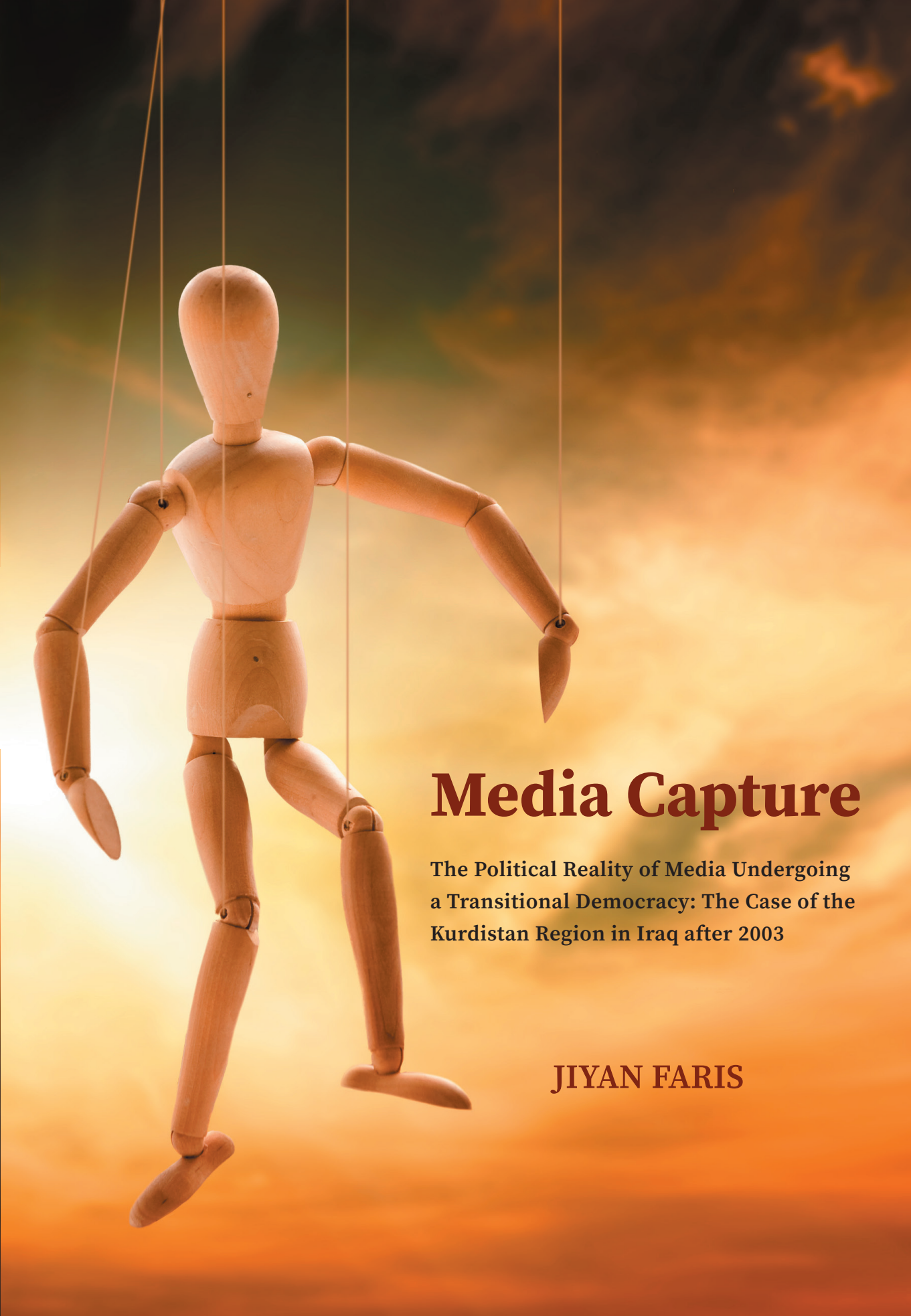

Media Capture

The Political Reality of Media Undergoing a Transitional Democracy: The Case of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq after 2003

JIYAN FARIS

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Coverdesign, Lay-out & Printing: Haveka | www.haveka.nl

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The Political Reality of Media Undergoing a Transitional Democracy: The Case of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq after 2003

This PhD thesis submitted for the degree Doctor in Social Sciences at the University of Antwerp and Doctor in Media and Communication Studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel to be defended by

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SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

When authoritarian regimes are overthrown, it is commonly expected that the emerging political systems will adopt many aspects of Western-based models of democratic government, including models of parliamentary democracy, human rights and freedom of speech. According to existing studies, however, the practical realities of these 'transitional democracies' often defy this expectation. This doctoral dissertation investigates how the concept of media capture allows us to understand media systems in transitional democracies by analysing the different mechanisms with which powerful social actors attempt to control media in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan.

To this end, it puts forward a highly innovative mixed methods design, in which a quantitative content analysis is used for the level of financing, document analysis and interviews with state officials and politicians for the level of regulatory control, and interviews with journalists and editors in chief for the level of journalistic culture. In this way, this proposal not only puts forward a multi-methodological approach that combines the paradigm of political economy with rigorous social-scientific research. It also makes this study comprehensive and able to triangulate its results across these different levels, thereby offering a multidimensional picture of how these mechanisms add to our understanding of (the level of media capture in) media systems in transitional democracies.

SUMMARY IN DUTCH

Wanneer een autoritair regime omver valt, wordt algemeen verwacht dat het nieuwe politieke systeem vele aspecten zal overnemen van Westerse modellen van democratisch bestuur, waaronder parlementaire democratie, mensenrechten en vrijheid van meningsuiting. Bestaand onderzoek wijst echter uit dat de praktische realiteit van 'transitional democracies' deze verwachtingen tart. In dit doctoraat wordt onderzocht hoe het concept van 'media capture' toelaat om inzicht te krijgen in mediasystemen van 'transitional democracies', en dit door de verschillende mechanismen te analyseren die machthebbers inzetten om media te controleren. Iraaks Koerdistan vormt de case study.

We schuiven een innovatief multi-methodisch onderzoeksdesign naar voor, met een kwantitatieve nhoudsanalyse voor de analyse van financiering, documentanalyse en interviews met overheidsfunctionarissen en politici voor de analyse van regelgeving, en interviews met journalisten en hoofdredacteuren voor de analyse van journalistieke cultuur. Zo presenteert dit voorstel niet alleen een multimethodologische aanpak die het paradigma van politieke economie combineert met rigoureus sociaalwetenschappelijk onderzoek. Het maakt deze studie ook in staat om de resultaten te trianguleren over deze verschillende lagen, waardoor een multidimensionaal beeld wordt geboden van hoe deze mechanismen bijdragen aan ons begrip van (media capture in) mediasystemen van 'transitional democracies'.

G

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

An Overview on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

The Kurdish people (or Kurds) are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East after Arabs, Persians and Turks, spread out over a vast region in Central Asia as well as dispersed groups and in the diaspora. Kurds have (quasi) autonomous regions in Iraq and Syria but are involved in a struggle for autonomy and cultural and political rights in countries like Turkey, Iran and Syria. The term "Kurdistan" is widely used in Iraq to refer to what is officially known as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) located to the North of Iraq (Khedir, 2020; O'Leary, 2002, p. 17). Geographically, the KRI consists of the four governorates of Erbil (the Capital), Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Halabja with an area of 40643 Km2. The population of the KRI is estimated around 5.2 million (Taha, 2021, p.15), the majority of the inhabitants are Kurds, alongside Arabs, Turkmens, Assyrians, Armenians, and Jews, who inhabited the area for a long time (Khedir, 2020). For decades, Kurds remained deeply fragmented territorially, politically, culturally and linguistically, were subjected to considerable human rights violations in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and underwent a great deal of persecution that continued after the First Gulf War in 1991 (Khedir, 2020; Taha, 2020).

Following the birth of the autonomous region in 1991, two political parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – completely controlled the KRI through a 50-50 power sharing agreement. These two parties effectively divided the region into two zones that were administered separately: One in Sulaymaniyah under the leadership of the PUK and the other in Erbil and Duhok under the leadership of the KDP. After 2003, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq appeared to be a typical multi-party system. It was even considered to be a model of democratic pluralism for the whole region, with dozens of political parties participating in elections. In total, there are around 34 political parties active in the KRI, with 17 parties represented in the parliament of the KRI, in the period between 2014 and 2018 (Taha, 2020). In addition, a multitude of media outlets were established in the KRI following 2003.

In general, basic research on media democracy is still lacking in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, for example, regarding the autonomy of media in relation to the influence of political parties, the state and control by ownership. The investigations that have been conducted on media democracy in the Kurdish Region are descriptive and lack theoretical analysis or an academic perspective, being produced by organizations such as Reporters Without Borders (2010); The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations

Assistance Mission for Iraq (OHCHR & UNAMI) (2021), The Global Campaign for Free Expression; The Metro Centre for Human Rights (2015); and an annual report by the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate, etc. A few studies have looked at journalism and journalistic culture in the KRI. For instance, while Relly et al. (2015) found that the role perceptions of journalists trained by Western foundations largely reflect democratic, liberal values, both Hussein (2018) and Taha (2020) concluded that the practice of journalism is problematic due to financial and other pressures. However, these academic studies have addressed the case of media in the KRI from the perspective of developed democracies (e.g., Western-based theories).

Overall, previous academic studies and NGO reports have categorized media in Iraqi Kurdistan into the following three types (e.g., Hussein 2018; Reporters Without Borders 2010):

(i) **Partisan** media outlets: openly controlled and funded by political parties.

(ii) **Shadow** media outlets: profile themselves as independent, however, previous research has shown that these outlets are receiving funds indirectly from political parties or other powerful social actors.

(iii) **Independent** media outlets: financially dependent on sales, advertising and aid from international organizations, thus operating outside the influence of social powers.

From the perspective of media in transitional democracies, this study will evaluate the development of media and democracy under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq after the collapse of Saddams' regime in 2003. More particularly, this research will investigate the characteristics of the media environment in the KRI from different aspects, such as addressing the links between media organizations on the one hand and various powerful institutions and actors (including government institutions, political parties, corporations, non-governmental organizations, politicians, state-officials and businesspeople) on the other.

Media in a transitional democracy

Media freedom is considered a vital component of democracy, and thus, many argue that freedom of speech is more important for democracy than the right to vote (Diamond, 2002; Van Belle, 2000). Free expression gives people various rights: to complain, organize, protest, strike, demonstrate, shout, and threaten. The assumption is that such actions will make governments more responsive.

Scholars expect that media freedom will be found in democratic societies, while censored media occur in autocratic states (Mueller, 1992, p. 984; Wooden, 2009, p. 601). In general, the concept of democratic transition refers to a specific phase in a state's democratization process or to a particular political regime emerging after authoritarian rule (Arugay, 2021; Huntington, 1991). In this regard, Voltmer (2013) acknowledges that one of the conceptual problems with democracy is that any definition usually involves ideals concerning what is considered "good democracy," as well as empirical descriptions of how democracy works in existing democratic states. In theory, it is expected that having freedom of expression would assist journalists to keep state power in check and guarantee transparency and accountability (Whitten-Woodring, 2009; Yesil, 2014).

Following the collapse of an authoritarian regime, a process usually plays out between two points, with "closed autocracy at one end, and open and mature democracy at the other" (Voltmer, 2013, p.73). When authoritarian regimes are overthrown, theoretically, from a western perspective, it is commonly expected that the emerging political systems will adopt many aspects of western-based models of democratic government, including presidential systems, models of parliamentary democracy, human rights and freedom of speech (Schiffrin, 2017; Voltmer, 2008, 2013). According to existing studies, however, the practical realities of transitional democracies often confront this expectation (Yasil, 2018; Zielonka, 2015).

After the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the democratization process immediately started in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) (Hama & Abdullah, 2021; Hussein, 2018; Mohammad, 2020). The multiparty system established in 2003 is now considered a model of democratic pluralism across the whole region, especially with respect to aspects such as free elections, political pluralism, freedom to establish political parties and civil society organizations, and the creation of constitutions and laws that meet the principles of international human rights (Hussein, 2018; Taha, 2020). Nevertheless, similar to other transitional contexts, research has shown that clientelist practices by ruling parties remain widespread in the KRI, with a lack of transparency within governmental institutions, as well as a lack of implementation of laws, including media laws (Hussein, 2018; Irwani, 2015; Natali 2010; Taha, 2020). This has led to violence against journalists by state actors and unknown groups, while media remain under the control of powerful ruling parties (Hussein, 2018; UNAMI, 2021).

In the context of a society undergoing or having recently undergone democratic transition, studies have shown that there are some factors that may cripple media freedom,

such as economic pressures, unstable political environment, or lack of journalistic professionalism (Schiffrin, 2018; Voltmer, 2013). These factors might facilitate governments to control watchdog journalism, for example, by using their resources to prevent the disclosure of certain information to the public (e.g., Larsen, 2021; Schiffrin, 2018; Voltmer, 2013; Yanatma, 2021; Zielonka, 2015). In such political contexts, research has also shown that societies may face a period of dictatorship in which the media is controlled by the state, as was the case in several countries in South Eastern and Southern Europe (e.g., Spain, Italy and Greece), as well as in South America, South Asia and the Middle East (Curran & Park, 2000; Dragomir, 2018; Dupuy et al., 2014; Mabweazara et al., 2021; Schiffrin, 2018; Voltmer, 2013; Yanatma, 2021; Zielonka, 2015).

These studies have shown that the most contested link between media and transitional democracies concerns the role of the state. In other words, the state is seen as the major determinant of the freedom of the press, with democracy and media freedom only achievable in a functioning state – that is, through the proper functioning of state institutions, the judiciary, and the parliament. Those who have power in such a constitutional framework (through legislation and its implementation) are capable of facilitating an environment for the media to proceed with an effective agenda and as a watchdog of political power. Nevertheless, in societies undergoing a democratic transition, state authorities may continue to play a central role in media regulation, and several studies have indicated that governments may use their economic power to restrict media freedom by combining both direct and indirect mechanisms of control (see Schiffrin, 2017; Voltmer, 2013; Zielonka, 2015).

The conceptual challenges to media and communication theories for studying the relationship between media and politics in settings of democratic transition have been a fervent interest of academics (e.g., criticisms of comparative analysis between Western and non-Western contexts, theorizing media systems, and methodological challenges) (Curran & Park, 2000; Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2012). For instance, on a theoretical level, the literature, usually on media systems in transitional democracies, comes from two different schools of theories: the first school has been devoted to operationalizing Hallin & Mancini's (2004) framework of "Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics". More particularly, previous research has focused on the re-conceptualisation of their "four dimensions" (i.e. development of the media market, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state). The second school of media theories on media systems in transitional democracies focuses on media capture theory, referring to

a process whereby media outlets are controlled by powerful elites through their symbiotic, clientelist and patrimonial linkages (Finkel, 2015).

The theoretical framework of this doctoral thesis combines the two schools. First, it presents arguments on media systems in transitional democracies in light of Hallin and Mancini's framework, devoting special attention to the multiple challenges involved in operationalizing this framework in societies undergoing a democratic transition, including the case of media in the KRI. Second, it presents arguments on the practical realities of transitional democracies concerning media-politics linkages, with a focus on theories of media capture, such as the three major mechanisms of media capture: Advertising; media regulatory control; and journalistic culture. Consequently, it explains how the concept of media capture can be integrated into media systems analysis and how these theories can be operationalized in the context of media in the KRI. This resulted a central research question of the PhD thesis:

How the theory of media capture allows us to understand media systems in transitional democracies, by analysing how powerful social actors attempt to control media in terms of (i) advertising, (ii) regulatory control, and (iii) journalistic culture.

Thus, the ambition of this doctoral research is twofold. First, it aims to develop a theoretical framework to systematically evaluate the media environment from the perspective of a transitional democracy, in particular, the case of the media in the KRI. In this respect, based on earlier work, I emphasize issues surrounding the theoretical inadequacies related to media studies about transitional democracies, with a particular focus on media-politics linkages, such as in terms of development of the media market, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state. Second, this research project develops a methodological approach, highlighting some insights and challenges involved in studying a complex mediascape in a non-transparent environment, as was and still is the case for the media in the KRI after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.

Overall, this doctoral thesis consists of three parts. In the first part, I present the theoretical framework of the thesis, which consists of two chapters. In the first chapter, I present both theoretical schools. I discuss their advantages and disadvantages in the context of transitional democracies and consider how media capture might be integrated into media systems theory.

This starts with an examination of three mechanisms of media capture: (i) advertising; (ii) media regulatory control; and (iii) journalistic culture. The second chapter presents the methodological framework of the dissertation, such as how the research questions were developed, and also the multiple methods used to operationalize the three mechanisms of media capture in the KRI.

The second part of this doctoral thesis presents the empirical studies. It consists of four chapters, for each of which I provide an introduction. These empirical studies have also been published as journal articles. The first two studies focus on the advertising sector. The third study examines the level of regulatory control. Finally, the fourth study focuses on the level of journalistic culture. Each article (empirical study) provides in-depth explanations of theoretical and methodological choices made for each study.

In the last part, I conclude this doctoral thesis by integrating the results of the four empirical studies and discussing how the concept of media capture – in terms of the three mechanisms – allows us to understand media systems in transitional democracies based on the four dimensions identified in the course of the research (the media market, political parallelism, the role of the state, and journalistic professionalism). In this way, the thesis offers a multidimensional picture of how the three mechanisms of media capture add to our understanding of media systems and the level of media capture in transitional democracies.

FRAMEWORK

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

TWO THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO MEDIA SYSTEMS IN TRANSITIONAL DEMOCRACIES

Hallin and Mancini's Four Dimensions

Hallin and Mancini's comparative media system analysis has become a cornerstone in the field of comparative analysis of political communication and has received much praise, in terms of their typologies of media systems, conceptual development, and hypotheses. However, it has not been free from criticism, due to a lack of precise operationalization and standardized measurement, and the divergence their models from real media systems. Nonetheless, a line of criticism that has been most prominently advanced the fact that Hallin and Mancini do not cover countries beyond the western-world, particularly, when it comes to the application of this framework in the context of transitional democracies (Brüggemannetal, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Norris, 2009).

In their book, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Hallin and Mancini (2004) put forward a conceptual framework consisting of three models as the basis for comparing media systems: First, the *Mediterranean or Polarized-Pluralist Model* (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain), which is characterized by low newspaper circulation, a politicized press, a high level of political intervention (clientelism), a low level of journalistic professionalism (instrumentalization), and a strong role played by the state. Second, the *Corporatist Model* (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland), which is characterized by high circulation, high external pluralism, strong professionalism, and a strong role played by the state, albeit with strong protection of press freedom. Third, the *Liberal Model* (Britain, United States, Canada, Ireland), which is categorized by medium newspaper circulation, high level of internal pluralism (with external pluralism in Britain), strong journalistic professionalism, and market domination (except Britain, characterized by a strong role played by the state).

These models were distinguished on the basis of four dimensions, or clusters of variables: (i) *the development of media markets* (e.g., the rate of press newspaper consumption, gender differences in newspaper reach, the percentage of television to newspaper consumption); (ii) *the degree of political parallelism* (e.g., political affiliations of media outlets, journalist's own affiliations, political orientations of their readership, and political orientation of news content; (iii) *journalistic professionalism* (e.g., media subsidies, media laws concerning content, ownership regulations, and the capacity to access information); and (iv) *the role of the state* (e.g., autonomy, distinct professional norms, and public service orientation).

In 2012, Hallin and Mancini edited a volume entitled *Comparing Media Systems beyond the Western World,* a project based on assumptions concerning how their framework might apply to the rest of the world. Accordingly, several scholars have subsequently attempted to re-operationalize Hallin and Mancini's (2004) models and variables in non-Western countries. For example, analyses have been undertaken with respect to the media environment in Southeastern European (SEE) countries (Herrero et. al., 2017; Neff & Pickard, 2021; Ostrowska, 2012), in Asia (McCargo, 2012; Wang, 2021; Wang & Lyu, 2022), Latin America (Albuquerque, 2012, 2013; Echeverría et al., 2021), Russia (Vartanova, 2012), the Middle East, such as Lebanon and Saudi Arabia (Kraidy, 2012; El Richani, 2016), Israel (Peri, 2012), and Turkey (Atay & Irvan, 2021; Carkoglu et al., 2014; Ersoy & İşeri, 2021; Panayırcı et al., 2016; Simaku, 2021), among others. Using these examples, scholars have attempted to expand the applicability of Hallin and Mancini's theory to include specific cases in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America. Interestingly, these studies came to some similar but also different conclusions.

First, most of the authors cited above showed that non-Western media may be easily coupled with Mediterranean counterparts (the Mediterranean polarized-pluralist model) in terms of the low level of journalistic professionalism, strong role of the state and political parties in the media system, non-development of newspaper circulation, and especially regarding clientelism. Second, some researchers revealed that media systems in non-Western contexts can fall under two of the three models proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), a situation which is referred to as a "hybrid" media system model (e.g., Ostrowska, 2012; Peruško, 2012). For example, in the period 2000-2010, Ostrowska (2012) found that media in Poland fit into both the polarized-pluralist and liberal models, as its media system is characterized by high foreign intervention, high journalistic professionalism, limited political intervention in the private media, and a high level of political intervention in the public media.

At the same time, some of these previous studies have found that the re-conceptualizations of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) models beyond Western countries may fail to give accurate insights into what occurs within non-Western media systems that are undergoing a process of democratic transition (Albuquerque, 2012, 2013; Mcquail, 2005; Norris, 2009; McCargo, 2012; Peri, 2012, Wang, 2021; Thussu & Nordenstreng, 2020; Voltmer, 2013, etc.). For instance, Voltmer (2013) argued that the classification of media systems in non-Western countries into one of the three models proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) leads to theoretical overstretching and disguises the broad distinction of constellations that can be

found empirically outside the Western world (Hallin and Mancini, 2012, p. 244). In addition, a number of scholars have raised concerns about the scope of the four dimensions in non-Western contexts. For example, McCargo (2012) argued that in non-Western media the scope of these dimensions may go far beyond what is included in the categories of "high" and "low" or "strong" and "weak," as the media in developing countries are characterized by extreme inequality, hidden ownership, the controlling role of individual holders of power, and coercive tactics of state intervention such as hidden rules and clandestine practices. Likewise, Wang (2021) questioned the boundaries and scope of the four dimensions, indicating that these dimensions, grounded in the Western context, should be opened up to allow for more appropriate conceptualizations in different political systems.

Furthermore, other scholars have opened debates on missing variables in the four dimensions, which are related to the political realities in non-Western contexts. For example, Peri (2012) referred to security and safety considerations of journalism within media systems. While Thussu and Nordenstreng (2020) have claimed that Hallin and Mancini only focus on how the political context frames the media system, thereby neglecting issues related to culture, religion, and values in a society. Most importantly, through the lens of Hallin and Mancini's framework, the majority of previous research has described the nature of relationships between political parties and media relations as "*political parallelism*," however, it has been argued that the notion of "*political parallelism*" cannot be applied straightforwardly when looking at the relationship between media and politics in transitional democracies. This is because political parallelism requires certain conditions to be present within a media system which do not exist in transitional democracies, such as the existence of a "stable party system" and "organized" political parties, "well-rooted competing opinion," and "deep ideological cleavages in news media" (Albuquerque, 2012, p. 80; Mancini, 2012, p. 217, 2015, p. 25 - 29).

Even more relevant to the case of media in the KRI, studies have been devoted to operationalizing this framework within the context of media in the Middle East, such as El-Richani (2016), who argues that the Lebanese media system shares many similarities with the Southern Eastern Europe media system (e.g. low newspaper circulation, a high level of political intervention, a low level of journalistic professionalism and a limited role played by the state). El-Richani proposes an amended media-system model: CriSPP (crisis-prone, small, polarized-pluralist). A variation of the polarized-pluralist model, the CriSPP model explains salient features of conflict areas/crisis zones, adding the impact of state size to the

typical characteristics of the polarized-pluralist model. As mentioned by El-Richani, the size of the state should be considered in tandem with economic conditions such as newspaper circulation rates and revenues; political instability and crisis, internal and external political conflicts; the fragmentation and size of the market and technological development. As all these factors have impacted on Lebanese journalistic culture and norms. El-Richani further suggests that this media system model could be adopted in other Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq. On the other hand, Kim and Hama-Saeed (2008) argued that since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the media system in Iraq (including the KRI) shares many similarities with media in authoritarian contexts. Here, it is important to acknowledge that the Kurdistan Region is administratively part of Iraq; however, perhaps it is not entirely suitable to apply the Pan Arab Media System or CriSPP model as a standard for the case of the media system in the Kurdistan Region, which has undergone different political and social movements throughout its history and, in particular, after 1991, has been considered an autonomous "state within a state" (Relly, Zanger & Fahmy, 2015).

Therefore, when addressing the role of the state within the media system in the KRI, it is important to carefully consider the criteria and measurements that we use to capture the level of state intervention. For instance, according to El-Richani (2016), the media system in Lebanon is characterized by weak state intervention and strong intervention by non-state actors such as political parties. In this respect, empirical studies have shown that the state in the KRI consists of two main regions which are completely distinct geographically, with each region governed by one of two major political parties - the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Thus, "government and ruling parties in Iraqi Kurdistan are synonymous" (Gareth, 2003, p. 1). Nevertheless, in his book, *Global Media Giants,* Khiabany (2017) acknowledged that, in the context of Middle Eastern societies, the "media in general, and satellite channels in particular, operate under a patron who is either the government or some rich owner who is in many cases associated, in one way or another, with the ruling elite or the government" (p. 274). In addition, in his book, *Who Owns the World Media*? *Media Concentration and Ownership around the World*, Eli M. Noam (2016) argues that the majority of privately owned Arab media empires are controlled by ruling regimes, making their media quasi-private. This showcases the characteristic marriage between business and politics in the Arab world based on overlapping interests.

Remarkably, a number of Kurdish scholars from Iraq have also operationalized Hallin and Mancini's (2004) framework in the context of the KRI (Hussein, 2018; Taha, 2020). Hussein

(2018) has argued that Iraqi Kurdistan media are far from reflecting an authoritarian context, but rather moving slowly toward the liberal media model. At the same time, Hussein has argued that Hallin and Mancini's models are not intricate enough for the complex realities beyond Western countries. Hussein (2018) furthered the debate by addressing the political reality of the media environment in the KRI, arguing that contemporary media are closer to post-communist countries, for example, Russia, in terms of the increase in the number of media outlets; that all political parties are allowed to establish their own media outlets; that there is no official government censorship; and journalists are allowed to criticize government policies and report on corruption.

Nonetheless, Hussein (2018) also argued that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) encourages self-censorship among journalists, such as by allocating indirect funds to media that are close to dominant political parties and powerful governmental officials, and through other (in)direct tools used by government officials against journalists to restrict the watchdog role of journalism, such as arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial detention, etc. Likewise, Taha (2020) re-conceptualized Hallin and Mancini's (2004) four dimensions in the context of the media in the KRI, demonstrating that the *Polarized-Pluralist model* is the closest to the media system in the KRI, as it has a lot of similarities with media systems in Southeastern Europe, which are characterized by a high level of political pluralism, a small press market, a low level of journalistic professionalism, and strong state intervention. At the same time, Taha (2020) mentioned that the four dimentsons developed by Hallin and Mancini are "not achievable" ideally in the context of media in the KRI, due to the lack of political stabilty in the region. Indeed, Hallin and Mancini (2012) themselves were concerned about the limitation of their framework, such as their "three models turning into a kind of universal schema to be applied almost everywhere", in particular, in non-Western media contexts (p. 2). Later, both Mancini (2015) and Hallin (2020) have further argued why their models may not cover societies under democratic transitions with unstable political system, suggesting that media systems "models" are durable in nature; that it is possible to talk about a "model" of a media system if it is steady over a period of time; and that systems theory is able to explain "stability."

Like many other researchers, at the beginning of this PhD project, I employed Hallin and Mancini's framework as a starting point for situating and understanding the media environment in the KRI. Particularly, I aimed to operationalize Hallin and Mancini (2004) four dimensions in such a way as to allow us to understand and situate the media

in the KRI, rather than trying to fit the KRI media system into one of their three models. However, studying these dimensions was challenging and especially problematic with respect to understanding the relationship between media and politics in the Middle East in general, and in the case of the KRI in particular. For example, while Hallin and Mancini's four dimensions were developed based on particular variables within a political setting, in the context of the KRI media landscape, there are no transparent and independent sources of information related to the structure of media ownership. In addition, there is no obvious source of information in relation to the commercial orientation of media outlets, while information on public service broadcasting is controlled by the government. Such information is routinely hidden, either by the government administration or media owners. In April 2017, I participated in a spring school organized by Hallin and Mancini at the University of Perugia, Italy, on Media Systems: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives. In this spring school, I discussed the complexity of the operationalization of their four dimensions within a media environment such as the KRI.

Keeping this in mind, and following the feedback that I received from the discussants (such as Hallin and Mancini themselves and some other scholars), I started to address the media environment in the KRI by focusing on its political reality, rather than trying to fit its media into one of their three models. Therefore, I considered the theory of "media capture" as an alternative framework for explaining the relationship between media and politics in transitional democracies. This theory takes its starting point much more from the political realities on the ground in transitional or recently established democracies (e.g., Bajomi-Lazar, 2014; Schiffrin, 2017; Yanatma, 2016, 2021). At the same time, a number of authors, including Hallin and Mancini (2012) themselves, have argued that the *four dimensions* could still hold potential in providing an understanding of and situating media systems in transitional societies, at least imperfectly, by focusing on some indicators within the proposed dimensions but not all of them (Norris, 2009, p. 335; Hallin and Mancini, 2012). Thus, drawing on Hallin & Mancini's theories, the overarching theoretical ambition of this thesis is to assess the potential synergies of integrating the concept of media capture into comparative media systems analysis. The research starts from the assumption that these four dimensions do not function independently in transitional democracies. Quite the contrary, there is an overlap of interests between the state, political parties, business, media organizations, and other social actors, with the state at the center of this dynamic (Khiabany, 2016; Noami, 2016; Schiffrin, 2017; Yesil, 2018; Zielonka, 2015).

Media Capture Theory

Multiple definitions of "media capture" have evolved in the field of media and communication studies over the last two decades. One of the most useful definitions is that presented by political scholar Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, who writes:

> By "media capture" I mean a situation in which the media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous in manifesting a will of their own, nor able to exercise their main function, notably of informing people. Instead, they have persisted in an intermediate state, with vested interests, and not just the government, using them for other purposes" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013, p. 41).

This definition has been widely used to describe the pressures on media (e.g., commercial, political, legal, etc.) in societies undergoing democratic transition (see Ryabinska, 2014; Schiffrin, 2017; Voltmer, 2013; Zielonka, 2015).

Originally, "capture" was a term employed in the field of economics, in particular in the context of economic theories proposed by George Stigler (1971) in his article, "The Theory of Economic Regulation." In this paper, he links capture to regulation, starting with the hypothesis that "as a rule, regulation is acquired by the industry and is designed and operated primarily for its benefit" (p. 3). In this sense, capture theory, understood as a political market, refers to "regulation" that is provided in response to the demands of "interest groups" which struggle among themselves to maximize the income of their members (Posner, 1974, p. 1). More specifically, economists have argued that such economic rules are not about public interest, but rather they are used in a process by which interest groups seek to promote their own (private) benefits. In this sense they speak of "regulatory capture."

Economists and political scientists have further elaborated the concept *capture* in a broader sense, within different settings and circumstances. For example, in the 1990s, Hellman et al. (2000) introduced the concept of "state capture" to explain patterns of behavior observed in the first decade of transition in parts of the former Soviet Union and Southern Eastern Europe. However, state capture is not only about regulatory capture but also concerns the "core function" of governments (DávidBarrett, 2023, p. 4). In this respect, Hellman et al. (2000) focused on governance, corruption, and state capture, defining "state capture" as "the efforts of firms to shape and influence the underlying rules of the game (i.e. legislation, laws, rules, and decrees) through private payments to public officials" (p. 20).

Later, "state capture" was used to describe governance in many countries undergoing democratic transition, such as South Africa, several countries in Latin America, Middle East, and Southern Eastern Europe (e.g., Auerbach & Kartner, 2013; Black et al., 2020; Chipkin & Swilling, 2018; Szarzec, Totleben & Piątek, 2022; Innes, 2014; Kimya, 2018). Studies of these cases have shown that the state is captured by political or economic elites. For example, captors of the state might be wealthy businesspeople, also known as "oligarchs," who influence the government's regulatory environment, either through "direct kickbacks" or "promises of favors," as well as "rent-seeking," utilizing their personal connections with high-ranking state actors and parties holding political power (Frye, 2002; Klíma, 2019; Wong, 2010). Alternatively, the captors might be high-ranking politicians themselves, who utilize state resources to maintain their position within the power structure (Auerbach & Kartner, 2023; Posner, 1974; Szarzec, Totleben & Piątek, 2022).

However, some studies have shown that there is a significant blurring between economic and political elites due to high interdependencies between politics and business in transitional democracies (Curran & Park, 2000; Shai, 2017). In such a context, it has been shown that high-ranking politicians who are also business tycoons can place the state under huge pressure (Frye, 2002; Zielonka, 2015). Such groups (political and economic elites) may capture the state using different means: first, through the creation of laws and policies, such as controlling constitutional reforms, the police, the courts, intelligence networks, legislation work, etc.; second, through the implementation of laws, rules and policies, such as control over the distribution of funds (e.g. budgetary corruption), with the government's funds distributed to their favorite recipients; and third, through controlling accountability, such as disabling the institutions of accountability that would increase transparency around decision-makers (DávidBarrett, 2023; Frye, 2002) .

Capture theorists have also argued that state weakness gives opportunities to individuals such as powerful state officials to establish strong connections with lobbyists and the private sector. This leads to the informal "*business capture*" of the authorities. When state officials establish their own personal businesses through informal ties with businesspeople, the nature of the relation between state officials and business automatically becomes "less one-sided in favour of business." These kinds of connections are based on mutual patron–client relationships that are characterized by "elite exchange" between business and state actors (DávidBarrett, 2023; Frye, 2002).

The concept of *media capture* in an economic sense was introduced for the first time in 2006, in the paper, "Handcuffs for the Grabbing Hand? Media Capture and Government Accountability," by Timothy Besley and Andrea Prat. In this paper, they attempt to describe characteristics of the media market that affect political outcomes. In a discussion of nominally democratic societies, Besley and Prat (2006) used the term "media capture" to analyze how government and business work together to control the media. Their theory has shown that news media can be bought (e.g., advertising, bribes), which has consequent effects on political outcomes. While independent media provides information that allows voters to choose whether to maintain the current party in power or replace it with the opposition, media capture allows corrupt politicians to be less recognized as such by the public (Basely &Prat, 2006).

Encouraged by Besley and Prat's work, Maria Petrova's paper, "Inequality and Media Capture" (2007), investigated a situation where the media were captured by the rich, who thus had an impact on the content of the news. Consequently, voters were unaware of who was working in their true interests, and this led to increasing inequality. She thus pointed out that media capture by the rich may have longer lasting effects than merely capturing politicians, as "income inequality leads to political inequality, and policy outcomes are more responsive to the preferences of the rich than to those of the poor" (Petrova, 2007, p. 2).

In 2014, Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez published the book, *Media Systems and Communication Policies in Latin America*, which focused on media environments in several countries in Latin America, including Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, El Salvador, and Guatemala. In this context, they proposed "the captured liberal media model." They defined it as "liberal" because "it keeps the formalities of a predominant commercial media system", and they defined as "captured media" "due to its late development under historical circumstances that made them dependent on governments and public funding, it subordinated the media system from the start" (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014, p.59). The authors argued that fundamental aspects of the political system affect the media in transitional contexts, such as strong linkages between ruling politicians and traditional media organizations; the roots of clientelism; and the type of deregulation and market reforms. These aspects directly impact on: 1) the quality of regulatory efficiency and 2) the interference of interest groups in watchdog roles. Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez (2014) further argued that although their model shares certain features of the polarized-pluralist model proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) –

especially regarding clientelism – the captured liberal media model better represents the actual media environment in Latin America. This because it describes the circumstances that obstruct the governments' regulatory capacities, as well as showing that the pressures may come from various actors, such as politicians, state agencies, economic interests, or from owners and editors of the media corporations themselves.

Another book, *In the Service of Power: Media Capture and the Threat to Democracy*, edited by Anya Schiffrin (2017), looks further into the context of transitional democracies. Many scholars contributed to this book, with case studies into the media environment across the world, such as Myanmar, South Africa, China, Tanzania, the Czech Republic, Tunisia, and Romania. These case studies provided further evidence and examples of how media are indirectly controlled in societies undergoing democratic transition, through such means as indirect funding, bribes, advertising, and regulations, etc. Most significantly, this book highlighted less obvious forms of media capture that threaten journalistic independence. For example, Stiglitz (2017) highlighted how journalists practice self-censorship due to economic pressures over journalists on newsrooms by wealthy individuals. He called this "cognitive capture." Atal (2017) presented another form, which he called "plutocratic capture," describing how powerful wealthy individuals who are associated with political elites often seek to control traditional media and restrict the scope for political debate, and succeed through an often symbiotic interdependency among media owners, wealthy individuals, ruling families, and political elites. In addition, Pan (2017) discussed how the Chinese government controls media in the digital era, either using an "intermediary," requiring internet service providers to censor media content under the guidelines of the government, or "manually" by government employees; that is, internet police who manually check the content of online platforms. It was shown that these practices have alarmed journalists and resulted in a high level of self-censorship.

Over the last two decades, several studies have been conducted on media capture in transitional democracies. Some examples, in Turkey, Yanatma (2016, 2021) has examined a situation in which the government controls media content through state advertising. In addition, in Afghanistan, Relly and Zanger (2016), in Turkey, Yesil (2018), and in Poland, Ryabinska (2014) examined how the government controls media content through government bureaucracy, regulations, various routines, legislation, and legal violence, including media law, to protect their own interests. Bajomi-Lazar (2013) extended theories of media capture even further in the context of political parties in transitional democracies,

examining how political parties attempt to control media through the colonization of state resources, including airtime, satellite frequencies, or even obtaining positions in media regulatory bodies.

Despite all of this recent work, there remains a need to further develop this concept of media capture and integrate it into media systems theory. While both theoretical perspectives (media capture and Hallin and Mancini's framework) have their advantages and disadvantages, it is vital to explore their potential synergies in furthering our knowledge and understanding of complex media systems in transitional democracies, since both share concerns with regard to:

(i) Who is financing media outlets?
(ii) How is press freedom guaranteed and regulated?
(iii) What is the level of journalistic autonomy and public service orientation in the journalistic culture?

In the following section, I explain how these three gaps in the literature will lead to further conceptualization in this theoretical framework in the context of media in the KRI.

Integrating the Concept of Media Capture into Media Systems Analysis

Media capture scholars have focused on *three mechanisms* with which governments and dominant political parties build networks with other powerful social actors with the aim of controlling media: (i) advertising, (ii) media regulatory control, and (iii) journalistic culture. Below, I explain how each of these three mechanisms will be operationalized and how this will allow us to re-conceptualize the four-dimensional framework of media systems analysis. In this way, this research advances both theories (media capture and Hallin & Mancini's framework) in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan (officially known as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq), a transitional democracy in the Middle East – a region about which there is a lack of media research.

Advertising

This mechanism of media capture refers to advertising as a means of financing media outlets. First, previous research has revealed a situation known as advertising as media capture, in which governments capture news media through state advertising and announcements (i.e. development of the media market, the role of the state). This form

of control pertains to the role of the state in media market development: it refers to how a biased and/or non-transparent allocation or withholding of state advertising increases the control over the economic viability and content of media (Kodrich, 2008; Yanatma ,2016; Yesil, 2018). In small advertising markets, this impact is inevitable, as small newspapers must survive entirely on advertising, and governments remain the largest advertisers within the media market. In the case of private companies, research has shown that they tend to copy state agencies, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes involuntarily, to ensure that they advertise in those media that have the backing of powerful political actors (Yesil, 2016).

Moreover, studies have indicated that advertising can interfere directly with the work of journalists, for instance through self-censorship, as journalists might have the placement of advertising in mind while performing their journalistic work (Eberl et al., 2018). But it can also happen under the pressure from the editor-in-chief or the advertisers themselves (i.e. journalistic professionalism). Especially in non-transparent media environments, the direct payment of individual journalists by state advertisers can become an "institutionalized practice," with both parties expecting favors from one another (Open Society Justice Initiative 2008, p. 10).

Media Regulatory Control

This mechanism relies on another particular aspect of media capture theory by examining how press freedom is guaranteed and regulated in terms of how media regulatory bodies and governmental bureaucracy apply the different formal and informal instruments at their disposal.

In the context of media capture, previous research has demonstrated how dominant political parties attempt to control media formally, such as by colonizing state resources (Bajomi-Lazar, 2014; Ryabinska, 2014; Yesil, 2016, 2018). More specifically, they gain control by occupying influential positions within media regulatory bodies and public service broadcasting (i.e. political parallelism). Such tactics enable political parties to use their positions to draft and implement media law, and force the adoption of particular regulations, all in such a way that it suits their interests (i.e. role of the state). For example, the political parties' representatives in government institutions, such as actors are involved in those institutions where regulations are formulated, may challenge media owners informally when they apply to renew their media licenses or by using vaguely defined laws as sanctioning instruments to restrict freedom of expression and silence adversarial or

critical voices in the context of a partisan justice system. Furthermore, through positions within public service broadcasting, politicians can access a variety of services. For example, such positions can be used informally to engage in party patronage by offering well-paying jobs to supporters (e.g. journalists, activists, private media owners) in exchange for future services (i.e., journalists' professionalism). And finally, by failing to create regulation that formally ensures transparency and accountability within the media market (e.g. public procurement, antitrust or advertising laws), potential sources of surreptitious state funding remain hidden and corruption can thrive (i.e., development of the media market).

Journalistic Culture

This mechanism of media control explores a particular aspect of media capture theory by analyzing the level of journalistic autonomy and public service orientation. Media capture research has pointed at the problematic nature of a journalistic environment characterized by pressures on an economic, political and professional level (Frisch et al., 2017; Morris, 2016; Stiglitz, 2017). This refers to uncertain sources of income or the involvement of journalists in multiple jobs, political interference in journalists' unions and sometimes even physical attacks on editors, refusing to apply existing codes of ethics or insufficient levels of education.

Previous studies have indicated that the massive investments made by western aid agencies and foundations following the fall of authoritarian regimes can have a considerable impact on journalistic quality and values (Relly et al., 2015, 2017; Schiffrin, 2011). For example, journalism training may positively impact journalistic reporting on critical topics and enhance awareness of professional ethics and values. Journalists may nevertheless play an active role in the process of media capture by practicing self-censorship in the newsroom. As indicated by previous research (e.g. Morris, 2016), successful reporters and trained journalists who graduate from journalism schools tend to join government mouthpieces, thereby accessing more secure and lucrative fields that allow no room for investigative journalism. In the such contexts, these mechanisms are often used by some journalists as a consequence of an ongoing economic crisis, small market, low advertising revenues, and lack of journalists' safety (Schiffrin, 2017; Yanatma, 2016). In addition, research on journalism has argued that journalists have developed both professional and personal networks with powerful social actors to mitigate conditions of chronic instability, as the case of journalists in both Russia (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019), and in Lebanon (Selvik & Høigilt, 2021).

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY:

A MIXED METHOD DESIGN

Introduction

In general, the argument above concerning the theoretical framework made it clear that in the case of the media environment in the KRI, the re-operationalization of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) four dimensions presents methodological challenges. However, this awareness has directed this research to make a number of particular methodological choices. Therefore, this study has considered that conceptualizing the four dimensions in the context of transitional democracies could provide guidelines, directions, and what are called "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1954; Hallin, Mellado, & Mancini, 2023). This was the starting point for our thoughts and allowed for deeper insight into the challenges that I might face in conceptualizing media capture in the context of the political reality of the media environment in the KRI.

While this research aimed to clarify how media capture allows us to understand the media environment in transitional democracies, this will be done by analyzing the *three mechanisms* with which powerful social actors attempt to control media in a non-transparent media environment. However, in the context of the media in the KRI, conducting such as research to offer a multidimensional picture of media capture was problematic, since the targeted data were hard to reach, unknown and/or hidden, as all of the information is controlled by the media organizations, and/or by the government and political parties. To this end, an advanced mixed methods research design is put forward to undertake a comprehensive examination of this non-transparent media environment with regard to financing, regulatory control, and journalistic culture.

The following section begins with an explanation of how the research questions were developed in the context of media in the KRI. I then describe how I conceptualized the three mechanisms of media capture in the context of media in the KRI: (i) advertising; (ii) media regulatory control; and (iii) journalistic culture. In addition, I present the methodological approach used to operationalize each of these three mechanisms in the KRI.

Operationalisation of Three Mechanisms of Media Capture in The KRI

This research was planned over the course of seven years (2016–2023). In the period between 2016 and 2018, the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this research were advanced and planned. The following sections present the details on how

the research questions were developed, and when/where the empirical studies were conducted for investigating the three mechanisms of (i) advertising, (ii) media regulatory control, (iii) journalistic culture.

Research Questions and Methods

Three particular questions were established to investigate the three mechanisms of media control in the KRI, leading to the four empirical chapters of this dissertation. The research questions were based on the literature review, which allowed this research to test particular hypotheses, as well as being the result of an organic process that was relevant to the political context of the KRI.

> ***RQ1****: How do various social actors attempt to capture media – through their allocation of advertisements and announcements in the KRI?*
>
> ***RQ2:*** *How is press freedom guaranteed and regulated, in terms of how media regulatory bodies and governmental bureaucracy apply the different formal and informal instruments at their disposal?*
>
> ***RQ3:*** *How safe or dangerous is the landscape through which the KRI journalists have to navigate? How can we relate this to broader state capture processes undertaken by the Kurdistan Regional Government? How do journalists respond to such an unsafe environment?*

These research questions have been addressed in four empirical chapters, RQ1 has been addressed in chapters 3 (case study 1) and 4 (case study 2), and RQ2 and RQ3 have been addressed in chapters 5 and 6. In each empirical study I provide detailed information on how I dealt with the methodological challenges and procedures involved in studying a complex mediascape in a non-transparent environment. However, the following sections present some brief explanations about how the three research questions have been developed and operationalized in the context of media in the KRI.

Advertising

Most of the existing research in the context of transitional democracies has limited itself to examining the role of state advertising as a means of governmental control of the

media (e.g., Dragomir, 2017; Kodrich, 2008; Petrova ,2008). This PhD research expands this approach to include other social actors, such as advertisers, corporations, political candidates in election periods, and international non-governmental organizations. Here, I use the term "media capture" in a slightly different manner, with a broader scope. For instance, a large amount of research on media capture has comprehensively focused on the strong role of the "state," showing that the primary reason behind media capture by governments is the management of information.

However, other considerations are entirely ignored, such as the extraction of media resources (e.g. advertising, frequencies, public service funding, airtime) (Bajomi-Lazar, 2017); the informal personal ties among powerful social actors that are used for personal gain; and how powerful politicians hijack the state for their own personal purposes (Frye, 2002). All of these aspects are highlighted in this research by exploring the role of various social actors in the process of media capture, either directly or indirectly. By expanding the concept of media capture in this way, I situate media capture within the wider literature on the nature of state capture (DávidBarrett, 2023; Hellman et al., 2000; Stigler, 1974), party colonization of media (Bajomi-Lazar, 2013), business capture (Frye, 2002; Szarzec, Totleben & Piątek, 2022), and regulatory capture (Yesil, 2018). This resulted in the first specific research question:

> ***RQ1****: How do various social actors attempt to capture media through their allocation of advertisements and announcements in the KRI?*

To address this question, two empirical sub-studies were conducted. The first sub-study examined the *distribution of advertising* (see Case study 1), while the second sub-study examined the *impact of the advertisers* (see Case study 2). In the period between 2018 and 2019, the first case study explored how various social actors chose to *distribute* advertisements to specific media outlets in the non-transparent media market of the KRI. This first sub-study provided a rich supply of information on which to build arguments related to organizational linkages between the state, media owners, politicians, and business. I then turned to another important dimension in sub-study two: *the impact of advertisers*. In this respect, a number of questions remained to be answered, such as: 1) What were the exact motivations and interests of the various social actors, including NGOs and political parties, in terms of advertising allocation? and 2) What was the potential impact of these advertisers on journalistic output?

Method

Given the complexity of the newspaper industry, the context of the media market in the KRI posed a number of methodological difficulties relating to the commercial confidentiality of media organizations, not least because there is no independent institution that offers information on advertising revenues and their sources. To ensure the data validity, I used mixed methods design (the combination of a quantitative content analysis with interviews), in which quantitative content analysis was used for the first sub-study on *advertising distribution,* and interviews were used for the second sub-study on the *impact of the advertisers.* For this reason, I travelled two times to the KRI. First, for case study 1, in July 2018, I obtained access to the archives of six newspapers. In total, 11,112 ads were selected. I coded the size (in cm2), the portrayed source (i.e., state-based entities, political parties, commercial companies, NGOs), and the region where the source was based (details of the methodology are available in Chapter 3). Second, for case study 2, I traveled to the KRI in July and August 2019 to conduct 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, managers of media companies, and members of media regulatory bodies (details of the methodology are available in Chapter 4).

Case study 1*: Advertising distribution,* to explore the role played by different social actors in the allocation of advertising and announcements, this work package involved a quantitative content analysis of six major weekly and daily newspapers between 2014 and 2018. These newspapers were selected according to type (party, independent, shadow media) and region-wide distribution.

(i) *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Hawler* and *Evro* identify themselves as partisan newspapers, as they are openly funded by political parties. *Evro* is based in Duhok, *Kurdistan Nwe* in Sulaymaniyah, and *Hawler* in Erbil, but all are also distributed in the other regions.

(ii) *Hawlati* and *Awene* identify themselves as independent newspapers. They are based in Sulaymaniyah, while being distributed in all regions. They were the first independent newspapers to exist, established in 2000 and 2006, respectively. Two journalists were assassinated in recent years following news stories related to government corruption (Reporters Without Borders, 2010; Nikqash, 2015).

(iii) *Rudaw*, established in 2006, also presents itself as independent. However, according to information published by Wikileaks, the government makes monthly payments. Therefore, Reporters Without Borders (2010) and previous academic research listed Rudaw as a shadow media outlet (Hussein, 2018)

Case study 2: *Advertising impact*. This research was undertaken in the period between July 2019 and August 2020, with 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with media professionals (e.g., journalists, editors, managers of media companies) and officials from media regulatory authorities in the KRI.

For the selection of our interviewees, this research considered the media environment of the KRI in terms of the three types of media ownership identified above: partisan, shadow, and independent. However, while for the first sub-study, I only worked on printed newspapers, for this sub-study, the interviewees selected were working for both print and online press, and some of these media organizations also broadcast television and radio, such as *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Rudaw*, and *NRT*. Thus, some of the interviewees were working for multiple media platforms, such as online and print media, as well as for TV and radio, as in the case of *Rudaw*, *NRT*, and *Kurdistani Nwe*.

Media Regulatory Control

The literature suggests that governments may control media news through regulations, such as through inspection powers over regulations and governmental bureaucracy, or dominant parties may occupy influential positions within media regulatory bodies to control state resources in their own interests (Bajomi-Lazar, 2013, 2018; Yesil, 2018). Therefore, in Case study 3, I addressed the following question:

> ***RQ2:*** *How is press freedom guaranteed and regulated, in terms of how media regulatory bodies and governmental bureaucracy apply the different formal and informal instruments at their disposal?*

To address this question from a regulatory perspective, I conceptualized media capture in terms of the hierarchy of media regulatory bodies; the content of media regulations and laws in the KRI; and the implementation of media laws in the KRI.

Method

A mixed methods approach (Jensen, 2002) was used combining a document analysis of media-related laws and in-depth interviews with media professionals and high-ranking officials who were involved in media regulatory bodies.

First, I utilized a qualitative document analysis of previous and existing media regulations. These documents are the original Iraqi Central Government Press Law, the amendment to the constitution of the Kurdish Regional Government entitled "Improvement to the Press Law" from 2008, and the "Instructions for public service broadcasting and media licensing" issued by the Ministry of Culture and Youth in 2014. These documents are analyzed and compared using qualitative content analysis in line with the method of thematic coding (Jensen, 2002), with a focus on the changes between the original Iraqi laws and the current Kurdish ones.

Second, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with media professionals from different types of media organizations (partisan, independent, shadow). Third, I interviewed regulatory authorities in the KRI, the selected state officials are involved in those institutions where regulations are formulated, issued and implemented, such as the Ministry of Culture and Youth, the General Directorate for Media and Publishing, and the Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate. They were asked about who drafted and enforced current regulations and how (details of the methodology are available in Chapter 5).

This analysis provided insights into the role of political parties and their relationship to media, revealing how dominant parties in the KRI occupy influential positions within media regulatory bodies and public service broadcasting and how the government in the KRI adopts formal/informal regulations in a way that suits their interests. The study also gave some insight into journalists' circumstances, such as the challenges faced by journalists in the KRI due to the vaguely defined laws, which are also used as sanctioning instruments to restrict freedom of expression and silence adversarial or critical voices in the context of a partisan justice system.

Journalistic culture

Based on the broad selection of partisan, independent, and shadow media in studies 1, 2, and 3, the analysis was able to examine the status of journalists and editors working in different types of media and with a region-wide distribution. In the context of media capture, most of the research in the field has discussed how journalists and editors

practice self-censorship to avoid being punished by government. As mentioned above, the previous studies (2 & 3) gave some insights into the insecure situation of journalists in the KRI. This analysis thus took into account how journalists in restrictive contexts develop multiple strategies to maintain some independence, by focusing on the concept of journalism as "emotional labour" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). This allowed a nuanced view of how journalists function in a complex context, while recognizing the engaged and emotional nature of their work. Therefore, the final empirical study (i.e., case study 4) of this dissertation aimed to address the question of journalists' circumstances in the KRI:

***RQ4**: How safe or dangerous is the landscape through which the KRI journalists have to navigate? How can we relate this to broader state capture processes undertaken by the Kurdistan Regional Government? Moreover, how do journalists respond to such an unsafe environment?*

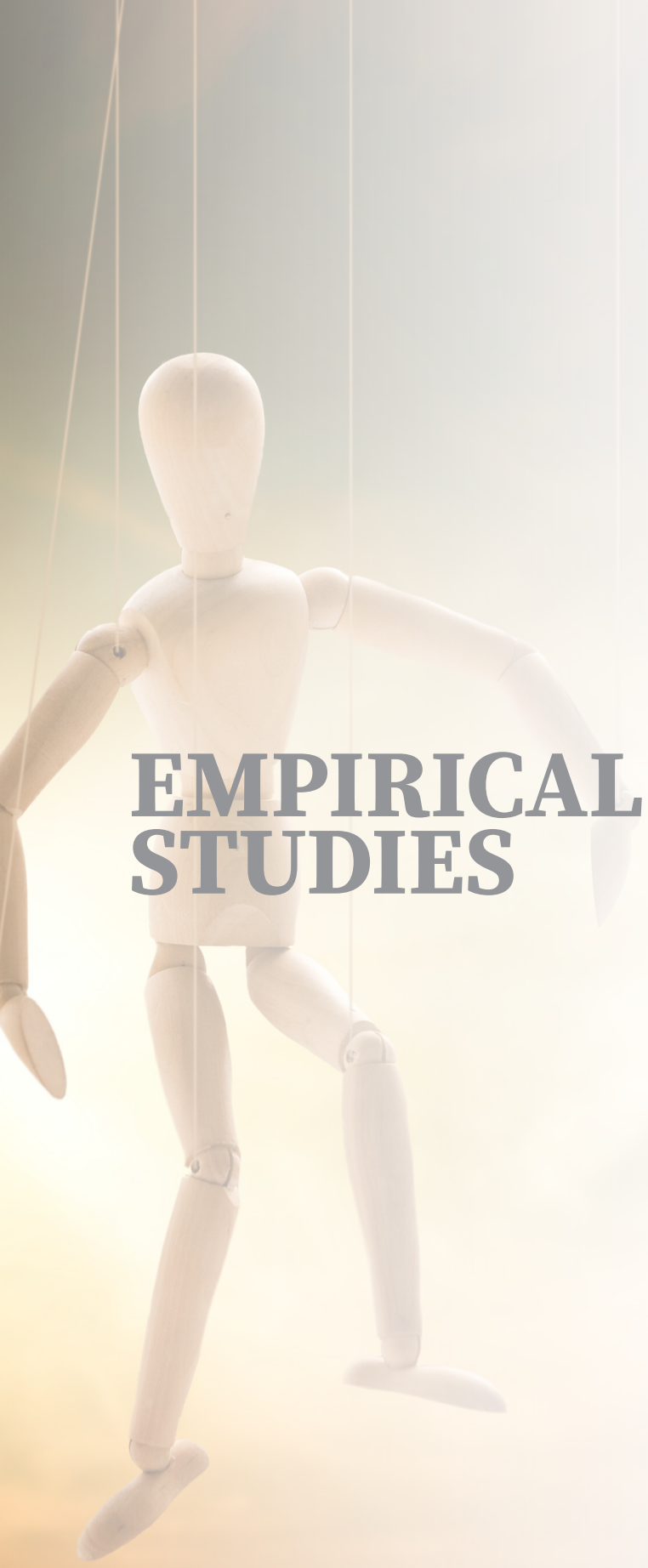
Method

A mixed methods approach has been employed for this analysis: quantitative and qualitative content analysis of documents and in-depth semi-structured interviews (Jensen, 2002).

First, I analyzed reports published by two major organizations that defend the rights of journalists (The Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate [KJS] and the Metro Center for Journalists' Rights and Advocacy [MC]). These reports record and publish details on violent incidents against journalists in the KRI. Second, I conducted interviews with media professionals, journalists and editors inquired about their experiences. This allowed a nuanced view of how journalists function in a complex context, while recognizing the engaged and emotional nature of their work (details of the methodology are available in Chapter 6)

In the concluding chapter, the findings of the various studies are brought together. In this way, this research presents a multi-methodological approach that combines the paradigm of political economy with rigorous social-scientific research, in which media operate within a non-transparent environment (e.g., such as informal clientelist structures and networks).This also gives the research its comprehensive character, being able to triangulate the results across these different levels and thereby offering a multidimensional picture of how the mechanisms at play at these different levels add to our understanding of media capture in the media system of the KRI. At the same time,

each of the three mechanisms that were uncovered and further investigated (advertising, regulatory environment, and journalistic culture) tell us something about the four dimensions developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), with the political parties always at the centre.



EMPIRICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER 3

CASE STUDY 1

Published article:

Faris, J., Maeseele, P., & Smets, K. (2021). Newspaper advertising in a nontransparent media market: The case of Iraqi Kurdistan (2014–2018). International Journal of Communication, 15, 1393–1413.

Introduction

This chapter presents the first case study of this thesis, analyzing an advertising market operating in a non-transparent environment, as is the case for the media in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). In the context of media systems in transitional democracies, previous studies have been concerned about the economic sustainability of media organizations due to issues such as a weak economy, an unstable political system, and underdeveloped advertising revenues. In such a context, previous research has shown that governments use their economic power (i.e., advertising, bribes, direct/indirect funding) either to reward the pro-government media or punish the critical media of the government. This chapter focuses on advertising as a means of media financing. This chapter provides insight into how powerful social actors (government, political candidates in the elections, corporations, NGOs) choose to financially support different types of media outlets in the KRI, such as through the allocation of advertisements and announcements.

Before this study, no basic research or information on the advertising sector in the KRI was available. In terms of media market development, the role of the state and political parallelism, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is a clear example of a non-transparent media environment. This poses a number of methodological difficulties relating to the commercial confidentiality of media companies, as advertising revenue is controlled by media owners. This chapter provides information on how to deal with the methodological challenges involved in studying a complex mediascape in non-transparent environments; it reveals who the major advertisers in the KRI are; and shows how the advertisements are distributed to different types of media organizations (partisan, shadow, independent) in the KRI.

The results of this study provide information on the nature of the linkages between political parties and media outlets (i.e., political parallelism) and the nature of the relationship between political parties and government (i.e., state capture), as well as insight into the connections between business and politics in the KRI (i.e., crony capitalism).

This chapter was originally presented as a paper at the International Association for Media and Communication Research – IAMCR 2019 and it was published as a journal article in the International Journal of Communication (IJOC) in volume 15. I was the leading author, I developed the theoretical framework, I collected and analyzed the data. The article was co-written with my supervisors, Pieter Maeseele and Kevin Smets, who helped me narrow down the scope of the study and guided me in the academic structuring of the paper.

Newspaper Advertising in a Nontransparent Media Market: The Case of Iraqi Kurdistan (2014–2018)

Abstract

This article focuses on a particular aspect of media capture theory: advertising as a means of financing media outlets in a transitional democracy such as Iraqi Kurdistan. Its aim is to investigate the extent to which various social actors attempt to capture news media by choosing to provide financial support to some and withhold it from others through their allocation of advertisements and announcements. We report on the findings of a quantitative content analysis of the ads published in six major weekly and daily newspapers in the five-year period from 2014 through 2018 (N = 11,112). These findings provide information on the linkages between media organizations and powerful social actors within a nontransparent media environment, and shed new light on the nature and profile of both "partisan" and "independent" media outlets. We conclude by discussing the implications of these results with regard to the state of media capture in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Keywords: Iraqi Kurdistan, transitional democracy, newspaper advertising, media capture, partisan media, independent media

After the first Gulf War, the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq came into existence in 1991. Up until 2003, the region was controlled by two political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union Kurdistan (PUK), which established their own media outlets to advance their political agenda (Hussein, 2018). The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 set in motion a process of democratization: Both the political and media landscapes drastically changed, as many new political parties were founded and numerous media outlets were started. Iraqi Kurdistan became a transitional democracy (see also Hussein, 2018; MacQueen, 2015), characterized by the emergence of new institutions and a volatile political reality, where various sections of the elite, political parties, and other powerful social actors actively rethought their positions within the power structure (Mancini, 2012; Voltmer, 2013; Zielonka, 2015).

Since 2014, the region has been suffering an economic crisis because of cuts in the transfers from the Iraqi central government and the budgetary implications of the long-term efforts of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The crisis has resulted in a dramatic deterioration of the media market, which primarily has affected independent media outlets: Hundreds of publications are believed to have closed because of financial difficulties, including the independent newspapers *Hawlati* and *Awene*. Their managers have been quoted as saying that they are failing to generate adequate ad revenue as most government and corporate advertising goes to media owned by political parties (Hardi, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Latif, 2015).

In the context of a weak economy, an unstable political system, and underdeveloped advertising revenues, some form of media capture can thrive. Media capture refers to the ways in which governments and dominant political parties build networks with other powerful social actors with the aim of controlling media, for instance, through advertising, the colonization of state resources, or clientelism (Bajomi-Lazar, 2012; Frisch, Gagon, & Agur, 2017; Yanatma, 2016). However, little is known about how this political and economic environment might impact Iraqi Kurdistan's media system.

The aim of the research is to investigate the extent to which various social actors attempt to capture news media by choosing to provide financial support to some and withhold it from others through their allocation of advertisements and announcements. It reports on the findings of a quantitative content analysis of the ads published in six major weekly and daily newspapers in the five-year period from 2014 through 2018 ($N = 11{,}112$). These findings provide information on the linkages between media organizations and powerful social actors such as state entities, private companies, political parties, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) within a nontransparent media environment, and shed new light on the nature and profile of both "partisan" and "independent" media outlets. That way, this research makes an important empirical contribution given that media organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan do not make any public announcements about their advertising revenues, and the government does not publish any data related to government advertising. This lack of economic transparency on the part of the government is generally linked to autocratic regimes and bad governance because it facilitates rent seeking and enlarges the authorities' room to maneuver (Hollyer, Peter, & James, 2019). At the same time, Iraqi Kurdistan is often regarded as a model for democratic pluralism in the Middle East region for successfully integrating democratic characteristics, such as political pluralism, free

elections, a vibrant civil society, and a diverse media landscape (see also Hama et al., 2018; Hassan, 2015; Mohammad, 2020). A study on advertising as a means of financing media outlets in a transitional democracy such as Iraqi Kurdistan is therefore much needed.

In the following section, we address the history of media in Iraqi Kurdistan within the context of the changing political and economic conditions of the past decades. Subsequently, we explain the concept of media capture and introduce three potential scenarios on how media can be controlled through advertising within the context of transitional democracies. The Method section presents the research aims, the data collection process, and the method of analysis. In the following section, the findings are discussed by social actor. We conclude by discussing the implications of these results regarding the state of media capture in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Media and Politics in Iraqi Kurdistan

The Kurdish press has been an integrated part of the political and economic development of Kurds in the Middle East and more specifically in Iraq. The national project of the Kurds has been closely linked to journalism. As Hussein (2018) argues, this has been articulated through different phases for Kurdish journalism, such as "nationalism journalism" (1898–1918), when the first printed Kurdish press appeared; "resistance journalism" (1918–1979), when the Kurdish press was under strict control of the Iraqi central government; "mountain journalism" (1979–1991), with clandestine publishing against a revolutionary backdrop; and "partisan journalism" (1991–2003), after the first Gulf War (Hussein, 2018, p. 79; Taha, 2020, p. 48). Taking into account this particular history of the Kurdish press, this article focuses on a new era characterized by party/press parallelism.

To understand how this new era has developed, it is necessary to look at political events in the 1990s and 2000s. After the first Kurdish elections in 1992, the region quickly fell into civil war. Eventually, KDP and PUK came to control separate parts of Iraqi Kurdistan: The provinces of Erbil and Duhok came under the control of KDP, while Sulaymaniyah was controlled by PUK (Irwani, 2015; Khalil, 2016). Following negotiations, both sides agreed to share power and a council of ministers. In the process, both parties established their own media: In 1992, PUK launched its daily newspaper *Kurdistani Nwe*; in 1994, KDP launched *Khabat* in Erbil and *Payman* in Duhok (renamed *Evro* in 2009). *Hawler* was established in 1951 in Erbil and also came under direct control of KDP at that time. Gradually, satellite TV stations became part of this divided, party-controlled media landscape, with KDP launching Kurdistan TV in 1999, and PUK launching Kurdsat in 2000. This media landscape

was thus defined by party/press parallelism in which media outlets operated parallel to the political parties that owned and funded them (see also Mancini, 2012). This did not stop the emergence of some private initiatives too: The foundation of the newspaper *Hawlati* in 2000 was seen as a hopeful turning point (Al-Rawi, 2012).

Between 2003 and 2018, the situation changed drastically, and a total of 831 newspapers and magazines, 33 TV satellites, 74 radio stations, and 82 local TV channels came into existence, as did online journalism (Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate, 2017). However, in the context of a lack of official data, the sources of funding for these media organizations remain unclear, and ambiguity even exists with regard to the ownership of the most popular and respected media outlets that profile themselves as independent/private media. Kurdish media scholars and international NGOs (Hussein, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2010) have previously categorized media outlets into three types: (1) Partisan media outlets refer to so-called party organs that are openly controlled by political parties, such as *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Evro*, *Hawler*, Kurdistan TV, and Kurdsat. (2) Independent media outlets refer to organizations that are financially dependent on sales, advertising, and aid from international organizations, and are thus considered to operate outside the influence of social powers, such as *Hawlati* and *Awene*. In this regard, numerous international foundations entered Iraq after 2003 to support media democratization and journalism, such as the United Nations Development Program and the U.S. Agency for International Development. However, some studies have emphasized the lack of clarity regarding these sources of international aid, casting doubt on whether particular media are truly independent or in fact funded by the U.S. government (Al-Rawi, 2012, 2015). (3) Shadow media outlets refer to media organizations that profile themselves as independent despite indirectly receiving funding from political parties or other powerful social actors (Hussein, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2010). These outlets are often owned by high-ranking politicians who are also business tycoons. In fact, the two largest media companies, *Rudaw* Media Networks and *Nalia* Media Corporation, are considered examples of this type (Hama, Abdullah, & Jasem, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Wikileaks, 2012).

Several studies have expressed concern about the interference of the ruling parties in governmental institutions, business, and NGOs. Kurdish and international scholars have argued that the KRG's public administration and the Kurdistan National Assembly function as party organizations rather than as a regional government or parliamentary body, as both are actually operated by officials who also act as functionaries for political party leaders (Irwani, 2015). Furthermore, research has pointed out how this domination by two

political parties has turned corruption and patronage into major issues in the KRG (Berwari & Ambrosio, 2008; Relly, Zanger, & Fahmy, 2014). These ruling parties have been found to exploit the KRG's budget for their own interests (Irwani, 2015). Mills (2016) describes the political economy of the KRG as a "classic 'rentier state,'" characterized by "a lack of domestic taxation, heavy subsidies to the populace, a high degree of state employment, the prevalence of patronage and corruption, and an authoritarian government albeit with democratic elements" (p. 31).

It is no surprise then that the ruling parties also have a large impact on the economic sector. International research institutions and Kurdish scholars have established how much the political economy of the region is characterized by economic monopolies and nepotistic links (Finkel, 2015; Irwani, 2015). For instance, the major Internet and telecom providers are owned by the two ruling parties (e.g., Korek Telecom is owned by KDP leaders and Asiacell by PUK leaders). Finally, Hassan (2015) describes the KRG's political economy as an example of crony capitalism: the result of a strong interlocking between the ruling party and the state. The public treasury and private capital become indistinguishable, and the constitution and laws are manipulated in the interests of the ruling parties. Others have argued how this impact also extends to NGOs, with whom ruling parties hold a clear clientelist relationship (Finkel, 2015).

However, little is known about how this environment might impact the media economics in Iraqi Kurdistan. Previous research has highlighted how indispensable examining the overlap of interests among media ownership, politics, and business is to understanding the dynamics of media systems under democratic transition (Schiffrin, 2017a; Yesil, 2018; Zielonka, 2015).

Media Capture in Transitional Democracies

This study concerns the nature of relationships between media and politics in transitional democracies. The framework of media capture is particularly apt for understanding these relationships as it starts very much from the political realities on the ground (e.g., Bajomi-Lazar, 2012; Yanatma, 2016). Media capture has been defined as a "systemic governance problem where political leaders and media owners work together in a symbiotic but mutually corrupting relationship: Media owners provide supportive news coverage to political leaders in exchange for favorable government treatment of their business and political interests" (Finkel, 2015, p. 1). Research on media capture has focused on three particular mechanisms with which governments and dominant political parties attempt

to control media: (1) state advertising (Kodrich, 2008; Schiffrin, 2017b; Yanatma, 2016); (2) the regulatory environment: media law, regulatory bodies, and governmental bureaucracy (Bajomi-Lazar, 2012; Relly & Zanger, & Fahmy, 2015; Ryabinska, 2014); and (3) symbiotic linkages with journalists (Frisch et al., 2017; Morris, 2016; Stiglitz, 2017).

In this article, we focus on the first mechanism, advertising as a means of financing media outlets, with the aim of examining the development of Iraqi Kurdistan's newspaper industry as well as the linkages between media organizations and powerful social actors within a nontransparent media environment. The literature on media capture has put forward three possible scenarios for controlling media through advertising in the context of transitional democracies.

A first scenario is a situation known as "advertising as media capture," in which governments capture news media through state advertising and announcements. This form of control refers to how a biased and/or nontransparent allocation or withholding of state advertising increases the control over the economic viability and content of media (Kodrich, 2008; Yanatma, 2016; Yesil, 2018). This usually occurs when media organizations are vulnerable to financial difficulties, when the media market is small and fragmented, and when the newspaper industry is immature (Schiffrin, 2017b). Such impact is inevitable in small advertising markets given that small newspapers must survive entirely on advertising and governments continue to be the largest advertisers within the media market. Media outlets must therefore seek politically motivated subsidies. Studies have revealed that a state can interfere with the work of journalists either directly or indirectly under pressure from the editor-in-chief or the advertisers themselves. Such interference can also occur through self-censorship, as journalists might have the placement of advertising in mind when performing their jobs (Eberl, Wagner, & Boomgaarden, 2018).

A second scenario involves the influence of state advertising on the behavior of advertisers within private companies. Commercial advertisers have been found to loyally track state advertisers in terms of how they allocate advertisements to media outlets, thereby ensuring that their advertisements are published in media that have the support of powerful political actors. The symbiotic connection between private advertisers and media outlets that are friendly to the government can be voluntary, as some large-scale companies (e.g., telecommunications companies and banks) have strong connections to the ruling parties. Moreover, in many cases, business enterprises are owned by political

parties, and their distribution of advertisements is heavily dependent on the direction of these parties (Yesil, 2018). Such linkages can help commercial actors strengthen their positions within political networks. Previous research has found journalists explaining how they are expected to write positive news stories about particular private companies as their media outlets depend on their sponsorship through either advertising or loans (Milojević & Krstić, 2018). Such is not always the case, however, and private advertisers do not always use advertising to meddle in the editorial content of the news media. Sometimes they are under state (i.e., legal) pressure to follow particular policies, specifically with regard to the distribution of advertisements to media outlets that are critical of the state. In such situations, governments thus exercise their power through regulations (and lawsuits) and inspections as a means of punishing private advertisers (Milojević & Krstic, 2018).

A third scenario involves media control related to the linkages between states and parties. Advertising can arguably be controlled directly by the ruling parties through their supermajority position within various governmental bodies. This situation is known as "state capture" (Zielonka, 2015, p. 26). Bajomi-Lazar (2017) uses this concept to explain the motivations of dominant parties attempting to control state resources (e.g., state advertising). The majority of existing studies have proceeded from the assumption that powerful social actors seek control over advertising to suppress critical voices and gain favorable coverage, thereby influencing voting behavior. At the same time, however, they have largely ignored other possible motivations. Bajomi-Lazar (2015, 2017) establishes the extent to which ruling political parties rely on state subsidies that guarantee their organizational survival. The nature of strong relationships between parties and the state can be analyzed under a variety of patterns in transitional democracies. The first pattern has to do with the party's dependence on the state because parties receive public funding. This type of relationship is related to the notion of "cartel-style party politics," in which dominant political parties build strong networks with the state based on previous contracts in a process of "cartelization" (Zielonka, 2015, p. 80). The second pattern concerns the colonization of the state by a party. This type of relationship between the state and a political party is the most complex, referring to rent-seeking behavior on the part of ruling political parties within government institutions. In this respect, Bajomi-Lazar (2015, 2017) argues that dominant political parties use symbiotic connections with the state to take control of the media, for instance, by colonizing public broadcasting services for a variety of purposes (e.g., to control state advertising as a source of financing).

Method

Research aims

Regarding media market development, the role of the state, and political parallelism, Iraqi Kurdistan is a clear example of a nontransparent media environment. The funding of media organizations in particular is nontransparent: Ownership structures are hidden; information on circulation, consumption, and revenue is controlled by media owners; and information on public service broadcasting is controlled by the government. There are no independent organizations that offer information about funding sources or about the affiliation of media outlets, such as the World Association of Newspapers or the World Bank. For that reason, we advance an innovative methodology to examine the allocation of advertisements on two levels.

First, whereas the majority of existing research in the context of transitional democracies has limited itself to examining the role of state advertising as a means of governmental control (e.g., Kodrich, 2008; Petrova, 2008), this study expands this approach to include other social actors as advertisers, such as political parties, private companies, and NGOs.

Second, whereas other scholars (e.g., Yanatma, 2016) have examined documents collected from the websites of advertising agencies to ascertain how much state advertisements are allocated to which newspaper, we focus directly on the published advertisements in a broad selection of newspapers because we have no such websites or databases at our disposal. We developed a content analysis method that allowed us to establish the (portrayed) source and size of advertisements and announcements, with the aim of drawing conclusions about how different social actors choose to financially support particular newspapers over others.

Finally, this methodological framework also sheds new light on the nature and profile of different types media outlets by providing important information on which newspapers can rightly present themselves as independent while others are really shadow newspapers. At the same time, it is interesting to see the advertising patterns in the partisan newspapers, as it opens questions about which other social actors primarily advertise in them.

Data selection

To establish the role played by different social actors in the allocation of advertising and announcements, this study involved a quantitative content analysis of six major weekly and daily newspapers between 2014 and 2018: *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Rudaw*, *Awene*, *Evro*, *Hawler*, and *Hawlati*. These newspapers were selected according to type and profile (i.e., partisan, independent, shadow) and region-wide distribution (see also Hussein, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2010).

First, *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Hawler*, and *Evro* identify themselves as partisan newspapers as they are openly funded by political parties. *Evro* and *Hawler* get direct funding from KDP, *Evro* being based in Duhok and *Hawler* in Erbil. *Kurdistani Nwe* gets direct funding from PUK, and is based in Sulaymaniyah. All are distributed in the other regions as well. Although these newspapers were born as partisan newspapers, there are no official data on the sponsorship of these media organizations. We raised this issue with the editors of newspapers (*Kurdistani Nwe*, *Hawler*, and *Evro*) when visiting their archives on location and we were told that it is not a secret that the respective political parties are replenishing the necessary amount after the revenue from ads and sales has been established (J. Haji, personal communication, August 4, 2019; B. Naci, personal communication, July 22, 2019; A. Stran, personal communication, August 21, 2019).

Second, *Rudaw*, *Hawlati*, and *Awene* profile themselves as independent newspapers. *Hawlati* (translated as "Citizens," founded in 2000) and *Awene* (translated as "Mirror," 2006) are regarded as the first independent newspapers in the history of Iraqi Kurdistan. They present themselves as critical media outlets that uncover corruption on the part of the government and political parties (Hussein, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2010). Two journalists were assassinated in recent years following news stories related to government corruption (Latif, 2015; Reporters Without Borders, 2010). *Hawlati* and *Awene* are based in Sulaymaniyah, but are distributed in all three regions. On location, we were told that both newspapers used to receive large donations from international foundations such as IKV Pax Christi and Free Press Unlimited. These were stopped, however, in the wake of Islamic State's military offensives in 2014, as these foundations redirected their aid to provide education and shelter to refugees, according to the editors of *Awene* and *Hawlati* newspapers (T. Fateh, personal communication, August 21, 2019; A. Hardi, personal communication, August 22, 2019). The *Rudaw* Media Network is regarded as the largest media institution in the history of Kurdish media (Hama et al., 2018). It profiles itself as an independent media outlet.

However, previous research has revealed that *Rudaw* is owned by the current president of Iraqi Kurdistan (Hama et al., 2018; Hussein, 2018). Furthermore, according to information published by Wikileaks (2012) and Reporters Without Borders (2010), the government makes monthly payments to the newspaper. *Rudaw* is also distributed in all three regions.

This study focuses on the period between 2014 and 2018. This focus not only allowed us to integrate the potential implications of the ongoing economic crisis since 2014, but also the potential implications of four political campaigns. Indeed, in this period, four elections were held: The Iraqi parliamentary elections of April 2014 and May 2018, the independence referendum of September 2017, and the Kurdish parliamentary elections of September 2018. Previous studies have pointed to the pressure experienced by news media in Iraqi Kurdistan during the authorized 40 days' election campaign because of their potential impact on voters, as political actors are likely to use their advertising expenditure to influence journalists or editors (Besley & Prat, 2006).

We collected all of the archival editions (as PDFs) of the six newspapers that were published between 2014 and 2018 and saved them to an external hard drive. Although the corpus includes every issue of the weekly newspapers (i.e., 48 issues per year), this was not feasible for the daily newspapers. To arrive at a comparable number of editions, we selected four issues per month, each published on a different day of the week. There were two exceptions: *Hawlati* ceased its operations between February 2016 and April 2018. The corpus therefore includes eight issues from 2016, zero from 2017, and 25 from 2018. Similarly, only 28 issues of *Awene* are included for 2018, as it stopped issuing its print version in August 2018. As shown in Table 1, this corresponds to a total number of 240 issues for *Kurdistani Nwe, Hawler, Evro,* and *Rudaw;* 129 for *Hawlati;* and 220 for *Awene*.

Table 1. Number of Issues per Newspaper (2014–2018).

Media type	Newspaper	Issues (*n*)
Partisan	*Evro*	240
	Kurdistani Nwe	240
	Hawler	240
Independent	*Hawlati*	129
	Awene	220
	Rudaw	240
Total		1,309

Data Analysis

Because it is impossible to examine advertising revenue in monetary terms in the nontransparent media environment of Iraqi Kurdistan (e.g., Besley & Prat, 2006), and we had no access to advertising agency websites or databases (e.g., Yanatma, 2016), we focused directly on the advertisements and announcements as they were published in the selected newspapers. For each advertisement or announcement, we coded (1) the size (in cm^2), (2) the portrayed source (i.e., state-based entities, political parties, commercial companies, NGOs), and (3) the province where the source was based.

Because we worked with PDFs, the advertising space in square centimeters reported does not reflect the actual size of the advertisements. We converted the advertising space to ratios for each category (e.g., state entities, private companies, political parties, and NGOs). This process can be explained as follows:

$X(i)$ = total area of advertisements and announcements for newspaper i.

$Y(i)$ = total area of advertisements and announcements from government entities for newspaper i.

$Z(i)$ = total area of advertisements and announcements from private companies for newspaper i.

$W(i)$ = total area of advertisements and announcements from NGOs for newspaper i.
$K(i)$ = total area of advertisements and announcements from different political parties for newspaper i.

a = year value, ranging (2014 and 2018).

i = newspaper, with the following values: *Evro*, *Hawlati*, *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Awene*, *Hawler*, *Rudaw*. We calculated the total advertisement area for each source in each newspaper for the five-year period as follows:

$$Y(i) = \sum_{a=2014}^{2018} Y(i,a), \quad (1)$$

where Y (i, a) represents the total advertisement area from a given government source for year (a) for newspaper (i). Similarly,

$$Z(i) = \sum_{a=2014}^{2018} Z(i,a), \quad (2)$$

$$W(i) = \sum_{a=2014}^{2018} W(i,a), \quad (3)$$

$$K(i) = \sum_{a=2014}^{2018} K(i,a). \quad 41)$$

We then calculated the total advertisement area for each newspaper $X(i)$ as follows:

$$X(i) = Y(i) + Z(i) + W(i) + K(i). \quad (5)$$

All portrayed sources were categorized according to source and region. Regarding private companies, a further distinction was made between local and international companies. Regarding political parties, the situation was more complex. According to the Ministry of the Interior, 29 political parties have been established in the region since 2003 (Irwani, 2015). In 2009, Movement for Change (Gorran) emerged from PUK and was regarded as an opposition party. Another opposition party is New Generation Movement (Naway Nwe), established in 2018. At present, there are three major ruling parties: KDP, PUK, and Movement for Change. The 111 MPs in the Kurdistan Parliament represent the diversity of political lists and parties, as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Election Results of September 2018 in Parliamentary Seats.

Party	Seats in parliament (*n*)
Kurdistan Democratic Party	45
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	21
Movement for Change	12
New Generation Movement	8
Kurdistan Islamic Group	7
Hevpeymaniya Ber bi Îslah (Toward Reform)	5
Turkman minority reserved seats	4
Chaldean Assyrian Council (Christian)	1
Modern Alliance	1
Freedom List	1

Source. "Kurdistan Parliament Federal Republic of Iraq" (n.d.).

However, essential to understanding the political situation in Iraqi Kurdistan is the concentration of power across the different provinces. Based on the parliamentary election results of 2013 and 2018, Table 3 shows how KDP is the dominant party in the provinces of Duhok and Erbil, and Movement for Change and PUK are the dominant parties in Sulaymaniyah. For that reason, the province of origin was coded for each portrayed source.

Table 3. Election Results of September 2013, 2018 in Percentage per Province.

	Sulaymaniyah		Erbil		Duhok	
Largest political parties	2013	2018	2013	2018	2013	2018
Kurdistan Democratic Party	11.00	9.77	48.00	49.31	70.00	73.32
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	29.00	35.95	13.00	22.00	6.00	8.37
Movement for Change	41.00	40.55	18.00	14.00	3.00	4.69
Kurdistan Islamic Group	8.00	6.28	7.00	7.66	1.00	12.75
Kurdistan Islamic Union	10.00	2.00	7.00	1.00	13.00	<1.00
Others	<1.00	1.01	7.00	2.73	8.00	0.80

Source. "Kurdistan Parliament Federal Republic of Iraq" (n.d.).

Findings

In this section, we discuss the findings by actor, starting with state-based entities and continuing with private companies, political parties, and international NGOs. Regarding state-based entities, it is clear that they served as the largest source of advertising between 2014 and 2018 in terms of both numbers (see Table 4) and space (see Table 5). However, Tables 4 and 5 also show that a large majority of these public advertisements and announcements were distributed to newspapers with direct ties to political parties (i.e., partisan newspapers).

Table 4. Number of Advertisements by Newspaper and Social Actor (2014–2018).

Newspaper	State entities	Private companies	Political parties	Nongovernmental organizations	Total (2014–2018)
Partisan					
Evro n (%)	1,998 (76)	370 (13)	35 (5)	152 (5)	2,555
Hawler n (%)	1,011 (84)	54 (4)	71 (6)	63 (5)	1,199
Kurdistani New n (%)	3,064 (90)	227 (7)	31 (1)	55 (2)	3,377
Independent					
Awene n (%)	586 (28)	1,466 (66)	41 (2)	24 (1)	2,117
Hawlati n (%)	381 (41)	400 (49)	71 (3)	8 (1)	860
Rudaw n (%)	13 (1)	989 (99)	2 (0)	0 (0)	1,004

In contrast, the other newspapers obtained remarkably fewer advertisements from the government. For example, although *Rudaw* has always been controversial in terms of its financial autonomy and has previously been identified as "shadow media," we found that it received the fewest advertisements in both frequency and size from government institutions between 2014 and 2018 (see Table 4; Hama et al., 2018, p. 3). For example, *Rudaw* obtained only 13 advertisements from the government during that period (see Table 4), accounting for approximately 2% of the total advertising space (see Table 5).

Table 5. Size of Advertisements by Newspaper and Social Actor (2014–2018).

Newspaper	State entities	Private companies	Political parties	Nongovernmental organizations	Total (2014–2018)
Partisan					
Evro % (cm2)	41 (57,170)	39 (54,808)	9 (12,496)	11 (15,350)	100 (139,825)
Hawler % (cm2)	69 (111,531)	11 (17,547)	15 (23,848)	5 (7,584)	100 (160.504)
Kurdistani New % (cm2)	75 (107,473)	19 (27.432)	3 (3,802)	3 (4,324)	100 (143,030)
Independent					
Awene % (cm^2)	13 (16,335)	81 (100,667)	4 (4,337)	2 (2,344)	100 (123,683)
Hawlati % (cm^2)	33 (39,578)	8 (10,536)	31 (37,102)	9 (10,575)	100 (97,791)
Rudaw % (cm^2)	2 (2,883)	98 (182,314)	<1 (429)	0 (0)	100 (185,626)

When we take a closer look at these results by year, it is remarkable how the size of state advertising in *Hawlati* dropped from 43% to 14% between 2015 and 2016 (see Figure 1). Between February 2016 and August 2018, *Hawlati* stopped publishing. In other words, this suggests that this drop in state advertising may have been a significant factor in negatively affecting its economic performance. As noted in previous studies, one mechanism used by governments involves suddenly discontinuing their allocation of advertisements to critical media outlets while continuing to grant large advertisements to other media outlets.

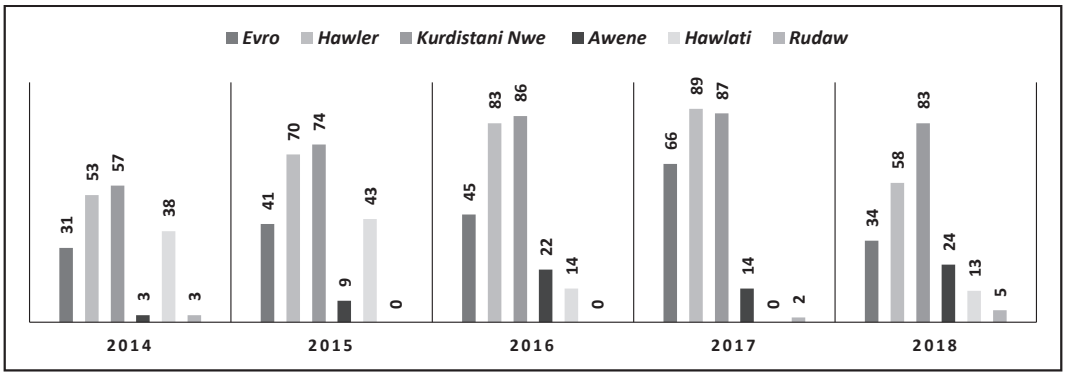


Figure 1. Government advertisements: Total area of advertisements in six newspapers (2014–2018).

Our results further indicate that political divisions have had notable effects on the distribution of state advertising. For example, the PUK-owned newspaper *Kurdistani Nwe* received the largest number of ads from state entities in Sulaymaniyah, where PUK is a dominant political party. At the same time, the KDP-owned newspapers *Evro* and *Hawler* received the largest number from Duhok and Erbil, respectively, where KDP is the dominant party (see Table 6).

Table 6. Total Number of Advertisements by Actor and Province (2014–2018).

Actor by province	*Evro*	*Hawler*	*Kurdistani Nwe*	*Awene*	*Hawlati*	*Rudaw*
State entities in Sulaymaniyah Province	0	20	3,061	585	346	0
State entities in Erbil Province	0	991	3	1	35	13
State entities in Duhok Province	1,998	0	0	0	0	0
Private companies in Sulaymaniyah Province	30	4	161	1,372	380	162
Private companies in Erbil Province	86	37	29	23	7	827
Private companies in Duhok Province	206	0	0	0	0	0
International private companies	48	13	37	71	13	0
International nongovernmental organizations	152	63	55	24	8	0
Parties based in Sulaymaniyah Province	0	0	31	38	63	0
Parties based in Erbil Province	0	71	0	3	8	2
Parties based in Duhok Province	35	0	0	0	0	0

In the case of advertising from private companies, we found these to allocate ads to all six newspapers, but with remarkable differences. The largest share of corporate ads was published in the independent newspapers: *Awene* recorded the highest in absolute numbers, and *Rudaw* recorded the largest advertisement space (see Tables 4 and 5).

For the partisan newspapers *Evro* and *Kurdistan Nwe*, corporate ads were the second highest source of advertising, but especially in terms of absolute numbers, this share was nothing compared with that from state-based entities. For *Hawlati*, there was a remarkable difference in the share of corporate ads between absolute numbers (the largest in comparison to other sources of advertising) and space (less than 10%). Similar to state ads, the distribution of corporate ads was nevertheless highly concentrated in terms of geography. Almost all of these in *Awene*, *Hawlati*, and *Kurdistani Nwe* came from companies based in Sulaymaniyah, where the newspapers were also based. A similar pattern was observed for the other newspapers, with Duhok in the case of *Evro* and Erbil in the case of *Rudaw* and *Hawler*.

In the case of political parties, we found that party advertisements were distributed only during the election periods: (1) the Iraqi parliamentary elections on April 30, 2014; (2) the Iraqi parliamentary elections on May 12, 2018; and (3) the Iraqi Kurdistan parliamentary election on September 30, 2018. The total volume of party advertising (frequency and area) distributed to the six newspapers is presented in Tables 4 and 5. As shown in these tables, the number of party ads was quite low (with percentages between 5% and 0%). To enhance precision concerning the allocation of party ads, we examined each election separately to identify the political parties from which the newspapers obtained their advertisements during the campaigns. The results clearly indicate that the newspapers identifying themselves as partisan newspapers obtained party advertisements from their owners during each of the election periods. For example, *Kurdistan Nwe* received ads from PUK, and *Hawler* and *Evro* obtained ads from KDP, the dominant party in Duhok and Erbil (see Tables 7, 8, and 9).

Table 7. Party Advertisements as a Percentage of the Total Advertising Space per Newspaper During the First Election Period (April 11, 2014–May 1, 2014).

Newspaper	Kurdistan Democratic Party	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Movement for Change	Other parties
Evro	16.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Hawler	46.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Kurdistan Nwe	0.00	57.00	0.00	0.00
Awene	0.00	22.00	21.00	0.00
Hawlati	5.00	32.00	28.00	0.00
Rudaw	8.04	0.00	0.00	0.00

With regard to party advertising, it is interesting that, although several political parties participated in the three parliamentary elections, the independent newspapers obtained advertising almost exclusively from the three dominant political parties: PUK, KDP, and Movement for Change (see Tables 7, 8, and 9). For example, during the first election, *Awene* obtained advertising from the two major parties in Sulaymaniyah: PUK and the Movement for Change. *Hawlati* also obtained ads from PUK and Movement for Change, as well as from KDP, the major political party in Erbil and Duhok, although to a much smaller extent. During the second election, both *Awene* and *Hawlati* obtained advertisements from a variety of political parties. This was particularly true for *Awene* (see Table 9). *Rudaw* received almost no party advertising. For example, it obtained only three ads from KDP during the first election (see Table 7). Similarly, *Kurdistan Nwe* obtained no party advertising in the second election (see Table 8).

Table 8. Party Advertisements as a Percentage of the Total Advertising Space per Newspaper During the Second Election Period (April 10, 2018–May 11, 2018).

Newspaper	Kurdistan Democratic Party	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Movement for Change	Communist Party	New Generation	Coalition for Democracy and Justice	National Coalition	Other parties
Evro	78.53	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Hawler	77.12	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Kurdistani Nwe	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Awene	0.00	9.11	13.89	7.73	16.25	0.33	2.77	0.00
Hawlati	12.84	14.17	23.47	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Rudaw	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Surprisingly, *Awene* stopped publication during the 2018 elections (see Table 9). At the same time, *Hawlati* received party advertisements only from PUK, the dominant party in Sulaymaniyah. In the third election campaign, the share of PUK ads even reached 87% of the total advertising space. This raises questions concerning the extent to which *Hawlati* might have been influenced by PUK.

Table 9. Party Advertisements as a Percentage of the Total Advertising Space per Newspaper During the Third Election Period (September 1–30, 2018).

Newspaper	Kurdistan Democratic Party	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Other parties
Evro	81.93	0.00	0.00
Hawler	78.07	0.00	0.00
Kurdistani Nwe	0.00	28.73	0.00
Awene	Ceased publication August 7, 2018		
Hawlati	0.00	87.10	0.00
Rudaw	0.00	0.00	0.00

As indicated in previous studies, political actors potentially use their advertising expenditures to influence journalists or editors by "buying" more positive media coverage (Eberl et al., 2018, p. 782). This influence can be substantial when the advertisers are political parties, as it represents both political and economic pressure on journalism (see also DeLorme & Fedler, 2005; Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

In the fourth component of our study, we examined how NGOs allocated their advertisements to the six selected newspapers between 2014 and 2018. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, the newspapers identifying themselves as party-owned newspapers received considerably more ads from NGOs than those that identified themselves as independent. Closer inspection of the geographic origins of the NGOs revealed that almost all of those that allocated their ads to party-owned newspapers were international foundations that had entered Iraqi Kurdistan for purposes of humanitarian aid (see Table 10). The majority of the content of the ads were announcements of job offers, international and national bids/tenders, and other procurement notices.

Table 10. Top Six International Nongovernmental Organizations That Allocated Advertisements to Newspapers Owned by Dominant Political Parties in Iraqi Kurdistan (2014–2018).

Evro	Hawler	Kurdistani Nwe
1. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit	1. International Organization for Migration	1. United Nations Population Fund
2. KURDS Organization Corporation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	2. Korea International Corporation Agency	2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
3. Norwegian Church Aid	3. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	3. Qandil (Sweden's humanitarian aid organization)
4. Peace Winds (Japan's humanitarian aid organization)	4. Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development	4. United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
5. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	5. The International Committee of the Red Cross	5. Reach (international humanitarian aid organization)
6. Lutheran World Federation Foundations	6. International Relief and Development	6. Qatar Red Crescent Society

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on a quantitative analysis of the ads published in six major weekly and daily newspapers, this study provides many significant findings regarding the use of advertising to study media capture in a nontransparent media environment. Not only does the analysis allow us to draw conclusions on potential informal linkages between media organizations and powerful social actors, but it also provides significant input for evaluating the nature and profile of both partisan and independent media outlets.

First, the findings show that the ruling political parties have clearly succeeded in capturing state resources when looking at the geographical distribution of advertisements: The party-owned newspapers (*Evro, Kurdistani Nwe,* and *Hawler*) received many more advertisements from the state than their counterparts did. On an abstract level, this confirms the existence of strong links among the government, ruling political parties, and the partisan press, at the same time as it shows how much ruling political parties rely on "state subsidies" to guarantee their organizational survival. This sets these results apart from classic work on the partisan press, in which case it was owned and funded directly by the political parties themselves (e.g., Mancini, 2012). Furthermore, the findings also demonstrate how much their reach extends to international NGOs, as the latter are clearly biased toward the party-owned newspapers in terms of advertising. This confirms previous studies that have shown how NGOs turn into apparatuses of the state and politicians (Atia & Herrold, 2018). This appears to be particularly the case within systems in which political parties engage in patronage and clientelism, with state officials using their positions within governmental bodies to build ties to various organizations at the local, regional, national, and even international levels.

Second, whereas almost no state advertisements were provided to *Rudaw,* both *Hawlati* and *Awene* were provided with some, but significantly less compared with the partisan newspapers. Withholding state advertising from independent media has most likely contributed to the recent financial difficulties and the subsequent cessation of their activities. However, other factors clearly play a role too, as *Rudaw* continues to publish, despite registering the lowest number of state ads.

Third, with regard to the relationships between the independent press and political parties, previous studies have demonstrated that when politicians become media funders, probably with the aim of influencing voting behavior (through party advertisements), they continue to maintain certain kinds of ties with those media. Independent newspapers are therefore likely to be subjected to political pressure too. In our study, *Hawlati* received party advertising from the three major parties in the first and second election campaigns, but this changed in the third election, when *Hawlati* only published ads from the ruling party in Sulaymaniyah (PUK). We therefore assume that the partisan allocation of advertising might be an indicator of high political parallelism within independent media organizations too. We further found that *Awene* was the only newspaper to receive advertisements from a variety of political parties, particularly during the period in which it was funded by the American embassy. In this regard, a previous study by Scott, Bunce, and Wright (2019)

argues that international funding may help preserve journalistic autonomy by "reducing the likelihood of pressure from an owner or advertiser giving reporters more time to work on a story freeing them to pursue less-popular topics" (p. 2036). Immediately following the election campaigns, the American embassy's financial support for *Awene* stopped, and the newspaper shut down shortly afterward because of a lack of financial viability. According to its editor, the sponsorship by the American Consulate was to support a project called "democratic election campaigns in Iraq" (Hardi, 2018, p. 1). This confirms previous studies that argue how much the lack of financial sustainability of U.S.-sponsored projects remains one of the central challenges for independent media in developing countries (Ford, 2005; Myers, 2009). However, in contrast to *Hawlati*, *Awene* obtained direct financial support from the United States and had many more advertisements, yet it was unable to survive the financial crisis. This raises questions concerning who exactly is funding *Hawlati*.

Fourth, although corporate ads were published in both partisan and independent newspapers, they were found much more in the latter. At the same time, this support was clearly concentrated by area, suggesting that the geographical and administrative division by the major ruling parties also impacts the decisions by businesspersons. Khalil (2016) showed how "the PUK supporters would be prevented from investing in the KDP zone and vice versa. As a result, investors remained in their areas and supported the dominant party there" (p. 93). Indeed, our data show that *Awene* and *Hawlati* received advertisements from private companies in the area dominated by PUK, and *Rudaw* received the largest number from private companies in the area controlled by KDP. This also corresponds to previous research that has argued that the majority of large companies choose to allocate their advertisements to media that are either indirectly owned by politicians or have strong ties to ruling political parties, and this is to show their loyalty (Hussein, 2018). There is no public information on who funds *Rudaw* Media Networks. In line with previous studies, Hussein (2018) describes *Rudaw* as an example of "shadow media," meaning that it receives indirect monthly funding from the government, as it is owned by Iraqi Kurdistan's current president Nichervan Barzani (Hussein, 2018, p. 7; Taha, 2020, p. 71). Our findings indeed show that *Rudaw* has strong ties to private companies in the area controlled by KDP. Within the context of transitional democracies, Stetka (2015) notes that some private media organizations are controlled by wealthy tycoons and politicians with good connections (e.g., prime ministers/presidents). According to the oligarchic ownership model, these actors build crony links to advertising agencies, thereby establishing conglomerates (Zielonka, 2015, p. 93). In this model, media owners act as philanthropists, funding media outlets without being

transparently involved in their media management and production, thus using their news as an instrument for advancing their political and economic interests. Future studies should address the link between *Rudaw* and the private sector.

Overall, this study provides a guiding framework with which to better understand informal ties among various social groups (e.g., government, media owners, politicians, commercial actors, and NGOs). This new understanding could improve predictions of the impact of advertisers' control on media content, as well as the interdependencies among powerful social actors, in a context where reliable data are missing.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, media organizations make no public announcement of their revenues. This lack of information limited our ability to examine the budgets that advertisers allocate to each newspaper. These limitations notwithstanding, our study provides insight into the biased orientations of advertisers toward specific media outlets. The analysis has raised several issues that call for further investigation, such as the informal connections between advertisers and media outlets as well as the potential impact of advertisers on journalistic output. Additional questions concern the methods that media organizations use to obtain advertisements from powerful institutions and the role that authorities play in regulating (or not) advertising.

CHAPTER 4

CASE STUDY 2

Published article:

Faris, J., Maeseele, P., & Smets, K. (2021). The impact of the Advertisers on Media and Journalism in Transitional Democracies: The case of Kurdistan Region in Iraq. International Journal of Communication, 17, 3388–3407.

Introduction

This chapter presents the second case study of this dissertation, examining the direct/indirect impact of advertisers on journalism in transitional democracies. It builds on the previous chapter by focusing on the theoretical aspects of media capture, such as the impact of advertisers on journalistic work. The previous chapter showed that the majority of the various social actors were biased toward partisan media or media that have strong links with powerful individual politicians in the KRI, through aspects such as advertising and announcements. In response to the findings of the previous chapter, this chapter undertook in-depth interviews focused on identifying the methods of advertising distribution used in this non-transparent environment (e.g., various forms of informal contact between media organizations and advertisers) and the impact of the advertisers on journalistic work.

In this chapter, I direct attention to the practices of various powerful institutions (e.g., government, political parties, corporations, NGOs) that have an impact (directly/indirectly) on the media market in a transitional democracy. This level of analysis also directs attention to the multiple motivations of these powerful actors (e.g., economic, political) lying behind their allocation of advertising to a particular media outlet. When combined with the results of the previous chapter, this analysis offers a better understanding of the media market environment, journalistic professionalism, political parallelism, and the role of the state in the KRI.

This chapter was originally presented as a paper at the 3rd International Kurdish Studies Conference-2019 at Middlesex University and it was published as a journal article in the *International Journal of Communication (IJOC) in Volume 17*. I was the leading author, I developed the theoretical framework, I collected and analyzed the data. The article was co-written with my supervisors, Pieter Maeseele and Kevin Smets, who helped me narrow down the scope of the study and guided me in the academic structuring of the paper.

The Impact of Advertisers on Media and Journalism in Transitional Democracies: The Case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Abstract

Although previous research focused on how governments use advertising to control news media, this study expands the literature on media capture not only by examining how state actors and dominant political parties control the advertising sector in a transitional democracy such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq but also by exploring the (in)direct impact of various social actors, including corporations, political candidates in election periods, and international nongovernmental organizations. It reports on the findings from 19 in-depth interviews with media professionals and officials from media regulatory authorities. The findings show that advertisers are driven not only by the motivation to influence media content but also by economic interests, such as the colonization of state resources, personal gain, and crony capitalism. We conclude by discussing how precarious socioeconomic conditions lead media professionals to develop informal networks with advertisers—in turn, allowing powerful social actors to use advertising for either capturing news media or expanding their networks with authorities—and how this impacts on journalism practice.

Keywords: media capture, advertising, transitional democracies, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, media independence, journalistic professionalism

Media freedom is considered a vital component of democracy, as it assists journalists in keeping state power in check and guaranteeing transparency and accountability (Voltmer, 2013). However, in transitional democracies, research has shown that there are some factors that can cripple media freedom, such as commercial pressures acting against journalists' independence or repression that is practiced by governments to prevent the disclosure of certain information to the public (Voltmer, 2013; Yesil, 2018). The term "transitional democracy" refers to a volatile political system that emerges after the breakdown of an autocratic regime and the subsequent establishment of new institutions (Voltmer, 2013; Zielonka, 2015).

Following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, the removal of the dictatorship regime in Iraq in 2003, a democratic transition started in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Hama & Abdullah, 2021; Hussein, 2018; Mohammad, 2020). The multiparty system since 2003 is considered a model for democratic pluralism in the whole region, and the KRI is designated as "a functioning democracy in the heart of the Middle East" (Taha, 2020, p. 115). This commonly refers to the elections, political pluralism, freedom of establishing political parties and civil society organizations, and establishment of laws and constitutions that meet the principles of international human rights (Hussein, 2018; Taha, 2020).

However, previous research has also shown how governments in transitional democracies attempt to control media through coercion tactics, such as indirect funding, regulations, government advertising, and so on. This study focuses on a particular aspect of media capture theory: Advertising as a means of financing media outlets (Kodrich, 2008; Schiffrin, 2018; Yanatma, 2021). In this regard, research on media capture has shown how advertising power is used by governments to control journalism, especially in societies with an ongoing economic crisis where governments serve as the largest advertisers, as in many countries in South-Eastern Europe, Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East (Dragomir, 2018; Dupuy et al., 2014; Schiffrin, 2018; Voltmer, 2013; Yanatma, 2021; Zielonka, 2015).

In the context of the KRI, previous research has found that advertisements by government, commercial companies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are, to a large extent, distributed to media that have strong relationships with powerful politicians (Faris, Maeseele, & Smets, 2021). However, questions remain about the exact motivations and interests of these various social actors in terms of ad allocation and about the potential impact on journalistic output. The aim of this study is to address this gap by reporting on the findings of a qualitative thematic analysis of 19 semistructured interviews with journalists, editors, and managers of established media outlets in the KRI, as well as officials from media regulatory authorities.

The first section of this study discusses previous research on media economics in transitional democracies, with a focus on advertising as a form of media capture. In the second section, we provide an overview of the political economy of media in the KRI, with a focus on how journalism is funded in such a nontransparent media environment. After discussing the methodology, the third section presents our findings on the motivations

and interests in terms of ad allocation by government institutions, corporations, political candidates in election periods, and NGOs. We conclude by discussing the role of the colonization of state resources, personal gain, and crony capitalism in this process of media capture, as well as the impact on journalism practice. Finally, we present recommendations for future research on media economics in transitional democracies and neo-authoritarian contexts.

Media Capture: The Role of Advertising

Media capture has been defined as a process in which news media are controlled, "either directly by governments or by vested interests networked with politics" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012, p. 40). It has been discussed in various contexts across the globe, but particularly in restrictive contexts such as neo-authoritarian regimes, transitional democracies, and postconflict zones. Research on media capture has focused on a wide range of practices, such as particular regulatory environments (e.g., Relly & Zanger, 2016), forms of governmental bureaucracy (e.g., Dupuy et al., 2014), or forms of government funding (e.g., Faris et al., 2021; Podesta, 2009; Yanatma, 2021).

This study focuses on advertising as a mechanism of media capture. In transitional democracies, the newspaper advertising market is often underdeveloped, with the state serving as the main source of advertising revenue. Research has found that governments use state advertising to either reward friendly media outlets and journalists or to penalize those who practice watchdog journalism (Frisch, Gagon, & Agur, 2017; Podesta, 2009; Yanatma, 2021). This is based on the principle of "I don't pay you to hit me" (Dupuy et al., 2014, p. 18). In the Latin American context, Di Tella and Franceschelli (2011) established a relationship between ad allocation on the one hand and media coverage of corruption by state officials on the other. For Turkey, Yanatma (2021) showed how state-sponsored advertising (i.e., public advertising and announcements, and ads by semigovernmental enterprises such as banks, telecommunications, and manufacturing companies) is used to reward progovernment media. For both Central America (Rockwell & Janus, 2002) and Turkey (Yanatma, 2021), a relationship was established between ad boycotts and freedom of speech (e.g., self-censorship in the newsroom). These studies have shown how governments extend control over commercial advertising, when the latter follow their path to gain political accommodation by ensuring that their ads are published in media that have the support of powerful political actors.

Furthermore, in Southern and Eastern Europe, research has shown that politically connected firms of oligarchical media owners create additional pressures on the advertising market through strong connections with advertising agencies: Often, owners of advertising agencies are found to hold powerful positions as politicians at the same time (Stetka, 2015; Zielonka, 2015). Likewise, Podesta (2009) demonstrated that, during election times, governments engage in bargaining with media owners in the interests of those political parties that are close to the government, notably through the allocation of government ads based on long-term contracts. In turn, media owners donate to the political campaigns of those political parties, using their media to support the governing coalition. Such deals offer these media outlets dual financial rewards in the future in the form of ads by political candidates in election periods and by the government.

Podesta (2009) has referred to situations where governments build direct links with journalists through government advertising—for instance, when individual journalists themselves address government institutions for advertising because their living depends on "advertising sales." In the Latin American context, this is even considered an "institutionalized practice," since state officials require journalists to sign agreements that mandate positive coverage of official government activities (see also Kodrich, 2008). This has created "unscrupulous journalists," resulting in "two-way blackmail." Whereas government officials threaten journalists if they do not write positive reports about them, journalists threaten "to destroy" officials and politicians if they do not allocate their advertising to them (Podesta, 2009, p. 9).

Although this overview shows that the impact of government advertising has been widely discussed, little remains known about the impact of ad allocation by other powerful actors (Eberl, Wagner, & Boomgaarden, 2018; Faris et al., 2021). Previously, a content analytical study established how corporations, NGOs, and politicians in the KRI make persistent choices when it comes to allocating their ads (Faris et al., 2021). Although this has raised concerns about the relationship between ad boycotts (or the withholding of it) on the one hand, and systemic political corruption, patronage, and clientelism in the media market on the other, this study goes a step further by examining the drivers underlying these practices.

The Political Economy of the Media in the KRI

In the KRI, there is no public information about media organizations' sources of income, as this is considered confidential data. This results in a nontransparent media environment, where there is ambiguity about the structure of media ownership, the financing of media outlets, and the distribution of advertising (see also Hama & Abdullah, 2021; Hussein, 2018; Taha, 2020).

Following the Gulf War in 1991, the KRI was controlled by two political parties: The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Between 1991 and 2003, new media outlets were established (e.g., newspapers, magazines, radios, and TV satellites). Hussein (2018) and Taha (2020) refer to these media as partisan mouthpieces because of their roles in the civil war between PUK and KDP. Moreover, media workers were directly receiving their monthly income from these political parties.

After 2003, new political parties emerged in tandem with many new media outlets (Taha, 2020). According to the latest updates provided by the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate (2021), the number of media outlets in the KRI is around 833 newspapers and magazines, 37 satellites, 331 radio stations, and five local TV channels. There are no official sources providing data on online media outlets in the KRI; however, previous academic research (in Arabic) has shown that there are around 1,755 online media platforms in the KRI (Ahmad, 2017).

Previous research has categorized media in the KRI into three types according to their sources of funding and ownership (Hussein, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2010; Taha, 2020). First, there are media organizations that are entirely funded by political parties, which are organized as "nonprofitable media" as they do not depend on revenue from sales and advertisements. They are known as "partisan media" and are owned by either of the two ruling parties (PUK and KDP). According to Hussein (2018), these two parties control more than 400 media organizations to which they allocate funds from the state budget (e.g., *Evro News, Hawler, Kurdistani Nwe, Waar*). Others are owned by opposition parties, such as the *Wusha* Media Company. Taha (2020) has argued how such "partisan media" increasingly replaced direct government-owned media. Journalists who work for such partisan media outlets are generally members of the respective political parties.

Second, there are media organizations that are funded indirectly by a single politician or state official, such as the president or the prime minister. Although they profile themselves as independent media, they are, in fact, "shadow media." Examples are Kurdistan 24, *Rudaw*

Media Network, and the *Nalia* Media group *NRT* News (Taha, 2020). Their existence creates a complex information landscape. Though describing themselves explicitly as independent, they serve as propaganda instruments, pushing the political agenda of their backers (Hardi, 2018; Hussein, 2018).

Third, there are media organizations that are completely dependent on advertising, sales, and international aid, such as *Hawlati* and *Awene*. As these media organizations have been found to play an important role as watchdogs, by exposing corruption and challenging authorities, they have been designated as genuine "independent media" (Hama & Abdullah, 2021; Hussein, 2018).

These types of media organizations are entitled under the same media-related laws and policies that have been established by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), such as press and advertising laws and audiovisual rules.

In general, much of the current literature on media in the KRI pays particular attention to the financial pressures on independent media, such as advertising boycotts by the government, the role of the economic crisis, an underdeveloped advertising market, or the lack of international aid (Hardi, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Taha, 2020). For instance, between 2014 and 2019, statistics indicate that 800 print media (newspapers and magazines) closed in the region, according to a high-level member of the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate (G. Mohamed, personal communication, August 6, 2019). Media reports indicated that the dramatic closure of media outlets in the KRI is linked to the ongoing economic crisis since 2014 (e.g., long-term salaries were cut because of a revenue dispute between the KRG and the Iraqi Federal Government). As a result, media circulation and revenues dropped dramatically, with some media outlets migrating to online platforms to reduce costs. For instance, in 2015, *Hawlati's* circulation dropped from 6,000 to 2,000 and *Awene's* from 13,000 to 4,000 ("Newspapers in Kurdistan Region," 2018).

Methodology and Context

We conducted qualitative semistructured, in-depth interviews with 19 media experts, including journalists, editors, media managers, and officials from media regulatory authorities. Based on media capture literature, we established interview guidelines designed to identify potential pressures from advertisers on journalism. The interviews

were conducted face-to-face by the researcher, with an average length of approximately 1 hour 20 minutes. The interviews took place from July 15 through August 28, 2019. They were conducted in locations selected by the participants, who indicated places where they felt comfortable. For example, one editor and some officials chose their offices, while some high-ranking officials preferred to conduct interviews outside their offices and far from the locations where they work. The journalists also chose some locations far from their place of work, such as public libraries, restaurants, or cafes.

All participants gave their permission to audio-record the interview. However, from the total of 19 participants, only three gave permission to reveal their names. Taking into consideration the critical political situation and the cultural, societal, and security environment in the KRI, the authors chose not to use their names to avoid any potential risk of exposure.

Data Collection

The data were collected in all three provinces in the KRI: Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Duhok (see Figure 1). In the provinces of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, the formal language is the *Sorani* dialect, whereas the formal language in Duhok is the *Badini* dialect. Therefore, the interview guidelines for this study were developed in English and then translated into both Kurdish dialects.

For the selection of our interviewees, we considered the media environment of the KRI in terms of the three types of media ownership identified above: Partisan, shadow, and independent. Furthermore, we approached participants with different profiles: Journalists, editors, as well as media managers. We interviewed seven employees from partisan media (Nos. 1–7), four from independent media (Nos. 8–11), and four from shadow media (Nos. 12–15). In addition, we interviewed four (Nos. 16–19) experts who were directly involved in media regulatory authorities.

First, for the partisan media, we selected popular media outlets that are openly owned by the major political parties PUK and KDP: *Evro News, Hawler*, and *Kurdistani Nwe*. Both *Evro News* and *Hawler* are published through the official Center of Media and Culture of the KDP. *Evro News* is based in Duhok and *Hawler* in Erbil. Established in 1992, *Kurdistani Nwe* was the first news organization owned by PUK. It is managed and published by party members and the PUK Institution of Media and Culture based in Sulaymaniyah.

Figure 1. Kurdistan region of Iraq (Sadeeq, 2017).

Second, two shadow media outlets were selected: The *Rudaw* Media Network and the *Nalia* Media Corporation (including *NRT* News). *Rudaw* (established 2006) has been described as the largest media company in the history of KRI as well as the most active media outlet in the Middle East (Hussein, 2018; Taha, 2020). *Rudaw* officially profiles itself as an independent media outlet. However, previous studies have shown that *Rudaw* is indirectly funded by Nechirvan Idris Barzani, the current president of the KRI. *NRT* News, established in 2010 and led by the *Nalia* Media Corporation, claims to be the first independent media organization in Kurdistan. However, it is owned and funded by Shaswar Abdulwahid Qadir, the leader of opposition party *Naway Nwe* (New Generation Party), and it was formed in 2018. It is known as an antigovernment media outlet and reports on the misconduct of state officials and ruling parties.

Third, for the independent media, we selected two media organizations: *Hawlati* (established in 2000) and *Awene* (established in 2006). They are both regarded as the first two genuinely independent newspapers in the history of the KRI (Hussein, 2018). They define themselves as critical media outlets that cover corruption in government and political party practices. Both are based in Sulaymaniyah. Since the economic crisis in the KRI in 2014, which resulted in low circulation and low advertising revenues, *Hawlati* ceased operations from February 2016 until April 2018, while *Awene* ceased to issue its printed newspaper after 2018 (Faris et al., 2021; Hussein, 2018).

The selected media outlets have both print and online press, some of these media organizations also broadcast television and radio, such as *Kurdistani Nwe, Rudaw,* and *NRT*. Some of the interviewees were working for both online and print media, as well as for TV and radio, as in the case of *Rudaw, NRT,* and *Kurdistani Nwe*. We believe that it would also be significant to include the perspectives of the advertisers themselves in this study, such as businesspeople and political candidates in the election periods. However, since the difficulty in accessing these people, we chose to limit the scope of the study accordingly.

It should be noted that each interviewee provided information from the perspective of more than one role, because of their involvement in multiple tasks within the media organizations. For example, some media managers also worked as reporters, correspondents, or producers. Some interviewees were working as journalists as well as in public relations (PR), or as economic or political consultants within the newsrooms. The notion of having multiple jobs is related to ongoing economic shortages after 2014. Consequently, media organizations found it difficult to provide salaries for their workers. They attempted to tackle this issue by reducing the number of employees, and thus, existing employees are subject to a multitask position, while several journalists have simply been left jobless (Hardi, 2018; Taha, 2020).

During the interviews, the focus was on the interviewees' experiences during the period between 2014 and 2019. This focus allowed us to gain insights into the potential implications of the ongoing economic crisis since 2014. In addition, four elections were held in this period: The Iraqi parliamentary elections of April 2014 and May 2018, the independence referendum of September 2017, and the Kurdish parliamentary elections of September 2018. Previous research has indicated that news media are more likely to be subject to pressures during election periods, with political actors likely using their advertising budget to influence journalists or editors (Besley & Prat, 2006).

Data Analysis

To analyze our data, we employed a qualitative thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a reliable qualitative approach that is used for descriptive analysis by analyzing, identifying, and reporting patterns (themes; Jensen, 2002). We started with an intense rereading of the entire interview transcripts, undertaking "repeated reading" to identify repeated patterns of meaning. We found that the participants answered our questions in different ways, such as giving their views, describing experiences, or referring to their

knowledge. In most cases, the participants expressed their thoughts indirectly, by giving hypothetical examples, using metaphors, presenting facts with reference to documents, avoiding names (e.g., officials above us), or recounting stories concerning their experiences. As a result, (1) we distinguished between the surface meaning of the data (direct arguments) and (2) what participants attempted to say indirectly by looking for the underlying meaning of the interview content, such as the context and position of the interviewees. Although the former represents the descriptive units of participants, the latter embodies a constructionist unit of the assumptions underpinning the interview texts. In our analysis, we have considered both situations. For instance, in the result section, we indicate when interviewees offer their points of view "indirectly," offering hypothetical examples and more.

In relation to media capture, we generated two themes from our initial codes based on our theoretical assumptions: (1) Motivations of the advertisers for the allocation of their advertising to media outlets (i.e., buying positive news, legal pressure, corruption deals, business ethics, politically connected firms, personal gain, forms of complex deals between business and politicians); and (2) Mechanisms of advertising distribution, as there is no official channel for the distribution of advertising in the KRI. The former theme allowed us to assess the impact of advertising on journalistic work. It revealed detailed evidence and practical experiences from journalists and editors, such as situations in which they restrict themselves in the newsroom to avoid advertising boycotts. Other reasons behind the allocation of the ads to a particular media outlet, such as economic motivations of individuals or organizations, also came forward. The latter theme provided insights into the informal methods involved in advertising distribution. It allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the relationships or interplay between advertisers and media organizations (e.g., interpersonal meetings, telephone calls, brokers, patronage links—informal points of contact between journalists and advertisers).

Findings

As the distribution of advertising is based on informal contacts between media organizations and advertisers, exploring the nature of these informal relationships offers a deeper insight into the degree to which advertisers may interfere in media content or may have other motivations. In this section, we present the findings by actor, starting with state-based entities and continuing with political parties, corporations, and international NGOs.

State Actors

Here, we use the term "state actors" to refer to the political parties' representatives in government institutions. Previous studies have shown that government advertisement (e.g., official advertisements and announcements) allocation can be used by state actors to reward friendly media and punish critical voices (Yanatma, 2021). The interviews revealed that official advertisements and announcements are indeed used to punish media that criticize authorities, for instance by means of advertising boycotts. This has been the case for the independent media organizations *Hawlati* and *Awene* and shadow media organization *NRT* News. Interviewee (No. 8) stated:

> Officials say to us, we will give you the advertisements, but be careful when you write about us [. . .] Some officials directly and disrespectfully said to me: "We will not give you any ads, and do not ask me why, just go, and do not come back again."

He added: "I have no choice; therefore, I advised my journalists to be as careful as they can when they make their reports." Nevertheless, our results show that this is not necessarily related to influencing media content. The common view among participants within partisan media (*Hawler, Evro News, Kurdistan Nwe, Rudaw*) was that the government did not attempt to interfere in their media content. Other factors were found to be at play: Partisan media are dependent on government advertisements and announcements for their financial survival. An important gateway here is the Public Service Broadcaster (PSB), which is being used to transfer government advertisements to media owned by one of both ruling political parties. As one interviewee (No. 19) indirectly has referred how officials that have higher-position "above us" in regulatory bodies of the media control government advertisements and announcements, explained:

> Some state actors are positioned above us in the hierarchy of the PSB, from both political parties (KDP and PUK); those state actors controlled the government advertisements and they are even involved in corrupt deals in order to provide financial support to media belonging to their parties (I mean the first two major parties).

This interviewee further indirectly explained the sort of corruption that occurs among state actors who are directly responsible for government advertisements. He gave a hypothetical example to explain this phenomenon:

> Let me explain to you in a more obvious way; for example, I'm from the PUK party, and I have some advertising from the government that I need to send to media outlets. First, I will send it to the media owned by the PUK. Second, I will pay PUK media for these advertisements at a higher price than the standard, if the advertisement cost is USD 100, I will pay USD 500 to media owned by PUK and so on, and this amount of money comes from the public funds, just for your information.

Although it is assumed that the partisan press is funded directly by the political parties themselves (e.g., Mancini, 2012), our interviewees show that the political parties have established their own informal policies to control government advertising as a primary source of funding for their media:

> The KDP monitors the ad revenues very carefully, they have very strict control, they want to see documents of how much we have obtained each month, they see who the advertisers are, and they want to know how much money was paid by each advertiser. The KDP set up a special committee to monitor all these details for each month. (Interviewee No. 1).

Political Candidates in Election Periods

In the KRI, there are around 34 active political parties, with 17 represented in the parliament and 21 participating in elections between 2014 and 2018 (Hama & Abdullah, 2021; Irwani, 2015). However, previous research has shown that six major (partisan, shadow, and independent) media outlets in the KRI primarily received party advertisements from the two ruling parties KDP and PUK during these elections, and almost none from the opposition party *"Naway New,"* especially in the case of the independent media (*Hawlati, Awene*; Faris et al., 2021). Previous research has been concerned with how political candidates transfer financial support through their advertising to influence media content and voting in elections (Besley & Prat, 2006; Petrova, 2008). Interviewee within the partisan media (*Hawler, Evro News, Kurdistani Nwe*) reported that they are obliged to write positive news content concerning candidates of the political party that owns the media outlet, as they receive direct income from them.

> During the elections, all our focus is on the KDP and its candidates, but we do not get money from KDP advertisements or their candidates when we publish advertisements for them, because we are funded by the KDP; we cannot ask for more money during election times. (Interviewee No. 3)

The distribution of advertising is based on informal relationships, with our results showing that some media organizations invite political parties to advertise their candidates by organizing some kind of bidding culture. For instance, a political party or politician who confirms the invitation first obtains exclusive media content during the election campaign. Thus, media managers and editors are involved in making commitments with politicians during elections, while political parties set their conditions: A long-lasting production of positive news. This was the case for two media outlets: *Hawlati* and *Rudaw*. One interviewee (No. 8) narrated his experience:

> We sent an official invitation to all political parties to campaign for their candidates. In the invitation letter, I indicated that the political party that responds to us first and gives us more ads will be given a larger extent of *Hawlati*'s space. However, the political parties did not respond to us in time; then, PUK contacted us and offered us all their ads, but on the condition that *Hawlati* newspaper would not accept to advertise for any other parties, and the whole space of *Hawlati* [content] was allocated to PUK exclusively. Only for PUK, not any other parties at all, we accepted their offer because we had no other choice.

Moreover, our results show that election campaigns offer journalists to strengthen their linkages further with politicians, as journalists found that they can obtain substantial economic advantages from politicians in the election times. An experienced journalist (Interviewee No. 13) confirmed that:

> Journalists build close relations with politicians for economic reasons, they attempt to find different ways to get money from political parties and their candidates, they consider this as an extra achievement in their careers. It is good for us to have close connections with political candidates; for instance, KDP gives USD 10,000 to each candidate specifically for political advertisements and campaigns. Sometimes we remove some critical programs in our agenda during this period of time, as we may harm some candidates, so they will not give us their advertisements.

Corporate Actors

Concerning corporate advertising, previous research has demonstrated that governments may restrict corporate advertising and direct it to specific media outlets (Rockwell & Janus, 2002; Yanatma, 2021). Our study indicates that private advertisers may not directly interfere in journalistic work in the KRI but rather indirectly, by applying pressure to those media outlets that are critical of the authorities. We found that corporations distribute their advertisements to media that have strong relationships with dominant parties to escape from legal pressures. One interviewee (No. 12) from a shadow media organization said, "The owners of party media (political parties/high-ranking officials) serve corporations in different ways, for instance, when corporations breach the law, when it comes to unpaid taxes or exporting expired products and selling such products in Kurdistan."

In this respect, several views about the forms of pressures were expressed by the participants, both journalists and editors, from different types of media outlets (*Hawler*, *Evro*, *Kurdistan Nwe*, *Rudaw*, and *NRT*). Representatives of the two dominant parties in government were mentioned in particular when it comes to using their powers of oversight to restrict businesspeople. To resolve their disputes with state actors, these businesses allocate their advertisements to media that belong to high-ranking officials. For example, one interviewee (No. 9) gave an example in this aspect, how a businessman (without mentioning the name directly) dealt with authorities to enter his products at checkpoints borders with no trouble, stated:

> I met a famous businessman, he is one of the wealthiest businessmen in Kurdistan, in Sulaymaniyah. The KDP did not allow this businessman to bring his cars into Kurdistan through the Ibrahim Kahlil border crossing point, as his cars did not pass the quality control, and the KDP has the authority of inspection. The businessman said, "I knew that there were no problems with my cars, and my cars were brand new, they had already passed quality control abroad. In order to get out of the problem, I established good relations with KDP officials by allocating huge advertisements to *Rudaw* media."

In addition, our interviewees indicated that the advertising of private companies can be used for bribes, and thus the violation of laws, to those high-ranking politicians involved in corruption, who then (mis)use their positions within regulatory bodies to assist the involved businesspeople. Thus, officials breach laws to ensure the future services of corporations and, in turn, businesses

reward those officials by the allocation of advertisements and direct funds to media owned by those officials. An interviewee (No. 1) indicated indirectly how officials "close their eyes" to assist businesspeople in such circumstances to the advantage of their parties, said:

> The dominant parties cannot force a private company to allocate their advertisements to their media, but they can use some other methods. For example, some officials belong to ruling parties, and have good positions within the governmental institutions, they can "close their eyes" when they see businessmen breach the laws, in terms of unpaid taxes or importing expired products and many other things.

Some officials may use government orders as a tool to pressure businesspeople for the benefit of the media organizations of the political parties to which they belong. In this respect, one interviewee (No. 19) reported:

> With the start of the economic crisis in 2014, the KRG made a decision to support the economy by making taxation payments more flexible for enterprises, this decision was utilized by some officials from ruling parties (I refer to two of our political parties) as a tool to reward some private companies with exchange benefits, such as getting advertisements from these private companies or direct funds for their media outlets, especially, I refer to the media outlets: *Rudaw* and *Kurdistan 24*.

Furthermore, advertising by corporations can be used by businesspeople as a means of showing their support and "loyalty" to a political ideology. This is done by allocating their advertisements to the media owned by high-ranking officials and ruling parties. This method of distribution is voluntary, as an interviewee (No. 10) reported:

> Let me explain to you: The problem is not about advertising as a source of revenue only, it is a matter of "loyalty and power." If a businessman does not show their loyalty to the ruling parties, he runs a big risk on securing the ruling political parties, in particular, if this businessman has large businesses and has links with media outlets, particularly, media that report against the government and ruling parties. You know it is a matter of power, as the majority of our businessmen become politicians.

This kind of funding was also mentioned by a high-level member of the PSB (Interviewee No. 19), who said, "many of the large private companies' owners called me, and asked me to inform them which media outlets belong to the two ruling parties (PUK, KDP). They said, we would like to publish our advertisements in their media outlets."

This phenomenon has indirectly impacted the content of those media that profile themselves as independent. Participants from these media (*Hawlati*, *Awene*) argued that these kinds of strong interconnections between businesspeople and politicians have a serious impact on their news organizations. Interviewee (No. 8) said: "We are poor, we do not have the power, so for the businesspeople it is not a big deal to stop their advertisements with our news organization, we are nothing to them."

Moreover, our results show that large businesses owned by top politicians in the KRI automatically allocate their advertising to their own media outlets, as is the case for partisan media (*Hawler*, *Evro*, *Kurdistan Nwe*) and shadow media (*Rudaw* and *NRT*). One interviewee (No. 1) from the partisan media said:

> There are many big companies that have made lasting advertising contracts with *Evro News*. Of course, these efforts belong to our sponsor, the KDP, our sponsor either owns large companies, or it has an indirect strong connection with private companies.

International Foundations and NGOs

Previous research has shown that the international humanitarian foundations at work in the KRI primarily allocated their ads to party-owned newspapers. The most active of these international NGOs are Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale (GIZ), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the United Nations Population Fund, and more. These ads were either announcements of job offers, international and national bids/tenders, or other procurement notices (Faris et al., 2021). However, our interviewees revealed that NGOs do not interfere in their journalistic work, with the exception of an editor (No. 9) from an independent media outlet:

> For the elections, we obtained funds from an American embassy to support democratic campaigns, it was a limited fund for a limited time (the election was over, and the funds were finished). So, if you want to get this kind of funding, then you have to make a proposal that fits their vision and mission [. . .] many times we got advantages for this kind of funding.

Interestingly, our results showed that the biased distribution of advertising by NGOs is related to patronage and clientelism within governmental bodies. In this respect, interviewee (No. 9) further reported:

> When international NGOs enter Kurdistan, the representatives of the two dominant parties in government directly receive them, as those NGOs have no other options, they build links with our political leaders, especially from the two ruling parties (KDP, PUK). When NGOs have advertisements and announcements; foremost, those NGOs contact government institutions such as governors. So who receives them? The state officials again from the two ruling parties; thus, those officials direct NGOs to the media organizations that are owned by their politicians.

Journalists and Their Sources

Previous studies have indicated that informal contacts between journalists and their sources of income have inverse effects (see Voltmer, 2013, pp. 207–212). Indeed, our data show that these informal distribution methods have created and facilitated an environment for journalists that involves close relationships with advertisers, as journalists make an effort to find advertisers for their media organizations. In turn, they obtain various privileges for their media organizations. In this aspect, our results indicate that this mechanism can be explained according to two scenarios:

One, journalists search for advertisers, and they obtain a percentage of the revenues of those advertisements. These practices lead them to engage with some individuals who have direct involvement in advertising distribution, such as with governmental institutions and corporations. In this respect, one interviewee (No. 2) who works in the partisan media, has given a real example on the nature of business deals between journalists and their manager (editor in chief), said:

> One method and a motivating strategy that we use here is journalists: each journalist who brings in an advertisement, they will get 25% of the money from that advertisement. Many journalists make an effort to find advertisements, and this is a great opportunity for journalists to get money too.

Two, meetings at cafes and other events, regular meetings between famous journalists—called "media stars" by the participants—and businesspeople provide an opportunity for journalists to build strong ties with business. Some journalists use these meetings to win advertising contracts with business; in addition, journalists obtain advantages from these contracts, such as special privileges within their media organizations (e.g., good position in the hierarchy, guaranteeing their permanent employment, financial rewards). One interviewee (No. 12) from a shadow media organization said:

> We do not ask journalists to search for advertisements for our media company, but we have some very famous journalists: They are big names, and they have strong contacts with businessmen, for example, *Ranj Sangawi*, he has brought so many ads from Sulaymaniyah because he has strong connections with the owner of *AsiaCell* Telecom Company. They meet regularly for coffee, drinks. He brought significant revenues to *Rudaw*, and *Rudaw* has obtained a large amount of money from these contracts.

Overall, these results provide important insights into the nature of relationships between media and powerful social actors within a nontransparent media landscape. The present results are significant in at least two major respects: First, they show how unstable and weak socioeconomic conditions lead media professionals to develop informal networks with advertisers, and second, they show how powerful social actors to use advertising as a tool both for capturing news media for expanding their networks with ruling political parties.

Discussion

The findings show that there is both a direct and indirect impact of advertising on media content. This applies particularly to independent media such as *Hawlati* and *Awene*. Direct interference refers to how advertisements are used to buy positive news from potentially critical media (the "carrot and stick approach"; Yanatma, 2021, p. 7). Journalists and editors

are found to practice self-censorship under the pressure of advertisers. The indirect impact of advertisers is grounded in the lack of sustainable and viable financial revenues for media, which has resulted in the closure of independent media outlets under the pressure of political patronage and clientelism. All advertisers studied here have participated in this scenario: Government, private companies, and NGOs.

Eventually, we found that advertising is not only used to impact news media but that there are multiple motivations, which we discuss below.

Colonization of Government Resources

About the question of the colonization of state resources, we found that public funding can be "occupied" by the dominant parties to ensure the financial endurance of (their) partisan media. This finding confirms earlier arguments by Bajomi-Lazar (2017) and Faris et al. (2021). At the same time, our results contradict previous research that argued that partisan media are nonprofitable, "do not consider the revenues as income," and "do not run their media with the revenues come [*sic*] from the market" (Taha, 2020, p. 73). Indeed, our data show that advertisements are considered a significant source of income for media directly owned by the two major ruling political parties (*Evro, Hawler, Kurdistani Nwe*).

Although previous literature has focused on the category of "politicians as media owners" who enter the press world (Zielonka, 2015, p. 85), our study confirms a new model of ownership: Political parties as media owners, with political parties made up of well-connected businesspeople. The revenue for these media outlets not only comes from party funds but also from their advertisements. Interestingly, such media outlets do not define themselves as "party organs" or "partisan mouthpieces," while journalists working within them believe that they are "relatively independent," when, in fact, they adhere to specific editorial policies. Further research should be undertaken here to investigate how journalists perceive the notion of media independence within media that have strong links with political parties.

Furthermore, our results show that the ruling parties have also succeeded in expanding their control over international NGO advertising, as bureaucrats act as brokers between the international NGOs and media outlets that belong to their political parties. This confirms previous studies that argued that strong relationships between patrons and clients are maintained by invoking a powerful sense of responsibility and duty (Irwani, 2015).

Personal Gain and Journalism Ethics

This study also found that advertising might be used for personal benefit, by showing that the biased distribution of government advertising is linked to corruption and (kickback) bribery for the personal advantage of high-ranking officials involved in the hierarchy of the PSB. Such bribes occur between some officials and media managers through deceitful and secret agreements (e.g., preferential distribution). In turn, those officials obtain a percentage of the money from those advertisements. This further confirms findings of previous literature, which has indicated that politicians and officials obtain benefits from PSB bodies for patronage and rent-seeking (Bajomi-Lazar, 2015). In this respect, Szanyi (2019) demonstrated that rent-seeking can be considered a form of "legal corruption," entrenched through formal regulations, or it might be illegal, when public officials are bribed or coerced in some way, such as through informal practices (p. 136).

Moreover, this study raises questions on journalistic norms and standards; it suggests that the normative wall between journalists and advertisers has become a curtain (Coddington, 2015). Our study has shown that the use of informal "social" networks for distributing advertising has allowed journalists to establish friendly relationships with powerful social actors (e.g., through unofficial calls, private meetings, social events, friendships, and even bribery deals). Consequently, this type of relationship offers journalists privileges within their media organizations, such as guaranteeing their positions (job security), or obtaining higher salaries and other financial rewards. Similarly, previous studies in restrictive contexts have demonstrated that informal contacts between journalists and their sources have a serious influence on journalistic work and the flow of information, in which journalists may sell news content through informal meetings (e.g., bargaining advertising) and may accept bribes and engage in "envelope" journalism to produce favorable media coverage (Mathe, 2020; Shin & Cameron, 2003).

These results raise further intriguing questions about the degree to which media professionals are involved in emotional labor (e.g., socialization skills and private networks) to manage the uncertain and chronic instability conditions within deeply restrictive environments (e.g., see Badran & Smets, 2021).

Crony Capitalism

We have found that the biased allocation of advertisements by corporations to media

owned by officials and political parties (as was the case for the media outlets of *Rudaw*, *Evro* News, *Hawler*, *Kurdistani Nwe*) is because of the close nature of the relationship between business and politics in the KRI. There are several possible explanations for this result. Our results show that corporations use advertising as a form of facilitation payment to media outlets owned by high-ranking officials. These kinds of transactions usually occur under the pressure of inspection powers, with businesses attempting to guarantee their economic viability. Obviously, our study shows that the abuse of legal power by officials (usually by invoking inspection powers to challenge businesspeople) is a major factor underlying such practices of clientelism and patronage.

In addition, our study found that business leaders use advertising as a tool to indirectly express their support for a political ideology. In contrast, the allocation of advertisements by business to critical media is understood as an indirect rebuff to the government. Accordingly, in restrictive and authoritarian contexts, the political economy has been described as "crony capitalism" based on networks of privilege, as business viability is based on close, mutually advantageous relationships between authorities and businesspeople (Heydemann, 2004; Moudud, 2013; Voltmer, 2013). However, this kind of interplay is voluntary, and these relationships may partly be related to a sense of corporate social responsibility of some businesspeople, their ethics/beliefs, or political favoritism. In the context of Middle Eastern political economies, it has been pointed out that informal networks between businesspeople generally encourage them to expand their networks with powerful government officials to achieve their economic objectives and to maximize profit from special preferences and benefits from the ruling parties. Therefore, further effort is required to establish the implications of these links within the advertising market (Heydemann, 2004; Moudud, 2013).

Finally, and related to the above, the factor of business capture is another pressure in the advertising market. This term was coined by economics scholars in the context of authoritarian regimes for referring to the strong interdependence between "business and politics" when political parties dominate significant portions of the economy (Zielonka, 2015). This study provides further evidence about how the economic structure of KRI has had an impact on the media market (Faris et al., 2021; Hussein, 2018). In this regard, we found that commercial advertisements are controlled by several economic and political actors, which are generally referred to as "oligarchs," for being media owners and politicians at the same, as in the case of *Rudaw* and *NRT*.

Conclusion

These findings make several contributions to the existing literature. The traditional approach of "advertising as a means of media capture" assumes that the key reason behind unfair distribution of advertising is to control watchdog journalism (e.g., Dragomir, 2018, p. 1136; Schiffrin, 2018). This study has shown that this is not always the case: Just as important is the extraction of state and media resources by dominant parties for the financial survival of their (media) organizations. Second, though a "culture of corruption" has been considered one of the major issues in transitional democracies, this study highlights novel forms of corruption among advertisers (i.e., state actors and businesspeople) and media professionals, and how this hampers the development of media independence (Voltmer, 2013). Third, this research is the first comprehensive investigation that explores the nature of "informal relationships" among media professionals, businesspeople, politicians, and officials. It reveals that the lack of transparency and accountability, as well as the precarity and uncertainty of financial circumstances, have created conditions that lead certain journalists and editors, as well as media managers, to develop informal relationships and networks with their funding sources, such as advertisers. Moreover, our results shed new light on the nature of relationships between international NGOs and state actors in this environment characterized by patronage and clientelism. At the same time, they support previous studies that have shown how NGOs turn into apparatuses of the state and politicians (Atia & Herrold, 2018; Faris et al., 2021).

Overall, this study has raised several questions that call for further investigation, such as the role of informal relationships between powerful social actors and media organizations in the sustainability of media independence and about professional standards and norms. Moreover, a follow-up study is called for with a focus on the role of particular media laws and the functioning of media regulatory bodies, and how particular regulatory frameworks might ensure transparency and accountability within such a media market, such as public procurement, antitrust or advertising laws.

CHAPTER 5

CASE STUDY 3

Published Article:

Jiyan Faris, Pieter Maeseele & Kevin Smets (2023), Regulatory Capture in a Transitional Democracy: Media laws in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Communication Law and Policy, DO I:10.1080/10811680.2023.2241449

Introduction

This chapter employs media capture theory as a framework to examine media laws in the KRI. In response to the findings of the previous two empirical studies, which raised concerns about pressures coming from media regulatory authorities (i.e., party control over media resources) in the KRI, this case study takes a closer look at the nature of the regulatory environment (e.g., hierarchy, content of media laws, and implementation of media laws).

The results of this study contribute further to our understanding of media systems in transitional democracies, providing insights into the role of political parties and their relationship to media (e.g., dominant parties occupying influential positions within media regulatory bodies and public service broadcasting); the role of the state (e.g., the adoption of formal/informal regulations); the media market (e.g., concentration of media ownership through media licenses, lack of transparency and accountably of media laws); and journalistic professionalism (such as challenges faced by journalists due to the vaguely defined laws, which are also used as sanctioning instruments to restrict freedom of expression and silence adversarial or critical voices in the context of a partisan justice system).

This chapter was originally presented at the 8th European Communication Conference - ECREA 2021, and this paper was published online in Communication Law and Policy Journal in September 12, 2023. I was the leading author, I developed the theoretical framework, collected, analyzed and interpreted the data, and I drafted the paper. The article was co-written with my supervisors, Pieter Maeseele and Kevin Smets, who helped me narrow down the scope of the study and guided me in the academic structuring of the paper.

Regulatory Capture in a Transitional democracy: Media Laws in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Abstract

This paper focuses on a particular aspect of media capture by examining how the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's media regulatory authorities and governmental bureaucracy use both formal and informal instruments and practices at their disposal to regulate press freedom. It reports on the findings of a mixed methods approach: A qualitative document analysis of media regulations (such as laws, bills and guidelines) was combined with 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with both state officials involved in media regulatory authorities and journalists, media managers and editors-in-chief (N = 20). The findings show deliberate shortcomings in the contents of the laws as a result of pressure from the ruling political parties. In addition, they reveal the existence of informal structures and practices to control formal media regulations through patronage relationships and clientelism. We conclude by discussing the implications of these results with regard to the state of the regulatory chaos occurring within an unstable political environment. This includes imprecise laws and, the irregular and unpredictable enforcement of media laws that are restricting journalists to discern the boundary between legal and illegal. As such, the findings provide key insights on the different dimensions of regulatory capture in transitional democracies more broadly.

Keywords: Media capture, Media laws, Informal practices, Patronage linkage, Political parties, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Introduction

Following the collapse of authoritarian regimes, existing laws and regulations are generally seen to be amended, and new ones adopted, by the newly formed governments, purportedly to realize the following expectations: the protection of human rights and freedom of speech, a fair distribution of state resources, media transparency and accountability, freedom of access to information, and many more. However, the practical realities of these "transitional democracies" often defy these expectations (Voltmer, 2013; Zielonka, 2015; Duffy & Mariam, 2017). For example, previous studies have raised a number of concerns about de facto government control over positions within media authorities and councils, with a negative influence on press freedom as a result (Voltmer, 2013).

Similarly, following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq implemented new media regulations and policies separately from the Iraqi central government, with the professed aim to foster media freedom and provide a democratic environment for journalists. However, previous research has criticized media regulations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as mere "laws on paper," due to their lack of practical activation and poor implementation (Taha, 2020).

In the context of transitional democracies, several media scholars have relied on media capture theory to emphasize the overlap of interests between the state, political parties, business, media organizations and other social actors, with the state at the center of this dynamic (Schiffrin, 2017a). Media capture refers to "a situation in which governments or vested interests networked with politics control the media" (Schiffrin, 2018). From a regulatory perspective, these studies have emphasized how the state uses its supervisory power to punish critical media and reward government-friendly ones. The aim of this paper is to expand this line of research by providing an answer to the following question: How is press freedom guaranteed and regulated in the KRI, especially in relation to how media regulatory authorities and governmental bureaucracy apply the various formal and informal instruments at their disposal?

To address this question, we conceptualized media capture in terms of the hierarchy of media regulatory bodies; the content of media regulations and laws in the KRI; and the implementation of media laws in the KRI. To answer this question, a mixed methods approach was used. First, we conducted a qualitative document analysis of media regulations drafted and legislated by the KRG, aiming to investigate how their contents support (or do

not support) media freedom. Second, we undertook semi-structured interviews with media professionals (journalists, editors, media managers), and with state actors involved in media regulatory authorities (ministries, parliament), to investigate their experiences with the contents of these laws as well as their implementation.

In the next section, the literature on media capture is discussed to provide insight into the political reality of the regulatory context in transitional democracies. Subsequently, an overview of media regulation in the KRI is presented. In the methodology section, the details regarding data collection, selection and analysis are discussed, before presenting the findings in the following section. We conclude the paper by discussing the main points that can be taken from the study and make a number of recommendations for future research.

Media Capture: From the Regulatory Perspective

Media capture theory conceptualizes the process whereby media outlets are controlled by powerful elites through their symbiotic, clientelist and patrimonial linkages (Finkel, 2015). Studies have researched media capture from various perspectives, such as: 1) economic aspects: the biased allocation of government subsidies, for instance toward friendly news organizations (the 'carrot-and-stick approach') (Podesta, 2008; Yanatma 2016, 2021); 2) symbiotic relationships: direct and indirect relationships between journalists and governments (bribes) (Larsen et al., 2021); and 3) the regulatory environment: the use of the governmental power of inspection over media professionals (Farmanfarmaian et al., 2018). These practices have been found in media systems characterized by strong – often authoritarian - state interference in public service broadcasting (PSB) and high political parallelism combined with weak rational authority (also referred to as clientelism) (Hallin & Mancini 2012). This was the case for societies undergoing democratic transition, for instance, in South-Eastern Europe, Latin America, South Asia and the Middle East. In this paper, our aim is to continue and expand existing work regarding the regulatory environment. The literature on media regulations in transitional democracies has put forward different scenarios in which media can be controlled through regulations, such as hierarchy, the contents of media laws, and their implementation.

Hierarchy

Hierarchy refers to the infiltration of the overseeing institutions within the regulatory environment of the media, concerning the state actors involved in those institutions where

regulations are formulated, issued and implemented. In this regard, previous research in transitional democracies has shown how media can be controlled through a hierarchy of regulations and laws that are being applied in either formal or informal ways (Bajomi-Lazar, 2015). This hierarchy is always based on a high level of political control in institutions where media regulations are drafted and implemented.

While it has been found that independent regulatory authorities and policymakers may support media pluralism and freedom of speech, political parties can be a major threat to the independence of such media regulations. For example, Bajomi-Lazar (2015, 2018) examined how dominant political parties control media by colonizing state resources and occupying influential positions in media regulatory authorities (Bajomi-Lazar, 2015, 2017). These tactics enable political parties to use their supermajority to change media laws and force the adoption of new regulations to serve their interests.

Thus, control over media regulatory authorities offers political leaders various opportunities to intervene, such as engaging in party patronage, where parties might offer well-paying jobs to their supporters, such as journalists, activists, and private media owners, in exchange for future services. This mechanism of control occurs when newly established parties in transitional democracies are underdeveloped, with limited membership and lower levels of loyalty, and are poorly embedded in society. In contrast, if a wide range of actors with diverse political backgrounds are involved in regulatory authorities, this can help shield the process from political and commercial interference.

In the context of media regulatory environments in Central and Eastern Europe, it has been shown how the consolidation of power in media regulatory authorities might be shifted to the hands of particular state actors at specific moments. For example, directly after the collapse of dictatorial regimes, lawmakers may utilize their own positions in drafting, redrafting and amending media laws in favor of their political allegiance, as the case of media regulations in Hungary, Poland, and post-Soviet Ukraine, etc. In such contexts, research has shown different examples of how media laws are controlled by the head of state and ministers on the one hand, and how they are managed by instrumentalized and politicized governmental institutions (Bajomi Lazar, 2017; Ryabinska, 2014).

Contents of Media Laws

Previous studies have shown that legislators might use particular policies as sanctioning instruments – "legal weapons" - to restrict freedom of expression in transitional democracies.

These policies can be implemented using two forms of media regulation. First, the contents of media laws may be vaguely defined; for example, in relation to anti-terrorism legislation, national security, the penal code, or defamation. This may include a lack of clear definitions of terms such as "insults," "symbolism" (such as religious and national symbols), "defamation," "fake news," "hate speech," and "national values", as is the case in Russia, Turkey, and Nigeria (Duffy & Alkazemi, 2017; Larsen, 2021). For instance, in the context of Turkey, research has confirmed that authorities use media laws (or specific articles), or more general laws under "status negotiation" – meaning that the content of the law is flexible (the content being negotiable among powerful officials), to sue journalists and prevent them from reporting critically on a government's policies or on state actors engaged in corrupt practices.

For example, journalists might be criminally charged under anti-terrorism or national security laws by being accused of spreading propaganda, supporting terrorist organizations (thus posing a danger to national security), or even of being involved in trying to overthrow the government (Benítez, 2021). In addition, research has shown that defamation laws may be used to penalize journalists for critical reports on state bodies. Calling a president, a "dictator" or calling the ruling party "corrupt" might be considered an attack on national values and/or religious sanctity promoted by political parties.

In a report on freedom of expression in Iraq, Freedom House (2017) demonstrated that the drafting of imprecise laws has been used by authorities as a coercive strategy under the guise of formal regulations to silence adversarial and critical voices that challenge authorities in the news media (Freedom House, 2020). In this respect, previous research has revealed that legislators create laws that contain "negotiable phrases" that allow them to control the work of journalists (Suraj, 2021). For example, laws allowing access to information have been established in most transitional democracies; however, at the same time, media laws allow governments to withhold information using specifically vague phrases such as "under certain circumstances" or "causing fear among the people." Journalists are subjected to pervasive discrimination by ruling authorities through the use of these ambiguous phrases. In Nigeria, research has found that online and social media are under significant pressure due to digital surveillance by government intelligence agencies (Jamil, 2021). By utilizing vague legal language in repressive telecommunication laws (e.g., snooper and gag laws), surveillance regimes have criminalized dozens of digital journalists and thus encouraged self-censorship. In such a context, research has shown that these vague laws have led journalists to become extremely fearful and cautious, and this has generated a culture of

"forced silence" under "chilling surveillance" (Suraj, 2021).

Second, the lack of legislation related to media transparency and accountability is another mechanism used by authorities to control media in transitional democracies (Nielsen et al., 2019). For example, in several countries in Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe, research has shown that not implementing a public procurement law is an effective legislative move allowing authorities to control government advertising, subsidies and subscriptions (Nielsen et al., 2019). Such a law would regulate state advertising and prevent governments from using public advertisements to punish critical voices and reward friendly news media (by favoring their advertisements). These studies have also argued that the nonexistence of anti-trust laws in transitional democracies has fortified cross-media ownership and monopolies of media ownership, which limits diversity and plurality within media systems (Bernatt & Jones, 2023). When there are no regulations or laws on the distribution of state resources, such as frequency, advertising, and media licenses, corruption is stimulated and a competition to prove loyalty in the media market begins. In addition, this creates an atmosphere in which privileges are given to ruling parties, who build patronage networks that serve their political and economic interests (Fox, 2019).

Implementation of Media Laws

Taking the above-mentioned factors into consideration, research has also demonstrated that the independence of the judiciary is unattainable when the presence of ruling parties is intensified in the legal system as well as in the police and security forces, as the case of media in Pakistan and Iraq (Farmanfarmaian et al, 2018; Faris, Meseele & Smets, 2023). This phenomenon often occurs in the context of a culture of impunity for crimes committed against journalists (Faris et al., 2013; Jamil, 2019). For instance, in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan, media laws are described as mere "laws on paper" and journalists can be deprived of protection from bureaucrats and powerful office holders who seek to silence critical voices. In such situations, research has revealed that courts do not adhere to press law when dealing with cases from journalists; instead they use penal codes under pressure from the authorities (Taha, 2020).

In addition, journalists have expressed concern about the informal collaboration between journalists' unions and judicial councils (Taha, 2020, p. 99). In the case of Pakistan's journalists, Jamil (2021), for example, reported that critical journalists were subjected to pervasive levels of discrimination by bureaucrats, denied access to public data, and were excluded, or prevented, from attending official events. Another fear among journalists is the

strategy of "negligence," especially by courts (Hussien, 2018; Taha, 2020). Cases of violent acts against journalists, for example, have been labeled "under investigation" for years, with no final outcome, including cases of the murder of journalists that go unpunished. This often happens when journalists report on critical news linked to powerful state actors. Richter (2008) elaborated on a type of informal order implemented by authorities called "telephone censorship" in the context of post-Soviet countries. This kind of order refers to government authorities circulating informal guidance to editors-in-chief through telephone calls. This occur often in the context of the abuse of regulatory functions within public service broadcasting bodies (both inspection and distribution), with journalists being threatened while practicing their watchdog journalism (Richter, 2008).

An Overview of Media Regulations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

Overall, little academic research has been conducted on media regulations in the KRI (for exceptions, see: Hussein, 2018; Taha, 2020). This overview of the KRI's media regulatory environment has been based on multiple sources of information, such as previous academic studies, NGO reports, official records and news reporting itself.

In Iraq, the media adhered to legislation such as the 1968 Publication Law (No. 206) and the 1969 Penal Code Law (Criminal Laws, No. 111) (Iraqi Publication Laws, 1969, No. 206). According to these laws (Articles 81-84, 433-434), editors and journalists were considered criminals if they published content criticizing the government (Taha, 2020, p. 99). The editor-in-chief of a newspaper would be considered the original perpetrator of any "crimes" committed, because they were responsible for what was published in their newspaper, including critical news about the government, for example, insulting government officials (Taha, 2020, p. 59). As the KRI is a part of Iraq, it followed these regulations until 1991 (Hussien, 2018, p. 142-162; Taha, 2020.p. 60-63).

However, following the Gulf War in 1991, which led to Kurdish autonomy, the KRG established its own regional laws to regulate the press (Hussien, 2028; Taha, 2020). In the period between 1991 and 2003, a number of laws related to journalism were established by the Kurdistan Parliament in Iraq. These laws include: Press Law No. 10/1993, the Law on Political Parties No. 17/1993, Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate Law No. 4/1998, and the Journalists Retirement Law No. 13/2001. These laws were proposed and drafted by the KRG's Ministry of Culture and Youth (MCY) and passed by the Kurdistan Parliament. The MCY was considered the primary authority overseeing these laws, including their implementation (Taha, 2020).

The contents of these laws were meant to guarantee media independence and freedom of expression (Articles 2 and 14), as well as press licensing without control (Article 5), and the protection of journalists' rights (Article 7) (The Law of Journalism in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, 2007), and the right to every political party to own and establish media (Article 13) (Political Parties Laws in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, 1993). However, there was still political censorship of the press which led to the media being labeled as "partisan" (Faris, Maeseele & Kevin, 2021).

Indeed, after the Gulf War in 1991, the KRI was controlled by two political parties: The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The media was an integral part of the political system, with most media outlets directly controlled by the parties. Furthermore, they quickly established their own media outlets that became mouthpieces for propaganda. Two years later, the KRI fell into a civil war between KDP and PUK (1994–1998). The war resulted in a two-way division of the Kurdistan regional administration, with KDP controlling the province of Erbil and PUK controlling Sulaymaniyah. During this period, press laws were instrumentalized by both political parties as political weapons, while each party established their own media council and authority.

Following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, multiple political parties (as shown in Table 1), as well as dozens of media outlets were established (Faris et al., 2021). According to data published in 2017 by the Kurdish Journalists Syndicate (KJS), approximately 867 newspapers and magazines, 160 TV satellite channels and more than 75 radio stations (Faris et al., 2021). Previous research has categorized these media outlets into three types: those directly controlled by different political groups ("partisan media"), those that operate independently of political groups ("independent media"), and finally, media outlets that profile themselves as independent but are indirectly funded by high-ranking officials ("shadow media") (Hussein, 2018, p 11-128). It is with respect to this context that this study investigates the extent to which media regulatory bodies reflect political diversity in the KRI. In this regard, as has been described by Natali (2010), non-transparency, party affiliation, clientelism and hidden institutionalized influences have been the predominant characteristics of all administrations in the KRG, while organizational procedures have remained associated with practices of nepotism (Natali, 2010). This situation has kept most of the public sector in party-based affiliations.

Table 1 Political parties in the KRI 2018

Party	Seats in parliament (n) since 2018
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	45
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	21
Movement for Change (Gorran*)*	12
New Generation (Naway Nwe)	8
Kurdish Islamic Group	7
Towards Reform (Hevpeymaniya Ber bi Îslah)	5
Turkmen reserved seats for minority groups	4
Chaldean Assyrian Council (Christian)	1
Modern Alliance	1
Freedom List	1

Following the removal of the Ba'ath regime by the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq in 2003, the Kurds, as one of the major opposition groups, participated in rebuilding the so-called "new Iraq ". In the period between June 2004 and May 2005, the representatives of different ethnic and religious groups took part in a committee to draft a new Iraqi constitution, and this new constitution became a foundation of all legislations and the political system in Iraq. According to this new Iraqi constitution, the KRI is considered as a federal autonomous regional government. Consequently, all laws and regulations passed by the Kurdistan National Assembly are considered valid legislation, and the KRG obtained the authority to amend, refuse, and accept any laws passed by the Iraqi Council of Representations (Taha, 2020). Thus, between 2003 and 2022, the KRG drafted several new media-related laws and regulations, separately from the Iraqi central government (as shown in Table 2). The KRG aimed to support media freedom through these laws, with KRG's legislators declaring that the Kurdistan Parliament intended to pass softer media laws "protecting journalists' rights, abolishing jail terms for offences such as defamation" and "increasing freedom and removing punishments (Radio Free Europe, 2008)." In addition, it was also announced that "the current media laws meet the demands of journalists," particularly with respect to comparing the KRG's media laws with the Iraqi central government's (Ministry of Culture and Youth, 2014, p. 31).

For example, the KJS proposed a draft law to the Kurdistan Parliament, which replaced the existing press laws with a broader law called the "Press Law" in 2007(Taha, 2020). This law consists of fourteen articles in five chapters and only covers print media. There are no laws to regulate audiovisual media due to disputes about this between the KRG and the Federal Government of Iraq (FGI). The FGI did not approve laws proposed by the KRG

that would have allowed it to directly regulate audiovisual media and radio frequencies (Personal communication, August, 6, 2014). Nevertheless, in 2014, the KRG's MCY created some guidelines for audiovisual media and radio frequencies; thus, in practice, the MCY acts as a supervisory authority in cooperation with the Ministry of Transport and Communications, overseeing these "rules" or set of regulations for audiovisual media (Personal communication, August, 6, 2014).

Table 2 Media-related laws created by the KRG, Iraq (2003-2022)

Media related-laws and regulations	Issuance year
Press Law	2007
Right to Access Information Law	2013
Guidelines for Audiovisual Media	2014
Commercial Advertising Law	2019
Bill Reorganizing Digital Media	2020

The Kurdistan Parliament also created the Right to Access Information Law (No. 11/2013), which enables citizens of the region to exercise a right to obtain information from public institutions (Law of the Rights to Access Information in the Kurdistan Region, 2013). According to its makers, the provisions of this law are intended to support the principles of transparency and effective participation, to consolidate the democratic process, and to provide a better climate for freedom of expression and publication (Law of the Rights to Access Information in the Kurdistan Region, 2013). In 2019, the Kurdistan Parliament also passed the first Commercial Advertising Law, which ensures that advertising is fair and honest, has a sense of responsibility to society, and encourages fair competition in the market (Commercial Advertising Law in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 2019). In 2020, the latest media-related law to be drafted and proposed was the Bill Reorganizing Digital Media. This law is still under discussion by the parliament and has not yet been passed. It has also received severe criticism from journalists and media workers concerning how the digital media laws might restrict their freedom of expression (Rudaw, August 17, 2021).

To date, no study has been published about the contents of the media-related laws drafted by the KRG, enquiring about how these support the journalistic profession or media transparency; However, some sources have focused on their implementation. For example, Hussein (2018) indicated that courts try journalists who are critical of the government under different laws (such as defamation articles or anti-terrorism law) (Hussein, 2018, p.

144). Taha (2020) raised questions about the lack of activation of media-related laws such as the Right to Access Information Law and described the press laws as "laws on paper" (Taha, 2020, p. 99). Moreover, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq has highlighted serious problems regarding the arrest of journalists without a warrant, or journalists being detained without a court order (Khalid, 2020).

There is still much that needs to be explored. A key question is how press freedom is guaranteed and regulated, especially in relation to how media regulatory authorities and governmental bureaucracy apply the various formal and informal instruments at their disposal. This matter is addressed below through an analysis of the hierarchy within media regulatory authorities, the contents of media laws and regulation as well as their implementation of media regulations, in terms of the government's different apparatuses, praxes and policies.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used to address the research questions, including a qualitative document analysis and in-depth interviews. The document analysis of previous and existing media regulations in the KRI presented a large amount of data that allowed a comparison of changes made before and after the fall of the former regime in 2003. These data cover issues related to freedom of expression for journalists, formal instruments of control, media licenses, and measures to ensure transparency and accountability in the media market. The in-depth interviews added insights from media professionals, including journalists, editors, managers and from high-ranking state officials involved in media regulation, covering issues such as their experiences with the contents of media laws, the actors and institutions involved in media regulatory authorities, and the implementation of media laws and rules. To allow for data triangulation, the multiple data sources were structured in a systematic way, as shown in Figure 1.

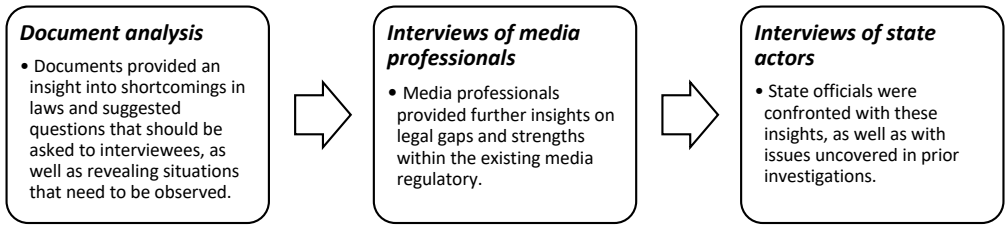


Figure 1 Data triangulation

Document Analysis

We selected and analyzed a number of government documents based on their relevance and significance, such as media laws that are currently in force to regulate journalistic work and media organizations. The documents include the media laws, bills and instructions drafted by the KRG as mentioned above in Table 1: The Press Law (No. 35/2007), the Right to Access Information Law (No. 11/2013), Media Regulations for Audiovisual Media (2014), Commercial Advertising Law (No. 4/2019) and the Bill Reorganizing Digital Media (2020). In addition, we included media laws drafted by the FGI: For example, the Journalist Protection Law (No. 21/2011), Iraq's Constitution of 2005 and the Audiovisual Media Regulations of 2014 by the Iraqi Communication and Media Commission (CMC).

These documents were collected from their websites (the Kurdistan Parliament and the CMC Directorate, Iraq), except for the Media Regulations for Audiovisual Media drafted by the MCY, which the first author collected in person at the MCY in Erbil on August 8, 2019. The documents were either in Arabic or Kurdish, and some have also been published in English (this included the Press Law, 2007; Iraq's Constitution of 2005). All documents were thematically coded by the researcher and translated into English. In total, the various documents amounted to 164 pages.

Since there is currently no available information about the actors and institutions involved in media regulatory bodies, in first instance this analysis allowed us to trace and reveal two institutions and three actors directly involved in media regulations.

In addition, while there is an ambiguity in the structure of media ownership, the financing of media outlets and the distribution of advertising (Jensen, 2002). The document analysis drew conclusions concerning the extent to which media laws ensure transparency and accountability in the media market. Moreover, we observed that there are two types of media laws enforced in the KRI – press laws and audiovisual laws – to regulate media organizations

and journalistic work. Here, the document analysis allowed us to identify contradictions and conflicts between these two laws, such as issues related to journalists' rights.

Accordingly, we generated multiple framing codes, including direct governmental control, political diversity, court independence, MCY control, KJS control, unclearly defined concepts, conflict of orders, funding issues, ownership transparency, distribution of resources, and negligence and exclusion of laws. This analysis allowed us to create rich interview guidelines and helped us to select the most relevant interviewees, in terms of their functions, roles and positions in the media regulatory landscape.

Semi-Structured In-depth Interviews

Two categories of interviewees were selected for this study: media professionals and high-ranking state officials from media regulatory bodies.

First, we selected twelve media professionals (numbered 1 to 12), who included editors, journalists and managers from several media outlets within the three types of media organizations (independent, partisan and shadow media). Second, we interviewed eight high-ranking state officials (numbered 13 to 20) from media regulatory bodies, who were directly involved in drafting and implementing media laws and regulations. Interviewees were selected and addressed based on the snowball sampling technique. This technique has been used in qualitative research where the targeted interviewees are hard to reach, unknown and/or hidden (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). In such a context, it is considered an effective method to enlarge the sample size and attain high-quality data (Hama et al., 2021).

The researcher started the interviews by asking an open demographic question, for instance, information about the interviewee's resume. In this part of the interview, the researcher obtained important data about the political affiliation of the officials. We found that interviewees often combined multiple jobs. In addition to their journalistic work, they had positions as lawyers, university lecturers, members of parliament, human rights activists, entrepreneurs, civil servants or party cadres.

In selecting the interviewees, we also considered the political situation, such as the concentration of power across the different provinces. For example, according to the parliamentary election results of 2013 and 2018, KDP is the dominant party in the provinces of Erbil and Duhok, and Movement for Change and PUK are the dominant parties in

Sulaymaniyah (Taha, 2020). Face-to-face interviews were conducted across the three provinces, in the period between July 15 and August 28, 2019.

The interviews were conducted in one of two Kurdish dialects: Sorani is the main dialect in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, while Badani is spoken in Duhok. Therefore, the interview guidelines and questions were translated into both dialects. The average length of each interview was approximately one hour and twenty minutes. The contents of the interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the first author.

Qualitative thematic coding was also used to analyze the interviews, focusing on the interviewees' experiences with media regulations and their perceptions of existing media laws (Jensen, 2002). The interviewees' responses expanded our knowledge on the issues identified during the initial analysis of the documents. New codes emerged from the analysis of the interviews which did not fit into the pre-existing coding frame, such as their experiences related to direct/indirect forms of control. These codes include: Corruption and patronage linkages, "elastic paragraphs" within media laws, the activation of laws, unofficial orders, the intervention of external actors and party control, which will be explained below.

Interview landscape

This study is potentially sensitive due to the topic itself and the general political situation in the KRI. The first author was faced with several challenges while conducting the interviews. The first one was finding the target interviewees, especially those actors involved in media regulatory bodies. Moreover, the interviewees who were asked to recommend another person for interview did not want their names to be revealed. Some were also hesitant to participate at all or preferred to keep the interview secret. Others canceled at the last minute due to new instructions from the prime minister, who announced on July 10, 2019 that "any worker who exposes information that has a negative impact on their organization [...] will be punished" (Personal communication, July 23, 2019).

Second, the majority of the interviewees chose to be interviewed in public places such as a coffee shop or restaurant far from their workplace. This made it harder for the researcher to hear the interviewees, due to the level of background noise. A number of interviewees chose to be interviewed in their offices, which were located in political organizations or government institutions, where access to the building required passing through a checkpoint controlled by security guards. The researcher overcame these obstacles by

using her valid employee identification cards at these checkpoints, from both her local affiliation (Duhok Polytechnic University) and foreign/international university affiliation (Antwerp University).

Third, to access some high-ranking officials in the media regulatory bodies, we had to seek official approval from their senior manager; for instance, vice-ministers, chairs, governors, and heads of political organizations. However, some interviewees avoided informing their managers and preferred to hold the interviews in secret, choosing a place and time that suited them.

Furthermore, the topics of the interviews are also quite sensitive, such as transparency and accountability, patronage, corruption, freedom of expression, court independence, and so on. During the interviews, the interviewees attempted to provide a range of information; however, they were also found to restrict themselves. They used various techniques to present their views indirectly, for instance, some interviewees were using hypothetical examples or metaphors, presenting facts by referring to documents, moments of silence, or recounting stories concerning their experiences while practicing their profession. Some interviewees used pronouns (they, their, them) instead of direct names when referring to their senior manager or high-ranking politicians, or they used indirect and vague phrases and titles, such as "high context culture," or "the two ruling parties" to refer to the major political parties, or the "high-ranking officials above us" to refer to their administrators, chairperson or head.

In many cases, the high-ranking officials responded to our questions aggressively and in a loud voice (shouting, banging the table), or they replied to our questions angrily, for example, saying "What do you mean?"; "This is a dangerous question"; "Be careful with such sensitive questions"; and "Asking these questions is not good for you." These situations usually occurred when we confronted high-ranking officials with journalists' views on media regulations, such as their concerns about the lack of an independent court, arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial detention. However, this also occurred when we referred to gaps in the contents of media laws, such as issues related to transparency in funding and the distribution of government advertising. Some of these interviewees used a "reverse question." For example, instead of answering a question, it was reversed by asking that same question back to the questioner (the first author). Such a technique was often used by the interviewees to avoid responding to particular questions, or said directly: "I have no answer to this question. If you want answers, go and ask [name redacted] this question".

All the above-mentioned factors and challenges may have affected the findings to some extent, contributing to some lack of depth in responses. However, we tried to overcome the challenges in various ways. The first author was able to draw from her pre-existing network, as she previously worked as a journalism lecturer who supervised student internships within several media organizations. In addition, as suggested above, we gave the interviewees the opportunity to choose the interview location so they would feel safe and comfortable. The interviewees were also sa confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, the use of a consent form by an international university was generally interpreted as a sign of credibility. Moreover, during the interviews, the first author avoided making any references to particular political actors and political views. And finally the interview questions were based on secondary resources, which is often motivated by providing a transparent source (such as news media, law content, previous academic studies, official statements). For example, the questioner (first author) was using phrases, such as "according to", as 'reported by' or 'as stated by,' referring to an opinion or an argument which was not the first author's opinion. This preparation created an atmosphere in which the interviewees were focused on a third party (the sources of the questions), rather than engaging in a confrontation with the first author, who acted as a listener and showed respect to each interviewee, avoiding interruptions.

Findings

The results of the document and interview analyzes clarify who is involved in media regulation in the KRI and show how media are regulated through formal and informal instruments, involving various aspects related to bureaucratic practices, government policies, control by political parties and legal regulatory gaps, among others. Below, these aspects are discussed in terms of the 1) independence, 2) uncertainties, and 3) transparency and accountability of media laws.

Independence

Our findings show that there are multiple organizations involved in the hierarchy of media regulation. First, there are those institutions that are openly (and formally) involved: the executive and legislative authorities of the KRG, as shown in Figure 2.

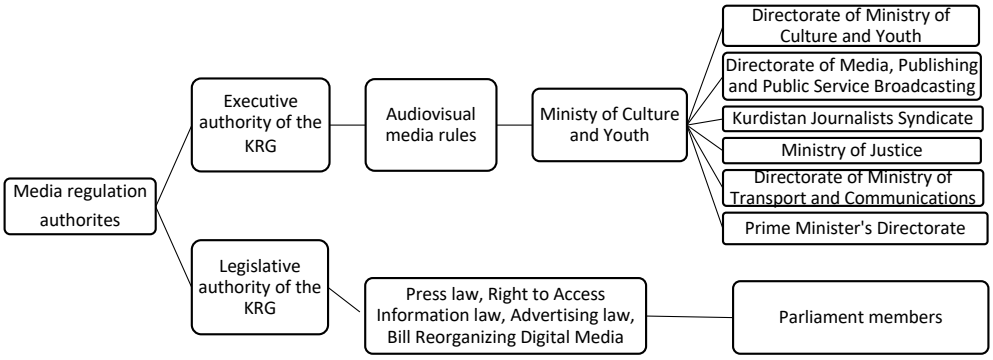


Figure 2 Institutions officially involved in drafting media regulation in the KRI, 2019

The document analysis showed that the MCY represents the executive authority for Audiovisual Media (Ministry of Culture and Youth in the Kurdistan, 2014, p. 30- 31). As executive authority, it is responsible for the drafting and implementation of the Audiovisual Media regulations, including frequencies, granting media licenses, distributing advertising and public funding. The interviews revealed that the MCY created a committee for audiovisual media rules and invited officials (top leaders of multiple offices within state bodies) (as shown in Table 3) (Ministry of Culture and Youth in the Kurdistan, 2014, p. 1-31). Remarkably, the Ministry of Justice and the Prime Minister's Directorate fall under the executive authority of the MCY (Ministry of Culture and Youth in the Kurdistan, 2014, p. 31).

The document analysis also showed that the legislative authority drafted the Press Law, the Bill Reorganizing Digital Media, the Right to Access Information Law and the Commercial Advertising Law. However, interviews revealed that the supervision of the implementation of these laws is controlled by two institutions: 1) the directorate of the MCY is supervising the implementation of the Right to Access Information and the Advertising laws, 2) and the KJS is responsible for supervising the implementation of the Press Law and the Bill Reorganizing Digital Media (Interviewees No. 14, 17).

In addition, the interviews revealed that there are two other institutions that indirectly or informally play a key role in media regulatory bodies and which are especially involved in supervising the implementation of media laws. These institutions are: 1) the Ministry of Interior, from which the executive authority of the KRG must obtain permission for issues related to the granting of media licenses, for establishing media companies, etc.; and 2) the Consultative Council of the KRG, or the "Fatwa," which is an authority that has the right to

interfere with the contents of media laws and make "some changes," and also has the right to interpret the contents of the laws on the basis of new "concepts" (interviewee No. 19). More precisely, it has the power to give advisory opinions when there are no laws to regulate journalistic work (such as for digital media) (Interviewee No. 14).

Media capture theorists argue that political parties might gain control of media by occupying influential positions within media regulatory bodies and public service broadcasting. Such tactics enable political parties to use their positions to draft and implement media law, and force the adoption of particular regulations (Bajomi-Lazar, 2013). Indeed, our interviewees (media professionals and lawmakers) were strongly supporting this argument: there were concerns about the lack of independence of the institutions and actors involved in media regulatory bodies. The concerns were mostly about the strong links between state actors within the MCY and their political organizations. The interviewees referred especially to the two major parties:

> All governmental officials with high-ranking positions within the state obtained their position through their ties with political parties. Their political leaders chose them specifically to take such governmental positions, so they offer maximum loyalty to their parties. (Interviewee No. 4)

Interestingly, based on the interviews, we found that the majority of state officials involved in the committee established by the MCY hold a high position within their political organizations: they are known as the "advanced cadre" (interviewee No. 17). From a total of eight officials, we learned that five belonged to KDP and two to PUK. Moreover, the interviewees emphasized that a number of academics also participate in this committee, as well as an official from the Directorate of the Ministry of Justice (Court) (i.e. a judge); however, there was no further information about the profiles of these actors.

Table 3 Political background of state actors in the committee established by the MCY

State actors	Political background
Directorate of Ministry of Culture and Youth (MCY)	(2) KDP, (1) PUK
Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate (KJS)	(2) KDP
Prime Minister's Directorate	(1) KDP
Directorate of Media, Publishing House, and Public Service Broadcasting	(1) PUK
Directorate of the Ministry Transport and Communications	(1) KDP
Directorate of the Ministry of Justice (Court)	Unknown
Academics from media and communication studies	Unknown

The high-ranking officials stated that despite their position as a party cadre, they could balance their role as a state actor with their party's goal of serving the public (interviewee No. 17). Nevertheless, the data show that power struggles between the parties is paramount and unavoidable: a "conflict of interest is inevitable" (interviewees No. 17, 19). There is also a high probability that officials may colonize state bodies in the interest of their parties, as mentioned by the interviewees. With regard to this, one interviewee (No. 17) from the MCY said:

> As members of KDP, our political concept has grown on some principles, and those principles serve both the government and our political goals, which is to serve the public [...] and our party leaders advise us to serve the country. But I have to be honest, because of the strong conflicts and strong competition among political parties, we always have problems with an overlap of interests between political parties and the government.

A number of interviewees described the MCY as a "political apparatus" and as "unprofessional," because it functions under continuous pressure from the two ruling political parties, the Ministry of Interior and/or some powerful politicians outside of the media regulatory bodies. As interviewee No. 2 reported:

> The MCY does not have enough resources to regulate media organizations because of their limited knowledge and their limited power. It is also a weak ministry and it works under the pressure of two of our political parties, plus their orders must be approved by the Ministry of Interior or by an important politician. In the last three decades, there has been extra pressure if, for instance, the minster is from PUK, the vice-minister from KDP, or vice versa.

In addition, there was a sense of anxiety among the interviewees, due to the strong relationship between the KJS and the two parties. Apparently, the KJS has its own local directorates in the three provinces. In theory, the document analysis found that the Press Law (2007), Article No.35, indicated that the KJS's directors must be elected by journalists. However, the interviewees highlighted that, in reality, these directorates are managed by experienced journalists who belong to the two parties, based on agreements between them. Regarding this aspect, one interviewee (No. 1) clarified:

> The general chair of the KJS has been held by KDP since the 1990s. The position of KJS director in Duhok is only for KDP, the person who comes after is from PUK, then the members who come after them are from the other minorities such as the Christian party, while there is no place for Islamic parties at all; not even for unimportant positions. This is an agreement between two parties about the hierarchy of positions in the KJS. In Sulaymaniyah, it is the same, but an opposite system, with the director of the journalist syndicate a PUK cadre, then KDP cadre comes next, then one member from the Christian party, then other minorities. But in Erbil the case is different, as it is the capital of the KRI. There PUK and KDP have agreed to swap the position between each party every two years.

While our data showed that the Ministry of Justice joined the committee created by the MCY, our interviewees confirmed that the authorities have further expanded their control over the judiciary, with both the MCY and the high court working together indirectly to control critical journalists. For example, by accusing them of violating press laws, which could then lead to their extrajudicial detention. Moreover, the judicial system is controlled by either of the two parties depending on the province (KDP in Erbil and Duhok, and PUK in Sulaymaniyah). Accordingly, this power division between the two parties in the media regulatory bodies has directly affected journalists' perspectives on freedom of expression. As one interviewee (No. 8) stated:

> Sometimes journalists face legal problems with influential politicians, not officials. In these cases, the government authorities attack journalists without considering that this is a kind of persecution with no prior investigation. But this depends where the politicians come from, whether from Erbil, Sulaymaniyah or Duhok. For instance, if I live in Sulaymaniyah and write critical reports about KDP, I have full freedom, and PUK will support me and protect me in their area, and vice versa, but KDP's authorities in Erbil are stronger than PUK's; sometimes both parties attack one journalist, especially if this journalist is from the opposition party "New Generation."

In this regard, other interviewees also reported a lack of independence, as well as the bias and dysfunction of the court (interviewees No. 10, 4, 6). They especially referred to pressure on the court from the MCY in relation to issues such as the implementation of laws (fair investigations by the court). Concerning this aspect, one interviewee (No. 8) explained that their concerns increased when they learned that the two parties admitted that there was a lack of "court independence" due to political pressure:

> We can look back at the events of February 16, 2018, when people took to the streets and demonstrated in Sulaymaniyah demanding their salaries. The offices and headquarters of political parties were burned; the KDP office in Sulaymaniyah was burned. The court in Sulaymaniyah directly issued an order to put all groups involved in this incident in jail. On that night, Fadel Mirani, the KDP's politburo and spokesperson, declared on TV that "they cannot trust the court in Sulaymaniyah, and they have to transfer this group to Erbil and address their case in our court in Erbil." Just imagine, KDP is the main ruling party in Kurdistan and their spokesperson says that they cannot trust the court in Sulaymaniyah. So how can journalists trust the court in Erbil?

We conducted further investigation of this issue of independence with high-ranking officials from media regulatory bodies. Some expressed dissatisfaction about the pressure on the members of the MCY committee coming from the ruling parties when it comes to unpaid taxes or unissued licenses, through their control of the court and the police. As one interviewee (No. 15) stated:

We do not send journalists who work for the two major ruling parties to the court or to report about the media organization that they belong to when they breach the laws, because the courts are under their control [...]. Some media owners breached laws by, for instance, establishing media companies without a media license. As I was holding a position as a [removed for anonymity], I sent them letters to apply for a media license and pay their taxes and they did not respond to my request. Then, I reported them to police. The police station ignored the reports and contacted me to inform me to stop sending them such reports.

At the same time, some other high-ranking officials considered that it was impossible to have independent courts in Middle Eastern countries, not only in the KRI. They mentioned other countries as a benchmark for this phenomenon. One interviewee (No.17) from the executive authority indicated that:

> Even in the US, the court is not independent, and you can see that there are rich tycoons involved in politics in the US, and you can see that in most cases the court is dominated by the Democratic Party in the US. Another example is Turkey. Over the course of Turkish history of the past 400 years, its constitutions were controlled by the Ottoman sultan, and now by a dominant ruling party (AKP). There is strong interference by political parties in the court, and we have to accept the fact that we live in a region where our neighbors are Turkey, Iran, Syria; and Kurdistan is a recently established region in which it is very normal for the court to not be independent.

Furthermore, our document analysis (Press Law, Article No. 35, 2007), showed that members of the opposition party "Movement for Change" (Goran) sided with the two ruling parties when media laws were being drafted in parliament. However, undemocratic views were expressed by some interviewees from the executive authority, who described the legislative authority as entailing the "interference of opposition parties," as well as being "chaotic" and a "threat to democracy" (Interviewee No. 19).

Apparently, they were concerned that the legislative authority might offer more freedom for journalists. Some members of the executive authority suggested that all media regulations (both drafting and implementation) should be solely under government control (such as the executive authority). As one interviewee (No. 19) stated:

> We [the executive authority of the KRG] have to visit all political groups and present our problems to them, inform them that we need to amend all media laws, and the parliament has to stop their intervention. Especially with regard to the journalistic profession, we have to control journalists and their attitudes.

Our data showed that the position of the KJS is not obvious when it comes to its independence. According to the document analysis (Press Law, 2007), the KJS was established in accordance with Law No. (40) of 1998 and amended by Law (40) of 2004, in the Parliament of Kurdistan (by legislative authority), and the KJS is a member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). At the same time, our data showed that the KJS presents itself as a semi-governmental institution and has strong connections with other governmental institutions, as well as with non-governmental organizations working to protect journalists (Interviewee No. 14). For example, one interviewee (No. 14) mentioned that there is some "needling between the KJS and the government, the problem is this link is not clear yet, and our problem is that we see there is huge pressure on the MCY from our two major political parties." In addition, our data showed that the president of the KJS is a member of the committee established by the MCY, representing the KJS (Interviewee No. 15). However, several interviewees argued that the "president of the KJS is completely affiliated to the KDP." In particular, this was clear for the interviewees after they found that "the KJS's president was elected as a member of the Iraqi parliament for the KDP in 2018" (Interviewees No. 1, 4, 6, 8).

Nevertheless, top officials from the MCY considered that the KJS was not completely loyal, as they found that the KJS sometimes attempted to protect journalists' rights according to the Press Law (2007) – as indeed, the KJS is responsible for supervising the implementation of the Press Law (Interviewee No. 19). Therefore, the MCY did not want the Press Law (for printed media) to be implemented and supervised by the KJS. It became apparent that the MCY wanted to take over the role of the KJS. In this respect, one interviewee (No. 19) said:

> The Ministry of Culture and Youth has to be responsible for all media regulations. I do not agree with the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate regulating the Press Law; we need to amend the Press Law and make a lot of changes.

The struggle between the KJS and MCY within the executive authority will be further discussed below.

Uncertainties

Previous research has shown that authorities in transitional democracies may use vaguely defined laws as sanctioning instruments to restrict freedom of expression and silence adversarial or critical voices in the context of a partisan justice system (Duffy & Alkazemi, 2017; Larsen, 2021). The combination of document analysis and interviews provided further explanation regarding the uncertain and volatile media laws and their impact on journalistic work, and how this problem is leading journalists to self-censorship in the KRI. Here, we use the term "uncertainty" to denote the ambiguous and uncertain situation in terms of media regulation, which is reflected in "unclearly defined concepts," "elastic paragraphs," "conflict of orders" from multiple institutions involved in media regulation, as well as in the lack of activation of media laws. These aspects of uncertainty will be further explained below.

First, our study found "unclearly defined concepts" to be a major challenge faced by journalists and editors when practicing their profession. For example, we found that, according to the Press Law (2007) (Article 9, Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4), journalists and editors can receive heavy fines of up IQD 20 million, if their published work "shows malice," "insults religious beliefs," "insults and offends religious symbols, sanctity of any religion or sect" and "reveals anything related to the secrets of individuals, even if true." Second, in this regard, interviewees, such as journalists and editors revealed that these phrases have been used by authorities as "elastic paragraphs"; that is, they are interpreted by authorities as they see fit to serve their own interests. One interviewee gave some examples:

> The Press Law is filled with unclear concepts and elastic laws, so they can use the press laws in different ways for different purposes. For example, when they refer to "harm our culture and customs," the question is: "What is our culture?" There is no definition of our culture, everyone looks at our culture in a different way. Or when it refers to "national security," but there is no definition of national security. They use the national security laws in different circumstances and however it suits the interests of ruling actors. Or what does "religious sanctity" mean? I look at religious sanctity in my way; others in different ways. For example, for me "Imam" is an ordinary person, but for many people they have "religious sanctity," and so on (Interviewee No.8).

Another interviewee indicated that unclear definitions have a major impact on watchdog

journalism, especially when it comes to reporting on corruption among state officials. Interviewee No. 1 specifically referred to Article 9, No. 4, which mentions reporting on "secrets of individuals, even if true":

> According to this Article, my editor prevented the publishing of my reports many times, as they were about corruption among our politicians (for example, oil smuggling, expired products, oil revenues). We really need our lawmakers to further explain what they mean when referring to the "secrets of individuals" (Interviewee No. 1).

Third, our results revealed conflict and divergence between the top officials within the MCY and KJS. The interviews showed that there is a "conflict of orders" between the two institutions, regarding their supervision of the implementation of media laws (Interviewee No.14). As mentioned above, while the MCY supervises audiovisual media (media licenses, taxes, advertising distribution), the KJS supervises print journalism (newspapers, magazines) as well as digital media, and all journalists in the KRI fall under the Press Law. However, our study showed that, in reality, the MCY interferes with journalistic work and the content of the Press Law, and in many cases the MCY changes the contents of the law to fit its requirements without notifying the KJS. As one interviewee (No. 14) from the KJS stated:

> The MCY has no right to interfere in journalistic work and media content or to shut down a media company such as a TV station and so on. The MCY is only responsible for the media licenses, taxes, advertising distribution. All journalists in the KRI are entitled to freedom of expression under the Press Law (2007). We have many problems with the MCY and its interference in the Press Law. We had some cases when the MCY changed the contents of the law to control journalistic work; this is bad for the KRG's reputation because we attempt to apply the journalism laws as much as we can, especially because we are under the scrutiny of international human rights organizations, but the MCY does not understand our point (Interviewee No. 14).

At the same time, undemocratic views about the rights of journalists were expressed by state actors within the MCY. One interviewee (No. 19) described the KJS as unprofessional and too supportive of journalists:

> The Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate should not be responsible for journalists and the Press Law because they cause us a lot of problems. We do not have control of the Press Law, and we do not have control of journalists' membership licenses; the KJS has registered 14,500 journalists in the KRI.

These conflicts between the MCY and KJS have created a precarious environment for journalists and editors as the MCY uses various techniques to control journalistic work by circumventing the Press Law (2007). For instance, by applying national security laws, the penal code or terrorism laws instead. One interviewee (No. 14, a high-ranking board member of the KJS) described one way of circumventing press laws, referring to Article 8 (Press Law, 2007):

> Journalists who make critical reports about someone are directly summoned by the court with claims that their report contains defamation. In these cases, journalists should be fined according to the Press Law (2007). However, the court has used Iraqi Government penal laws established in the 1950s. While the KJS is supposed to attend court during the investigation sessions, the court has never allowed the KJS to attend these sessions. This really puts journalists in danger, because the court demands a legal advisor from the MCY during the investigation sessions, and they use old laws from a period where the media environment was totally different; the culture has changed, social relations have changed, and there was no digital media then.

Overall, the analysis showed that, although the KJS attempts to protect journalists to some extent, huge pressure is applied to it by the MCY, due to the latter's strong networks with the judiciary.

Transparency and Accountability

As indicated in previous research, the lack of transparent laws and regulations is another mechanism that has been used to control media and journalistic work in transitional democracies (Podesta, 2009; Najjar, 2009; Nielsen, 2019). Our study showed that lack of transparency and accountability is indeed also a technique used by the executive authority (MCY) in the KRI in relation to issues of ownership, the distribution of resources and access to information. This technique is applied during either the drafting of media laws or their implementation, under pressure from the dominant parties or high-ranking politicians.

Regarding the drafting of media laws, the document analysis found that the Press Law (2007) addressed issues related to the transparency of ownership of printed media such as the owner's profile and their source of funding. However, these issues are excluded from regulations related to audiovisual media and PSB. For example, in Article 3 of the Media Regulations for Audiovisual Media drafted by the executive authority, in the section on "Granting media licenses: terms and conditions", there are no sections referring to the financial visibility (funding sources) of media organizations or media ownership.

Moreover, in the introduction, the MCY indicates that "our media regulations will apply to all types of media organizations"; however, there are no paragraphs that mention and define the types of media owners. Article 8 refers to "general principles for advertising", describing all conditions related to advertising formats and contents. However, there are no conditions referring to the distribution of advertising (either commercial or government). Similarly, the Commercial Advertising Law (2019) only defines commercial advertising that is directly under the supervision of the MCY, and while it addresses issues such as sanction fees, advertising content and consumer protection, there are no articles about fair distribution and state advertising.

Other aspects also emerged from the interviews. First, some interviewees who worked as media regulators indicated that the issues related to "sources of funding" and "ownership transparency" were not important, as it is clear to the public who owns a particular media outlet and who financially supports them. Interviewee No. 17 explained:

> In the KRI, about 99% of media organizations belong to political parties and are funded by them. This is a fact I monitor directly as a [removed for anonymity], I do not think these aspects should necessarily be addressed in laws, since it is clear to the public. However, we have attempted to raise questions on these issues but never succeeded.

Our interviewees revealed that there are some regulators who intentionally avoid addressing some issues, such as government advertising and funding sources, due to pressures from the ruling parties. As reported by one interviewee (No. 14):

> Many times in our regular meetings with the executive authority, I have discussed the need to address state advertising distribution, but no actual

> work has been done on this matter. Our lawmakers do not have a clear and professional intention; they look at laws as business deals among parties and the government.

Second, we found there is a vagueness surrounding the implementation of media laws. Consistent with previous research, the KRG may use national laws, such as anti-terrorism and national security laws, as an indirect method to control some media organizations. Some interviewees revealed that the Ministry of Interior is involved in issues concerning renewing or establishing media organizations and the extrajudicial detention of journalists (related to national security) (Interviewee No. 16). However, sometimes the reasons for the interference of the Ministry of Interior were found to be ambiguous to the regulators within the MCY. One interviewee (No. 19) from the MCY added further insights in this regard:

> We always have to wait for the decisions (i.e., acceptance or rejection) from the Ministry of Interior. We do not know what their conditions are; we do not know why they do not give permission for establishing or renewing a particular media outlet; and we are not allowed to ask questions about these issues. We only get the response from them, which is what they indicate on the application form.

On this point, we found that the interviewees did not provide much insight into the issues surrounding "national security," and they censored themselves while presenting their views. We also noted that there are some informal (verbal) rules involving issues related to media licenses, as one interviewee (No. 19) said:

> From my point of view, the applicants know why they are rejected, they know the reasons, that's why they do not demand their rights in court. The applicants come to us to receive their applications and see "the rejection," they withdraw their rights, nobody goes to court administration to demand their rights. Why? Because the security forces tell them why they had their media license rejected. But we have few cases of rejection and around 80% of applicants get their media license.

Third, another common view among the interviewees was that the lack of transparency was due to the lack of knowledge of the lawmakers regarding issues related to the media market and system. This was because the supervisory actors involved in the legislation did not meet the job requirements, with the lawmakers selected due to their loyalty to their political parties, not due to their professional background. As one interviewee (No. 14) stated:

> Our parties choose famous journalists to get votes from the public, rather than use them as experts in the legislative committee in the parliament. They choose famous actors in the media to get votes. As these actors are already known by the public, the parties do not need to invest money to advertise their candidates. So they have taken these journalism characters as ready-made candidates without investing time and money to obtain votes from the public. When I was appointed as a member of parliament, I thought I would fill many gaps in the media laws, as I promised, but they did not even allow me to join the media committee.

Overall, these findings provide important insights into how media are regulated in the KRI. There is a non-transparent regulatory environment characterized by a high level of informality and strong intervention by the ruling parties in the media regulatory authorities (in terms of hierarchy, contents of the laws and their implementation).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study employed media capture theory as a framework to examine the media regulatory environment of the media in the KRI. Through this lens, it contributes to our understanding of media systems in transitional democracies, providing insights into the role of political parties, the role of the state, media market concentration, and challenges in terms of journalistic professionalism.

The results show how a variety of formal and informal techniques are used by state actors, ruling parties and the government to control media regulatory bodies, through the establishment of hierarchies of power in these bodies, the drafting of legislation and the implementation of laws. The formal techniques concern direct interference of the government through official policies and approaches. The informal practices include holding influential positions, issuing unofficial orders through external actors or exercising verbal Islamic laws (Fatwa/Sharia), implementing laws with unclearly defined concepts

or "elastic laws," the lack of activation of media laws, clientelism and patronage linkages, corruption, exclusion, legal gaps and negligence. In the following paragraphs, we present five major findings that are seen as the main contributions to the literature.

First, our findings point out that media regulatory bodies are controlled by the two ruling parties. This observation supports previous research, demonstrating that such bodies can be controlled by multiple parties (Zielonka, 2015, p. 73-98). In "multi-party colonization," all parliamentary party nominees are granted seats on the various supervisory bodies of the media (Bajomi- Lazar, 2013, p. 60-89). In such cases, media freedom may increase, as all parties have similar access to government resources, but none can control all of the resources (Bajomi-Lazar, 2013, p. 74). Alternatively, media bodies might be controlled by one party, i.e. "one-party colonization." In such a context, the ruling party might abuse and exploit its influence over the legislative authority and use media regulations to suit its own needs. As a consequence, media freedom is severely restricted (Bajomi- Lazar, 2013). Taking the case of the KRI, media regulatory bodies may be considered an example of dual colonization of the media, where the two major parties (KDP and PUK) clearly have control. Consistent with the literature, this study found that the two parties' control over the media regulatory bodies offered them multiple benefits, such as tax exemption, control of public funding and rent seeking.

Second, we found that informal politics has a strong impact on these bodies. These informal practices include unofficial orders, patronage linkages, unwritten rules such as the Fatwa, which have resulted in poor implementation and legislation of media laws. For example, while two authorities (executive and legislative) are formally appointed to regulate media, informal institutions and practices by regulators are embedded within the media regulatory organizations. The findings revealed that these informal practices were above the law and outside formal institutions. In the literature, informal practices have been identified as potent, particularly in transitional democracies (Krygier, 2015, p. 119-136). In such contexts, the parliament or other governmental bodies are not of such key importance, with the political system mainly represented by informal hierarchical networks. These informal relationships often possess greater power than formal institutions. And again, these informal practices boost corruption and rent seeking. In this regard, Rupnik and Zielonka (2013) argued that:

> Informal practices and the network gain importance when the state is weak, political institutions are underdeveloped, and the laws are full of loopholes and contradictions (...) The rule of law is replaced by the rule of informal ad hoc arrangements orchestrated by people who have no accountability operating in a mood of dirty togetherness (p. 13).

Third, regarding the contents of laws and rules, our findings support the notion that lawmakers intentionally draft vague laws, or "elastic laws," to be used by regulators to restrict journalistic work, as a tool alongside arbitrary policies and coercive control. In addition, the findings confirmed that regulators in the KRI have either no information about media ownership or only incomplete information related to the transparency of funding and resources, which is to the benefit of the two dominant parties. Our findings further expand existing knowledge regarding this topic: these techniques have been deliberately used by regulators to support their own interests (as indicated in the literature) (Podesta, 2009). However, it is also the case that lawmakers lack knowledge and appropriate professional backgrounds, having been granted a position within the media regulatory bodies because of their loyalty, in a process called "cadre politics," rather than for their expertise in the field. This has been labeled a "nomenklatura system," which refers to a reliance on old authoritarian power. In this process, key positions of authority, such as senior positions in the state bodies selected by parties are appointed based on a high degree of mutual loyalty or "macropolitics" (Klima, 2020, p. 8-50). Research has shown that this practice occurs in transitional democracies and that it can develop into systems of informal clientelist structures and networks called "new nomenklatura," in a form of non-transparent state exploitation by political parties or "state capture" (Klima, 2020, p. 11). We believe that this would be a fruitful area for future research.

Fourth, the methodological approach (sampling, triangulation of data, a mixed method) used in this study provided conceptual clarity on a complex media system in a non-transparent environment based on informal networks among powerful social institutions. The combined use of document analysis and interviews revealed significant formal and informal social and organizational practices. This approach may help scholars working in similar contexts.

Overall, this research provided further understanding of how media are regulated through informal ties between regulators and powerful sources of pressure in the KRI. It is obvious

from the findings that the rights of journalists are not protected in the KRI. More broadly, further research is needed to determine how journalists working in such environments are able to bypass these instruments and maintain some degree of independence and professionalism, as well as how journalists themselves distinguish between informal and formal structures and regulations related to their journalistic work.

CHAPTER 6

CASE STUDY 4

Published article:

Jiyan Faris, Pieter Maeseele, Yazan Badran & Kevin Smets. (2023). Media Capture and Journalism as Emotional Labor: How Do Media Professionals Manage Bureaucratic Violence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq? Journalism Studies, DOI:10.1080/1461670X.2023.2185077

This chapter presents the fourth empirical study of this dissertation, focusing on the status of journalists and editors practicing journalistic work in the KRI. Building on the previous chapters, which revealed the chronic conditions of instability in the journalism environment in the KRI, such as various types of pressures dominating the journalistic atmosphere (i.e., economic viability, professionalism of media workers, and regulatory pressures), this chapter looks more closely at the effects on journalists and their professional practice.

This chapter not only reveals additional apparatuses used by state actors in the KRI, such as direct/indirect bureaucratic violence against journalists, but also attempts to present the strategies that are used by media professionals in the KRI to maintain some independence or, by contrast, how some journalists utilize the clientelist and unstable environment in the KRI to their own advantage, such as to secure their professional and economic position. The study of these aspects draws on theories of media capture and studies of the emotional labour involved in journalism in non-democratic regimes. The results of this chapter provide insight into the level of journalistic professionalism, political parallelism, and the role of the state in protecting journalists in the KRI.

This paper was published online in Journalist Studies in February 2023 as part of a special issue on the Safety of Journalists – Risks, Resistance, Resilience. I was the leading author for this paper, I developed the theoretical framework, collected and analyzed the data. The article was co-written with my supervisors, Pieter Maeseele and Kevin Smets, who helped me narrow down the scope of the study and guided me in the academic structuring of the paper. This article was also co-written with Yazan Badran (who worked as a PhD researcher at the research group on media, culture and politics [ECHO] at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel). Yazan Badran contributed to the development of the concept of “emotional labour” and to drafting and revising the article.

Media Capture and Journalism as Emotional Labor: How Do Media Professionals Manage Bureaucratic Violence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq?

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the (in)direct tools of governmental bureaucracy used to control journalistic work in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). It calls for understanding media capture not only through structural-level consequences, but also through the methods used to create an environment of instability and unsafety. To make sense of these processes, and how they are experienced and negotiated by journalists, this paper combines scholarship on the emotional labor of journalism with scholarship on processes of media capture in deeply restrictive environments. The mixed-methods approach aims first to uncover structural conditions of media capture in the KRI through a document analysis of 21 public reports published by the Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate (KJS) and the Metro Center for Journalists' Rights and Advocacy (MC) between 2014 and 2020. Second, it aims to reveal how journalists and editors-in-chief from diverse media organizations manage and negotiate these chronic conditions of precarity and instability, through 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews. The results show multiple strategies that have been developed by journalists and editors to mitigate or acclimate direct and indirect bureaucratic violence (e.g., editorial support, socialization skills and networks, understanding of unspoken and unwritten rules, etc.)

Keywords: Media capture; journalism; emotional labor; governmental bureaucracy; unsafety; Iraqi Kurdistan.

Introduction

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI 2021, 2) notes that "recent years have seen progress towards a democratic Kurdistan Region where freedom of expression and the rule of law are valued". However, according to Freedom house (2020) and Reporters Without Borders (2020), Iraq, and the KRI more specifically, remains one of the most dangerous states for journalists. It has been ranked 162 out of 180 countries by World Press Index (2020) and the KRI has been classified as "not free" by Freedom House (2020).

Much research has been done into processes of media capture in conflict and post conflict zones such as the KRI (Relly, Zanger, & Fahmy, 2015; Relly and Zanger, 2017; Yesil, 2016), and more particularly into how governmental bureaucracy is used to control media, for example with arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial detention, harassments, insults, and violence (Farmanfarmaian, Sonay & Akser, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Relly & Zanger, 2017). However, little is known about how journalists and editors themselves deal with, and respond to, such circumstances (Frey, 2016; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019).

This paper calls for understanding media capture not only through its structural-level consequences (in terms of delimiting of journalistic autonomy, concentration of media power, etc.), but also through the methods it uses to create an environment of instability and unsafety for journalists. In such an environment, violations and threats (both physical and psychological) become routine. To make sense of these processes, and how they are experienced and negotiated by journalists and editors themselves, this paper combines scholarship on the emotional labor of journalism with scholarship on processes of media capture in deeply restrictive environments (Finkel, 2015; Schiffrin, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, 2021). In order to do so, this paper will address the following research questions: first, what is the landscape of (un)safety that the KRI journalists have to navigate (e.g. threats, bans from reporting, detention, harassment, impunity, extrajudicial, arbitrary arrests, and electronic attacks, vague government policies, undefined media laws, high-ranking politicians' red lines)? And how can we relate it to broader state capture processes by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)? Second, how do journalists respond to such an unsafe environment?

This paper reports on the findings of a mixed-methods approach (Bryman, 2012; Jensen, 2002): first, we aim to uncover the structural conditions of media capture in the KRI through a document analysis of 21 public reports, published by the Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate

(KJS) and the Metro Center for Journalists' Rights and Advocacy (MC) between 2014 and 2020, to understand the frequency, types, and sources of violent incidents. Second, we aim to reveal how journalists and editors-in-chief from diverse media organizations manage and negotiate these chronic conditions of precarity and instability by reporting on 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section we discuss the literature on media capture, and governmental bureaucracy more specifically, and the emotional labor of journalism. In the methodology section, we present details regarding the document analysis and interviews. In the results section, we subsequently discuss the findings from the document analysis and the interviews. We conclude by discussing the main points that can be taken from this study and we make some recommendations for future research.

Governmental Bureaucracy as Media Capture

The concept of media capture has previously been developed in the literature to understand media-politics relationships within deeply restrictive contexts such as neo-authoritarian regimes, transitional democracies or post-conflict zones (e.g., Yanatma, 2016; Bajomi-Lazar, 2012). It has been defined as a 'systemic governance problem where political leaders and media owners work together in a symbiotic but mutually corrupting relationship: media owners provide supportive news coverage to political leaders in exchange for favorable government treatment of their business and political interests' (Finkel, 2015, 1).

Bureaucracy as a mechanism of media capture refers to the use of (in)direct tools by government officials against journalists to restrict the watchdog role of journalism on government accountability (Relly & Zanger, 2017). Previous studies have described different strategies, such as violent acts against journalists by the security forces and the police (Relly & Zanger, 2017; Hussein, 2018). These include judicial and online harassment, physical attacks, assault, arbitrary arrest and detention (Farmanfarmaian, Sonay & Akser, 2018; Orgeret & Tayeebwa, 2016; Yesil, 2018). For instance, police abuse journalists while they are preparing reports at an event site or state officials arbitrarily interrogate journalists (UNAMI, 2021). Furthermore, this generally takes place in the context of a culture of impunity for crimes against journalists: a strategy of 'negligence' is used by state officials, with murders going unpunished (by ignoring the cases) or violations against journalists remaining 'under investigation' for

years with no response (Farmanfarmaian, Sonay & Akser, 2018; Hussein, 2018).

As Farmanfarmaian, Sonay & Akser, (2018) have shown in the case of Turkey, an independent judiciary system often remains unattainable when the ruling parties maintain a strong presence in the judiciary system, police and security forces. In such circumstances, press laws have been described as mere 'laws on paper', with journalists being deprived of protection from bureaucrats and powerful office holders. In particular, empirical evidence has revealed that the courts do not address cases regarding journalists according to the Press Law, instead they use penal codes under the pressure of authorities (Farmanfarmaian, Sonay & Akser, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Taha, 2020). The majority of these cases are recorded when journalists are allegedly involved in pre-planned demonstrations or when they investigate state officials' corruption (UNAMI, 2021). For instance, governments might criminalize journalists according to anti-terror or national security laws, accusing journalists of 'divulging state secrets' or trying to overthrow the government by spreading propaganda on behalf of terrorist organizations, thus endangering national security (Farmanfarmaian, Sonay & Akser, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Larsen, Fadnes & Krovel, 2021; Yesil, 2018). In such contexts, studies have revealed examples of informal collaborations between journalists' unions and judicial councils, labeling these unions as political machines for the ruling parties (Taha, 2020).

In the context of post-Soviet countries, Richter (2008) has found how high-ranking officials, such as parliament members and ministers use informal rules like 'telephone censorship' (e.g., messages, phone calls) to stop investigative reporting. Other studies have shown that when journalists attempt to access information within public institutions, their requests are often met with silence due to unresponsive government officials, or with violent acts such as threats, punitive actions, and surveillance (Jamil, 2021, 22; Relly & Zanger, 2017).

At the same time, journalists have also developed tactics and skills in response to these strategies. Focusing on Putin-era Russia, Slavtcheva-Petkova (2019) has emphasized the resilience of journalists in a context of limited press freedom. Badran (2020) has demonstrated how oppositional Syrian media tactically maneuver an unstable and often hostile environment. Such examples show that it is vital to consider issues of (un)safety from the perspective of the journalist as a human being in a complex context, and to recognize the engaged and emotional aspects of their work. The next section will look deeper into the literature on journalism as 'emotional labor' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Journalism as Emotional Labor

Emotional labor has been defined as a process of managing emotions, in any number of professional settings, in order to fulfill job requirements (Hochschild, 1983). The last decade has seen an increase in attention to this type of labor in the context of journalistic work (Hopper & Huxford, 2015, 2016; Kotisova, 2019; Moran & Usher, 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, 2021). As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) has shown, emotions, and the processes of emotional labor, have been observed and studied at the level of content and texts (Jukes, 2020; Koivunen et al., 2021), audiences and engagement (Coleman & Banning, 2006; Thomson, 2021), and journalistic practice and labour (Knight, 2020; Miller & Lewis, 2022; Soronen, 2018). The latter, in particular, in its recognition of emotional labor as an integral, though often unseen, component of journalistic practice offers us a unique entryway to understanding how journalists manage and negotiate uncertainty and conditions of unsafety within deeply restrictive environments.

Kotisova's work on the emotional labor of journalists shows how it operates in two directions at the same time (Kotisova, 2019). In one direction, looking outwards, emotional labor is exerted to manage and maintain the 'professional integrity' of the journalistic product. Here, research has shown how journalists engage in 'emotional tradecraft' vis-a-vis their sources (Duncan, 2012; Rechard & Rees, 2011), in repressing and regulating their emotions as a function of their proximity to the story and of their role perception (Dworznik-Hoak, 2020; Hopper & Huxford, 2016; Kotisova, 2017; Stenvall, 2014), as well as funneling and objectifying their emotions as part of their practice (Kotisova, 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). This level of emotional labor reveals a particular entanglement with hegemonic normative constructions of the journalist as a detached individual (Kotisova, 2019; Pantti, 2010).

In the other direction, looking inwards, emotional labor is brought to bear in managing and protecting the psychological and physical integrity of the 'self'. Research, particularly in the field of trauma studies, has showcased the heavy emotional toll journalists endure while reporting in war zones, or covering violent incidents and crises, as well as the varied tactics journalists employ to attenuate their impact (Frey, 2016; Kotisova, 2019). Emotional labor here is intricately bound up with the high levels of resilience displayed by (and expected of) journalists when covering such traumatic events (Jukes et al., 2021). Such resilience should not be seen as innate, but rather continuously produced and reproduced by journalists through their emotional management and labor. This level of emotional

management extends beyond 'extreme circumstances' to the more prosaic challenges faced by journalists in their working environment. Indeed, intra/extra-organizational pressures (e.g., requirements in the newsrooms, work trips, low remuneration, and everyday pressures) involve constant emotional calibration and adjustment on the part of journalists (Badran & Smets, 2021; Frey, 2016; Hopper & Huxford, 2015; Kotisova, 2019).

Making sense of these different levels of emotional management in the journalistic profession, and recognizing them as 'labor', requires us to embed it within the specific social, political and economic contexts that shape this labor. Creech (2017) shows, for example, how bodily and psychological risks taken by war reporters (and the emotional labor connected to them), are a function of economic logics that individuate these risks and cascade them down to the journalists themselves.

Restrictive contexts such as neo-authoritarian regimes, transitional democracies or post-conflict zones present an interesting, and thus far under-explored, terrain for the study of emotional labor among journalists. Processes of media capture in such contexts shape an environment characterized by an indirect, ambiguous, but chronic, sense of instability and unsafety for journalists (as opposed to that experienced by war reporters for example, where instability and danger come in more direct, intense but short bursts). Thus, the emotional labor that is exerted by journalists living and working in such contexts to manage these chronic conditions of precarity and instability tends to be specifically tailored to deal with the long-term spans of these conditions and to be sensitive to their in-built ambiguities (e.g., Badran & Smets, 2021).

Such contexts require the journalists to hone their political skills as they need to learn what is allowed/forbidden, and to interpret actions and meanings within newsrooms based on their social interaction with others (Barnes 2016; Frey 2016). These skills become part and parcel of journalists' socialization in newsrooms and their understanding of the newsroom culture (i.e., rules, norms, routines, and unspoken policies). Moreover, journalists in such contexts are constantly required to consider and manage various threat vectors in the course of doing their job (e.g., thinking of the security forces when covering demonstrations, or thinking of censors as they write their pieces).

Slavtcheva-Petkova's (2019) work on Russian journalists, for example, illustrates how they develop professional and personal networks specifically to mitigate these conditions of chronic instability. Editors, for instance, are used as an important protective layer from a

multiplicity of threats (physical attacks, legal pressure, etc.). However, when journalists find themselves in danger, they also use their private networks (rather than state institutions, such as the police, which are often seen as a threat themselves) to ascertain the source of the threat and find a mediator to resolve the issue swiftly.

Processes of media capture place particular emotional demands and conditions on journalists active in such contexts. And while these processes of media capture, and their consequences, have been widely addressed in the literature (Relly & Zanger, 2017; Yesil, 2016), the responses of the journalists themselves have received less attention. By looking into the emotional labor of journalists in such contexts and showing how it is articulated with the structural conditions of media capture, this article aims to fill this particular gap and to develop a richer understanding of the (un)safety of journalists in restrictive environments.

Methodology

To address the regulatory bodies of the media in the KRI, and issue of journalists' safety, both in a general sense in terms of media capture and in a more particular sense with regard to emotional demands and conditions, we developed a mixed method approach (Bryman, 2012; Jensen, 2002). A document analysis of existing reports allows us to access a large amount of data on journalists' safety experiences, i.e., types, risks, sources such actors and institutions (Bryman, 2012; Bowen, 2009). Semi-structured in-depth interviews allow us to reveal how journalists manage and negotiate such insecure circumstances, for example risk assessments, strategies of protection, dealing with emotionality and journalistic objectivity (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997; Mahat-Shamir, Neimeyer & Pitcho-Prelorentzos, 2021). The former gives us insights into the landscape of (un)safety that journalists in the KRI have to navigate (e.g. threat vectors, methods, actors and informal practices), uncovering the context that shapes their emotional labor. The latter gives us insights into their responses to this (un)safe environment and the (physical and psychological) strategies and tactics they have developed to manage and negotiate its adverse effects.

Document Analysis

In the KRI, there are two major organizations that defend the rights of journalists, among others by publishing reports in which violent incidents against journalists are recorded: The Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate (KJS) publishes two such reports each year; and the Metro Center for Journalists' Rights and Advocacy (MC) one. It is important to emphasize that previous studies have argued how KJS has been used by the ruling parties in the past

to keep particular media under control (Hussein 2018; Taha 2020). For the period between 2014 and 2020, 14 KJS reports and 7 MC reports *(n* = 21) were collected from their website. There were 989 violent acts recorded in the KJS reports, and 1,890 in the MC reports. The reports are published in Kurdish, with some pages also in Arabic. All reports were coded by the first author and translated to English. A quantitative descriptive analysis (QDA) was used to investigate the (1) number, (2) type, and (3) source of the recorded violent incidents. The QDA technique has been used not only to measure scores/rates, but also for sensory evaluation, human reactions, type of actions, experiences and situations, and the meaning of texts and their implications regarding numerous social phenomena (Stone et al., 1998; Jensen, 2002). This was combined with a more qualitative content analysis, in line with the method of thematic coding (Jensen 2002), of the individual stories (4) within the reports to understand in what contextual conditions these incidents occurred. We focused on reasons behind the violations and acts against journalists by different groups while reporting in the KRI. These reasons include: news content such as reporting on government corruption (e.g. officials' misuse of public resources), oil smuggling, lack of public services, monitoring of votes, and coverage on protests; access to information and specific locations (e.g. access to public institutions, press conferences such as health conferences, Covid-19 data, access to war zones, access to disputed areas, and access to breaking events such as crime stories, economic and political events and cultural events); and we have found that there are also unknown reasons.

Semi-structured In-depth Interviews

Interviewees were selected among a diversity of media outlets in the KRI from the three types of media organizations distinguished in previous studies (Hussein, 2018; Faris, Maeseele & Smets, 2021): (i) 'partisan' media, or media outlets that are openly owned and funded by the political parties (e.g., *Evro, Hawler, Kurdistani Nwe*); (ii) 'shadow' media, or media outlets that profile themselves as independent media while actually being owned and funded indirectly by high-ranking politicians/officials (e.g, *Rudaw, NRT, Kurdistan 24*); and (iii) 'independent' media – media organizations that are financially dependent on advertising, sales and aid from international organizations (e.g., *Awene, Hawlati*). 15 interviews were conducted face-to-face across Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Duhok provinces between 15 July and 28 August in 2019. Interviews one to seven were conducted with employees from media organizations considered to be 'partisan'; eight to 11 with employees from 'shadow' media organizations; and 12 to 15 with employees from 'independent' media organizations. Sorani is the main dialect in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, while Badani is spoken in Duhok. Therefore,

the interview guidelines and questions were translated into both these Kurdish dialects. It is important to emphasize that interviewees often combine multiple jobs: in addition to their work as journalists or media professionals, some also work as lawyers, university lecturers, members of parliament, human rights activists, businessmen or civil servants. In the case of 'partisan' media, some were also found to work directly for the ruling parties, as communication directors or political strategists. Qualitative thematic coding was used to analyze the interviews (Jensen, 2002), with a focus on the strategies and mechanisms used by the interviewees to manage and negotiate the emotional demands and conditions placed on them in their journalistic practice. This resulted into the following themes: 1) editors' support in the newsroom (e.g., following the agendas of the ruling parties; attending private meetings of political parties, editor's review); 2) understanding unspoken and unwritten rules (e.g., vague government policies, undefined media laws, high-ranking politicians' red lines, understanding the political context); 3) socialization skills and networks (e.g., political skills, approaching high-risk sources, contacts with international media support organizations); and 4) accepting the journalistic environment (e.g., ethical choices and standards, risk assessments, emotional justifications).

It is important to note the significant challenges the first author faced in terms of gaining access to the interviewees. Some interviews were canceled or postponed at the last minute. There is one example of an interview being canceled after a telephone call from a political organization in which the interviewee was urged to leave for an important meeting. Another one was canceled as the interviewee was detained by the security forces for producing a news report about potential corruption by an army commander. Other interviewees were hesitant to participate in the light of new instructions from the prime minister that had been announced on 10 July 2019, with one interviewee stating 'maybe the points I present today will be criminalized tomorrow', as 'any worker who exposes information that has a negative impact on his organization [...] will be punished' (personal communication July 23, 2019). Furthermore, as some editors' offices were located inside the building of political organizations, accessing these buildings required passing a checkpoint controlled by security guards. During such checkpoint controls, the researcher used her valid employee identification cards from both her local (Duhok Polytechnic University) and foreign/international university (University of Antwerp) affiliation. Moreover, during the interviews, although interviewees attempted to offer a wide range of information, they were also found to censor themselves: there were moments of silence, and interviewees utilized different techniques to present their views indirectly, by giving hypothetical

examples, using metaphors, presenting facts with reference to documents, or recounting stories concerning their experiences while practicing their professions. Some interviewees used pronouns (e.g., they, their, them) instead of names while referring to high-ranking politicians, or interviewees used less-direct and vague titles such as 'the two ruling parties', or the 'high-ranking officials above us'. We believe that these issues may affect the findings to some extent. For example, in some cases, there was a discrepancy between what the interviewees narrated and their actual practices.

These challenges typical for neo-authoritarian contexts could be overcome in different ways: first, the primary researcher was able to draw from her pre-existing network, as she previously worked as a journalism lecturer who supervised students' internships within several media organizations. Second, interviewees could choose the interview location where they felt most comfortable and safe. Third, interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Being able to provide a consent form coming from an international university was generally interpreted by the interviewees as a sign of credibility.

Findings

Bureaucratic Violence as Media Capture

The analysis of the reports and semi-structured in-depth interviews confirms the picture of a precarious working environment for journalists, shaped by (in)direct threats of violence from a variety of institutional actors as well as from those institutional bodies which are supposed to protect journalists' rights (e.g., KJS, the courts, Ministry of Culture and Youth), via a culture of impunity, extrajudicial detention, discrimination, harassment and insult, prevention from reporting, electronic attacks and through arbitrary arrests.

The ambivalent role of the KJS

Figure 1 shows how the main perpetrators of violence against journalists are state actors such as the KRG security forces, the Iraqi Federal security forces, officials within public institutions, and the KRG Court. Table 1 also shows the variety of intimidation methods used by these actors, from direct forms of violence (including bans, threats, detention, harassment), to more indirect forms (including impunity, extrajudicial detention, arbitrary arrests, electronic attacks).

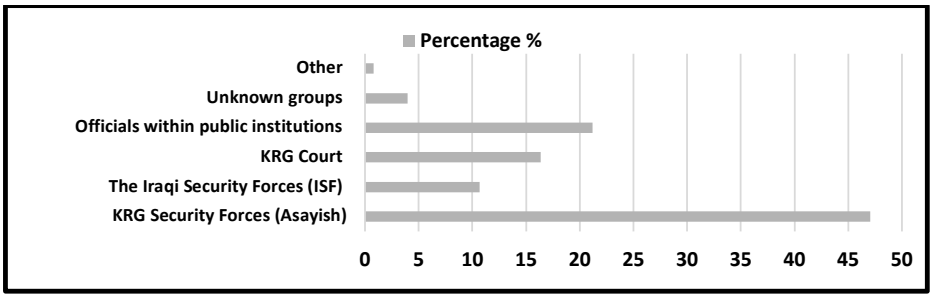


Figure 1 Violent acts by source, MC (2014–2020). (n = 1890)

Table 1 Violent acts by type and frequency, MC and KJS (2014–2020). (n = 2879).

Types of violation	MC	KJS
Assassinations	4	9
Prevented from reporting	881	428
Harassment and insult	181	161
Detention and arrest	309 (209 = extrajudicial detention, 100 = in violation of press laws).	210
Confiscation of equipment	142	N/A
Damaged and burned equipment	60	N/A
Electronic attacks (jamming media stations)	16	N/A
Beaten while reporting	174	111
Threats	44	19
Assassination attempts	10	N/A
Shut down of media organization	28	25
Others	41	26
Total	**1890**	**989**

With regard to indirect forms of violence, the case of KJS is interesting as it underlines how such violence is obfuscated and sustained through processes of state capture. Our findings are consistent with those of Taha (2020) and Hussein (2018) who suggested that there is a high probability that KJS is controlled by the KRG. As shown in Table 1, the MC reports register about twice as many violent acts as those from KJS (1,890 vs. 989). Many cases were not documented by KJS, usually those related to indirect violence such as extrajudicial detention ($n = 209$ cases) – journalists being arrested without being provided information on the reasons for the arrest or being detained without court proceedings; arrests in violation

of press laws (*n* = 100 cases) – journalists being arrested based on the Penal Code and other national laws without considering the press laws; electronic attacks (*n* =16 cases), including media organizations shut down directly by the Ministry of Culture and Youth; damaged and burned equipment (n= 60); and confiscation of equipment (n = 142).

Furthermore, when we analyse the individual stories from journalists documented within those annual reports, the data reveal that the KJS 'repackages' particular facts. For instance, when we zoom in on the category of 'journalists arrested in violation of press laws' by the KRG Court, we find this makes up 4% of recorded cases (see Figure 2), while these cases can be found under the category 'harassment and insult' in Table 1. In addition, we found that there were 72 recorded cases related to extrajudicial detention, but the KJS considered them under the category of 'detention and arrest', without providing further information. Examples like this demonstrate that it is important to consider multiple sources and perspectives when discussing the safety conditions of journalists.

This also raises questions about the role played by organizations (such as the KJS), that are supposed to defend the rights of journalists, in facilitating media capture. This is highlighted by our interviews, which reveal attitudes ranging from ambivalence to downright mistrust of the KJS's relationship with journalists, as the following two examples illustrate:

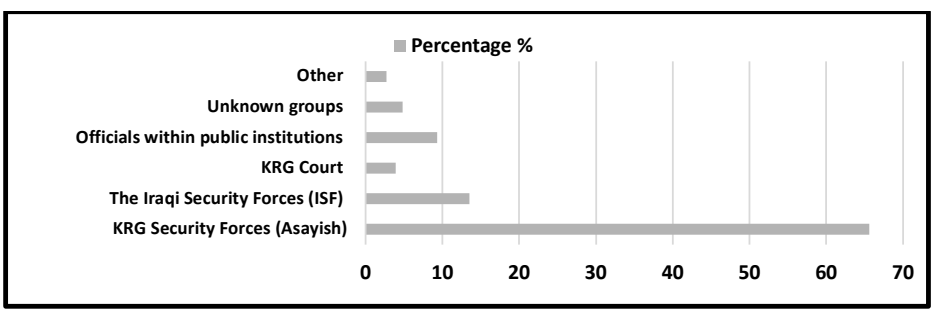


Figure 2 Violent acts by source, KJS (2014–2020) (n = 989).

For any journalist who faces a problem, the journalists' syndicate will evaluate the case, but if they see that the case will create problems with the powerful ruling parties or politicians, they will not support the journalist. (Interviewee No. 1)

I'm not considered a member of the journalists' syndicate. There is a collaboration between the security forces and KJS. I heard from a source that the security forces ordered KJS to not allow me membership. Thus, I will not have rights under the Press Law, and

whenever I write negatively about the government and politicians, I cannot ask about my rights as a journalist. They directly address my case according to the Penal Code. (Interviewee No. 9).

From indirect to direct violence

Previous research on media capture in authoritarian regimes has shown that acts of violence happen particularly among journalists who conduct independent reporting and investigative journalism in locations where news media are in development, like Iraq or Afghanistan (Relly & Zanger, 2017). Consistent with the literature, the document analysis shows that violent acts are perpetrated with the specific intent of curtailing journalistic freedom, by raising the cost of conducting journalistic work, and by punishing entrepreneurial journalists. As shown in Figure 3, 57% of recorded violent attacks happened after journalists reported on the following topics: political corruption, misuse of public resources, oil smuggling, lack of public services, and vote monitoring. About 40% of those attacks were recorded when journalists were reporting on demonstrations, and where the government accused journalists of being involved in organizing the demonstrations.

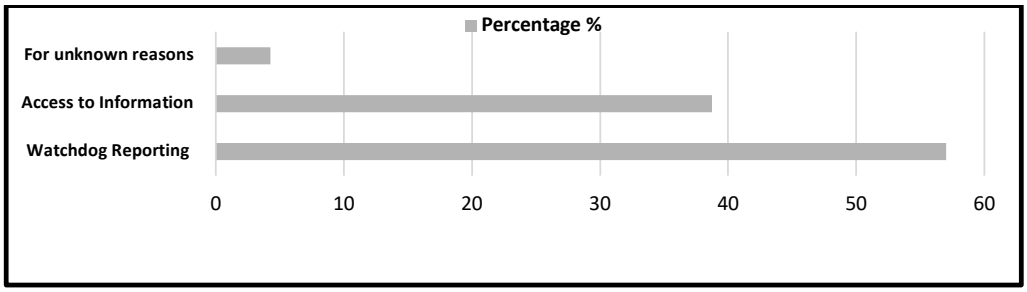


Figure 3 Violent acts by cause, MC and KJS (2014–2020) (n = 2879)

Previous studies have shown that requests by journalists for accessing information within governmental bodies in neo-authoritarian regimes are often met with silence or violence (Jamil 2021, p. 22; Relly & Zanger, 2017). As shown in Figure 4, 39% of the violent acts happened when journalists attempted to access information. We found that journalists were frequently attacked as they tried to access data, locations, and events. The attacks used different methods such as preventing them from reporting, or by confiscating, damaging or burning their equipment (see Table 1).

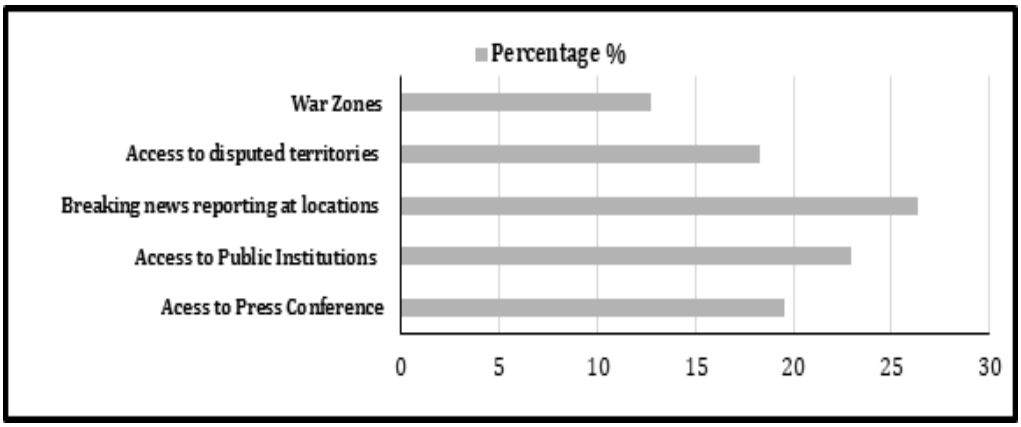


Figure 4 Violent acts by event or location, MC and KJS (2014–2020) (n = 2879)

Those practices happened in different conditions, and in different locations (e.g., war zones, disputed areas, public institutions, press conferences, and breaking news events), as shown in Figure 4. Adding the interviewees' insights to this aspect, nine out of the 15 interviewees indicated that journalists who work for media owned by opposition parties or who profile themselves as 'independent' media are subject to pervasive discrimination and violence by local authorities, particularly when they access exclusive news for example in war zones. In such a case, the government may criminalize journalists according to national security laws, accusing journalists of revealing war zones to enemies. In contrast, such zones are open to journalists who work for media owned by high-ranking officials, as in the case of journalists working for the Rudaw media company.

In this regard, our interviewees indicated that being prevented from gaining access to information is not necessarily related to investigative journalism, but often to economic motivations (e.g., search for scoops or exclusive news). Particular media outlets linked to high-ranking officials make contracts to sell exclusive news to international news agencies, as in the case of Rudaw, which was a main source of news about the ISIS war.

For example, Interviewee No. 14, recalled how they had been 'banned, detained, and beaten several times by the security forces' on the grounds that their reporting on the conflict with ISIS was divulging military secrets. However, according to the interviewee, the real reason was that their reporting was threatening the exclusivity of Rudaw's coverage which had already been sold to international media agencies. Interviews with journalists who work for Rudaw confirm that they were able to access locations in conflict and post-conflict zones

that on one else could, and that Rudaw obtained tremendous financial advantages by selling exclusive news coverages to prominent news agencies. As interviewee No. 10, reported:

> We got many advantages from exclusive reports during the ISIS and Peshmerga forces' battles. We reported on some locations where nobody could reach, such as areas that are located in frontlines, live field coverage, locations where ISIS left. The famous international media companies were very interested to know about the locations after the withdrawal of ISIS militants. So, we sold these exclusive media content to many international media companies at high prices.

Finally, the reasons for why 4% of the recorded violent incidents remained unknown were not clear, especially in the case of arbitrary arrests, murders by unknown groups or incarcerations in violation of press laws.

Overall, the document analysis confirms the unsafe and unstable working environment for journalists in the KRI, showcasing many examples of direct violence by state actors and examples of indirect violence embedded within institutional levels, such as through the state capture of regulatory bodies of media. However, the question remains how journalists manage and negotiate such risks while practicing their work. In the following section, we present the lived experiences of journalists and editors in the KRI in this regard.

Emotional Labor in the Context of Media Capture

Seen through the lens of emotional labor, as an integral component of journalistic practice, this section discusses how journalists and editors active in the KRI manage and negotiate these chronic conditions of uncertainty, unsafety, and instability. The results show how journalists have developed multiple strategies to mitigate or acclimate the risks surrounding their journalistic environment.

Editor support in the newsroom

In the context of neo-authoritarian regimes, previous research has indicated how journalists can find some relief from tension by having their work filtered by their editors, and by seeking support from their colleagues in the organization (Frey, 2016). We found this to be especially the case with journalists who work for 'partisan' media outlets. Although journalists show their loyalty to their owners (i.e., political parties), this does not imply that they are free from pressures in the newsroom, as newsroom policies continue to change

based on the agendas and goals of the ruling parties. A common view among interviewees was that in order to avoid risks they depend on their editors, who are usually senior political members and thus privy to such changes. This relationship of dependence on the editor's inside knowledge – and the sense of (emotional) precarity it evokes – is poignantly illustrated by this line from Interviewee 1: 'I feel scared and worried when I publish a report and it has not been edited by my editor.' Indeed, changes in the political or editorial lines of the media outlet can be both radical and sudden, as the example below shows:

> During the Kurdistan referendum, we presented the news in a way that voiced support for the separation with the Iraqi Central government – at that time, we were not allowed to use 'Iraqi Kurdistan'. After we failed to achieve independence, we received new instructions again, this time saying that we always have to mention 'Iraqi Kurdistan' instead of 'Kurdistan Region'. (Interviewee No. 1)

Being attuned to the double role of editors, as senior managers in the newsroom and connected political actors, in mediating such changes is crucial to the journalists' ability to preserve their professional and personal safety in such contexts.

Understanding unspoken and unwritten rules

The findings show that journalists' rights might be violated in the KRI through ambiguous governmental policies such as unclear and undefined media laws. It has been indicated by interviewees that vaguely defined laws could be used by the government as sanctioning instruments against critical journalists through national laws such as anti-terror legislation, national security regulations, the penal code, defamation laws, and unclear laws. Accordingly, journalists in the KRI have established their own strategies at a more individual level to manage or minimize risk, based on their previous experiences, to help them to navigate a difficult landscape of continuously changing and ambiguous government policies. Such strategies include the cultivation of different writing styles, or incorporating safety valves in their writing through different layers of ambiguity and self-censorship, as one interviewee (No. 10) explained, 'I write in an ambiguous way, the interpretation of my reports does not have an obvious meaning.' The skill thus becomes to convey certain critical messages indirectly while leaving space for plausible deniability. A heavy price is often paid in the course of developing such 'skills'. In the case of Interviewee No. 9 this included 27 court summons which resulted in five stints in jail. Such experiences are seen as a form

of learning by experience which allow the journalist to later claim that 'it will not happen again *Inshaallah* … At this moment I know how to deal with our politicians.'

A less punishing if more subtle way of learning and managing such intricacies is through the process of socialization. Indeed, as previous studies have shown, journalists learn what is allowed/forbidden by interpreting actions and meanings within newsrooms based on their social interaction with others (Frey, 2016). Some interviewees indicated the significance of understanding unwritten and unspoken policies and euphemisms – such as the elastic use of 'national security' to stifle any coverage critical of powerful high-ranking officials. As Interviewee No. 9 noted, 'many cases have been labeled as national security, but in reality it serves the interests of the ruling political parties' security instead of national security.'

An important component of these unspoken rules are the political 'red lines' that journalists are socialized within. The process of learning and re-learning the contours of what constitutes a 'red line' shows itself in the various forms of active (and passive) practices of self-censorship. One such example, given by Interviewee No. 3 from a 'partisan' media house, is instructive as to the powerful hold that such red lines have over journalistic practice in the region. In the process of researching a report on oil revenues in the KRI (a political taboo), the journalist stumbled on a newly-appointed European manager of an oil exploration company. The manage, unaware of the 'red line' nature of information on oil revenues in the region, readily agreed to share the numbers from their company with the journalist. As the interviewee put it, 'the European manager was not aware about our government culture and the lack of transparency of oil companies in Iraqi Kurdistan.' The journalist, however, was well aware that any publication of such data would place him/her under the law of national security, and thus, as he puts it: 'Although I got all that data, I did not publish it.'

According to Interviewee No. 11, these unofficial 'red lines' extend beyond oil revenues to a series of other business sectors and activities in which high-ranking officials in the KRI are deeply embedded, including corporate corruption, the pharmaceutical industry, and smuggling. As the interviewee noted: 'These are dangerous data. We know there are some high-ranking officials behind this type of business, and if we report about these topics, we will be penalized according to national security laws.'

Socialization skills and networks

Our study shows that journalists manage risks through their socialization skills and by expanding their networks, such as political skills, joining the authorities, or establishing links with international organizations that defend the rights of journalists. Previous research has also indicated that the strategy of managing emotional labor requires political skills, such as understanding the existing political environment through social interaction (Barnes, 2016; Frey, 2016). Our interviewees seem to go even further by integrating the analysis and assessment of political risk into their journalistic practice – e.g., by analyzing and attempting to interpret the policies of ruling parties. This strategy has especially been adopted by journalists who work with 'shadow' and 'independent' media outlets. As explained by Interviewee No. 9, the imperative to gain a deep understanding of local politics and to view policies through the eyes of those in power, as well as the potential risks associated with it, is paramount for journalists' safety in the region.

> For example, in Duhok province, we all know that we have a very big problem which is how both Turkey and PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] brought their conflicts in our area and they are fighting in our land in Duhok province. But I know that there is a strong relationship with KDP [Kurdish Democratic Party], the dominant party in Duhok, and this party built huge business deals with Turkey for their personal interests. So, I have to be careful when I write about Turkey. I cannot write negatively about Turkey at all, otherwise I will fall into trouble. I also cannot report negatively on the PKK, someone will kill me and they will say they are PKK, even if they are not PKK.

Indeed, as our results confirm, gaining a complex understanding of the political context is a key part of managing risks. This is at least partly due to the fact that journalists feel little to no protection is offered by the KJS. Many of the interviewees for this paper have developed their own methods and tactics to confront potential risks, such as by leveraging links with international organizations that defend journalists' rights, as journalists found that the authorities in the KRI remain sensitive to international opinion and attempt to avoid tarnishing their image internationally. 'I do not waste my time with the KJS,' Interviewee No. 10 remarked, 'I have saved some international NGOs' contacts. When I see that I am involved in big problems, I will directly use those contacts. From my experiences, I saw that when journalists' problems reach international opinions, our authorities start to address those cases more carefully.'

Our findings also show that journalists might manage the risks by 'joining' or

'approaching' the authorities, becoming closer to them in a pragmatic way. For instance, joining a party or its meetings or keeping close contacts with politicians. Previous research on journalism in conflict contexts has argued how the 'mitigation of risk requires a network of social relations, often embodied by institutions (Creech, 2018, p. 569). In this regard, in the interviews a variety of perspectives was expressed. For instance, journalists reported that joining political parties helped them to become critical journalists without being at risk. A viewpoint from Interviewee No.11, a journalist working for a 'shadow' media organization, demonstrates this:

> I did an interview with a state official 'governor', I asked him very challenging questions, we discussed corruption, he called me to remove critical questions in the interview. But I did not, I was not scared, I know what I do, first I worked for a KDP party-media organization [...] so nobody can take such a risk and interfere in my journalistic work.

Indeed, according to Interviewee No. 12, being a part of a political party, is 'one of the safest methods to be protected as a journalist.' For the interviewee – an active member of two political parties – this was an important way of mitigating the safety risks of the job as it meant that 'officials will never bother you, and they warmly welcome those journalists, plus the fact the KJS will not be afraid to support you in case you need them.'

Another common view among journalists was that they can access information within public institutions more easily because of their strong connections with ruling parties, or if they work for media owned by powerful political parties. Within public institutions, 'the employees show respect to us much more than they show to other journalists, they give me more permission than they give to other journalists' as one 'partisan' journalist (Interviewee No. 4) recalled, 'the doors open much for us within public institutions compared to other journalists.' As the same interviewee noted, this closeness to power doesn't only allow these journalists to have easier access to information, it also means safety for the journalist and their social circle: 'when we work in a political circle, we have more contacts with officials, and it is safer not only for me but for my family too.'

Accepting the journalistic environment

Previous studies have shown that socialization within newsrooms is a complex process, involving both spoken and unspoken ideologies (Barnes, 2016). Journalists learn policies from group interaction at the workplace, and respond to their circumstances based on individual preferences, depending on their (ethical) values, and the goals of their organizations. Consistent with the literature, our findings indicate that journalists and editors manage potential risks by accepting the journalistic environment in the KRI and their organization's rules. At the same time, they express their views with emotional justifications, such as "frustration", "generalization" and "lack of alternatives".

The rationale behind risk acceptance is that they consider unsafe conditions of journalists in the Middle East region 'inevitable' and a deep-rooted phenomenon, despite the collapse of blatantly dictatorial regimes over the past decades, and accept that journalists have to put up with the myriad costs required to mitigate or avoid risks. As Interviewee No. 14, working for an 'independent' media organization, reflected 'we have to accept that the mentality of dictatorship is still existing, not only in Kurdistan, but in the majority of Middle East countries. In the Middle East, journalists who work for media that have more space for freedom of expression are more vulnerable to the risk of authorities.'

Previous research has pointed out that journalists in unsafe environments, who face dangers and risks such as harassment, death and imprisonment, are forced to contest the normative understanding of journalism that is based on journalist' objectivity and impartiality (Sahin, 2021). Our findings show that there is a tension between journalists' professional role (acting as watchdogs) and their ethical dilemmas, and they attempt to mitigate this tension by showing their 'frustration', such as the lack of effectiveness of investigative journalism in the KRI. The interviewed journalists found that there is a lack of seriousness with which the authorities treat investigative journalism in the KRI. Therefore, journalists become increasingly jaded and cynical about such the benefits of such forms of investigative journalism that will put them at risk of having a confrontation with the authorities. As Interviewee No. 13 (from an 'independent' media organization) succinctly put it:

> One day I was having a coffee with one of the very, very important officials, he is my friend. He asked me: 'Why do journalists make all this noise and chaos; you know nothing will change? When there is a corrupt official, or

> when there are some corrupt politicians, so what? Tell me what is going to change if you publish such news?' At that time, I was very disappointed and I laughed at myself. I also asked myself why I have to put myself and my family in a dangerous situation.

Together these results provide significant insights into journalists' professional practice, what journalists really do in unsafe environments, such as how journalists counter risks related to their journalistic environment, and how journalists practice their watchdog roles in such a context.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study drew on theories of media capture and the emotional labor of journalism to examine the status of journalists in nondemocratic regimes, such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Our findings extend our knowledge of how a variety of tools of violence are used by state actors in restrictive contexts (e.g. security forces, police, army, officials within public institutions, courts) to control journalists' work. We argue that these include both direct forms (threats, ban from reporting, detention, harassment) and indirect forms of violence (impunity, extrajudicial, arbitrary arrests, electronic attacks, vague laws and government policies). Our findings show that journalists' rights are violated at an institutional level, even by organizations that are supposed to defend the rights of journalists, as in the case of the KJS. They reveal that the KJS has violated journalists' rights through two methods: either through the strategy of 'negligence', or through the repackaging of facts. According to our data, we can infer that the KJS has been influenced by the KRG. In addition, while previous studies have linked violent acts against journalists to their watchdog journalism, our study shows that there is also an economic motivation, as state officials only allow affiliated journalists to report scoops.

In such a context, our findings confirm that the unsafety of journalists' environments has resulted in new tactics of self-censorship among journalists in newsrooms, to avoid punishments from their stressors in the KRI. Our study shows that these editorial practices have become routinized within news organizations that are openly connected to dominant parties and high-ranking politicians (e.g., prime ministers/presidents). In these instances, trustworthy and politically conservative editors are appointed to manage newsrooms. Hence, journalists receive direct support from their editors to filter/review their reports,

to avoid sensational reporting, and to avoid sharp and direct criticism that may harm their supporters and owners. However, our study also shows that journalists censor themselves in newsrooms by developing their own tactics, such as through writing styles e.g. by writing ambiguously about already known forbidden topics, political redlines and critical views that may land them in trouble under criminal laws (e.g., anti-terror, defamation, national security). This tactic is developed by journalists who have accumulated experience working within unsafe conditions, due to their knowledge on political redlines and their understanding of unspoken and unwritten government policies and laws. Indeed, with digital transformation, these findings are encouraging for further study with more focus on online journalists in restrictive environments. Editors in authoritarian contexts may control and manipulate web metrics to avoid the government's wrongdoings and political controversies going viral, while using professional notions, like "newsworthiness", to criticize journalists for writing non-engaging political stories on social media (Koo, 2022).

Secondly, our findings show that there is an interplay (expressed through for example fear, frustration, friendly relations, arguments, acceptance) between journalists and politicians/officials, as they have shared values as well as interconnected activities such as coffee meetings or political events. This recalls Gans' (1979) argument that a journalists' relations with his/her sources can be described as 'a dance, for sources seek access to journalists, and journalists seek access to sources (p. 116). These results raise further questions regarding journalists' norms in the newsrooms. Specifically, these results reflect those of Milda (2019), who also found that the nature of the links between journalists and their sources is often defined as a 'negotiated, interdependent exchange. Both sides are adaptive, role-regulated actors acting in a shared culture' (p. 177).

Here, this research contributes to existing scholarship by reflecting on the role of journalists' professional values and ethics under continuing violence. This study could allow us to better understand the nature of personal links between journalists and officials, such as how journalists avoid conflicts of interest in unsafe environments. In this respect, our findings confirm what has been noted by Reese (2001), i.e., that 'journalists' professionalism needs to be understood in relation to its specific cultural context' (p.178). The interviews show how this relationship can be described as a continuous tactical game, since both sides attempt to be in a safe zone and acquire protection. While politicians/state actors are interested in positive publicity and prevent negative publicity, journalists are interested in making efforts at producing news according to their customary journalistic criteria to avoid

punishments. This sort of relation has been described as a 'maneuvering space', since both journalists and politicians/officials 'require maneuvering space in which they can create and maintain a balance of power in the relationship' (Orebro, 2002, p. 21).

Overall, our research confirms that journalists' emotional labor impacts the quality of journalism. The main strategy of managing emotions for journalists in the KRI is to avoid any 'critical' reporting that may harm potential perpetrators' interests. Thus our study also invites extending the notion of emotional labor in journalism beyond the lived experiences and emotions of journalists themselves, but also in relation to anticipated, expected and feared emotions of others. In the case of the KRI those others are clearly the politicians and political parties in power, but potentially it could be other individuals and groups as well. Such anticipated emotional labor as part of the symbiotic linkages with politicians because this type of relationship requires 'nourishment' in order to survive (Orebro, 2002).

Finally, two important trajectories for future research come forward from this study. First, with regard to the structural conditions of media capture, further research requires addressing questions related to media's legal environment. More specifically, more study is needed regarding the ways in which media laws are indeed supportive of journalists' rights, and about the methods used by officials to control media regulatory bodies in the KRI as well as in other neo-authoritarian contexts (e.g., hierarchy of regulatory bodies, unclear media laws, etc.). Second, while this research provides a guiding framework on the emotional labor of journalists with which to better understand journalistic culture and emotional labor of journalists in deeply restrictive contexts, the question remains whether there is an exact implication on journalists' sources on their production of media discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, I will respond to the main objective and research question of this PhD research:

How does the concept of media capture allow us to understand media systems in transitional democracies in terms of the four dimensions?

The doctoral thesis addressed this question using mixed methods investigations into the role of media capture, conducting four empirical studies in the context of the media environment in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This concluding chapter will summarize and integrate the findings of each empirical study, also explaining how the findings provide insight into the media-politics relationship within a multi-party system in a transitional democracy.

In the theoretical framework, I discussed how Hallin and Mancini's four dimensions do not give accurate insight into the media environment of non-Western regions, such as the KRI. This issue has been an essential point of discussion among a number of scholars studying media systems outside Western contexts (e.g., Hallin & Mancini, 2012; McQuail, 2005; Norris 2009). This thesis has provided deeper insights into this issue, through the conceptualization of media capture theory as an alternative perspective. Accordingly, I have been able to integrate media capture into comparative media systems theory, in particular in relation to the four dimensions developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004): *the development of media markets, the degree of political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state*.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, this doctoral research started from the idea that the four dimensions cannot be explained independently of each other in the context of the media within a multi-party system undergoing or recently having undergone a transition to democracy. This became evident in the four empirical chapters, which revealed that there are complex media-politics linkages between the government, political parties, business, media organizations, and other social actors, and the dominant political parties lie at the center of this dynamic. In the following sections, I discuss the nature of these linkages, in doing so explaining the relevance of the four dimensions in the context of the KRI.

Development of the Media Market

In this context of the media in the KRI, through the lens of media capture, this research has shifted attention to the practices of various powerful institutions (e.g., government, political parties, corporations, NGOs) that have an impact on the media market in a transitional democracy. This research also addressed the multiple motivations of these powerful actors

(e.g., economic, political), which has led to the concentration of the media market in the hands of a few powerful actors. Previous studies have focused on advertising as a means of control, on the strong role of the government, and on the impact of governments on watchdog journalism within media systems in transitional democracies. Such approaches, however, failed to address the status of the advertising market in the context of a weak government, where rational legal authority is weak and clientelism is common (Kodrich, 2008; Schiffrin, 2017; Voltmer, 2013; Yanatma, 2016, 2021).

This research provided in-depth knowledge about the media market environment in such a context, having examined the economic viability of different types of media outlets in the KRI (independent, partisan, and shadow media). It identified the different practices that may have an impact on the media market in the KRI, addressing significant variables and answering the questions: Who are the advertisers (actors)?; How are the advertisements distributed (channels)?; Who is involved in institutions where the advertisements are regulated and distributed (actors and their political affiliations)?; How is the transparency of the media market guaranteed through the content of media laws (such as advertising laws, funding sources, ownership transparency and accountability, and public funding)?; and, How do advertisers have an impact on news media?

Thus, in this research, I define the *captors* of the media market as those engaged in a process in which they have the ability to regulate the market and determine the basic rules of the game (i.e., laws, patronage linkages, rules, rent-seeking, decrees, informal practices, and regulation) in a non-transparent environment. In this regard, the doctoral research contributes to our understanding of a number of factors that play a significant role in the sustainability of the financial resources of media outlets in transitional democracies, in which the advertising market is weak, as is the case with the media market in the KRI.

These factors are associated with the inequitable distribution of state resources within a party system through formal and informal practices, resulting in the capture of the media market by a few powerful social actors. In the following, I will explain the various forms of pressure on the media market in the KRI.

First, this study has revealed that within the multi-party system the dominant political parties apply the greatest pressure to the media market. Prior to this study, it was difficult to make predictions about how the political parties control media through the use of state

resources and state capture based on their own interests, as evidence from previous research was limited and hypothetical in this respect (Bajomi-Lazar, 2014, 2015, 2020). The findings of this research provide greater insight into how the media market is controlled by the dominant parties through rent-seeking, lobbying, clientelism, and patronage (such as in state advertising and regulations). It showed that the media market has been instrumentalized by the two major political parties (PUK, KDP), with these two parties controlling the media market through various practices (formal/informal). Above all, they control the economic resources of the media by commanding influential positions within the institutions that regulate and distribute public funds and government advertising. Consequently, this has allowed them to draft media-related laws that serve their interests, while neglecting laws that guarantee transparency and accountability (e.g., public procurement, antitrust, or advertising).

These practices by the dominant parties have offered them multiple benefits. In particular, it became apparent that political parties in the KRI transfer state advertisements directly to their own media outlets as a source of funds for these organizations (partisan media). This led to financial problems in the media market, exacerbated when the region suffered an economic crisis due to budgetary disputes between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) that led to funding cuts for salaries in the KRI. The crisis resulted in the dramatic deterioration of the media market, with many media outlets failing to increase their revenues.

Second, while non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are supposed to protect and support media democracy in transitional countries, these NGOs have established relationships with governmental institutions (e.g., governors) to ensure delivery of their services. This process has a negative impact on media democracy in the KRI, as the governmental bodies directly receive international aid from the NGOs. Some state officials even act as brokers between the NGOs and media outlets in the interest of their own political parties. For example, they may direct NGO advertisements (e.g., announcements of job offer, international and national bids/tenders, and other procurement notices) to their own media. I conclude that more research is needed regarding the role of NGOs in promoting media democracy in transitional democracies, looking at issues that are related to the fair distribution of international aid that defends independent media in such societies.

Third, our study showed that the dominant parties have succeeded in expanding their control over commercial advertisements and NGOs through clientelism and patronage

connections within the regulatory bodies (e.g., the representatives of the two dominant parties in government). Very few studies have mentioned this aspect in the context of media capture (Yanatma, 2016; Yesil, 2018). Our research further explored this, bringing new understanding to the literature, by revealing the various motivations behind these practices. Our study showed that some state officials have abused their legal powers in the interest of their own political party's media outlets (usually by invoking inspection powers to challenge businesspeople). This has led some businesspeople to offer direct funds and set up long-term advertising contracts with media outlets that have strong linkages with high-ranking politicians (e.g., presidents/prime ministers). Moreover, the research also found situations in which businesspeople voluntarily transferred their advertisements to these media. Such practices offer businesspeople a means to strengthen their networks with ruling political parties to ensure they are in the best position to provide future services. In many cases, our findings have shown that corporations avoid advertising their products in media that broadcast reports that are critical of high-ranking politicians, as they perceive that such practices may harm their business in the future (e.g., legal pressures).

Fourth, corruption practices place further pressure on the media market in the KRI. The culture of corruption has been considered one of the major issues in transitional democracies (Voltmer, 2013). In this respect, our results add to the rapidly expanding field of theory on the colonization of the state by political parties (Bajomi-Lazar 2014). Our findings have provided tangible evidence of the overlap between corruption and state capture. While most existing studies have focused on the role of ruling parties that is inherent in the abuse of state resources for their benefit, this research suggests that there are conditions that allow sufficient freedom to some state officials to become involved in various forms of corruption for personal gain. One example is the continual interaction between state officials and media professionals to maximize rent. Our results also indicated that some state officials exploit their position within public service broadcasting in the KRI and are involved in corrupt kickback bribery deals with some media managers through secret agreements (e.g., preferential distribution). In such instances, the officials receive a proportion of the cash from government advertisements. Additional results of this investigation showed that owners of private companies may offer indirect funds/or advertising as bribes to media owned by high-ranking politicians, with those politicians in turn assisting these businesspeople when they breach the law (such as trading expired products and tax exemption).

Finally, this study has been one of the first attempts to thoroughly examine a situation in which the advertisers themselves are politicians. This occurred under two circumstances. First, the findings have shown that political candidates were major advertisers in the KRI in the four periods of elections. Second, this research has identified a form of business capture by high-ranking politicians, or politicians as businesspeople. This research has shown that the majority of the powerful financial actors (tycoons) who own giant corporations are high-ranking politicians from the dominant ruling parties in the KRI (e.g., KDP, PUK, Naway New). This situation has not only led to journalists and editors practicing self-censorship in newsrooms, but has also created a certain journalistic culture. This research has found that well-known journalists and influential reporters may themselves search for advertisers (politicians, businesspeople) to ensure their financial survival. This might be achieved by establishing personal connections with these advertisers through regular informal meetings in restaurants, cafes, or at various other events. Providing vivid examples, some journalists indicated that they obtain benefits from these personal connections. They not only find advertisements for the media organizations they work for, but are also granted certain privileges from their media managers, such as a better employment position, or financial rewards, or an important position within the hierarchy of media organizations.

In general, our findings suggest that the media market has been instrumentalized by powerful social actors, and it has thus become a participant in both the political and economic conflicts of these powerful social actors (e.g., political parties, individual high-ranking politicians, individual entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, media professionals) in the KRI. These powerful social actors have various agendas and goals (personal, organizational) at specific moments.

Political Parallelism in the KRI

Following the collapse of Saddam Hussain's regime in 2003, journalism in the KRI entered a new phase, with a dramatic increase in the number of media outlets and political parties. From the perspective of Hallin and Mancini's variables of political parallelism, previous research has described the media-politics relationship in the KRI as exhibiting high political parallelism (Hussein, 2018; Taha, 2020). Political parallelism is defined as the "degree to which the structure of the media system parallels that of the party system" (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p. 27). Political parallelism is connected to external/internal pluralism within media systems. *External pluralism* is achieved at the level of the media system as a whole, through the existence of a range of media outlets or organizations

reflecting viewpoints of different groups or tendencies in society (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p. 29). *Internal pluralism* is achieved within each media organization, where media outlets maintain neutral, unbiased content and avoid strong institutional ties to both social and political groups (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p. 29; Hitchens, 2006).

In this regard, our research validates the previous studies that have argued that the notion of political parallelism cannot be applied straightforwardly when looking at the relationship between media and politics in non-Western countries Albuquerque, 2012, p. 80; Mancini 2012, p. 217, 2015, p. 25 - 29). Within a volatile political system, where the media experience substantial political and economic pressures, a form of instrumentalization occurs (Mancini, 2012; Selvik & Høigilt, 2021). In relation to the case of the media in the KRI, the media-politics linkages can be characterized as instrumentalization, or the parties' colonization of the media, and media clientelism. For example, the results of this study has found strong clientelistic media-politics connections (personal and organizational links) in the KRI, within various forms of media ownership structures, as explained below.

According to the results of our research, the first form of media ownership can best be described as *Political Parties as Media Owners*. This type of media publicly acts as partisan media. They claim that they are directly funded by political parties; they are managed by party organizations; and journalists who work for such media organizations are party members/or party cadres. However, our findings also showed that advertising revenues (e.g., from the government, corporations, NGOs) were a major indirect source of funding for these media outlets (see Chapter 3). This was particularly the case for the media owned by the powerful dominant political parties (KDP, PUK), as they also controlled influential positions within the media regulatory bodies in the KRI. Examples of this type of media are *Evro, Kurdistani Nwe, Hawler*. As mentioned in the previous section, bureaucrats act as brokers within governmental institutions for the media owned by the dominant political parties (PUK, KDP). Those bureaucrats not only transfer public funds to media owned by their political organizations, but also provide other forms of financial support, such as tax exemptions, license exemptions, offering journalists access to information and breaking events.

The second form is *Politicians as Media Owners*. This type of media organization officially profiles itself as independent media, despite being indirectly owned by high-ranking politicians. These media outlets are funded by private businesses (giant corporations) of

politicians (their owners), and their advertisements. While this media obtains significant funding and advertising revenue from business, the latter do not seek to interfere in the content of the media and journalistic work, but aim to expand their networks with high-ranking politicians for economic gain and to further secure their business. Thus, they show their loyalty to a political ideology through their indirect and other funding (advertising/direct funds), as was the case of the media organizations of *Rudaw*, *NRT*, and *Kurdistan 24*.

The third form of ownership concerns the actual Independent Media. These media define themselves as engaging in watchdog journalism, and according to their owners their funds come from advertisements and international aid. In this research, two media outlets have chosen from this type of media: *Awene* and *Hawlati*. The findings showed that these media outlets face economic pressure due to their watchdog journalism, with media organizations owned by politicians and political parties receiving much more advertising than these two media outlets. In fact, *Awene* closed down in 2018 because of a lack of financial viability, in particular, due to an advertising boycott.

Regarding *Hawlati*, our findings revealed a strong connection to one dominant political party (PUK) in the KRI. This media also describes itself as poor media, as they do not have their own supporters (i.e., high-ranking officials within the governmental structures). In addition, our findings showed that strong connections between businesspeople and certain politicians have had a serious impact on *Hawlati*, as these businesspeople do not advertise their products in these critical media to avoid any potential risk to their business. Under such conditions, the journalists and editors within this type of media practice self-censorship in newsrooms for the sake of financial survival. These results are in accord with a recent study indicating that clientelism and a weak market encourage journalists to self-censor or cozy up to politicians for financial survival, or to simply leave the profession (Morris, 2016; Selvik & Høigilt, 2021).

To conclude this section, in political parallelism, it is expected that journalists embrace a political ideology or that they may have a history of "grassroots activism." As Mancini (2012) clarifies, this is "often driven by their own points of view, and (…) taking part in the general cultural and political debate" (Mancini 2012, p. 276). This characterization is not reflected in our findings concerning journalists' beliefs, motivations, and their orientation in the KRI. This research has discovered that successful reporters and respected journalists who graduated from journalism schools in the KRI tend to work for media owned by high-

ranking politicians or political parties primarily to ensure access to more secure work and lucrative futures (guaranteed employment and high salaries, easier access to information within public institutions, early access to breaking news events and press conferences) and this may not necessarily be based on any inherent ideological beliefs. Nevertheless, our research was somewhat limited in addressing this element (such as what drives media content). Thus, while scholars have indicated that political parallelism is more likely to be based on choices made by the news media and the ideological orientations of journalists themselves, in the KRI it is difficult to make such a claim. Notwithstanding these limitations, our research provided some significant insight into journalistic practices in the KRI, which will be presented in the next section.

Journalistic Professionalism in the KRI

From the perspective of the comparative media systems theory of Hallin and Mancini, journalistic professionalism has been addressed in terms of the degree of journalistic autonomy; distinct professional rules and norms (e.g., ethical principles/journalists' choices in newsrooms); and the level of public service orientation of journalists. According to these variables, previous research has described journalistic professionalism in the KRI as weak (Taha, 2020; Hussein, 2018). However, by focusing closely on journalistic culture through the lens of media capture theories (Finkel, 2015; Kodrich, 2008; Yanatma, 2016, 2021), and combining this with scholarship on the emotional labour of journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), this research has provided more precise insight into the level of professionalization of journalism in a non-Western context. In particular, this research provides insight into an environment where the media is under the influence of political clientelism, a culture of corruption, and an instrumentalization of the media market, as was the case in the KRI.

Autonomy refers to the extent to which journalists feel in control of content and use, and to the independence of journalists from their sources (Relly et al., 2015, 2016; Milojević & Krstić, 2018). Our findings showed that there were various constraints placed on journalists and editors while doing their journalistic work in the KRI.

First, in relation to the individual conditions of journalists, our results align with those of others who have previously revealed the impact of social inequalities and economic pressures on journalists working in transitional democracies (Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020; Milojević & Krstić, 2018). Examples of such negative conditions faced by individual journalists include low wages, insecure or unguaranteed employment, and an awareness in

journalists that their media organizations are under the threat of closure at any moment due to a lack of revenue. These conditions have created a certain type of journalistic culture in the KRI. For example, in relation to financial survival, our research showed that journalists are involved in multi-tasking jobs, with some journalists working as media managers, reporters, correspondents, and/or producers. This research has found that some were also parliamentary members, high-ranking officials, or businesspeople, or they also worked as university lecturers or lawyers, for example. In such circumstances, our research showed that a conflict of interest is inevitable, and there are strong probabilities of an overlap of interests in terms of balancing different types of roles, especially when it comes to the role of journalists in public service.

In addition, our research showed that journalists compete to obtain jobs within media outlets owned by high-ranking politicians and political parties, as they find that these outlets have better wages, which are also guaranteed, and a more lucrative future, as these media outlets are more financially stable. Unstable economic conditions have led some journalists and editors to become involved in fiduciary acts and secret agreements with advertisers, either in their own personal interest (kickbacks), or in the interest of their media organization. This includes a bidding culture involving advertisers, where positive news is reported in exchange for advertising revenues. Such practices reinforce the negative conditions and thus the journalists' positions within their media organizations. These results further support the argument that the uncertain economic position of journalists impacts on their autonomy and integrity and that they might easily become vulnerable to several negative influences at subsequent levels (Milojević & Krstić, 2018).

Second, our study showed that direct/indirect violence against journalists places another type of pressure on journalistic work in the KRI. The direct forms of violence include a variety of intimidation methods used by state actors, including bans, threats, detention, harassment, and beatings. The indirect forms include impunity, extrajudicial detention, arbitrary arrests, and jamming of radio and television stations. In addition to these acts, which restrict journalistic freedom, this research has found that uncertainty and vagueness surrounding the drafting and implementation of media laws and media regulations have doubled the pressure on journalistic work in the KRI (e.g., unstated laws, unclearly defined concepts, elastic paragraphs within media laws, and the lack of judiciary independence, see Chapters 3 and 4 for more details). These mechanisms of control are applied either during the drafting of media laws or during their implementation, such as under pressure from

the dominant parties or high-ranking politicians. On the one hand, these inadequacies within media regulations are intentional, that is, a planned tactic to control journalists, which is practiced through informal institutions and regulators that are embedded within media regulatory bodies. On the other hand, they are also due to a lack of knowledge of the lawmakers regarding issues related to media regulations, as these lawmakers are appointed to these influential positions based on their strong client connections with high-ranking political leaders rather than their relevant expertise.

While previous research has indicated that, in such a context, journalists practice self-censorship, our findings showed that journalists not only practice self-censorship but have more complex strategies to navigate these circumstances and adapt to the context in which they operate. Such strategies include gaining the editors' support in the newsroom, understanding unwritten and unspoken rules and policies, and joining powerful political parties. Other coping strategies include the cultivation of different writing styles, or incorporating safety valves in their writing through different layers of vagueness.

Overall, our findings match those of earlier studies on the status of journalistic professionalism in transitional democracies – in particular, in Middle East contexts – which indicate that in societies characterized by political clientelism, journalists cannot operate unless they have personal relationships with powerful social actors, and approaching power brokers is crucial for their safety (Sahi, 2022; Selvik & Høigilt, 2021; Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020). To some extent, journalists in the KRI utilized the clientelist environment to their own advantage to secure their professional and economic position. In the KRI, the journalists established contacts with powerful actors within different institutions, organized networking activities, such as meeting for coffee or attending political events, discussed certain issues with politicians in a friendly atmosphere, and mobilized these contacts for diverse purposes (e.g., political protection, financial survival, and access to information). Although our research revealed close friendships between journalists and powerful actors, these linkages can be characterized in many cases as ambiguous relationships. Further work is needed to fully understand the implications of these kinds of relationships.

The Role of the State in the KRI

Both theoretical approaches to media systems – Hallin and Mancini's the four dimensions and media capture mechanisms – generally focus on the strong role of the state in the media system, such as its role in providing economic subsidies, determining media regulations,

and ensuring the transparency and accountability of the media market. Through the lens of media capture theories, however, this PhD research has directed attention to how a weak role of the state can hamper the development of media independence, as is the case in the KRI. Through different levels of our analysis (advertising, regulatory environment, and journalistic culture), our research research has shown how the fragmented political structure and laws have a negative influence on media freedom in the KRI.

As seen in previous chapters, the KRI's party political landscape can be regarded as a multi-party system. Our research has indicated how the two dominant parties (KDP and PUK) have created a weak institutional environment in the KRI, through activities such as rent-seeking within government entities, and especially through their control of regulatory bodies, the legislature, the executive, ministries, and the judiciary.

The parties' control of all aspects of the government can be understood as political state capture and business state capture. The former refers to the two parties colonizing state resources and powers through their representatives in government bodies to maintain their position within the political system. The latter refers to the high-ranking politicians as powerful tycoons, who also act as lobbyists (e.g., Frye, 2002; Zielonka, 2015). These circumstances have negatively impacted on press freedom in the KRI. Our research has shown that despite the diversity of political parties in the KRI, however, the political division in terms of a 50-50 power sharing agreement among PUK and KDP is still apparent in journalistic practice. For example, the journalists' syndicates and press councils, as well as media regulatory administrations, are divided between the two major parties, with the journalists' union directors in Sulaymaniyah coming from the PUK and those in Erbil and Duhok from the KDP. Thus, journalists feel that these syndicates offer no protection, and they lack trust in them, as well as the media laws and media regulators (more implications of these practices can be found in Chapter 2). In addition, advertising and announcements by all state entities in PUK-dominated areas are only found in the PUK media, while in the KDP zones these placements are only found in the KDP media (see Chapter 1).

In the context of transitional democracies, research has shown that establishing new media laws may threaten media freedom, as regulators may draft laws to their own advantage (Krygier, 2015; Zielonka, 2015). This research has added further to our knowledge in this respect. It shows that the conflicting legislation between the IFG and the KRG was another source of pressure on media freedom in the KRI. Until 2013, the audiovisual media (such

as laws on frequency spectrum distribution, media license rules and taxation, advertising distribution) were regulated by the IFG. Due to long-term legislative conflict over frequency spectrum distribution between the two governments, in 2014, the KRG authorities started to create their own rules to regulate audiovisual media and the frequency spectrum (regulating under regional rules instead of national laws). This situation immediately opened the door for the two dominant parties to take further control of the media rules. They were created, drafted, and implemented by the Ministry of Culture and Youth, which represents the executive authority of the KRG.

Our empirical data has shown that this Ministry of Culture and Youth is completely controlled by representatives of the two parties in government (minister, deputy minister, general directors). In our study, these rules have been described by media professionals as elastic, as they may change at any moment because they are not officially fixed laws and not passed by the IFG. Our research disclosed that these rules are applied by the two major parties in ways that suit their own interests, with the two parties and their allies having several options for punishing critical media professionals (though formal and informal practices), including through electronic attacks (jamming media stations), controlling public funds, advertising boycotts, as well as restricting critical journalists.

In the context of an unstable political system, previous research has indicated that a diversity of political parties within a constitutional framework supports media freedom and prevents media concentration in the hands of a few groups (Bajomi-Lazar, 2017; Zielonka, 2015). However, this research has shown that this is not always the case, particularly in the context of fragmented political structures and fragmented laws. While the legislative authority of the KRG consists of a diversity of political parties that create media laws in the KRI, and the content of these laws apparently reflects democratic values that might support media freedom, these laws are not implemented in most circumstances. Rather, in most cases, the executive authority of the KRG applies its own rules and not the legislated press laws. This situation has led to a political cleavage between the legislative and executive authorities of the KRG, and made media organizations and journalistic work prone to pressure from the two major political parties. Our empirical studies revealed that the lawmakers have embraced autocratic views and operate under the control of the two major parties, to the extent that they have absolute power over media regulations and reject the involvement of other parties, such as opposition parties, in the media regulatory environment.

Overall, in an unstable political environment, characterized by state fragmentation, contradictions in the system, internal conflict, and inter-party divisions, as well as legislative conflict, disagreement between the two governments (the KRG and the IFG), opportunities for the authorities to activate informal structures and practices to control media have arisen. Our study has shown that these informal practices operate even beyond media laws and rules (e.g., unofficial orders, patronage linkages, and unwritten rules such as the Fatwa) and have resulted in the poor implementation and legislation of media laws.

In conclusion, our research validates the ideas of Hallin (2020, p. 5776) and Mancini (2015, p. 26), who both suggested that media systems "models" are durable in nature; that it is possible to talk about a "model" of a media system if it is steady over a period of time; and that systems theory is able to explain "stability." A "captured media" and a "captured state" means there is a situation of uncertainty (less durable media organizational structure) and volatility within structures of government and the media. Neither are disconnected from the influence of external groups and thus are vulnerable to frequent change depending on these influences. The main consequence of this is that both the legislation and the legislative framework of the media in the KRI – the legal structure within which it operates – is continually changing, with the rules shaped by the interests of both politically and economically powerful groups, as is the case for the media in several other transitional democracies.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest thanks to my supervisors, Prof. Pieter Maeseele and Prof. Kevin Smets, who made this research possible.

To begin with, my warmest thanks to Pieter Maeseele for his trust from the outset. In September 2015, I started to develop the first draft of my research proposal while I was an assistant lecturer at Duhok Polytechnic University in Iraqi Kurdistan. Pieter gave me the opportunity to take the initial steps into the research environment. This made me the first woman from the Badinan area in Iraqi Kurdistan to study for a PhD in Media and Communication Studies at an international university. This needs to study abroad arose due to the lack of doctoral programs in media studies in Iraqi Kurdistan, the lack of research resources for journalism and media studies, and the lack of a suitable research environment in general. I believe the involvement of women in valued scientific research in conflict zones is extremely important, with scientific research remaining limited otherwise. Pieter has therefore not only had a huge impact on my own research career but also made a significant contribution to the development of research in media studies in Iraqi Kurdistan generally.

Later, when I arrived in Belgium, I met my second supervisor, Prof. Kevin Smets. He welcomed and introduced me to his field of research. This gave me much hope and more confidence that I was not alone in this journey, especially on discovering that Kevin was deeply involved in Middle East Studies and had substantial knowledge about the Kurdish media landscape in the Middle East. Your kindness is unforgettable.

Pieter and Kevin, thank you both for your absolute support during my PhD research. This includes thanks for the constructive feedback on my papers, which challenged me each time, to the point that each paper was systematically improved. Thank you for your non-stop advice and guidance on how to improve my academic English, and for your encouragement, your patience, and the positive energy that you both passed on to me in more difficult times.

Second, I would like to thank my committee members, Prof. Steve Paulussen and Prof. Stijn Joye, who kept an eye on annual committee meetings and always managed to steer

me in the right direction. Most importantly, the positive feedback you gave me during the PhD was a great source of mental support, which further encouraged me to continue my research project. I would also like to thank Prof. Fatima El Issawi, Prof. Elisabetta Costa, and Prof. Johana Kotišová for agreeing to be part of my doctoral jury and reading my thesis.

Third, I would like to express my gratitude for both universities: University of Antwerp and Vrije Universiteit Brussel, for providing all possible facilities and support.

Fourth, special thanks to the participants (interviewees) who contributed to this research for the substantial amount of time they offered.

Fifth, I want to thank my incredible colleagues and friends. When I first arrived at the University of Antwerp, I was surrounded by amazing colleagues (Danielle Raeijmaekers, Miriam van de Brug, Laurens van der Steen, Yves John Pepermans, Marion Lucille, Robin Reul, Shai Kassirer). These wonderful colleagues offered me their support and helped with all the administrative issues and many other aspects. Here, I would like to express special appreciation to Danielle Raeijmaekers, who was very supportive of me in the more difficult times and there to help me whenever I needed her. Danielle, you are incredible! In addition, I would like to thank other colleagues for the productive discussions and great atmosphere in the office (Timothy, Kenza, Maud, Jonas, Prescilla, and Nicola).

Moreover, I would like to thank the nursery staff of my daughter Pel. They were taking care of my daughter Pel in an amazing way. Their incredible care helped me to focus on my research in a perfect way. Also, I want to thank the teachers and school staff of my children for their support and for providing the care after school. Without their support, I would not be able to complete my PhD research.

Next, I would like to thank my parents and sisters for their support. I know you were always ready to support me as much as you could.

Finally, to those closest: I would like to thank my husband, Shavan Askar. You were the first person in the family who supported me and encouraged me to start a PhD. You told me "You can be the best mother and the best researcher at the same time." Thank you for your sacrifices and understanding throughout this journey. To my wonderful kids, Rand, Aza, and

Pel, thank you for brightening my days in otherwise dark moments. To my lovely daughter Rand, thank you for the beautiful friendship you share with your younger brother and sister and the endless support that you gave them, especially in relation to their education, when I could not, either due to my limited time or due to my lack of Dutch. You have been my greatest source of strength and inspiration.

Media Capture

The Political Reality of Media Undergoing a Transitional Democracy: The Case of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq after 2003

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