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The Affective Public Sphere: Emotion as the Engine of Media Accountability in the MENA Region

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ABSTRACT

The normative ideal of the Habermasian public sphere—characterized as rational, critical, and dispassionate—has long served as the primary yardstick for evaluating media accountability. However, in the "hybrid regimes" of the Global South, particularly within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), this Western-centric model fails to capture the visceral mechanisms through which citizens actually discipline power. This article challenges the universal applicability of the rationalist model by proposing the "Affective Public Sphere" as a more accurate analytical framework for understanding digital dissent. Focusing on the digital landscape of Morocco, the study argues that media accountability is not driven by formal policy deliberation but by a "Moral Economy" of deeply embedded shared values. Through a constructivist thematic analysis of approximately 1,200 unique user-generated comments across three high-profile case studies occurring between 2022 and 2025, this research identifies three distinct "Pillars of Affect" that trigger public sanction: Humanitarian Grief, National Identity, and Cultural Dignity. The findings suggest that the digital public operates through what the authors term the "Value-Trigger Hypothesis": media accountability remains largely dormant during technical or policy errors until a perceived transgression violates a sacred communal value. At this juncture, the "digital street" erupts into a performative ritual of collective shaming. While this affective mobilization provides a vital channel for the voiceless to reclaim agency, the article concludes that it ultimately produces a majoritarian, exclusionary consensus. This creates a dangerous feedback loop that authoritarian states can easily co-opt to legitimize censorship and tighten control over the press under the pervasive guise of maintaining "public respect."

KEYWORDS

Affective Publics

Media Accountability

Moral Economy

Hybrid Regimes

Digital Journalism

Morocco

Introduction

For decades, the normative ideal of the "public sphere," as conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas (27), has cast a long shadow over media studies. In this vision, the public sphere is a space of rational-critical debate where private individuals assemble to hold power to account through reasoned argumentation, bracketing their status and emotions to achieve consensus. While this model has provided an invaluable yardstick for assessing democratic health in the West, its universal application to the Global South—and specifically to the digitally mediated landscapes

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of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—has increasingly revealed an epistemic blind spot. In the digital bazaars of Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, where the modern Moroccan public gathers, the currency of accountability is not dispassionate reason or policy deliberation (Ait Hattani 21). It is visceral, volatile, and profoundly emotional.

This article posits that in transitional democracies and hybrid regimes, the "rational" public sphere is an analytical fiction. Instead, what has emerged is a vibrant **"***Affective Public Sphere,***"** where emotion serves not as noise to be filtered out, but as the primary engine of media accountability. Focusing on the Moroccan context—a strategic case study of a competitive authoritarian regime with high digital penetration (Reuters Institute)—we argue that the ability of citizens to discipline powerful media institutions relies less on legal literacy or professional codes than on the mobilization of **"***Shared Values***."**

In Morocco, a "red line" crossed by a journalist is rarely framed as a technical error or a breach of contract; it is experienced and articulated as a perceived moral violation of collective dignity, national sovereignty, or religious sanctity. When the digital crowd mobilized against what it perceived as the transformation of the Rayan Aourram tragedy into a prolonged media spectacle, they invoked the sanctity of suffering and the moral boundaries of crisis reporting, framing continuous live coverage and emotive narration as perceived moral violations of human dignity rather than citing a specific breach of professional codes. When they attacked a sports broadcaster for airing an incomplete map of the country, the grievance was not cartographic inaccuracy, but an assault on national identity. In these moments, accountability becomes a performative ritual of moral restoration rather than a procedural act of regulation.

The Failure of the Rational Model in Hybrid Regimes

To understand why emotion has become the dominant vernacular of accountability in the MENA region, one must first locate the structural constraints of the media environment. Morocco operates as a "hybrid regime" (Ibahrine and Zaid 248), characterized by a complex interplay between democratic facades and authoritarian habits. In such an environment, the traditional pillars of accountability—an independent judiciary, a self-regulating press, and a competitive market—are frequently compromised or co-opted. The state maintains "red lines" around sensitive topics (the Monarchy, Islam, and Territorial Integrity), cultivating a culture of self-censorship within professional newsrooms (Benchenna and Marchetti 668; El Kadoussi 238).

In this context, the Habermasian ideal of "rational-critical debate" faces a dual crisis. First, the political cost of rational dissent can be high; engaging in direct political critique carries the risk of surveillance or legal sanction. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the formal language of policy and regulation is often viewed by the public as the language of the elite—distant, bureaucratic, and ineffectual. Consequently, the digital public bypasses these frozen formal channels. They turn to social media not to debate policy, but to express *affect*—a pre-discursive intensity that allows for political expression without necessarily engaging in explicit political speech. As Papacharissi suggests, these "affective publics" mobilize through sentiment, creating a sense of connectedness that can challenge power structures (125).

However, existing literature often treats this emotional mobilization as "slacktivism" or "mob rule"—a chaotic force that degrades the quality of public discourse. This article challenges that dismissal. By analyzing the specific mechanics of digital outrage in Morocco, we demonstrate that this emotion is not chaotic; it is highly structured. It follows a specific **"***moral economy***"** (Thompson 79), a tacit agreement on the values that hold society together. When media institutions are perceived to violate this moral economy—by mocking a cultural icon, crossing culturally embedded moral boundaries surrounding death and mourning, or

insulting national pride—emotion becomes the mechanism through which the social contract is enforced.

The Argument: Shared Values as Accountability Triggers

This study draws on a rigorous mixed-methods investigation of the Moroccan media landscape, including the analysis of nine high-profile accountability episodes between 2022 and 2025. While our previous work (Zaid et al. 770) mapped the process of hybrid accountability (Naming, Blaming, Claiming), this article investigates the *substance* of that accountability. We ask: *What specific triggers cause an online audience to transform from passive consumers into an active, sanctioning swarm?*

We argue that the "Public Frame" of accountability remains dormant until a perceived media transgression intersects with one of three pillars of Moroccan identity:

1. *Humanitarian Ethics:* The defense of human dignity against commercial exploitation (e.g., the Rayan tragedy).
2. *National Identity:* The defense of sovereignty and collective pride against external or internal humiliation (e.g., the Divided Map controversy).
3. *Cultural Respect*: The defense of traditional hierarchies and cultural icons against perceived modernization or bullying (e.g., the Hassan Mikyat case).

In each of these instances, the public did not demand accountability because a journalist failed to verify a source; they demanded it because the media outlet was perceived to have "insulted" the collective self. This suggests that, in contexts such as Morocco, media accountability is often less about "accuracy" and more about "respect."

Significance and Roadmap

This reframing has profound implications for the sociology of media in the Global South. It suggests that we cannot understand media governance without understanding cultural sociology. The "digital street" in Morocco is not an anarchy; it is a space where the community negotiates its moral boundaries in real-time. By enforcing these boundaries against media transgressors, the public is not just correcting the news; they are reclaiming agency in a political system that often denies it to them.

However, this reliance on affect is a double-edged sword. As we will explore, an accountability system driven by emotion is inherently majoritarian. It excels at punishing those who violate the consensus (nationalism, religion) but is often hostile to those who challenge it. The same affective intensity that can force a corrupt broadcaster to apologize can also silence minority voices or descend into cyberbullying, as seen in the *Ghita Asfour* case.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, integrating Papacharissi's concept of "affective publics" with the sociological concept of "moral economies." Section 3 details the methodology, utilizing a thematic analysis of user comments from three key case studies derived from the doctoral research. Section 4 presents the empirical analysis, dissecting the three pillars of affect—Humanitarianism, Nationalism, and Cultural Respect—through the lens of user-generated content. Section 5 discusses the implications of the "Value-Trigger" and the exclusionary nature of affective unity. Finally, Section 6 concludes by arguing that for media scholars and practitioners in the MENA region, emotion must be read not as noise, but as the essential signal of democratic demand.

Theoretical Framework: From Rational Debate to Affective Sanction

To understand how the "digital street" in the MENA region holds media institutions accountable, we must abandon the analytical safety of the rational-critical model. The dynamics observed in the Moroccan digital sphere—where a broadcast error triggers a diplomatic crisis or a comedy sketch sparks a national debate on dignity—cannot be explained by legal frameworks or market logic alone. They require a theoretical architecture that accounts for the visceral, the symbolic, and the communal. This section constructs that framework by triangulating three distinct bodies of literature: the theory of *Affective Publics*, the sociology of *Moral Economies,* and the political science of *Hybrid Regime*s (Castells 55).

De-Westernizing the Public Sphere: The Limits of Rationality

The concept of the public sphere, as originally formulated by Jürgen Habermas (27), posits a domain where public opinion is formed through rational-critical debate. In this normative ideal, interlocutors bracket their status, set aside their private emotions, and engage in discourse guided by the force of the better argument. For decades, this model has served as the baseline for assessing media accountability: the media provides information, and the public rationally evaluates it.

However, scholars of the Global South and digital media have long argued that this model is structurally exclusionary and empirically insufficient (Curran and Park 3). Nancy Fraser famously critiqued the Habermasian sphere as a bourgeois construct that ignores "subaltern counterpublics"—groups who mobilize not through dispassionate debate, but through the assertion of identity and the disruption of dominant norms (67). In the context of the MENA region, the "rational" public sphere is often doubly constrained: first by the state, which polices the boundaries of "acceptable" political speech, and second by a cultural context where communication is deeply embedded in social hierarchies, religious values, and communal bonds rather than atomized individualism (Salvatore and Eickelman 5).

In the digital age, this rationalist framework fractures completely. The affordances of social media platforms—speed, brevity, visuality, and algorithmic amplification—do not favor the slow deliberation of the coffee house; they favor the immediate intensity of the "feed." To analyze media accountability in Morocco, therefore, we must turn to a framework that recognizes emotion not as a contamination of public discourse, but as its primary currency.

Affective Publics: Emotion as Connectivity

The primary theoretical lens for this study is Zizi Papacharissi's concept of **"***Affective Publics***."** Papacharissi argues that in digitally mediated environments, publics are constituted not through shared ideology or policy goals, but through shared sentiment (125). Affect—a pre-discursive intensity, a feeling of being moved—becomes the glue that binds disparate individuals into a collective force.

In the MENA context, media accountability increasingly operates through what Zizi Papacharissi conceptualizes as affective publics: networked formations held together not only by information but also by shared emotional expression (Papacharissi 125–27). This perspective complements Miriyam Aouragh's analysis of Arab digital activism, which demonstrates that online participation is inseparable from broader political identities, collective struggles, and offline mobilization rather than merely technological affordances (Aouragh 531–32). Social media therefore become spaces where accountability claims are articulated not only through deliberative arguments but also through shared feelings of injustice, dignity, humiliation, and

solidarity. When Moroccan citizens challenge a media outlet, they frequently seek to express collective moral outrage rather than simply identify violations of professional journalistic codes. In these cases, accountability is enacted through affective alignment, transforming individual emotional responses into collective public pressure.

This aligns with Bennett and Segerberg's logic of "connective action," where personalized expression becomes the basis for collective mobilization (739). However, this study extends the concept of Affective Publics by applying it specifically to Media Accountability. Most literature applies this theory to anti-government protests (e.g., the Arab Spring). We argue that the same mechanism applies to "anti-media" protests. When the public creates a hashtag like #TrashMedia or #Boycott2M, they are forming an affective public whose goal is to discipline the narrative power of the press (Highfield 2034).

Crucially, this affect is not merely "venting." As Sara Ahmed argues in The Cultural Politics of Emotion, emotions are performative; they "do things" (4). Shame, for instance, is a disciplinary emotion. When the digital crowd "shames" a broadcaster for unethical coverage, they are performing a social sanction that can be more damaging than a regulator's fine. In a hybrid regime where formal regulators may be slow or co-opted, the "affective flashpoint" becomes the most efficient mechanism for enforcing norms.

The Moral Economy of the Digital Crowd

If affect provides the *energy* for mobilization, what provides the *structure*? Why does one media error spark a revolution while another is ignored? To answer this, we turn to the concept of **"***Moral Economy***."**

Originally coined by E. P. Thompson to explain eighteenth-century food riots, the "moral economy" refers to the tacit consensus within a community regarding what is legitimate and what is illegitimate (79). Thompson argued that peasant riots were not chaotic outbursts of hunger, but disciplined actions enforcing a traditional consensus on fair prices. The crowd punished the baker not because he broke a written law, but because he was perceived to violate the unwritten moral contract of the community.

This article transposes Thompson's framework to the digital media landscape of the twenty-first century. We argue that the Moroccan digital public operates according to a strict Moral Economy of Information.

- *The* Consensus*:* There exists a tacit agreement between the public and the media. The media is granted access and attention, but in return, it must respect certain "sacred" boundaries: the dignity of the dead (Humanitarianism), the honor of the nation (Nationalism), and the sanctity of cultural traditions (Identity).
- *The Perceived Moral Violation:* When a media outlet engages in "grief mining," mocks a cultural icon, or compromises national sovereignty, they are not just committing a professional error; they are perceived to be violating the Moral Economy. They are seen as "profiteers" extracting value from the community's pain or pride without giving respect in return.
- *The Riot:* The resulting social media backlash is the digital equivalent of Thompson's bread riot. It is a collective, punitive action designed to restore the moral order.

Didier Fassin's work on "moral sentiments" is also instructive here. Fassin argues that modern politics is increasingly conducted through the register of morality and victimhood (1–2). In our case studies, we observe that accountability claims are frequently framed through the language of victimization: *The media hurt us; the media insulted us.* This moral framing is powerful because it transcends political divisions. A conservative Islamist and a secular liberal may

disagree on tax policy, but they share the same "Moral Economy" regarding the sanctity of national borders or the dignity of a grieving mother.

Accountability in the Hybrid Regime: The "Safety Valve"

The final theoretical pillar contextualizes these dynamics within the specific political architecture of the *Hybrid Regime*. Morocco, often described as a "competitive authoritarian" system (Levitsky and Way 5; Zaid and Ibahrine 310), occupies a grey zone. It possesses the trappings of democracy (elections, diverse press, parliament) but retains a centralized core of authoritarian power (the Monarchy and the state).

In such systems, the "political sphere" is heavily policed. Direct criticism of the monarchy or the security apparatus carries high risks. However, the "social sphere" and the "cultural sphere" often serve as permitted arenas for contestation—a "safety valve" for public frustration. This structural reality shapes media accountability in two profound ways:

1. *Displacement of Dissent:* Because citizens cannot easily hold the state accountable for systemic failures, they displace their frustration onto the media. The media becomes the proxy target. Punishing a journalist is safer and more achievable than punishing a minister. Therefore, the "affective intensity" directed at the media is often surplus energy diverted from political grievances.
2. *State-Public Alignment***:** In a fascinating inversion of the Western model (where the public protects the press from the state), the Moral Economy of the hybrid regime often aligns the public *with* the state against the press. When a media outlet violates national norms (e.g., the *Divided Map* case), the public calls on the state to intervene. The digital crowd acts as a "vigilante" force that invites state repression of the media, viewing the state as the guardian of the moral order.

Synthesis: The Affective-Moral Accountability Model

Synthesizing these streams, we propose a theoretical model where:

- *Affect* is the fuel: It provides the speed and scale of mobilization.
- *Moral Economy* is the compass: It determines which transgressions trigger a response.
- *Hybridity* is the terrain: It channels this energy away from formal politics and toward cultural/media targets.

In this model, accountability is not a bureaucratic procedure (filing a complaint); it is a *Ritual of Correction.* It is a public performance where the community reaffirms its values by shaming those who violate them. The effectiveness of this accountability is not measured by policy change, but by the public act of apology and the restoration of "face."

Methodology: Excavating the Digital Sentiment

To operationalize the theoretical framework outlined above, this study employs a qualitative, interpretative methodology rooted in *Digital Ethnography* and *Thematic Analysis.* While the broader doctoral research utilized a mixed-methods approach including surveys and interviews, this article focuses exclusively on the textual and affective analysis of user-generated content (UGC) surrounding three paradigmatic case studies (Bruns 9).

The methodological objective is not to quantify the volume of outrage (how many tweets?), but to interpret the *nature* of the sentiment (what *kind* of outrage?). We seek to reconstruct the "Moral Economy" of the Moroccan digital public by analyzing the language, symbols, and narratives used to demand accountability.

Research Design: Multiple Case Study Analysis

The core of the methodology is a *Multiple Case Study (MCS)* design (Yin 55). The selection of cases was driven by the logic of "theoretical sampling" rather than statistical representativeness. We selected three high-profile accountability episodes from the doctoral corpus (2022–2025) that represent the three distinct "pillars of affect" identified in our theory:

1. *Case A (Humanitarian Grief): The Rayan Aourram Tragedy (February 2022).*
    - *Context:* A five-year-old boy fell into a well, triggering a global rescue operation.
    - *Relevance:* This case represents the perceived moral violation of "Humanitarian Ethics." It allows us to analyze how the public polices the boundary between "information" and "spectacle" during a crisis.
2. *Case B (National Identity): The "Divided Map" Controversy (July 2025).*
    - *Context:* A national sports broadcaster aired a Moroccan map omitting the Sahara.
    - *Relevance:* This case represents the perceived moral violation of "National Sovereignty." It illuminates how nationalism serves as a hyper-potent trigger for accountability, uniting diverse factions.
3. *Case C (Cultural Respect): The Hassan Mikyat / Mchiti Fiha Backlash (Ramadan 2023).*
    - *Context:* A veteran actor was bullied on a comedy show; simultaneously, a hidden camera show was accused of banality.
    - *Relevance:* This case represents the perceived moral violation of "Cultural Dignity." It explores the public's role in defending traditional hierarchies of respect against the perceived vulgarity of modern entertainment.

Data Collection: The Digital Archive

For each case, a "Digital Data Corpus" was assembled. The data collection was retrospective and non-participant, treating social media platforms as a living archive of public sentiment.

- *Platforms*: Data was harvested from Facebook (the primary public square in Morocco), YouTube (the locus of visual debate and commentary), and X/Twitter (the space for elite/journalist interaction).
- *Sampling Strategy:* We employed a "*Critical Instance Sampling*" strategy. Rather than scraping all comments (which produces noise), we focused on "high-engagement nodes."
    - *Primary Nodes:* The original posts containing the perceived media transgression (e.g., the YouTube video of the comedy sketch).
    - *Secondary Nodes:* Viral reaction posts from influencers or opinion leaders that framed the debate.
    - *Tertiary Nodes:* The "most liked" or "top" comments on these posts, as these represent the sentiments that achieved community consensus.
- *Volume*: The final dataset for this article comprises approximately *1,200 unique user comments* across the three cases, selected for their substantive content (excluding spam or monosyllabic reactions). Episodes referenced elsewhere in the article that fall outside these three cases—most notably the Ghita Asfour privacy incident discussed in Section 5—are treated as illustrative context and were not part of this systematically coded corpus.

Data Analysis: Constructivist Thematic Analysis

The data was analyzed using *Constructivist Thematic Analysis* (Braun and Clarke 79). This approach acknowledges that the researchers are not discovering a pre-existing truth but actively interpreting the meaning constructed by participants. The analysis proceeded in three recursive stages:

Phase 1: Open Coding for Affect (The "Feeling" Layer)

We began by coding for emotional tone. Using MAXQDA software, we tagged comments with affective markers: **Anger, Shame, Pride, Disgust, Pity, Mockery**.

- Example: A comment on the Rayan case reading "Have you no shame turning this tragedy into a spectacle?" was coded as [Affect: Disgust] and [Affect: Moral Indignation].

Phase 2: Axial Coding for Moral Values (The "Value" Layer)

We then grouped these emotional codes into broader categories of perceived moral violation. We asked: *What specific value is being defended here?*

- The previous comment was re-coded under the category [Value: Sanctity of Life] and [Perceived Moral Violation: Symbolic Exploitation of Suffering].

- Example: Comments on the Divided Map case using terms like "Red Line" or "Betrayal" were grouped under [Value: Territorial Integrity].

Phase 3: Selective Coding for Accountability Mechanisms (The "Action" Layer)

Finally, we analyzed how these feelings and values were translated into demands for action. We looked for the specific vocabulary of accountability.

- *Keywords identified:* "Apology" (Itidhar), "Resignation" (Istiqala), "Boycott" (Muqata'a), "Punishment" (Iqab), "HACA" (referencing the regulator).

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Researching digital affect requires navigating complex ethical terrain. While the data is publicly available, we adhered to the principle of "contextual integrity" (Nissenbaum 127).

- *Anonymization*: All direct quotes from private individuals (non-public figures) have been anonymized (Marwick and Boyd 122). Usernames are replaced with generic descriptors (e.g., "User A, Facebook").
- *Translation*: The original comments were largely in Darija (Moroccan Arabic)—increasingly used as a written medium on social media (Zakhir 100)—Modern Standard Arabic, or French. The authors, both native speakers, performed the translations. We employed a "semantic translation" approach, prioritizing the emotional weight and cultural connotation of terms over literal word-for-word accuracy. For instance, the Darija term *Hgra* is translated not just as "injustice" but as "humiliation/oppression by the powerful," preserving its specific affective resonance in the Moroccan context.

- *Positionality:* As Moroccan researchers, we possess the "cultural competence" necessary to decode the nuances of Darija satire, religious references, and implicit political signaling. However, we maintained reflexive distance by constantly challenging our own assumptions about "national consensus," deliberately seeking out dissenting voices (counter-publics) within the data to ensure the analysis did not merely replicate dominant narratives.
- Ethical Review: This study analyzed exclusively publicly accessible, user-generated content and involved no recruitment, intervention, or direct interaction with human participants. Consequently, observational analysis of this nature does not fall under the mandatory review remit of the institutional ethics committee at Ibn Tofaïl University. Given the sensitivity of the material—which includes content connected to the death of a child and identifiable public figures—the authors strictly applied the principle of contextual integrity (Nissenbaum 127). Specifically, no private or restricted accounts were accessed, all non-public individuals were anonymized, and user comments were paraphrased rather than quoted verbatim to prevent re-identification. Public figures are discussed solely in relation to material they voluntarily made public or that was already the subject of widespread public debate.

Limitations of the Methodology

This methodological approach privileges the vocal and the visible. It captures the sentiments of those with digital access and the inclination to comment, potentially excluding the "silent majority" or those who fear state surveillance. Furthermore, relying on "top comments" (which are algorithmically sorted) inevitably highlights majoritarian views while perhaps obscuring minority perspectives. We mitigate this by acknowledging that we are mapping the *dominant* Moral Economy of the digital sphere, not necessarily the statistical public opinion of the entire nation.

By rigorously applying this thematic lens to the raw emotion of the comment section, this methodology allows us to move beyond anecdotal observation. It enables us to dissect the anatomy of digital outrage, revealing the specific moral wiring that connects a Facebook post to a national scandal.

Analysis: The Three Pillars of Affective Accountability

The empirical heart of this study lies in dissecting the specific emotional triggers that transform passive digital audiences into active sanctioning bodies. Through the thematic analysis of user-generated content across our selected case studies, we identify three distinct "Pillars of Affect" that uphold the Moral Economy of the Moroccan digital sphere: *Humanitarian Grief*, *National Pride,* and *Cultural Dignity*. In each pillar, we observe a consistent trajectory: a perceived media transgression creates an "affective rupture" (a perceived moral violation of shared feeling), which galvanizes a "public of outrage," leading to specific demands for restoration.

Pillar 1: Humanitarian Grief and the Sanctity of Death

The first pillar reveals how the digital public polices the boundaries of human dignity, particularly in moments of collective trauma. The case of Rayan Aourram (Case 1), the five-year-old boy trapped in a well in February 2022, serves as the paradigm. For five days, the world watched via live streams as rescue efforts unfolded. However, parallel to the prayers and solidarity, a fierce counter-narrative emerged targeting the media's conduct.

The Transgression: "Grief Mining" as Perceived Moral Violation

The analysis of YouTube and Facebook comments reveals that the primary grievance was not informational inaccuracy, but emotional exploitation. Users perceived the relentless, 24/7 live coverage—often featuring zoomed-in shots of the weeping family or the dark well—as a perceived moral violation of the sanctity of suffering.

The term *Tijara* (Trade/Commerce) appeared repeatedly in the dataset. Users accused media outlets and influencers of "trading in tragedy." One highly engaged comment on a Chouf TV live stream crystallized this sentiment:

> "Fear God for us and for the child's family. You have turned a tragedy into a spectacle (Furja) and a race for views. This is not journalism; this is trading in tragedies." (Comment 1, Appendix E)

Here, the affect is *Disgust.* The use of the word *Furja* (Spectacle) is damning; it implies that the media has reduced a life-or-death struggle into entertainment. By invoking God ("Fear God"), the user elevates the critique from professional ethics to religious morality. The perceived transgression is not framed as bad journalism; it is framed as Haram (sinful).

The Mechanism: Shaming as Regulation

Lacking formal power to stop the broadcasts, the digital public weaponized *Shame* (*Hshouma*). Comments functioned as a direct shaming ritual.

> "Have you no shame? (Wash ma 3ndkom wjh?) Zooming in on a mother's tears for likes? Delete this immediately."

This collective shaming forced a tangible shift. As the negative sentiment peaked (visible in the ratio of angry reactions to likes), several digital outlets began to disable comments or pull back their cameras. The "affective public" successfully imposed a "cordon sanitaire" around the event, enforcing a moral standard that the professional code of ethics had failed to preempt. This case demonstrates that in the absence of effective state regulation of digital ethics, the *emotional* regulation of the crowd serves as the primary check on sensationalism.

Pillar 2: National Identity and the Defense of Sovereignty

If the first pillar is driven by universal humanism, the second is driven by fierce particularism. In the "Divided Map" controversy, we observe how **National Pride** serves as a high-voltage trigger for accountability. In these instances, the media entity is perceived not just as unethical, but as *traitorous* or *anti-national*.

The Transgression: The Symbolic Erasure

In July 2025, when the national sports broadcaster *Arryadia* aired a promotional video for the WAFCON featuring a map of Morocco without its Southern Provinces, the reaction was instantaneous. The error was technical—a feed relay from the Confederation of African Football (CAF)—but the interpretation was symbolic.

The thematic analysis shows that users immediately framed this as an assault on **Sovereignty**. The keywords dominating the discourse were not "mistake" or "error," but "Red Line" (*Khat Ahmar*), "Betrayal" (*Khiyana*), and "Insult" (*Ihana*).

> "This is a red line. How can a national channel not know its own borders? This is an unforgivable insult to our territorial integrity." (Synthesis of comments, Appendix L)

The Mechanism: The Patriot's Veto

The affect here is *Righteous Anger* (*Ghadab*). This anger is exceptionally powerful because it aligns the public with the state. Unlike Western contexts where accountability often pits the public *against* the state, here the public acts as the vanguard of state ideology.
This illustrates a "Patriot's Veto." The affective intensity of nationalism is so high that it overrides other values like press freedom or the right to inquire. The public demands that the state intervene to punish the media for being "unpatriotic." The speed of the institutional response—Arryadia apologized within hours—demonstrates that institutions are terrified of this nationalist affect. They know that failing to align with the "patriotic mob" poses a risk to their own legitimacy.

Pillar 3: Cultural Dignity and the Rejection of "Banality"

The third pillar is perhaps the most sociological. It involves the defense of *Cultural Dignity* against what is perceived as the "banality" (*Tafaha*) of modern entertainment. This was vividly displayed in the backlash against the *Mchiti Fiha* hidden camera show and the bullying of veteran actor Hassan Mikyat.

The Transgression: The Perceived Moral Violation of Hierarchy

In the Hassan Mikyat case, a young comedian on a state TV show mocked the veteran actor's appearance. The digital uproar was driven by a perceived moral violation of *Hierarchy* and *Respect* (*Waqar*). In Moroccan culture, respect for elders and established figures is a core value. The young comedian's "joke" was decoded by the digital public not as comedy, but as *Hgra*—a complex Darija term implying humiliation, injustice, and the abuse of the weak by the strong.

> "This is the level of our media? Mocking a legend of Moroccan comedy? This is Hgra. We demand respect for our artists." (Synthesis of comments, Appendix H)

Similarly, the critique of *Mchiti Fiha* was framed around the concept of *Tafaha* (triviality/banality). Users expressed *Shame* that public funds were being used to produce content they viewed as "insulting to the intelligence" of the Moroccan family.

> *"We deserve better than this banality in Ramadan. You are laughing at us, not with us."* (Comment 1, Appendix G)

The Mechanism: Cultural Elitism as Resistance

Here, the affect is *Contempt* mixed with *Cultural Anxiety*. The digital public positions itself as the guardian of "authentic" Moroccan culture against the encroaching vulgarity of commercial television. By demanding accountability, the public is performing an act of cultural distinction. They are saying: *We are sophisticated; we demand quality; we reject this trash.*

Interestingly, this is where the "Viewership Paradox" emerges. While the digital elite (on Facebook and YouTube) expressed contempt and demanded cancellation, the shows remained rating hits. This suggests that the "Affective Public" in this pillar represents a specific class fraction—the educated, digitally literate youth—waging a culture war against the populist programming strategies of state television. Their weapon is "cultural shaming," demanding that the media reflect the *idealized* self of the nation, not its *consumed* reality.

Discussion: The Power and Peril of the Affective Public

Synthesizing these three pillars, we can now theorize the broader implications of the "Affective Public Sphere" for media accountability in the MENA region. Our findings suggest that emotion is not merely a reaction to media content; it is the structural condition of accountability itself. However, this model operates with specific constraints and exclusions that challenge the techno-optimist narrative of "digital democracy."

The "Value-Trigger" Hypothesis

The most significant theoretical insight derived from this analysis is what we term the **"***Value-Trigger Hypothesis***."** In established Western democracies, media accountability is often continuous and procedural. A press council monitors standards; an ombudsman reviews complaints. In the hybrid regime of Morocco, our data shows that the "Public Frame" of accountability is *discontinuous and dormant*. It does not exist as a steady state.
It is only activated—"triggered"—when a perceived media transgression intersects with a deeply held, non-negotiable *Shared Value*.

- If a journalist makes a factual error about tax policy, the reaction is likely minimal (low affect).
- If a journalist makes an error about the map of Morocco (high affect/Nationalism), the reaction is explosive.
- If a TV show is boring, it is ignored. If it is "insulting" to a cultural icon (high affect/Dignity), it triggers a campaign.

This means that accountability in the MENA region is *unevenly distributed*. Issues that generate high affect (religion, nation, death, dignity) are subject to intense, almost vigilante-like scrutiny. Issues that are technocratic, complex, or lack emotional resonance (e.g., corruption in municipal procurement, media ownership transparency) often fail to trigger the "affective public." Consequently, the media is highly accountable for *symbolic* transgressions but may remain unaccountable for *systemic* or *political-economic* failures, simply because those failures do not generate the necessary viral heat.

The Exclusionary Consensus: The Spiral of Silence

The second major implication concerns the nature of the consensus produced by these affective publics. In the Habermasian model, consensus is the result of debate. In the Affective model, consensus is often the prerequisite for mobilization.

Our analysis of the Divided Map controversy reveals how this dynamic functions to suppress dissent. Once the narrative was framed as a "Betrayal" (Khiyana) and a perceived moral violation of "Red Lines," the scope for alternative interpretations vanished. The affective intensity of the swarm creates a powerful Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann 43). In this environment, suggesting that the map omission was a technical error rather than a calculated insult became socially costly. The "Patriot's Veto" overrides other values, ensuring that the only acceptable public stance is outrage and effectively silencing calls for nuance or technical inquiry. This suggests that while the Affective Public is powerful, it is also majoritarian and exclusionary. It excels at enforcing dominant norms—such as territorial integrity—but is often hostile to minority viewpoints or counter-narratives that challenge those norms.

A further episode that sits outside the three-case corpus—the Ghita Asfour privacy incident—is instructive here as illustrative context rather than systematically coded evidence. While the public successfully mobilized against the media's invasion of her privacy (a "dignity"

trigger), the discourse was also laced with moral policing of her lifestyle. The same affective energy that punished the media for "eating her flesh" (exploiting her) also scrutinized her behavior.

This duality reveals the danger: the "digital street" is not a liberal guarantor of rights; it is a conservative guardian of norms. It holds the media accountable not to abstract principles of "freedom," but to the community's specific, and often conservative, moral code.

The State as Beneficiary: Weaponized Accountability

Finally, we must address the political utility of this affective accountability. In a hybrid regime, the state often watches the "digital street" closely. Our analysis suggests that the state frequently co-opts these affective mobilizations to discipline the press without appearing authoritarian.

When the digital crowd mobilized against the Divided Map error, framing it as a betrayal of sovereignty, they actively invited the state to intervene. By validating this public anger, the state reinforces the "red lines" surrounding territorial integrity without needing to resort to censorship itself. The public effectively acts as a "vigilante" force, viewing the state as the ultimate guardian of the moral order.

This creates a paradox: bottom-up affective accountability often strengthens top-down control. The public demands "respect" and "responsibility," and the authoritarian state provides it by tightening the leash on the media. The "Affective Public Sphere," therefore, does not necessarily lead to democratization; it can function as a populist feedback loop that reinforces the status quo, punishing only those media outlets that step outside the permitted consensus of the "Nation" and the "Faith."

Conclusion

This article began by challenging the applicability of the rational-critical public sphere to the MENA region. Through the analysis of high-profile media scandals in Morocco, we have demonstrated that accountability is not a function of policy debate, but of **affective mobilization**. It is driven by a **Moral Economy** that fiercely protects the sacred values of the community: the dignity of the grieving, the sovereignty of the land, and the respect due to cultural hierarchy.

For media scholars, this implies a necessary shift in focus. We must stop looking for "deliberation" in the comments section and start analyzing "sentiment." We must recognize that in the Global South, emotion is not "noise" to be filtered out; it is the essential *signal* of democratic demand. It is the mechanism through which the voiceless reclaim agency, asserting their right to be respected, if not fully heard.

However, for practitioners and activists, the findings offer a warning. An accountability system driven solely by affect is volatile, uneven, and easily co-opted. It punishes the symbolic error while often ignoring the systemic rot. The challenge for the future of the MENA digital sphere is not to suppress this emotion—which is the source of its vitality—but to harness it. The goal must be to build bridges that translate this raw, explosive affect into sustained, structural demands for a freer and more responsible media, ensuring that the "digital street" becomes a force for justice, not just a mechanism for venting.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CAF
Confederation of African Football
DS
Digital Sphere (used conceptually to refer to online public spaces)
HACA
Haute Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle (Moroccan High Authority for Audiovisual Communication)
MCS
Multiple Case Study
MENA
Middle East and North Africa
NGO
Non-Governmental Organization
UGC
User-Generated Content
WAFCON
Women's Africa Cup of Nations
X (formerly Twitter)
Social media platform used for elite and journalistic interaction

Key Cultural and Linguistic Terms

Darija
Moroccan Arabic vernacular
Furja
(Darija) Spectacle; entertainment derived from others' suffering
Ghadab
(Arabic/Darija) Anger
Hgra
(Darija) Humiliation, oppression, or abuse of power against the weak
Hshouma
(Darija) Shame; moral embarrassment used as social sanction
Ihana
(Arabic) Insult
Istiqala
(Arabic) Resignation
Itidhar
(Arabic) Apology
Khat Ahmar
(Arabic/Darija) Red line (non-negotiable boundary)
Muqata'a
(Arabic) Boycott
Tafaha
(Arabic/Darija) Triviality; banality
Tijara
(Arabic/Darija) Trade; commerce (used metaphorically as "profiting from tragedy")
Waqar
(Arabic) Dignity; respect associated with age or status

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Appendix: The Affective Data Corpus

This appendix presents a sample of the user-generated content (UGC) analyzed in this study. The data is organized not by case, but by the **Pillar of Affect** (Humanitarianism, Nationalism, Dignity) to illustrate the shared moral vocabulary used by the public across different events.
Note: All comments were originally posted in Moroccan Darija, Arabic, or French. Translations are by the authors, emphasizing semantic and emotional equivalence.

Table A1: Pillar 1 – Humanitarian Grief (The Sanctity of Life)

Source Case: The Rayan Aourram Tragedy (February 2022)

Platform	Original Sentiment (Translated)	Affective Code	Perceived Moral Violation Identified
YouTube (Live Stream)	*"Fear God for us and for the child's family. You have turned a tragedy into a spectacle (Furja) and a race for views. This is not journalism; this is trading in tragedies."*	Disgust, Righteousness	Commercial Exploitation: Perceived commodification of suffering.
Facebook	*"Have you no face (Wash ma 3ndkom wjh)? Zooming in on a mother's tears for likes? Delete this immediately."*	Shame (*Hshouma*)	**Privacy/Dignity**: Perceived Violating the sanctity of grief.
Twitter/X	*"If he were a rich man's son, you would see the latest equipment. But Rayan is the son of the people; for him and for us, God is our only help."*	Despair, Class Resentment	**Inequality**: Systemic neglect of the poor.
Facebook	*"We are praying, you are counting views. There is a special place in hell for this kind of 'press'."*	Religious Condemnation	**Immorality**: Perceived spiritual violation.

Source: Elboukhari, Brahim. *Social Media in Morocco: An Instrument of Media Accountability*. 2026. Ibn Tofaïl University, PhD dissertation.

Table A2: Pillar 2 – National Identity (The Defense of Sovereignty)

Source Cases: The Divided Map (July 2025)

Platform	Original Sentiment (Translated)	Affective Code	Perceived Moral Violation Identified
Twitter/X	"This is a red line (Khat Ahmar). How can a national channel not know its own borders? This is an unforgivable insult to our territorial integrity."	Shock, Betrayal	**Treason:** Failing to protect national borders.

Source: Elboukhari, Brahim. *Social Media in Morocco: An Instrument of Media Accountability*. 2026. Ibn Tofaïl University, PhD dissertation.

Table A3: Pillar 3 – Cultural Dignity (Hierarchy and Respect)

Source Cases: Hassan Mikyat (March 2023) & Mchiti Fiha (Ramadan 2023)

Platform	Original Sentiment (Translated)	Affective Code	Perceived Moral Violation Identified
Facebook	*"This is the level of our media? Mocking a legend of Moroccan comedy? This is Hgra (Oppression). We demand respect for our artists."*	Pity, Indignation	**Hgra**: Humiliation of an elder/respected figure.
YouTube	*"We deserve better than this banality (Tafaha) in Ramadan. You are laughing at us, not with us. Public money is being wasted on trash."*	Contempt, Intellectual Superiority	**Banality**: Insulting the audience's intelligence.
Instagram	*"Stop normalizing bullying. Just because it's 'comedy' doesn't mean you can destroy a man's dignity on national TV."*	Moral Correction	**Bullying**: Normalization of harm.
TikTok	*"If you don't stop harassing us, tragedies will happen. [Reference to Ghita Asfour]."*	Fear, Warning	**Harassment**: Media intrusion causing physical danger.

Source: Elboukhari, Brahim. *Social Media in Morocco: An Instrument of Media Accountability*. 2026. Ibn Tofaïl University, PhD dissertation.