

REGULATING CHILDREN'S MEDIA CONTENT IN MOROCCO

POLICY PAPER BY

Tarik Sabry

University of Westminster

Sabryt@westminster.ac.uk

Hicham Ait Mansour

Mohammed- V University In Rabat

Hicham.aitmansour@um5.ac.ma



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Summary

The present policy paper aims to inform the public and policy debate in Morocco on the regulation of children's media in the digital age. It is an output of a collaboration between two researchers from Mohamed V University's sociology department in Rabat, Morocco and the University of Westminster's Communication and Media Research institute, a world leading university in media research. The collaboration is part of a British Academy mobility scheme, designed to foster dialogue and research collaborations between UK researchers and the international academic community.

This paper aims to foster a public debate in Morocco around the regulation of Moroccan children's screen media content. In order to do this, developing a policy community in Morocco, comprising of different stakeholders including academics, media regulators, media producers, educationists and members of civil society groups is a necessary step.

Based on ethnographic research findings (2015, 2019) conducted by Dr Tarik Sabry and Dr Nisrine Mansour of the university of Westminster which explored how Moroccan children aged between 7 and 12 used and engaged with screen media texts¹, and on the outcome of three workshops organized in London and in Rabat, including media regulators, media academics and media producers from both Morocco and the UK, this paper argues that the regulation framework in Morocco is mainly protectionist, thus overlooking the relationship between provision of appropriate content and participation as well as protection. The paper identifies three key problems facing the regulation of children's content in Morocco. These, in turn, we argue are the product of three key deficits:

I. The theoretical deficit

After having studied key regulatory and research initiatives led by the two key media regulators in Morocco HACA and ANRT and after our engagement in workshop discussions both in Morocco and in the UK with different stakeholders with interest

1. Sabry, Tarik and Mansour, Nisrine (2019) *Children and Screen Media in Changing Arab Contexts: An Ethnographic Perspective*, London: Palgrave <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783030043209>

in children's media and regulation, it became clear to us that media regulatory debate in Morocco is too media-centric. Therefore, it tends to ignore wider and fundamental socio-cultural determinants such as lived experience and everyday life. We've also noted that the theoretical debate around childhood and children audiences is deeply entrenched in outdated theories and modalities (both explicit and implicit) of thinking about media audiences. Media regulatory frameworks in Morocco are, in the main, inspired by positivistic models of media effects which privilege protectionism over creativity, reflexivity and agency. Children in the digital age are not just mere passive recipients of media texts; they are also producers of media content and members of online communities engaging in complex forms of communication that have yet to be studied systematically.

II. The methodological deficit

The methodological and theoretical deficits are strongly linked. From our workshop discussions in Rabat and London with different stakeholders and after listening to and studying recent research initiatives conducted by HACA and ANRT it became clear to us that policy on children's media content in Morocco is largely driven by survey research. It is also influenced by an outmoded theoretical framework that frames the concepts of childhood and youth within discourses of paternalism and victimization. This theoretical deficit has serious repercussions for methodology. The fact that no research funding has as of yet been invested by the Moroccan media regulators into ethnographic studies of children's media uses is suggestive of a research culture that treats children and their experiences as being inadequate. This is tied to an outmoded theoretical wisdom that could be traced back to Jean Piaget (1926, 1929) that a universal individual must develop through particular stages before reaching adult maturity.

We for example learn from ANRT's 2017 national survey that Moroccan children's media consumption is increasingly taking place over the mobile phone. We also learn from a 2014 *Maroc Numeric Cluster/Averty* study, based on 1000 respondents, that 82 percent of social media uses in Morocco are for the purpose of accessing information. However, survey data of this kind, either demonstrating shifts in media technology access or shifts in audience patterns does not, by itself, teach us much about how children audiences decode texts, nor does it teach us much about children's lived

experiences, habitus or sociocultural environment and most importantly what the children themselves think of the media and their world. Lack in ethnographic research on children and the media (which is endemic across the Arab world and not just in Morocco) is symptomatic of a deficit in theory and methodology. Thus, it has major consequences for policy and media regulation in Morocco.

III. Lack of continuity within media regulatory institutions

We have learnt from discussions with both ex and current media regulators at HACA that periodic changes in personnel in HACA contributes to lack of continuity at the level of research and policy and seriously impedes the development of a more coherent and systematic regulatory framework focusing on children and their media uses.

In order to deal with these three deficits, this paper recommends the creation of a sustainable media policy community in Morocco that would help policy makers in Morocco to provide appropriate guidance, regulation and policy that favours the emancipation of children and youth especially in this age of digital media where children and youth no longer only consume but also produce and share content.

The paper has three main sections:

- 1. Ethnographic research findings (2015, 2019): Moroccan children and screen media**
- 2. Problems and Recommended Actions:**
 - a. Defining the Concept Childhood in Morocco
 - b. Moroccan Media Regulation and the Dominant Paradigm
 - c. Research Methods and Media Policy.
- 3. General recommendations**

1. **Ethnographic Research Morocco (2015)**

- Findings from ethnographic research conducted in Casablanca (2015, 2019) led by Dr Tarik Sabry from the University of Westminster, with children between the ages of 7 and 12 from different social strata revealed the importance of moving beyond a media-centred approach to researching children audiences. Contrary to the protectionist media effects framework, research evidence emerging from Morocco showed Child respondents to be active interpreters of their realities rather than passive victims of media content.
- The ethnography included four workshops and family visits lasting three weeks. A total of 35 children took part in the ethnographic research. Media uses diaries were completed by the children over a period of three weeks.
- Since the bulk of the respondents' media use cut across different media platforms and technologies, and since many of the children were themselves not only consumers but creators of content, it was imperative for us to reconceptualise children as bricoleurs of cultural meanings who are positioned at the symbiotic interface between their media worlds and lived experiences.
- Moroccan children grounded themselves within the local socio-cultural environment despite the overwhelming consumption of an array of western and/or programmes from the Arab region.
- Moroccan children's viewing diaries demonstrated a varied and rich experience of online and offline media consumption. They showed us clearly that MBC and its various channels (MBC1, MBC2, MBC3) attracted more children than Al-Jazeera or any local media.
- Moroccan children watch mainly imported media content for entertainment and news. The two most watched Moroccan TV channels are 2M and Medi 1 TV. The researchers also found a striking preference across the classes for horror movies and found out that Internet use by children is seldom supervised. All this raises real questions about the need for a more effective and coherent media policy for Moroccan children.

- Reversing the focus from media to lived experiences allowed the researchers to note variations in the ways in which children engage with their immediate environment and their imagination of the world.
- Moroccan children's daily interactions were strongly grounded within local Moroccan cultural dynamics, yet they displayed the highest sense of exposure and worldliness through their media use. They were savvy audiences of American Hollywood action and horror films, Bollywood and Korean films, and Arabic-dubbed Turkish drama series, in addition to an array of Arabic-language shows through pan-Arab satellite channels.
- Ethnographic findings revealed a fluid process of understanding of the children's selves and heritage that challenges deterministic assumptions about fixed identity formation.
- Moroccan children identified strongly with their context. At the level of identity construction, the children identified more with Islam and being Moroccan than they did with being Arab. While overt skills of organization and creativity were not much in evidence in children's interaction at the workshops, the workshops nevertheless gave us a great insight into the sophisticated and nuanced ways in which young Moroccan children debated and negotiated issues around identity and religiosity.
- Variations in educational settings and outcomes emerged as the prime variable affecting children's worldview and identity formation. Moroccan children conformed to the national educational system that accentuates hierarchical and disciplinary approaches by educators. Children displayed a reserved attitude and hesitance to expressing their opinions freely, yet progressively tapped into their creative and analytical potential to engage fully with the research.
- Children from working class areas of Casablanca had access to a variety of media platforms, including television, radio, satellite and online media. Their media diaries showed a richer variety in terms of content than those of children from the middle classes. (Mansour, N, Sabry, T, Sakr, N, Steemers, J 2015)².

2. See our extended AHRC findings report at <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Findings%20Report%20English.pdf>

2. Problems and recommended actions

A. The definition of children in Morocco

- The definition of children in Morocco is not subject to public debate to highlight different groups and their attributes, such as urban/rural, in schools/out of schools, age groups, social positions and the state of access to opportunities (education, training, leisure, access to adequate information, mechanisms of protection from potential harm, etc.).
- Legally speaking, Moroccan laws have, to some extent, harmonised the penal majority, civil majority and political majority to 18 years old. However, the minimum working age is still set at 15 years old. In addition, the family code in Morocco asserts that children continuing their studies should be cared for by their parents up to the age of 25. If they are disabled, there is no age limit to such compulsory parental care.
- Sociologically speaking, the definition of childhood and children in Morocco seems to depend on the wider social context in which such definitions are grounded. Thus, the appearance of the social category of children has evolved in time and can be traced to the early beginnings of the modern Moroccan nation-state, in particular the appearance of public schools.³

Recommended action:

It is highly recommended that policy makers in Morocco differentiate their policy intention and intended effects according to the state and the extent of different groups of children's enjoyment (or lack of enjoyment) of basic entitlements as outlined in the children's rights conventions, signed and ratified by the Moroccan government as well as in Moroccan laws.

3. Mohamed Chekroun and Momamed Boudoudou (1986), Définition sociale de l'enfance et de l'enfant au Maroc, Bulletin Economique et Social du Maroc, N°157, PP 99- 123.

B. Moroccan media regulation and the dominant paradigm

The prevailing regulation paradigm in Morocco seems to be mainly protectionist (protection from materials that breaches cultural boundaries and values as well as from potential harm); (cf, Sakr⁴, N and Bourara, B⁵).

- With the exception of some independent producers, the regulation agencies and broadcasters promote mainly the narrow protection vision which seems to stand in the way of developing more stimulating approaches to regulation.⁶
- Media's content policies in Morocco remain unclear and ambiguous. Since it is the regulation framework that gives effect to policy, the status-quo prevails, as regulation focuses merely on protection.⁷
- The regulation literature distinguishes between positive protection (which promotes stimulating approaches that locally produce information beneficial to children), and negative regulation that focuses solely on protection overlooking the principle of indivisibility stated by UNCRC between provision of adequate content, participation and protection;⁸
- Without provision and participation, protection remains a negative action that does not help children develop and grow.

Recommended action:

There is an urgent need to create a media policy community among different stockholders. This may include national regulation agencies, ministries of childhood and family and youth, researchers, journalists and activists working on media as well as national agencies such as the national council for human rights, social and economic council, etc. This policy community can be hosted in the forthcoming council of childhood and family mandated by the Moroccan constitution to provide policy advice on children and family issues.

4. Naomi Sakr (2017), Provision, Protection or Participation? Approaches to regulating children's television in Arab countries, Media International Australia

5. Interview with Bouchra Bourara, Rabat 8 June 2017.

6. Sakr, Naomi Op.cit

7. Sakr, Naomi Op.cit

8. Sakr, Naomi Op.cit

C. Research methods and policy

So far, the main source of data available in Morocco on media content is quantitative data (both macro: nationally aggregated indicators from different sources and micro: household survey data including references to media uptake or patterns of use).

Thus, little is known about what kind of content is being used by Moroccan children and youth and for which purposes. Moreover, in the age of digital media children and youth are no longer only consuming information, but also producing and sharing it. Therefore, little is known on the discrepancies that might exist between what traditional media is producing, how and by whom it is used and what children and youth are actually producing and sharing.

An understanding of such patterns cannot be achieved using only quantitative data. Qualitative research is also required through ethnographic methods, interviews, focus groups etc., with different groups of children.

Recommended action:

Improve the understanding of the state of the art of media content in Morocco by combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This will inform the debate among the policy community initiative mentioned above not only in terms of what kind of regulation is more appropriate to Moroccan children and youth but also to inform appropriate policy choices and options.

3. General recommendations:

- Fostering and developing an organic and inclusive media policy community in Morocco including, but not limited to, media scholars, educationists, psychologists, media producers, media regulators, teachers, sociologists, anthropologists and civil society groups.
- We strongly recommend that HACA and ARNB design a collaborative dialogical internet hub that can be accessed by children, parents and, academics. The hub can be a platform for sharing information and research about children and their media uses as well as parenting. It is key that this hub is accessed by members of the public.
- We strongly recommend that the Moroccan media regulators invest in in both quantitative and qualitative research. We strongly advise that funding is made available to conduct ethnographic research across the regions of Morocco. The focus should be on both rural and urban areas of Morocco as well as other characteristics such as children in schools versus out of schools, working children, etc.
- Organising an annual conference that brings together key stakeholders to discuss cutting edge research, methodology, theoretical frameworks, media production and policy issues on children and the media. The conference should include both Moroccan and International experts.
- The recommended building of a policy community as well as the Internet Hub, if created, would contribute to a growing public debate that is necessary to develop appropriate media content for children in Morocco. Such debate would create opportunities to identify various forms of evidence that would inform policy making in terms of media regulation in Morocco.

