

DOI: 10.51480/1899-5101.17.2(36).586

The Capture Effect: How Media Capture Affects Journalists, Markets and Audiences

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Abstract: As the literature aimed at defining and explaining media capture has grown in recent years so has the interest in documenting the impact of capture in greater depth. There is still a relatively wide gap between the literature focused on defining and describing the concept, which is rich and increasingly sophisticated, and the body of research aimed at measuring the impact of capture, which now consists of a collection of disparate analytical papers primarily focused on case studies. This paper aims to contribute to this second body of knowledge: building on existing research, it looks to identify the changes that media capture leads to in three key areas: journalism (with a focus on the impact of capture on professional standards and the performance of journalists), market (with a focus on the effects of capture on free competition, market health and viability of investments), and audience (analysing the content limitations that audiences are faced with in environments where propaganda media is dominant).

Keywords: media capture; editorial independence; state media; independent journalism; corruption; government control.

CAPTURING THE MOMENT: DEFINITIONS OF MEDIA CAPTURE

In November 2019, the person in charge of media affairs in the Hungarian Prime Minister's office emailed Zsolt Nemeth, director of Hungary's state-run news agency MTI, with the following request: "Hi, could you write an article about this, citing me as a source? Thanks!". He was referring to a letter that a European rabbi had sent to his boss, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, to thank him for his support. Later, the official in the Prime Minister's office emailed Nemeth the exact title he was ordered to use in the article. MTI followed the request word for word, according to a report from Direkt36, a Hungarian investigative portal, based on leaked emails (Wirth, 2022).

For decades, one of the main challenges faced by journalism in an increasing number of countries worldwide is instrumentalization, a situation where media outlets lose their editorial independence under pressures from state authorities or private companies, or both. Concentration of media ownership in the hands of a limited number of businesses, which are often associated with politicians or government officials, is the main factor that enables such collusion.

A series of economic crises, coupled with massive shifts in technology, have torpedoed attempts to adjust traditional business models for journalism to the newly emergent digital economy, further eroding the sustainability of the media sector. As a result, journalists and media outlets have become extremely vulnerable to pressures, allowing powerful actors, both politicians and wealthy businesses, to spread their dominance over swathes of the media industry. They do so through control over media regulation and state/public media, preferential allocation of public funds to friendly media companies, and takeover of private media companies.

This is the concept of media capture that we use in this article: a phenomenon that entails the government and its affiliated businesses wielding influence and control over four key areas—regulation, public/state media, state financial resources, and the private media sector—to manipulate the media narrative according to their own agenda (Dragomir, 2019).

When control in these four areas is achieved, entry barriers are elevated as new entrants, particularly small players, are denied access to broadcast licences or other regulatory incentives and benefits; access to public funds is barred to media outlets with an independent editorial coverage; state media governance bodies are staffed with people close to the authorities to ensure alignment with the government's interests; and a large number of private media operators are forced by their owners to follow the official agenda.

The term 'media capture' was first used in academic scholarship by economists who based it on the economics literature of regulatory capture, a situation where regulators become supportive of the entities they are supposed to regulate (Stigler, 1971). Closer to our times, the concept of capture was used by economists to discuss political influence on the media in systems with press freedom (Besley, & Prat, 2006), political consequences of such influence (Corneo, 2006) and the negative impact of media capture on inequality (Petrova, 2007).

A raft of studies of the media capture analysed from a media studies perspective appeared in the past decades.

Writing about the role of media outlets and journalists in informing the public, political scientist Alina Mungiu-Pippidi defined media capture as 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). A key element distinguishing media capture from other forms of government control is the involvement of the private sector (Schiffrin, 2017).

The chronology of media capture history is rather fluid, since it is difficult to precisely establish the birth of this phenomenon. Moreover, made possible by a combination of factors and trends that have to happen at once in a given national context, media capture has no linear history. Elements of capture appear and disappear, depending on the political configuration, economic trends, technological advances, and local culture. Yet, lasting cases of media capture have emerged in recent years in a multitude of countries, signalling that, once entrenched, media capture, as defined in this paper as a combination of control and manipulation of media regulation, state/public media, state funding and private media ownership, is extremely difficult to dismantle.

Based on existing country studies, it can be argued that the first signs of media capture, “particularly the prodigious participation of the government in the market, directly or through clusters of private owners”, could be seen in Eastern Europe in the late 2000s (Dragomir, 2019). During those years, numerous media outlets across the region began to feel the pinch of the economic downturn. Moreover, media markets were shaken by the dramatic technology-induced shifts, with large chunks of ad spending migrating to the rapidly growing global tech platforms (Dragomir, 2020).

Faced with a steep decline in the value of their assets, numerous media outlets became easy targets for a small elite of businesses, mostly companies run by oligarchs connected with governments through common interests. In many countries, those companies developed the financial wherewithal to dominate the market solely thanks to funds allocated to them by the government, chiefly to carry out public works in various large industries (e.g., construction) (Buckley & Byrne, 2017). Some of them were set up through loans from state-controlled banks or capital from unknown sources (Dragomir, 2019).

This transformation of media markets across Eastern Europe was accompanied by the exodus of foreign media owners that had operated in the region since the 1990s. The exit of these foreign companies can be considered the main “media capture event” in Europe. Some of those countries, including Czechia, Slovakia and Bulgaria lost almost all key foreign investors in the media, especially in the publishing business (Stetka, 2013).

While there has been a proliferation of studies that define and describe the phenomenon of media capture, it is crucial to systematically document the impact of capture in order to better understand the various changes it brings about at different levels. This article aims to achieve just that by using existing evidence from academic literature and research.

The article begins by introducing the four key components of the concept of media capture used in this article (An Anatomy of Media Capture: Key Components and Variations). It then provides a summary of the geographical spread of media capture (Media Capture: Geographies and Typology). Moving forward, the article delves into a discussion on the impact of media capture on journalism (professional level), media market (structural and economic level) and society (social level).

AN ANATOMY OF MEDIA CAPTURE: KEY COMPONENTS AND VARIATIONS

To understand the analysis of the impact of media capture, which is the focus of this article, the concept of media capture used in this article is introduced below. The growing scope of media capture in a cluster of countries in Eastern Europe as well as in other parts of the world has prompted an intensification of research efforts studying the inner workings of capture. After comparing data and trends in government control collected from more than 150 countries (State Media Monitor, 2022), a media capture model consisting of four key components was designed (Dragomir, 2019).

REGULATORY CAPTURE

This is a situation where the government is in full control of the regulatory processes that affect the media. Achieving regulatory capture is a relatively effortless task for authorities, especially in countries with low accountability standards and a weak civil society. The type and number of regulatory authorities with competences in the media vary from country to country. Broadcast regulators, in charge of licensing television and radio channels, print media watchdogs, data regulators or competition authorities can all play a role, more or less significant, in media regulation.

Because these institutions are in one way or another subordinated to the authorities, depend on funding from the government to operate, and their decision-making bodies are staffed with people appointed by government institutions, regulatory capture has been a perennial challenge in media ecosystems in many nations all around the world.

CONTROL OF STATE/PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

For decades, state and public service media have been confronted with various forms of government control resembling, to a large extent, the forms of control exerted through regulation. In countries where state/public media depend on government funding to operate, and their main supervisory and management structures are filled with people appointed by the authorities, those media

outlets often lack editorial independence. Such institutions are usually operated as state propaganda channels charged with promoting state policies and protecting the government's interests.

In the past two to three decades, governments in Eastern Europe, some Latin American countries, a spate of African nations and a few Asian countries have attempted, usually under pressure from civil society and experts, to rebuild their national state media into modern, editorially independent, public service outlets, or to create such media institutions from scratch. Those reforms, which in most cases were a lengthy and painful process, only rarely led to a successful transformation of the state media systems, primarily because of the reluctance of the political class to give up control over media organisations built on massive nationwide infrastructure which gave them access to most of their country's population.

With a few exceptions, most of those state media continued to operate primarily as propaganda channels in the service of the political parties in power. Examples are plenty, ranging from the state broadcasters in many Eastern European nations, such as the public broadcaster MTVA in Hungary (Toth, 2015) or the public media operator in Bosnia & Herzegovina (Knezevic, 2017), to most of the state broadcasters across Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) regions (Dragomir & Soderstrom, 2022).

USE OF STATE FINANCING AS A CONTROL TOOL

Following years of economic crises and dwindling sustainability, state funding has become an extremely effective instrument used by governments to control media outlets. On top of funds from the state budget allocated for the operation of public or state media, many governments also create purses of public funds that they use to buy advertising space in media outlets, either for government-sponsored social campaigns or to advertise products and services offered by state-owned enterprises.

This form of state funding is in many cases used to reward or punish media outlets, creating a dependency that helps authorities further bolster their influence in the media sector. Media outlets blocked from accessing state advertising funds, for example, especially smaller ones that operate in less affluent markets, face deep financial crises, which often lead to their demise (Dragomir, 2018).

PRIVATE OWNERSHIP TAKEOVER

Finally, the takeover of privately owned media is a key piece in the media capture architecture. Without control of the media market and its main players, capture would not be complete, as those media outlets have a significant outreach and market influence. In most cases of private ownership capture, governments use either state-controlled companies or conglomerates run by associated

(or supportive) businessmen to buy media assets. In some cases, businessmen close to the authorities are given access to loans from the state or state-owned financial institutions to complete such purchases (Burazer, 2021).

A common pattern in cases of private media takeover, documented in numerous media captured environments, is the intensification of politically motivated media acquisitions prior to elections (usually the “acquisition fever” starts to be noticed one year before elections), a strong indicator of the real purpose of media capture: electoral success to secure renewed access to public resources and power mechanisms.

Research of a variety of media contexts through the four-component media capture matrix described in this article shows that both the government and the private sector play a key role in achieving capture. The state, for instance, can establish control over regulatory bodies and state-owned as well as public media platforms. By using state funds at their discretion, they can effectively secure the loyalty of numerous media outlets. However, complete control over the media market cannot be achieved without the active involvement of the business sector, which allows the state to extend its influence over private media ownership. Nonetheless, extensive research conducted on numerous media systems consistently points towards the state as the primary perpetrator of this phenomenon, underscoring its prominent role in media capture.

MEDIA CAPTURE: GEOGRAPHIES AND TYPOLOGY

In this section, we present a taxonomy of state and public media encompassing the various forms of state interference in the media and highlighting instances of private sector involvement. The brief global overview of capture and state control incidence is derived from extensive research, encompassing 157 countries and employing the taxonomy as a framework.

Although a series of political and economic developments have made Eastern Europe a fertile ground for media capture, the phenomenon could hardly be described as an Eastern European product. First, there are many examples of media organisations, both public and privately owned, that at some point in time are captured by political parties or authorities. In some countries, media outlets fall victim to capture for long periods of time.

Media capture in various forms and deployed with various degrees of intensity has been documented in countries ranging from Thailand in the mid-2000s (IFEX, 2004) to Ukraine (Ryabinska, 2017) to Mexico (Urrusti-Frenk, 2015) and Hong Kong (Frisch, Belair-Gagnon & Agur, 2018). In 2017, The London School of Economics (LSE) analysed four sets of factors driving media capture in a diverse sample of nations, which included South Sudan, Tanzania, Bangladesh, and

South Africa (Jiménez Cárdenas et al, 2017). Cases of media capture were also identified in more developed media markets such as Japan (Hung Au, Kawai, 2011) and Spain (Minder, 2015).

These cases, however, exhibit significant disparities in terms of capture and occur within distinct contexts, resulting in varying degrees of impact. To discern the intricacies within the different forms of capture, the author of this paper has devised the State Media Matrix, a taxonomy of state and public media based on three key criteria: funding, governance/ownership, and editorial independence. The matrix has been used to develop State Media Monitor, a mapping of state and public media regularly update.¹ (See Table 1 and explore the detailed explanation of the seven proposed models below)

Table 1. State Media Matrix: a typology of state media

	Predominantly state-funded	Control of governing structures and ownership	Editorial control	Model
1	Yes	Yes	Yes	State Controlled Media (SC)
2	No	Yes	Yes	Captured Public/State Managed Media (CaPu)
3	Yes	No	Yes	Captured Private Media (CaPr)
	No	No	Yes	
4	Yes	Yes	No	Independent State Funded and State Managed Media (ISFM)
5	Yes	No	No	Independent State Funded Media (ISF)
6	No	Yes	No	Independent State Managed Media (ISM)
7	No	No	No	Independent Public Media (IP)

Source: Designed by Author

Media outlets editorially controlled by the government (models 1-SC, 2-CaPu and 3-CaPr) fall into three categories. The state-controlled media category is the largest, comprising media outlets that were established and are run by authorities as government propaganda channels. In many cases, these outlets are part of the government apparatus, and are operated as state bodies. They are entirely dependent on state funding, managed by government-appointed bodies,

¹ The study is anchored in the application of a research framework, known as the State Media Matrix, to media outlets across the globe. The State Media Matrix is a typology of state media that allows classification of state media according to three key factors that affect their independence: funding, ownership/governance, and editorial autonomy. Using these three main factors, the study identified seven state media models that are characterised by various degrees of independence. Three of them are government-controlled: (a). State-controlled media, b). Captured public media, and c). Captured private media; the other four are independent state/public media (a). Independent state-funded and managed; b). Independent state-funded, c). Independent state-managed; and d). Independent public media (the least government controlled, most editorially independent model).

and follow an editorial line vetted by state authorities. The state-controlled model is widespread in the world, in countries such as China, North Korea or Venezuela, several Southeast Asian nations, numerous Middle Eastern states, most of Sub-Saharan Africa as well as a string of nations across Central and Eastern Europe (Dragomir & Soderstrom, 2022).

A second category encompasses captured public or state-managed media, a model characterised by government control of a) governance structures and/or ownership, and b) editorial coverage. This group includes three types of players: print media publishers that are managed by state institutions, but financed primarily through commercial revenue (such as Sociedade de Notícias in Mozambique, Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) in Zambia, Zimpapers in Zimbabwe, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), and SRMG in Saudi Arabia; public service media that lack editorial autonomy such as Pakistan's PTV; SLBC and SLRC in Sri Lanka; HRT in Croatia; ERT in Greece, Italian public broadcaster RAI; or RTS in Serbia); media holdings that run both broadcast media outlets and print media all closely following official government lines (they include Medianova in Angola, Shanghai Media Group in China and various commercially funded Russian media groups known to be close to the Russian government such as Gazprom Media or National Media Group).

Outlets in the captured public/state-managed media category are the most vulnerable to being fully state-controlled (and thus relegated to the state-controlled category described above), the missing component to fall into that class being funding: increased state funding, to make government the preponderant source of financing, would turn them into state-controlled media. When it comes to editorial coverage, there are only slight, if any, differences between public captured media and state-controlled media.

Finally, the captured private media model applies to media outlets that are editorially controlled by state authorities, yet remain privately owned and, in many cases, commercially funded. This model is the distinctive pillar in the media capture architecture, where state control is achieved via affiliated privately run businesses. Some outlets in the captured private media category receive funding from the state budget (mostly as state advertising); others are fully financed through commercial revenues (some of that income is channelled to those media outlets on political grounds) (Dragomir & Soderstrom, 2022). To some extent, the captured private media model is the most difficult to document as these media companies often lack formal links with state institutions, with control exerted through personal relations of top managers and high officials.

The captured private media model has emerged mainly in countries where state interventionism in the media is rife, such as Morocco, Cambodia, Azerbaijan, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey, or Serbia. It is important here to distinguish the captured private media model from cases of politicised or politically controlled media

whose ownership is held by political actors or groups (who are not in power). Such politician-owned outlets abound worldwide. A key characteristic of the private captured model is the systemic editorial control exerted on journalists by both individuals (businessmen, politicians, state officials) and institutions (state bodies, government agencies).

Overall, the number of captured media outlets has noticeably increased in recent years. In 2022, a total of 493 government-controlled media outlets were identified by State Media Monitor, the largest database of state media in the world, covering 157 countries (Dragomir & Soderstrom, 2022). That represented more than 84% of the total state/public media analysed in the study in 2022, an increase from 80% in the previous year (see a more detail overview in Table 2).

Table 2. Global overview of state and public media by typology and number of media outlets, 2022

	Number of media entities							Total
	SC	CaPu	CaPr	ISFM	ISF	ISM	IP	
Europe	24	11	21	29	4	12	12	113
Eurasia	56	5	7	2	0	0	0	70
Sub-Saharan Africa	109	12	1	3	0	0	0	125
MENA	55	15	14	2	1	1	0	88
Asia	94	13	7	4	0	2	5	125
Latin America*	47	1	1	7	7	1	0	64
North America, Australia & New Zealand	0	0	0	4	3	1	2	10
Total	385	57	51	51	15	17	19	595

State Media Matrix: SC: State Controlled Media; CaPu: Captured Public/State Managed Media; CaPr: Captured Private Media; ISFM: Independent State Funded and State Managed Media; ISF: Independent State Funded Media; ISM: Independent State Managed Media; IP: Independent Public Media. Note: The study includes two countries, Monaco and Luxembourg, which do not have any state-administered media outlets

*Including the Caribbean

Source: Media and Journalism Research Center, Marius Dragomir, 2022

The dominance of the state-controlled media model in the overall media ecosystem remains worrisome. Nonetheless, the rapid spread of captured models is equally concerning. In some parts of the world, such as Sub-Saharan Africa or many parts of Asia, the state media have not changed in decades, a strong indication of either failure to reform the state media or a tight government grip over the media sector. The high and growing incidence of captured media in Europe, on the other hand, signals a substantial decline in media freedom on a continent that has traditionally been home to most of the world’s independent public media.

One textbook case of media capture is Hungary, a ten-million country in Eastern Europe, where businesses close to the right-wing government led by Prime Minister Orbán have bought a vast amount of privately owned media companies since 2010 which, along with the country's state-controlled behemoth have been used to build a propaganda powerhouse that services state authorities.

IMPACT OF MEDIA CAPTURE ON JOURNALISM, MARKET, AND AUDIENCE

In this section, we discuss the implications of media capture on three key aspects within the media landscape of any given nation: the journalistic field, market dynamics, and the audience's beliefs, behaviours, and attitudes.

Media capture is by far the biggest threat facing independent journalism in recent years. Debates about the phenomenon naturally tend to focus on its impact on journalists, as they are the actual producers of news content. While that is an important aspect of the debate since journalists are key actors in the overall media ecosystem, more nuance and granularity are needed in studying the impact of capture.

For a more holistic understanding of the impact of capture, its effects on the media market and audiences should be included in the discussion.

As for journalism, the study of media capture should be widened to identify the changes it triggers in both journalists' behaviour as well as professional norms and standards. Although causal relations are hard to pin down, a rich body of data and cases has been published recently, which has helped to analyse the tendencies caused by capture.

Regarding the market, an obvious consequence of capture is declining competitiveness, as captured environments tend to be highly concentrated, subject to distortive state interventions, and harmed by erratic regulations. One other aspect that should be analysed here is the impact on investments, since in media captured environments small groups of interests tend to amass much of the wealth in the sector (including commercial revenues, as well as public subsidies and state advertising), prompting investors to scotch investment plans and shift their attention to more competitive markets.

Finally, regarding audiences, one important aspect in need of analysis is the availability of independently produced news content. This requires detailed audience data and triangulation of datasets to understand how media consumption habits are formed and preserved and the role of capture here. On the other hand, measuring the influence of media content on people's reactions, attitudes and way of thinking is key to understanding the ultimate effect of capture: its societal impact.

MEDIA CAPTURE IMPACT ON JOURNALISM

By far, the area most affected by media capture is journalism. The effects of media capture on the journalistic profession are manifold and long-term. In highly captured environments, as a significant part of the media sector is government-controlled, the space for independent journalism is considerably reduced. The consequence is a combination of de-professionalisation, polarisation and weakened sector representation.

Firstly, media capture transforms the media field beyond recognition as most of the media outlets taken over by oligarchic structures linked with the government or state media controlled by authorities are transformed into propaganda channels with the sole purpose of promoting the interests of supportive business elites and the government. Especially in highly captured environments, where authorities systematically attack privately held media in their attempt to take them over, pro-government media coordinate their editorial agenda, becoming part of a centralised propaganda operation that get to dominate the entire communication ecosystem.

One of the most illustrative examples of such efforts to centralise control in the media is Hungary where, after more than a decade of methodically expanding control over many media, loyalists close to the government of Prime Minister Orbán established Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), an organisation that incorporated 467 media outlets, which were donated to the foundation by their pro-government media owners (Griffen, 2020).

A key player in the propaganda architecture is the state media operator, which in captured contexts is editorially under government control, run as a state propaganda machine. Across the Western Balkans, for example, reforms aimed at transforming former state media organisations into independent public media have repeatedly failed, with most of these institutions lacking editorial independence and serving as propagators of politically biased news content (Milosavljević, & Poler, 2018). In some of those countries state media are referred to as “red carpet” television channels whose main mission is to provide coverage of government protocol (Remzi, 2011).

The pervasive role of state media in bolstering capture is notable in many other countries with a tradition of state intervention. Direct government control of public media is predominant across most of sub-Saharan Africa (Mabweazara, Muneri & Ndlovu, 2020) where governments see public media as a mouthpiece of the political party that wins the elections. That is to a large extent also the consequence of the patrimonialistic political culture that has prevented development and progress in many fields, making media capture unavoidable. According to the State Media Monitor project, out of 125 state and public media outlets analysed in Sub-Saharan Africa, only three have editorial independence.

An obvious consequence of the overwhelming growth registered by propaganda media is the decline of professionalisation, as the media sector is divided between a dominant media segment that draws and grows on generous public support, and a frail, shrinking independent media bubble that survives on frugal financial resources, mostly through philanthropic donations or citizen support.

In this uneven marketplace, norms and standards lose importance, as journalists in government-controlled media accept to operate as disseminators of state-endorsed content. In Zimbabwe, for example, ministers and officials affiliated with the ruling party Zanu-PF are the main conduit for government interference with the editorial agenda of the country's public media (Mabweazara, Muneri & Ndlovu, 2020).

The gravest consequence of government control over the editorial agenda of captured media outlets is the quality of their news content. In media captured systems, the public narrative is dominated by the government propaganda machine, which is used to craft messages fitting the interests of the authorities. For example, the close relationship between Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán and the Russian President Vladimir Putin has fuelled the spread of pro-Kremlin propaganda among most of the Hungarian mainstream news media, most of which are pro-government. They based their reports on pro-Kremlin content, for example, from news providers run by the Russian government (such as RT or Sputnik News), according to a journalistic investigation run by the Hungarian outlet *Atlatszo* (Redl, 2022).

Lower journalistic standards not only erode journalists' professional reputation, but also fuel political polarisation, which has a considerable societal impact with negative consequences for the quality of democracy.

During the past decade, political polarisation has been on the rise in an increasing number of countries, including advanced, diversified, and competitive media markets (Druckman, Levendusky, & McLain, 2018), a sign that not only captured contexts are a fertile ground for polarisation. In the United States, for example, the proliferation of increasingly partisan media, which also include a slew of portals with dubious ownership, has been the engine of polarisation of the country's politics. In the current media environment, which offers access to a high number of sources of information, there seems to be a bias towards standing out, opposite to the tendency in the pre-digital media era when media organisations were concerned about neutrality and impartiality to achieve the largest audience possible (Klein, 2020). Furthermore, the declining trust in traditional media as a main source of facts, resulting from the rise of disinformation, also feeds into polarisation (Wilson, Parker, Feinberg, 2020).

Research on polarisation and media has grown sharply since 2012, focusing chiefly on the role played by social media in boosting polarisation and on a few

major media markets. Studies about polarisation in the United States, for example, abound (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

However, polarisation is clearly a trend found elsewhere, too (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2019). Studies focused on non-US cases provide evidence of a spiking incidence of polarisation linked with capture (or even triggered by it). In countries such as Turkey (Çelik, Bilali & Iqbal, 2017), Hungary (Bene & Szabó, 2019) or Poland, characterised by alarmingly high levels of media capture, political polarisation has been on the rise, yet each of these nations is different, with its own peculiarities. There is an obvious causality between media capture and political polarisation, since captured media outlets, built to operate as propaganda channels, trigger a counter-reaction from independent journalists and media, a clash that leads to an antithetic narrative.

What is specific to media captured environments is the rise of what Beata Klimkiewicz calls the “structural polarisation of the news environment” itself. (Klimkiewicz, 2021) This structural polarisation is a major rift in the media ecosystem, which becomes a battlefield between media outlets supportive of the government and media criticising the authorities (and usually exposing the manipulation techniques of government-controlled media), with almost no outlet left to cover current affairs objectively, without any pro – or anti-government bias.

Klimkiewicz identifies five “symptoms” of the structural polarisation in Poland, including policies that affect the mainstream news media environment, the growing partisanship of public service media, the shift towards “journalism of identity” propelled primarily by right-wing “identity” media, and the widening gap between media consumers based on political biases (Klimkiewicz, 2021).

Structural polarisation, through the fragmentation of the journalistic guild into opposing groups that use, if at all, widely different codes of conduct and self-regulatory rules, weakens the sector’s power and representativeness. In Poland, for example, it prevents journalists from building a strong united front when they negotiate with their owners or ask for legal changes (Klimkiewicz, 2021). In Serbia, another country where the government has captured swathes of media outlets, journalists are faced with a raft of challenges including job insecurity, editorial pressures, and low pay. As a result, many of them “embraced a pro-government bias and self-censorship, seeing them as necessary in improving their own status” (Radeljić, 2020).

When combined, de-professionalisation, structural polarisation and growing instability have a lasting effect on the journalistic profession. Complying with journalistic rules and norms becomes increasingly difficult in media environments dominated by lavishly funded propaganda outlets whose main goal is to churn out propagandistic content at a rapid pace. Due to structural polarisation, independent media outlets tend to be either reactive (obsessively focusing

on investigations aimed at unveiling wrongdoing by authorities), or corrective (with propagandistic content flooding the info-sphere, many journalists choose to focus on fact-checking and debunking false content circulated online). In the middle, between *reaction* and *correction*, the space for factual, day-to-day news production remains entirely in the hands of captured media. Finally, instability prompts numerous journalists to leave their profession for better jobs in related or sometimes totally unrelated sectors. Those who prefer to stay, as they do not have any other job option, often have to self-censor their work (Clark & Grech, 2017).

MEDIA CAPTURE IMPACT ON THE MARKET

Capture is equally disruptive to media markets, affecting first and foremost their competitiveness. As in media captured environments, dominant government-controlled media players are advantaged by both favourable regulatory decisions and financial support from the state, they enjoy a significant competitive advantage over independent media outlets. In most of the highly captured media contexts, market distortion is one of the most dramatic consequences of capture. Evidence of this trend abounds in Central and Eastern Europe.

Following a joint international press freedom mission organised in 2019 by a group of media freedom NGOs in Hungary, the report summarising the findings of the visit described the situation as follows: “The government has mobilised its control over state resources to marginalise the independent press and distort the media market in favour of a dominant pro-government narrative” (Conclusions, 2019).

State advertising is a powerful tool widely used in media captured environments to distort the market in favour of state-controlled media. The 2019 mission to Hungary found that “state advertising has been weaponized to fund pro-government media and starve independent outlets.” The latter are almost barred from accessing state funds, which is a major distorting factor “strongly affecting the sustainability of the sector.” (Conclusions, 2019).

A study tracking state ad spending in Hungary found that before 2010, a period when the Socialists were in power, state ad distribution was rather balanced. After 2010, the year when the right-wing party of Prime Minister Orbán won the elections, state ads have been gradually redirected to government friendly outlets (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020).

In the context of the profound economic crisis faced for over ten years by media in Hungary, as in other countries, the preferential allocation of state advertising has had a baleful effect on the overall sustainability of the independent media sector. “[...] The distortion that has emerged in the Hungarian market has the result that pro-government players in the media market are relatively sheltered against the challenges of market competition, while the independent players in turn become extremely vulnerable with respect to their competitive position

in the market” (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). One study presents evidence that targeted state advertising also influences the owners’ ideology (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021).

In Serbia, another country where authorities and allied businesses control a vast number of media outlets, capture is an insurmountable barrier to media sustainability as government-favoured outlets, both at the national and local levels, have an important competitive edge primarily thanks to the hefty state aid they regularly receive from the government (Burazer, 2021). The privatisation of local media during the 2014-2015 period has partly contributed to that situation, as it created “a vast number of private pro-government media, which kept being financed by the local municipalities” (Pavlovic, 2015).

In many cases, preferential allocation of state ad funds forces independent media out of the market. In Hungary, for example, many independent news companies had shut down as they could not compete with “the state’s limitless resources.” (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020)

In Latin America, where media ownership concentration is among the highest in the world, granting dominant players significant market power, the government, often at odds with large media companies, uses state advertising to secure favours from these groups. Argentina serves as an example, where state advertising plays a pivotal role for media companies. Under the leadership of Alberto Fernández, the government allocated approximately US\$ 180 million in advertising funds between December 2019 and August 2022, with the majority going to the country’s most prominent media conglomerates. Notably, the Clarín Group received 12% of the state advertising expenditure, followed closely by other media groups aligned with the government, such as Indalo, Octubre, and América (Mastrini et al., 2023).

In Mexico, a similar pattern emerged during the Enrique Peña Nieto regime. The government has dedicated a total amount of over US\$ 2 billion to advertising in the media, marking the highest level of government ad spending in the nation’s history (Ahmed, 2017). Moreover, leaders from all political parties used hefty state funds to purchase advertisements in their preferred media outlets, as revealed by data from Fundar, an advocacy group. However, this financial support comes with many strings attached. Editors were being pressured to provide favourable coverage prior to signing ad contracts. Consequently, the Mexican media landscape underwent a significant transformation, becoming a sector heavily influenced by politicians and government entities, who now dictate the editorial line (Ahmed, 2017).

The emergence of such government-funded media microcosms has been documented elsewhere. For example, the capture of a high number of media outlets in Bulgaria has sharpened the collusion between media owners and politicians. Specifically, the misuse of state resources to simultaneously fund and punish media

companies “has helped finance a pro-government media bubble” (Dzhambazova, 2022).

In Africa as well, national governments are the primary source of funding for news media (Ogola, 2017). In Rwanda, for instance, industry insiders estimated that up to 90% of advertising spending came from the state coffers (Ogola, 2017). This significant financial influence by the government in African media can be traced back to the challenges faced by African regimes in controlling the news agenda after the introduction of multi-party politics in the 1990s (Prempeh, 2007). As a result, African governments use funding to solidify their control over the media and maintain their hold on power.

The argument of nation-building has also been conveniently used to suppress criticism, with dissent being portrayed as a threat to nation-building. Additionally, government funding in the media is driven by the practical reality of slowly developing media markets that lack profitability in many African countries. However, state funding is not distributed to improve the market conditions but tends to favour outlets that remain loyal to the authorities, thereby serving as a tool to punish critics. For instance, in 2016, the South African government announced a significant reduction in its government ad budget for local commercial media, resulting in a loss of approximately US\$30 million for the commercial newspaper industry. Critics argue that this move was actually intended to retaliate against a media outlet critical of then President Jacob Zuma (Nevill, 2016).

Media capture also has a substantial impact on the overall advertising market, influencing, to a large extent, the logic and dynamic of commercial ad distribution. In countries with high levels of media capture, the influence of the state is reaching many key industries either directly, through conglomerates controlled by businessmen supportive of the government or indirectly, through various state institutions and politically controlled regulators whose decisions can affect businesses (for example, through the imposition of new taxes or the introduction of new taxation rules). As a result, many of these companies will refrain from advertising in independent media, fearing repercussions from the authorities.

In Czechia, for instance, once a vibrant media market, which during the past decade has been faced with the growing threat of capture, especially during a period when powerful oligarchs held positions in both government structures and media companies. The case of Andrej Babiš, a wealthy oligarch who controls one of the largest industrial conglomerates in the country, is emblematic. His accession to political power (as Finance, then Prime Minister) coincided with his business expansion in the media following the acquisition of Mafra, a leading publishing company.

Journalists say that cases of companies that withdraw their ads from independent media fearing retaliation by the Babiš-controlled authorities were common in the country when Babiš was Prime Minister. A report on media

capture in Czechia quotes marketing managers stating that they would have liked to support independent media but doing so would have been devastating for their company: “[...] Andrej [Babiš] will squash me. I don’t want to end up like Mr.” (Klíma, 2022).

Finally, media capture is a major obstacle to media sustainability because the overdominance of pro-government media badly distorts the market.

Firstly, capture empowers businesses close to the government to amass huge market power, which combined with preferential allocation of state funds, weakens the financial health of independent media. Without access to state funds and increasingly shunned by commercial advertisers, as described in this paper, independent media companies are faced with a financial predicament that often forces them to reduce operations or that leads to their collapse. The fragmentation of the Czech news market as a result of such uneven competition hampers the sustainability of independent media. Following the purchase by Babiš of Mafra in 2013, hundreds of journalists and top editors quit Mafra, many of them launching their own publications, which are, in most cases, small outlets run on shoestring budgets (Dragomir, 2018a).

Secondly, capture discourages investment in the media and experimentation with business models. Operating an independent media outlet in a market with large and powerful players controlled by the government is hardly lucrative. That is a basic reason why investors rarely venture into such markets. Moreover, experimenting with new streams of revenues is almost impossible in captured environments. Take subscriptions: in media ecosystems flooded by news content produced by a myriad of state-sponsored media providers, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to introduce competitive business models, such as subscriptions, as research of this phenomenon carried out in Central Asia has shown (Nussipov, 2019). Even philanthropic bodies that support independent journalism find it difficult to design grants for independent media in captured environments as their financial resources are only a fraction of the overall state funding that feeds the government-controlled media system.

To conclude, the market distortion triggered by media capture and the consequent obstacles to the development of the independent media sector are having lasting effects on the health of the media industry. In countries with high levels of capture, the media industry turns into a centralised, state-controlled media economy, heavily subsidised by the government.

MEDIA CAPTURE IMPACT ON THE AUDIENCE

In media captured environments, factual, verified news content is in short supply as most of the media scene is occupied by government-controlled outlets. While it is important to measure and document the impact of media capture on the journalistic profession and media market, the overall effect of capture

on audiences, both as citizens participating in democracy and users of media content who make political or consumer-related decisions is equally important. Yet, that is a major research gap that needs to be filled in order to gauge the amplitude of capture. In particular, data and evidence that help to understand how people's decisions shift because of exposure to captured media are needed.

In the absence of such granular research into the effects of media capture on people's thinking and decisions, existing studies highlight the link between media capture and distorted collective decisions, especially political ones.

A high level of wealth concentration, for example, is seen to lead to more corruption in media as it empowers businessmen to acquire media companies to use them to manipulate the electorate (Corneo, 2006). Electoral results seem to be a strong indicator of the impact of captured media on people's decisions. In Hungary, for example, Fidesz, a right-wing political party, has been in power since 2010, thanks largely to a vast propaganda machine consisting of hundreds of media outlets acquired through its oligarchs. An article documenting the spread of capture in Hungary shows that, since 2017, most of the country's 18 local newspapers have been bought by allies of the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, their content becoming strikingly similar (Nolan, 2019). The longevity of Fidesz in power is a strong indicator of the effectiveness of a well-oiled propaganda machine.

Government control of the news agenda also affects the political balance, according to studies focused on the link between the effects of media capture and political outcomes (Besley & Prat, 2006). An article published as part of the research project *Illiberal Turn* found a negative correlation between people's attitudes to immigration and public service media consumption in countries with captured public media such as Hungary and Poland. In contrast, more positive attitudes towards immigration were detected in the Czechia (Kondor, Mihelj, Štětka & Tóth, 2022), a country with a public service broadcaster that has remained independent despite various attempts by the government to bring it to heel.

Yet, in some highly captured media contexts, the efficiency of propaganda can be limited (Enikolopov & Petrova, 2015). Public availability of information about the media source helps people understand who controls the media that they consume, prompting some of them to discount, from time to time, information coming from those sources (Jie, Golosov, Qian, Kai, (2014). In some of those cases, propaganda can backfire if the narrative is too different from or totally contradicts the beliefs of the audience (Maja, Enikolopov, Petrova, Santarosa, Zhuravskaya, 2015).

Also, in regimes plagued by economic woes, the strategic control of media outlets plays a crucial role in shaping the public narrative. However, this tactic alone is insufficient to quell social unrest, as an increasing number of individuals, grappling with economic hardships, are growing disillusioned with the

ruling regime. A stark example of media capture can be witnessed in Nicaragua, where President Daniel Ortega has solidified his authority for over a decade, largely due to his tight grip on the nation's media landscape since his return to power in 2007 (Mestan, 2019). Nonetheless, despite the considerable impact of Ortega's propaganda machinery, with many outlets owned by his family members, the regime failed to stifle the massive wave of street protests that engulfed the nation from 2018 to 2019.

In contrast, there are countries grappling with similar economic challenges where the media capture remains effective. Egypt serves as a prime example, where the government, military, and secret services have collaborated to consolidate control over the majority of the country's media outlets, effectively shaping the public narrative and suppressing social reactions to economic difficulties. Moreover, the Egyptian government has become increasingly adept at employing propaganda, expanding its reach to include influencers with substantial social media followings who are enlisted to promote the state's interests, a strategy that further bolsters the government's influence (Michaelson & Safi, 2021).

In summary, the influence of media capture on the audience manifests in various ways and intensities, contingent upon local circumstances and factors. Nevertheless, there exists a significant research gap in assessing the societal consequences of media capture, particularly in comprehending the transformative effects on individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and cognition within captured environments.

CONCLUSIONS

Independent journalists all over the world are confronted with a plethora of dangers and threats. Nothing is worse than journalists killed doing their job. Legal pressures or methodical harassment of journalists are highly disruptive, too. The staggering increase in cyberattacks against journalists adds to the woes.

Yet, because of its systematic nature of gaining a disproportionately high level of control, media capture is arguably the most extraordinary challenge that independent media grapple with today.

Research describing cases of media capture has grown in recent years, shedding light on the characteristics of capture in various contexts. However, studies of the impact of capture are still in short supply. This paper has attempted to fill part of that gap by describing what happens with journalists, journalism and media markets and how audience tastes and consumption patterns change in captured environments.

While more data is needed to understand this impact, especially when it comes to how people's thinking and attitudes are swayed by captured media, the data

gathered and analysed in this paper unearths a series of significant effects of capture on the overall media ecosystem.

By destroying professional norms, polarising the journalistic community, distorting media markets, eroding the sustainability of independent media, and manipulating audiences' preferences, tastes and political choices, media capture dramatically transforms media ecosystems, turning them into vast, government-curated, propaganda machines that fundamentally change how people get information and participate in society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The article "The Capture Effect. How Media Capture Affects Journalists, Markets and Audiences" was prepared within the project "The Media System and Journalistic Culture in Bulgaria (Research carried out in the light of the Three Models of Media – Politics relations of Hallin and Mancini)". The project is implemented by the Veliko Tarnovo University "St. St. Cyril and Methodius" and is financed by the Scientific Research Fund of Bulgaria under contract №KP-06-H35/6 – 18.12.2019.

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