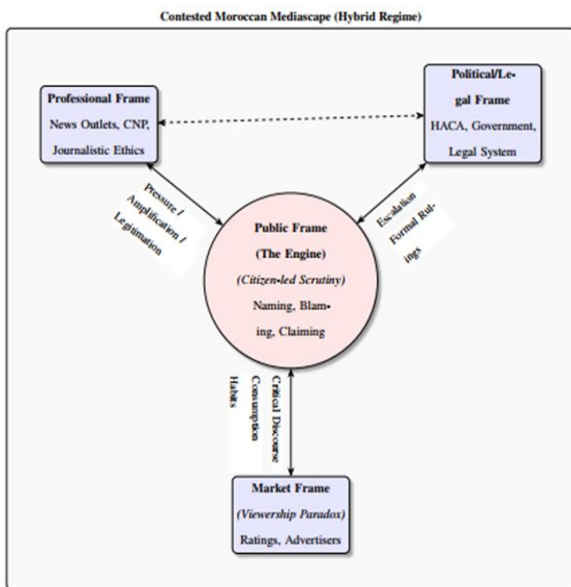
- **Convergence with the Professional Frame:** Other news outlets pick up the story of the public outrage, amplifying it and lending it journalistic legitimacy. Press syndicates or professional bodies like the National Press Council (CNP) may issue statements, further validating the public's grievance.
- **Convergence with the Political/Legal Frame:** The public pressure escalates to a point where formal complaints are filed with regulators like the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA), or the threat of legal action is introduced.

This act of convergence transforms diffuse public anger into a tangible institutional threat, making the **3. CLAIMING** stage, where demands for redress are made, far more potent. The final **Outcome** can range from an apology or retraction to institutional sanction, or, if convergence fails, dismissal and no action. This entire process is modulated by contextual factors, such as the public's digital literacy, the prevalence of state-sponsored disinformation, and the ever-present threat of state surveillance.

This process can also be visualized as an ecosystem (Figure 2), where the Public Frame acts as the central engine, exerting constant pressure on the other frames, which in turn push back with their own institutional logics and constraints.

Figure 2: The Ecosystem Model of Hybrid Media Accountability

(This model was developed from the thematic analysis for this research, building on an earlier framework presented in Elboukhari [20].)



5.2. An Insider's Contribution to De-Westernized Theory

This journalist-grounded model provides a vital micro-level operationalization of macro-level systemic

theories, particularly the de-Westernized framework of Zaid et al. [4]. Where their model identifies abstract concepts, the journalists' testimonies provide the procedural mechanics and lived realities.

- **The "Dialectic of Enabling and Deterrent Factors":** Zaid et al.'s concept finds its empirical voice in the journalists' "double-edged sword" metaphor. The enabling factors are the affordances for dialogue and scrutiny; the deterrent factors are the lived fears of "directed electronic swarms" and the "chilling effect" of potential state reprisal.
- **The "Ascendant Role of the Public as Watchdog":** This research confirms this ascendancy but adds crucial nuance. The public's power is not constant but is contingent and affective, mobilized most powerfully by transgressions that touch on deeply held collective values.
- **The "Interplay of Accountability Frames":** The journalists' conceptualization of the hybrid model provides a clear procedural map for this interplay. It shows *how* these frames are strategically linked through the process of convergence, moving beyond a description of coexistence to an explanation of strategic interaction.

By providing this rich, empirically grounded operationalization, this study transforms the theoretical framework of Zaid et al. into a more robust and analytically powerful tool for understanding other hybrid media systems across the Global South.

5.3. Extending and Complicating Western Theories

This research does not simply discard Western theories but actively refines and extends them, testing their assumptions against the empirical reality of the Moroccan context.

- **Extending Processual Models:** The findings offer a powerful empirical update to Pritchard's [5] "Naming, Blaming, and Claiming" model. The research argues that in the digital age, a fourth, recursive stage must be added: **"Amplifying."** This stage, defined by the "social media-to-news amplification loop," is the engine that sustains and legitimizes accountability demands, giving them the critical mass necessary to succeed. The amplification of the grievance is as important as its initial articulation.
- **Challenging the Habermasian Ideal:** The journalists' descriptions of the digital environment, as a "deluge" of insults, conspiracy theories, and emotionally charged posts, provide a robust empirical critique of the classic Habermasian ideal of a single, rational-critical public sphere. Their experiences resonate far more with theories of an

affective public sphere, where emotion, shared sentiment, and collective identity are the primary drivers of mobilization [21]. Accountability, in this context, is often enacted through affective mobilization rather than purely deliberative processes.

Inverting Social Responsibility Theory: The findings effectively invert the traditional logic of Social Responsibility Theory. The theory posits that media self-regulate in the public interest to maintain autonomy and forestall government intervention. In the Moroccan context, where media outlets are often constrained by the state, accountability is frequently not a gift from self-regulating media; it is a **demand enacted by citizens against media outlets** perceived to have failed in their public duty. The public, enabled by social media, steps into the institutional vacuum, positioning itself as an external enforcer of the very professional norms the media are meant to uphold.

6. CONCLUSION

This study embarked on an exploration of the under-examined perspective of journalists as they navigate the complex and often perilous terrain of digital media accountability. By centering their lived experiences, the research moves beyond simplistic binaries to reveal a profession in profound transformation. The findings demonstrate that Moroccan journalists are not passive victims of digital disruption but are active theorists of their own condition. They are consciously articulating a pragmatic **Hybrid Accountability Model**, where potent outcomes arise from the strategic convergence of informal citizen pressure and formal institutional response. Simultaneously, they are developing adaptive professional protocols such as a renewed commitment to verification and a defense of editorial autonomy to uphold core journalistic values in a volatile digital environment.

The theoretical contribution of this study is threefold. First, it provides a rare, qualitative **insider account from the MENA region**, offering a crucial professional perspective that enriches the de-Westernization of media studies. Second, it offers a grounded, process-oriented hybrid model that empirically validates, operationalizes, and extends emerging de-Westernized frameworks like that of Zaid et al. [4]. Third, it contributes to the broader study of journalistic professionalism and media theory by documenting a compelling case of real-time normative adaptation and by proposing necessary extensions to foundational Western theories, most notably the addition of an "Amplifying" stage to processual models and the inversion of Social Responsibility Theory for hybrid contexts.

This study is not without its limitations. The small, purposive sample, while providing analytical depth, does not allow for statistical generalizability. The focus on journalists' perceptions provides one crucial side of the story, but not the whole picture. These limitations, however, illuminate clear paths for future research. Comparative studies in other hybrid

regimes could test the applicability of the Hybrid Accountability Model. Longitudinal ethnographic research inside Moroccan newsrooms is needed to observe these negotiations in practice. Broader surveys could quantify the pressures journalists face and map their adaptive strategies on a larger scale.

In the final analysis, the rise of social media has not marked the end of media accountability, nor has it delivered a simple technological utopia. Instead, it has ushered in an era of unprecedented complexity, forcing a fundamental reconfiguration of power and responsibility. The journalists in this study are on the front lines of this transformation, charting the difficult path of how to be accountable in a world where everyone has a voice. Their narratives paint a picture of a profession actively, and often painfully, negotiating a new social contract for the digital age; a negotiation that is not a settled destination but an ongoing, fluid, and vital struggle.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Definition of Media Accountability (Provided to participants for context):

Media accountability refers to the responsibility of media outlets to provide accurate and reliable information to the public and to be held accountable for their actions and decisions. This includes being accountable to the public, ensuring good governance, and providing a platform for democratic initiative and exchange of opinions.

Interview Questions:

1. In Morocco, what role do social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, X, and Instagram play in enhancing dialogue between official media institutions and journalists on one hand, and their audience on the other hand?
2. How can Moroccan social media users contribute to discussing Moroccan media content on social media?
3. How effective are the tools provided by these platforms in helping users participate in expressing their opinions on content presented by Moroccan media?
4. Have you encountered or participated in discussions about Moroccan media content on Facebook and YouTube pages, groups, or channels?
5. Are there cases or examples where social media users have corrected specific content or caused media institutions or individuals associated with the media to apologize for intentional or unintentional statements or actions?

6. Do you think media institutions take into account user comments on the presented content?
7. Do you believe that social media will replace traditional media accountability mechanisms, such as the National Press Council, the HACA ombudsmen, and internal regulations of these institutions, or will it not reach that level?
8. How has the increased use of social media platforms affected the dynamics of media accountability for journalists in Morocco?
9. To what extent do you think public opinions and comments contribute to shaping the responsibility of Moroccan journalists today?
10. In the era of instant news dissemination, how can a balance be achieved between the need for speed and responsibility to ensure accurate and accountable reporting?

Appendix B: Sample Translated Interview Transcripts

Interviewee: Journalist 8

Date of Interview: [July 16, 2025]

Method: Semi-structured interview

Question 1: In Morocco, what role do social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube play in enhancing dialogue between official media institutions in Morocco and journalists on one hand, and their audience on the other hand?

Answer: In Morocco, Facebook and YouTube have become vital bridges between official media outlets (TV, radio, newspapers) and the public. Media institutions increasingly post content—news clips, short reports, talk shows—on Facebook and YouTube. These platforms allow audiences to comment directly, share opinions, ask questions, and react in real time. This fosters an informal, immediate channel of dialogue outside traditional letters-to-the-editor or call-in programs.

Question 5: Are there cases or examples where social media users have corrected specific content or caused media institutions or individuals associated with the media to apologize for intentional or unintentional statements or actions?

Answer: Although not always formally documented, there have indeed been cases where social media pressure has elicited corrections or apologies. For instance: A media outlet posted incorrect figures, and the comment section erupted with corrections, prompting the outlet to publish a follow-up clarification. In one case, a host made a culturally insensitive remark, sparking backlash on Facebook that led the broadcaster to issue an apology both online and on air.

Question 7: Do you believe that social media will replace traditional media accountability mechanisms...?

Answer: Not entirely. Traditional structures—like the National Press Council, ombudsmen, and internal editorial codes—still serve essential functions: investigations, retractions, and formal disciplinary measures. Social media adds a layer of public, real-time accountability, democratizing feedback—but it lacks procedural rigor. In essence, both systems can complement each other: social media for immediacy, institutional mechanisms for structure and follow-through.

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