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EDITORIAL

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Media Capture and Transitional Settings: Towards Theoretical and Empirical Developments

Mireya Márquez-Ramírez
0000-0001-5890-2363
Universidad Iberoamericana Mexico City, Mexico

Nelson Costa Ribeiro
0000-0003-4724-550X
Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Portugal

INTRODUCTION

Media capture is rampant around the world. There are easily recognizable instances throughout the global North and South. There are oligarchs seizing, through questionable tactics, struggling media houses as part of their more extensive business portfolio and executives of privately owned media who serve in boardrooms of the institutions in charge of regulating the media industry. Agents of the state are known to grant broadcasting licenses to their cronies and may include political websites that pop up during election time to sell news coverage to the highest bidder. State and political agents typically seek to control the media, news agendas, and news content via legislation, funding, ownership structures, market distortion, and other means. For their part, media owners, executives, and business cartels often use their own media organizations to attempt to influence politics for their own advantage and business interests.

Across a broad range of disciplinary studies—from economics to political science to media and journalism studies— the concept of media capture has become an encompassing term to typify some of the most pressing issues related to media control and power. So far, the most cited definition was coined by political scientist Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2013), who in taking a step forward from earlier studies on the subject, broadened the concept to include various perpetrators of capture beyond just the State. Mungiu-Pippidi defines

it as "the interference of influential actors and vested interests in the news media, as individual parties act on their benefit, for private purposes, and to the detriment of the public interest and the democratic functions of journalism" (2013: 40-41). Scholars around the world now follow that lead. They use the concept to refer to cases, in which State or corporate agents act to gain control of the media or intervene in news decision-making processes to obtain benefits at the expense of professional standards, norms, and societal functions.

In doing so, the concept of media capture has invertedly helped bridge some of the most contrasting arguments –from the radical and liberal perspectives— about the role of media in the face of governments and the market: the liberal argument of the State controlling the media to curtail their watchdog functions and the radical argument of media corporations exerting undue power for their own benefit to maintain the status quo. There is an argument from earlier proponents of the concept still insisting on distinguishing media capture from media power by claiming that the former concept only occurs when the government, rather than other actors, actively attempts to influence media markets or media ownership (Besley & Prat, 2006; Prat, 2015). However, the conceptual and empirical expansion of contemporary stances on media capture now recognize various facets of capture perpetrators, mechanisms, and outcomes that overlap with traditional forms of media control and media power (Petrova, 2008; Shiffrin, 2017; 2018). The term's increasing flexibility now allows for the freely characterization of the multiplicity of actors, interactions, strategies, and outcomes, including corporate and State perpetrators involved (Enikolopov & Petrova, 2015; Atal, 2017). Media capture can encompass the undue influence on regulation, investment in media firms, the funding of segments of the media through political advertising, paid articles or subsidies, or the new dominance and business models of digital platforms (Petrova, 2008; Shiffrin, 2017; 2018; 2021; Dragomir, 2019).

Media capture studies nowadays adopt more tangible macro, meso, and microlevels of analysis to account for the phenomenon's complex features, shapes, and directions. Capture can affect or characterize entire regional news media systems, markets, and regulatory frameworks (Guerrero & Márquez, 2014) or specific media segments like public service broadcasting (Dragomir, 2019; Dragomir & Horowitz, 2021; Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). Capture can materialize primarily in the ownership structures of media houses (Bignon & Flandreau, 2014), in journalists' interaction with their sources (Au & Kawai, 2012) or the news routines that are specific to a news desk (Atal, 2018). Capturing forces and actors can also be transnational (Frisch et al., 2018), digital (Nielsen, 2017; Shiffrin, 2021), and platform-centric (Usher, 2021). Capture can involve sponsors (Gabor, 2021), advertisers (Gurun & Butler, 2012; Beattie, 2020), or technological infrastructures (Nechushtai, 2018; Napoli, 2021) affecting and shaping media content. Digital

media outlets can, directly and indirectly, increase the possibilities of capture because original news from traditional media has a limited exclusive supply period due to copying by cut-and-paste digital outlets (Choi & Yang, 2021). The capture agents, victims, and strategies have become increasingly complex, whereas the outcomes of captured relations mostly result in limited journalistic autonomy, curtailed freedom, distorted content, and misinformed citizenry.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPT

Early capture theories focused almost exclusively on the regulatory field (Stigler, 1971) by noting that regulatory agencies tend to be dominated by the interest agent they are meant to regulate. Media capture therewith became an extension of the more established concept of state capture, where certain actors and sectors successfully manage to twist public reforms and policies in their favor, primarily through illicit or opaque methods (Hellman & Shankermann, 2000: 546). Transferring the idea to the media, the regulatory bodies that oversee the media and audiovisual sectors would have their independence compromised, as players would act on behalf and in favor of the sector and not the public interest. This type of regulatory media capture is, in fact, paramount across European States (Dragomir, 2019), where control over public media's governing bodies or the fragility of independent regulators is commonplace (Fernández Alonso, 2022). However, the capture direction has diversified, placing the State not only as the main perpetrator and beneficiary of capture but also advancing a more sophisticated model. Besley and Pratt (2006), for example, put forward one of the first frameworks to show how specific features of the media market determined the ability of governments to exercise media capture and influence political outcomes such as corruption, voting turnover, electoral results, and, ultimately, political accountability. Biased content is the proxy of media capture; politicians, interest groups, and media actors are capture enablers; media property and market structures are the mechanisms; and a misinformed electorate and null accountability are the outcomes. Undoubtedly, the research literature gained sophistication and complexity with these conceptualizations.

Moreover, these early studies argue that balanced and plural media markets help safeguard against media capture and protect media independence. Distorted market structures and barriers to entry in the media market led to more capture and worse political outcomes, whereas media plurality is said to safeguard against it (Besley & Prat, 2006: 729). Increased wealth concentration raises the probability of corrupt media. It provides them with a patron with much to benefit from manipulating the electorate. However, differences with respect to endowments, preferences, technologies, and market structure will generally lead to various

political–economic equilibria (Corneo, 2006). Competition in the mass media market does not always hold a universally positive influence in deterring media capture by bad politicians (Trombetta, & Rossignoli, 2021). Therefore, the types of interaction between states and market structures are paramount to understand the directions and facets of media capture. This in turn prompts the need to adopt meso – and micro-levels of analysis to examine all the types of interactions, agents, structures, and organizations. Even if not explicitly branded as such, capture can involve the whole market (Besley & Prat, 2006) or selected news media only and can take place at several levels of the news ecosystem (Corduneanu-Huci & Hamilton, 2018) or target key inside agents (McMillan & Zoido, 2004). Loius-Sidois and Mougin (2021) distinguish two types of capture where a principal can either influence journalistic investigation (internal capture) or let the media investigate and pay to suppress news stories at the publication stage (external capture).

Evolution in the media capture concept means that research has gone further than pioneering studies like Besley and Prat (2006). Recent typologies or classifications of media capture do not always consider state agents as the sole or primary perpetrators or beneficiaries of media capture; neither do they place the focus at the macro-level alone or just focus on the market structure. For example, Enikolopov and Petrova (2015) divide studies into capture by the State, capture in media content, and capture by other interest groups like media owners, advertisers, journalists, politicians, or private companies, suggesting the enabler, mechanisms, strategies, and outcomes vary.

At the macro and meso levels, Dragomir (2019) observes the existence of regulatory capture, control of public service media, use of state financing as a control tool, and ownership takeover. For his part, Stiglitz (2017) proposes a taxonomy of media capture that goes from macro to micro levels of action and includes ownership, financial incentives, censorship, and cognitive capture. Meanwhile, Atal (2017) proposes that state, plutocratic, corporate, and intersecting capture play out together, especially in the global South, where independent media institutions are still consolidating in the context of the shift to digital forms of communication. The study by Mabweazara and colleagues (2020) suggests the existence of "interconnected driving forces of media capture," which coalesce around legal and administrative regulation, financial and economic enticements, and the dynamics of media ownership.

MEDIA CAPTURE WORLDWIDE

Transitional democracies tend to present us with many types of media capture where State agents, corporate agents, or a combination of both enable assorted forms of capture. In these regimes, boundaries between political and business actors are blurrier due to the prevalence of media and political alliances forged for the benefit of a few players. Hence, capture can materialize at intersecting levels due to corruption, the weakness of both the rule of law and the media markets, instrumentalized public media, and discretionary allocation of State funding. There is also the matter of clientelist and patrimonial political cultures, as states do not always resort to repressive measures of media control, but to more subtle means of interventionism..

In countries across Eastern Europe, media systems often tend to operate between "democratic theory and not-always democratic practice" (Gross & Jakubowicz, 2013: 11), as the media are deeply embedded into the clientelist system that enables elite-to-elite communication (Örnebring, 2012). The transitional period from the Communist era was characterized by the continuity of elites as the former bureaucratic ruling class restructured itself in the new market economies. This restructuring resulted in former state agents and their cronies becoming the primary owners of private capital and instrumentalizing emerging media for their self-serving purposes. One such consequence is that, across Balkan countries, "opaque and corruptive local business-political networks" exercise leverage over the ownership and editorial structures of domestic outlets, which, in turn, enable Russian media influence in the political debate (Filipova, 2018: 11).

Since informal rules and practices often subvert or undermine new formal regulations introduced after the abandonment of communism (Ryabinska, 2014), media outlets are typically captured by vested interests – whether market to cartels – often in the quest for political influence rather than for profit alone (Mungiu-Pippidi & Ghinea, 2012). In Poland and Hungary, political parties typically take over the public media sphere and indirectly extort pressure on private media outlets to manipulate discourses (Kerpel, 2017). Capture operates through large advertising favors from the government to connected media in exchange for coverage favors from connected media to the government (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021). In Balkan countries, public service broadcasters display a lack of editorial independence due to pro-government news content promoted by the ruling elites (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). Another typical media capture strategy devised by the State in the region is public funding (Dragomir, 2018), either in the way of state-administered media; official or public advertising; State subsidies; or market-disruption measures.

Other transitional democracies are not free from these phenomena. In Latin America, for example, there has been a historically strong private orientation

of media ownership and a weak development of public service broadcasting, facilitating hospitable conditions for media-power kind of capture. In tandem with the periods of political authoritarianism of the 20th century, media systems historically developed amidst centripetal factors (Hughes & Lawson, 2005), such as generalized weakness in the rule of law, holdover authoritarian legislation, oligarchic ownership of media outlets or uneven journalistic standards. Coupled with weak advertising markets, for-profit political parallelism, and overall clientelist transactions underpinned by heavy dependence on governmental advertising as the primary source of income, 'liberal-captured' media systems reign supreme in the region after the wave of political democratization (Márquez & Guerrero, 2014). Some characteristics of the pluralist polarized media (PPM) systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) have developed. But not necessarily in the Mediterranean fashion of formal state intervention in media policies, public broadcasting, or in the overtly partisan press ideologically aligned to, and instrumentalized by, political parties. The development of PPM characteristics in Latin America occurred in the more subtle ways of media and political collusion that underlies the apparently liberal structures through which private news media supposedly operate. In Latin American captured-liberal media systems, the political neutrality of news content is not necessarily an ideological position or a tenet of professionalism but a commodity to exchange. When high levels of clientelism are present (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002) privately owned, for-profit media outlets tend to survive and even thrive, not from private advertisers in the traditional liberal sense but from political patrons and official advertising. Private media exchange coverage for benefits, such as advertisement contracts, tax exemptions, permits, and license renewals to grow business (Márquez-Ramírez, 2014) or retort to other capturing strategies when economic and political elites wrestle for power (Rivera Robles, 2021). Since party platforms and orientations are not as clear-cut in presidential systems as they are in parliamentarian democracies (De Albuquerque, 2013), political parallelism displays its own unique characteristics in the region –especially with the arrival of leftist popular governments, where distinct political parallelism has emerged (Kitzberger, 2023), all of which facilitate the emergence of capture mechanisms that benefit both State control and media power. In fact, across Eastern Europe and Latin America, clientelism appears to be a cornerstone of media-state and market relations even after processes of political democratization and economic reforms: both State control and media power benefit from the implementation of capture mechanisms.

Other regions also offer their unique instances of media capture. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Mabweazara et al. (2020) link a complex web of phenomena to media capture, such as patrimonialism, clientelist media practices, and brown envelope journalism. Akin to many societies across the global south, in a patrimonial

media system, the media "become subordinate to individuals who wield political power," as patrimonialism affects both state-controlled and private media (Mabweazara *et al*., 2020: 6-7). More straightforward mechanisms of State media capture also prevail, as governments across sub-Saharan Africa seek control of independent media through economic and legal pressures or regulatory measures as well as attacks on individual journalists (Cagé & Mougin, 2022; Höglund & Schaffer, 2022).

Moreover, in recent decades oligarchs originating from autocratic political regimes have also expanded their influence on media markets in Western countries aiming to promote their own agendas. This trend became especially visible following the 2008 crisis with investments by Russian businessmen Roman Abramovich and Alexander Abramov's in the British media and communication sectors and with the acquisition of strategic Portuguese companies by members of the Angolan elite. Two of the most notorious investors in the Portuguese media system were Isabel dos Santos, the eldest daughter of the Angolan president José Eduardo dos Santos and the richest woman in Africa, and Álvaro Madaleno Sobrinho, a member of the regime's *nomenklatura* (Figueiras & Ribeiro, 2013). Together they gained significant control over several media outlets before being involved in multiple criminal charges following what became known as the Luanda Leaks.

A PATH FORWARD FOR MEDIA CAPTURE STUDIES: PRESENTING THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Together, most capture studies across transitional democracies show that capture is not static, as it can take many faces and operate in multiple scenarios beyond the concentrated markets and corporate types of ownership that prevail in established democracies. Certainly, monodirectional top-to-bottom capture relations are constant, as States are still the most discernible actors in attempting to influence the media through political advertising, regulation, funding, or other more punitive mechanisms. Such processes can be the most common and easiest to identify and characterize, even if they run in parallel to other intersecting forms of capture. As we have shown, capture can be complexly intertwined in many ongoing processes across materialization levels, structures, and agencies.

Undoubtedly, this burgeoning media capture scholarship is empirically rich and has yielded promising research avenues. Media capture has become a useful but overarching concept that permits theoretically dispersed phenomena to be covered and studied under the same conceptual umbrella, often tying media power and media control scholarship together. However, as argued elsewhere (Márquez-Ramírez, 2024), the downside is that the concept can become redundant if used as another word for more theoretically developed terms. For example, studies

can refer to media markets, systems, industries, proprietors, journalists, news routines, newsbeats, and news content as a proxy for "media." For their part, phenomena like distorted regulation, censorship, control, media-state collusion, partisanship, instrumentalization, political parallelism, and biased digital algorithms can all account as proxies of capture, with various external and internal actors and factors in-between (Márquez Ramírez, 2024). Most studies also fail to explicitly declare a macro, meso, or micro-level of analysis, observance, and materialization of capture and its direction.

In brief, media capture scholarship still needs (and is in the process of) theoretical maturing, conceptual systematicity and empirical evidence to move the concept forward and allow for better comparison across various dimensions. The concept's flexibility means there is a need for a more apparent distinction between media controlled by politics and vice-versa. Many media capture studies implicitly adopt a loosely defined understanding of capture while complexifying the participation of a growing number of actors, scenarios, and forces but rarely clarifying the role played by each. Future research should avoid taking media capture for granted, aiming to define more explicitly what exactly is being captured, by whom, and the effects, actors, mechanisms, and outcomes involved in these processes.

Aiming to expand our understanding of the strengths and limitations of the concept of media capture, this Special Issue of the *Central European Journal of Communication* offers a combination of theoretical articles and case studies, authored by young and senior scholars, that together discuss and make use of the concept as an analytical tool. While some authors call our attention to the need to better problematizing the connection between media capture and related concepts such as media instrumentalization and party colonization, others apply it to shed light on how media companies, systems and newsrooms are trimmed in their capacity to scrutinize power structures due to their capture by political and economic political and economic agents.

The opening article by Marius Dragomir is "The Capture Effect. How Media Capture Affects Journalists, Markets and Audiences". Dragomir offers a discussion on the development of the concept of media capture and an analysis of what the author considers to be its four key components and variants: regulatory capture, control of state and public service media, use of state financing as a control tool, and private ownership takeover. After demonstrating that governments and private businesses have succeeded in capturing the media across countries and world regions, Dragomir presents compelling data demonstrating its impact on journalism, media markets, and audiences. Overall, the article makes a persuasive argument about how media capture not only destroys professional norms and distorts markets but also manipulates audience preferences with deep-rooted consequences for the sustainability of the democratic process.

Authored by Ivo Indzhov, the second article in this Special Issue – "Bulgarian Media Since 1989: From Instrumentalization to Capture" – starts by discussing the connections and establishing the differences between media instrumentalization and media capture, arguing that the latter is more adequate to describe the evolution of media systems in former communist countries, marked by a collusion of interests between politics and media owners. The author then applies Dragomir's (2019) four-component model to analyze Bulgaria's media system development after its transition to democracy. It concludes that the political-oligarchic dependencies have become a central feature of the country's media market which poses a serious threat to the advance of democracy. Indzhov concludes by arguing that the situation of Bulgaria is significantly different from that of other countries, namely in Southern Europe, that despite dealing with high levels of media instrumentalization, is less permeable to the influence of an oligarchic elite that exercises a severe control over the communication ecosystem in Eastern Europe.

The third research article, "Media Capture and Perspectives for Media Development in a Fragile Media System" by Johanna Mack, looks at the development of the media in Guinea-Bissau in the postcolonial period. It demonstrates how the successive governments have taken measures to ensure the control of the media system. Based on documental analysis, interviews, and focus groups with journalists and media experts, the article presents a three-level analysis of the country's legislative, political, and economic systems, media companies, and the freedom allowed to journalists. Mack offers an insightful view on what one may expect from the media in fragile states, in which political actors can easily restrict the autonomy of independent outlets. As Mack highlights, the case of Guinea-Bissau, marked by regulatory capture, presents similarities to other Sub-Saharan countries where the media ecosystem is captured through legislation, with the few independent media being dependent on subsidies from non-governmental organizations and religious groups.

In "Captured by the Elites – The Portuguese System in Liberalism (1820-1926), Isadora Ataíde Fonseca takes us back to the colonial period. She argues that media capture can be a useful theoretical construct to understand how elites used and appropriated the media across historical contexts. By discussing the cases of the press in Macao, Angola, and one newspaper published in Lisbon targeted to those living in the Portuguese Empire, the article argues that print media functioned as an important tool for forming an 'Imperial Public Sphere' controlled by the elites. Fonseca demonstrates how newspapers produced or targeted at those living in the colonies were capture by the economic, political, and military elites, thus offering an unfair representation of the social relations in the colonies.

The following article by Péter Bajomi-Lázár, entitled "Media Capture Theory: A Paradigm Shift?", argues for the need to rethink the concept of 'media capture'

and to consider its limitations. Due to the epistemological changes being proposed, the article is part of the section "Methods & Concepts" through which the *Central European Journal of Communication* aims to contribute to the discussion of new methodological and theoretical constructs capable of opening new research avenues. Bajomi-Lázár offers a critical reflection on media capture and questions its relevance in a context marked by social media that allows political elites to bypass traditional media systems and reach out directly to audiences. Besides arguing that the concept of media capture is experiencing a paradigm shift, the manuscript suggests that scholars may better use other terms, such as 'party colonization of the media,' to describe the level of freedom allowed to the media across political contexts. Through an analysis of several party configurations in Eastern European countries, the author concludes that one-party colonization leads to much lower levels of media freedom when compared to a multi-party alternative.

Along with the research articles presented above, the Special Issue also offers a Section with two research reports that present a diagnosis of the media systems in Mongolia and in Greece in the post-2010 crisis. Both shed light on understudied cases and reveal the profound entanglements between traditional and new forms of media control. Written through the lens of media capture, the research reports demonstrate how media outlets, including the digital-specific, fall under the control of political-business elites that aim to control the public discourse. In the first manuscript, Undrah Baasanjav, Poul Erik Nielsen and Munkhmandakh Myagmar provide a diachronic analysis of the media system in Mongolia from the country's transition to liberal democracy to the present. Based on documental analysis and interviews with media experts, the article provides an insightful characterization of the media market development, the legal and regulatory frameworks in which it operates, and the state intervention. The author conclude that only a few independent media companies were able to establish themselves, while most of the Mongolian media ecosystem is owned by politicians and businessmen in a traditional scenario of media capture.

The second research report is authored by Michael Nevradakis who looks at the case of Greece with a particular focus on the role played by social media in bolstering the Greek public sphere following the 2010s economic crisis. As the article demonstrates, the crisis fueled the emergence of several online media initiatives that were presented as a forum for expressing new opinions and ideas that were then absent from traditional media. Nevradakis investigates two case studies in detail, the Independent Greek's social media, and the Nikos.gr news portal-blog. He concludes that, despite having been launched to expand the range of voices that reached the public sphere, these initiatives ends up being controlled by the same political and business elites that have captured traditional media.

The Special Issue also includes an interview with Alina Mungui-Pippidi, professor of Comparative Public Policy at the Department of Political Science

at LUISS Guido Carli in Rome, who is a renowned researcher on the corruption phenomenon. In the interview conducted by Bissera Zankova, Professor Mungi--Pippidi comments on the regression of democracy, the fragility of democratic institutions in the post-Soviet space, and the role played by the media, namely in contexts of authoritarian politics and corruption. The interview is followed by a report on the conference "Captured Media: Exploring Media Systems in and after Transitions", that took place at the Catholic University of Portugal in Lisbon, in December 2022, sponsored by the Research Center for Communication and Culture and the research project "The Media System and Journalistic Culture in Bulgaria" implemented by the "St. Cyril and St. Methodius, Veliko Tarnovo University". The event functioned as a forum to discuss the evolution of the concept of media capture and how it can be used as a conceptual tool to understand the development of media systems across geographies.

In its various sections, the Special Issue offers valuable manuscripts produced by authors originating from various geographies and whose work covers a wide variety of countries from Eastern Europe to Africa and East Asia. The Special Issue presents a new outlook on the topic of media capture. It demonstrates the concept's strength as an analytical tool while also advocating for its limitation and its interconnections with other theoretical constructs to be revisited and reconsidered.

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

Marius Dragomir
0000-0003-2078-348X
Central European University in Vienna, Austria
University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

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 all, 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.

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Bulgarian Media Since 1989: From Instrumentalization to Capture

Ivo Indzhov
Freelance Researcher, Bulgaria

Abstract: In the second decade of the 21st century, Bulgaria earned the unsavory reputation of having the least media freedom in the EU's (Reporters Without Borders). This paper examines the current state of Bulgarian media based on two research concepts: for instrumentalization, respectively the capture of media. The latter, especially when talking about the specifics and consequences of political-oligarchic pressure on media, is more appropriate for countries with serious deficits in their democratic development. The main purpose of the paper is to study media capture in Bulgaria at a structural level: regulatory capture, control of public service media, use of state financing as a control tool, ownership takeover (based on concepts by Dragomir, 2019, IPI, n. D.), including appropriate cases. The analysis makes use of material from to scientific articles, media publications, other publicly available sources, expert interviews.

Keywords: Bulgaria; transition; media; instrumentalization; capture.

INTRODUCTION: MEDIA IN BULGARIA – FREE BUT NOT INDEPENDENT

Thirty-five years after the beginning of the democratic transition in Bulgaria, there has been a constitutional and legally guaranteed freedom of the media, but also serious problems with their independence. The state of the media environment deteriorated during the right-of-center GERB party administration between 2009 and 2021 (with small interruptions) – a clientelist formation, led almost solely by the three-time Prime Minister Boyko Borissov.

In their "Nations in Transit 2022" annual report, Freedom House found that in Bulgaria, a country with a "semi-consolidated democracy", special interests "exert influence" on media and editorial independence and can lead to self-censorship despite the independence of media in general. These weaknesses were established against the backdrop of models of political patronage, conflicts of interest and opaque contracts by the former GERB administration (Petrov,

2022). For a long time, Bulgaria has ranked the worst out of all EU member states on the Reporters Without Borders (RWB) World Press Freedom Index. In 2010, at the beginning of the GERB rule, Bulgaria ranked 70th. In 2021, the last year in which GERB was in power Bulgaria ranked 112.[1] Reporters Without Borders then found Bulgaria's media environment was in a dire situation, for which there were several reasons as Fileva (2021) notes. First, the few independent journalists that existed were not only subjected to defamatory campaigns and harassment by the state, but they were also the subject of intimidation and violence. Secondly, politicians and oligarchs had corrupted pro-government media. Thirdly, the government distributed European and other public service media funding with a complete lack of transparency, allowing the ruling party to 'buy' favorable media reflection. Fourthly, judicial harassment of independent media such as *Bivol* and the *Economedia* group posed a constant threat to press freedom[2] (Fileva, 2021).

Against the backdrop of the presence of domestic public interest "watchdogs" in Bulgaria, the poorest in the EU with major flaws in the field of the supremacy of law, high levels of corruption are not surprising. In 2022, the country ranked 72nd in Corruption Perceptions Index on Transparency International (TI), second to last in the EU (just ahead of Hungary), and remained an example "of a systematic problem with corruption and of ineffective fight to tackle it" (TI Bulgaria, 2022).

The focus of this article will be the issues that worsened at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. The analysis will be done through the prism of two concepts established in international media studies: instrumentalization and capture of media. In the theoretical part, the article will try to prove that although these two concepts are often viewed as both sides of a coin, there are significant differences between them. Instrumentalization is the more versatile concept prevalent in, for example, Southern European countries. Media capture is more adequate when researching the state of media in countries such as former communist countries in Europe, which, although EU member states have serious flaws in their democratic development. The main objective of the article is to study the media in Bulgaria at the structural level (regulation, financing, ownership) as a prerequisite for influence on media content.

1 In 2022 and 2023, as a result of a change in the methodology of the index, Bulgaria significantly improved its ranking – from 112 to 91, respectively to 71st place. The higher assessment is most likely also a consequence of the political change in 2021 and 2022, but Reporters without Borders found that the authorities have failed to implement systematic measures to improve press freedom (see e.g. Fileva, 2023).

2 SLAPP cases are becoming an increasingly serious problem for Bulgarian journalists and media. The insurance company "Lev Ins" has filed a lawsuit in the Sofia City Court against Mediapool for BGN 1 million (approximately EUR 500 thousand) on the grounds that it felt affected by material that quotes and retells a transcript of a meeting of the Council of Ministers (Mediapool.bg, 2023).

The article also aims to tackle a more specific task – to create a typology of the capture of Bulgarian media, discussing specific cases, based on the available information in scientific articles, media publications, other publicly available sources, expert interviews.

THEORY: MEDIA INSTRUMENTALIZATION VERSUS MEDIA CAPTURE

As stated earlier, clarifying the difference between these two terms is the key for this analysis. First, it is necessary to note that the two terms, which are used both about democracies in transition (from or to authoritarianism), and about established democracies, will be distinguished between the stringent control exercised over media in authoritarian regimes. Secondly, both concepts refer to a negative impact on media organizations, most often from external factors, although the threat may come from "within". Some authors, in practice, view them as synonyms. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen cites Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) argument that media capture is synonymous with the concept journalism research called instrumentalization, and that capture involves "media being operated not for profit or for public service, but as an instrument for the pursuit of other interests, either purely political or tangled up between politics and commerce" (Nielsen, 2017, p. 38).

Secondly, in their landmark work, "Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics", Hallin and Mancini (2004) popularized the existing concept of the instrumentalization of the media and characterize it as "control of the media by outside actors – parties, politicians, social groups or movements, or economic actors seeking political influence – who use them to intervene in the world of politics" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 37). Anya Schiffrin (2021) views this definition of Hallin and Mancini of instrumentalization of the media as one of the most important definitions of media capture. Other authors, however, find more traditional threats of instrumentalization to the media in democratic societies. Jarren and Donges (2002) cite Schatz (1997) and Langenbuher (1983) to list how political systems in democratic societies try to instrumentalize the media system, through "the direct or indirect influence on the media, the expansion of press offices, the professionalization of political public relations, the development of persuasive PR strategies, etc." (Jarren & Donges, 2002, p. 27).

Thirdly, although both terms began to be actively used in the first decade of the 21st century, media capture came to be more preferred in the second decade in research into the serious flaws in media systems transitioning to democracy. Compared to the "instrumentalization of media" in Mediterranean countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), the problems of media in the former communist

countries in Central and Eastern Europe were presented more as media capture, as being much deeper and more systemic.

Hallin and Mancini link the term instrumentalization specifically to the political condition of the media, but also add that they can be instrumentalized because of commercial pressure (commercialization). Both types of instrumentalization, which in many cases act at the same time, can endanger the professionalization of journalism in its three components: limiting its autonomy; political criteria become prevalent over independent journalistic norms and rules; media mainly serves private interests instead of offering public service journalism (Hallin & and Mancini, 2004, p. 37). The professionalization of journalism is one of the four characteristics that Hallin and Mancini used to typologize 18 media systems in Western Europe and North America[3] and distinguish them into "three models of media and politics": Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model; North/Central Europe or Democratic Corporatist Model; North Atlantic or Liberal Model (2004, pp. 67–68)[4].

The instrumentalization of media is more widely practiced in countries with traditions of clientelism. Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) consider political clientelism as the cause of the vulnerable position of media in Mediterranean countries, and especially in "kinship with" Latin America, where powerful economic circles have entered politics. Political clientelism:

> is a particularistic form of social organization, in which formal rules are less important relative to personal connections or, in later forms of clientelism, connections mediated through political parties, the Church, and other organizations. While rational-legal authority tends to be associated with a political culture that enshrines the notion of the "common good" or "public interest" (…) in a clientelist system commitment to particular interests is stronger and the notion of the "common good" weaker. (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 58).

Clientelism is associated with the instrumentalization of media, both in public (prioritizing political loyalty over professional criteria), as well as private (the political ties of the owners are decisive for obtaining state contracts and

3 The remaining three characteristics are: structure of the media market with an emphasis on the development of the mass press; political parallelism, describing the level of political orientation of the press in different countries; the role of the state in relation to the media system. Hallin and Mancini's conceptual framework for analyzing media systems also includes an additional component – their political context, which is examined using five other characteristics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 21–45, pp. 46–65).

4 There are justified criticisms of this typology, including that it is not applicable to non-Western media systems. Nevertheless, the "three models" and especially the "Mediterranean" are the starting point for comparative studies and typolizing of media systems in Eastern Europe and other regions of the world.

concessions, including broadcast licenses; owners use their media to influence politics) (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 58)

Spassov (n.d.) argues clientelism is one of the main problems of media, particularly combined with the political system of "semi-consolidated" democracy like Bulgaria. There is a direct correlation between the weaknesses of the political system (also marked by widespread corruption in the government) and the flaws of the media system, characterized by the lack of autonomy. "There are almost no independent media in Bulgaria and most of them – like most of the political parties – are characterized by clientelism" (Spassov, n.d.)

Clientelism creates a favorable environment for corruption practices, especially in the context of highly developed networking dependencies between politics, business and media. But not every form of corruption is clientelism. If clientelism is a chronic disease, corruption is acute pain. Media corruption illustrates the capture of media by private, corporate or political-oligarchic interests.

The concept of media capture is a complement to the base phenomenon state capture. The latter term was first used by the World Bank in the early 21st century to refer to former communist countries in Central Asia. Transparency International defines state capture as:

> one of the most pervasive forms of corruption, where companies, institutions or powerful individuals use corruption such as the buying of laws, amendments, decrees or sentences, as well as illegal contributions to political parties and candidates, to influence and shape a country's policy, legal environment and economy to their own interests. (Martini, 2014, p. 1).

Mungiu-Pippidi (2013, p. 36) views systemic corruption as a major problem for post-communist countries, as "a form of particularistic social organization where the norm is corruption itself" also being the foundation of "systemic media corruption". Mungiu-Pippidi uses the term media capture with regard to media systems in the former communist countries in Eastern Europe.

> 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, pp. 40–41).

She distinguishes three paths of development of Eastern European media systems after the fall of communism: (i) open competition, independent media and media pluralism; (ii) controlled, limited competition and media capture

by political and economic interests; (iii) a return to censorship and media control (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013, p. 40).

Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez (2014) explore the 'captured liberal' model of media systems in Latin America and distinguish two key aspects of the capture of media in the region, although with varying degrees: the degree of regulatory (in)efficiency" and "the (limited) watchdog role of media". Guerrero (2017, p.123) describes two aspects as: "low regulatory efficiency" and "high degree of instrumentalization of the normative function of the media". There is a dichotomy here: after the transition from authoritarian to democratic systems and a neoliberal market model, instead of establishing autonomous and professional media, the commercial media "were captured by particular actors who often fused political and economic power" as the authors claim (Hallin, 2016).

Daniel C. Hallin (2016) criticizes the concept of the captured liberal model for being too general to describe Latin America in view of the diversity of media systems in the region and varying degrees of capture and independence of the media. At the same time, Hallin (2016) considers aspects of the captured liberal model with the flaws pointed out by Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez (2014) may also be relevant to analyze other parts of the world. Aspects such as: control of many media outlets through their dependence on government advertising; providing broadcasting licenses as a patronage tool; the involvement of political actors in private media takeover schemes.

Marius Dragomir (2019) addresses the problem of media capture within the interactions between politicians and oligarchs in Eastern Europe. Dragomir in the context of the well-known flaws of the media systems in the region, he refers to a weakness of public media, an uncontrolled concentration of media property, increased importance of government-sponsored media, which could be closer related to the more traditional "instrumentalization" of media. In this context, Dragomir highlights the new trends, of the capture of media:

> [T]he collusion between the political class and media owners has reached unprecedented levels, leading to a phenomenon known as media capture, a situation where most or all of the news media institutions are operating as part of a government-business cartel that controls and manipulates the flow of information with the aim of protecting their unrestricted and exclusive access to public resources. (Dragomir, 2019, p. 1).

On the interweaving the traditional state media control with control by business interests (see also Schiffrin, 2017, pp. 2–3).

The intensity of media capture in a national context can be analyzed by a four-component model, created by the Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) and based on research in over 30 countries (Dragomir, 2019, pp. 8–13): "regulatory

capture, control of public service media, use of state financing as a control tool, ownership takeover". The International Press Institute formulate four components of media capture in liberal and non-liberal democracies in Europe similar to this classification:

> [T]urning public broadcasters into government mouthpieces; capturing and instrumentalizing media regulatory bodies with political appointees; abusing state resources to distort the media market in favor of pro-government media; and creating a circle of loyal oligarchs to run private media in the government's interest. (IPI, n.d.).

Dragomir points out that:

> in the most extreme cases of capture, state institutions act as a private enterprise and at the same time oligarch-controlled media become an active user of public resources. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between the two. In such an environment, it is nearly impossible for independent media to operate as their access to public resources (broadcast licenses, frequencies or state subsidies) is blocked and the market is captured by a handful of companies, a situation in which the space for fair competition is dramatically reduced and independent journalism ends up on the fringes (if it survives at all). (Dragomir 2019, p. 9).

THE MEDIA CAPTURE IN BULGARIA – TYPOLOGY AND CASES

There is not always a clear distinction between instrumentalization and capture of media in Bulgaria. However, the period of systematic capture of media began at the end of the first decade of the 21st century and could be referred to as "political-oligarchic" (the preceding two periods are the 'democratic' and the 'market'; clear boundaries cannot always be drawn between the three periods).[5]

During the first two decades of the democratic transition, there were objective factors that predetermined the lower degree of pressure on media and its rather unsystematic character. In the 1990s (the "democratic" period), media was released from authoritarian control, media pluralism arose in the face of increasing market competition and media legislation was introduced, complying with Western

5 Media researcher Georgi Lozanov came up with a somewhat similar periodization of the media transition in Bulgaria. He distinguishes three periods: "romantic", "market" and "corporate" (Lozanov, 2014).

European standards as a whole. There are also some acute but rare attempts by politicians to control media – for example, the war of the first democratic government (1992) with leading daily newspapers and the severe pressure of the socialist government (1995–1996) over the then state media Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR).

During the 2000s (the "market" period), powerful foreign media investors came into play. These included the German press group WAZ (1996), News Corp and the Scandinavian MTG in the field of TV business that introduced profitable business models; the foundations of media self-regulation were laid, but the Code of Ethics still remained a fig leaf to conceal systemic media transgressions.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century (the conditional beginning of the "political-oligarchic period" of media in Bulgaria), key foreign media investors began to leave Southeastern Europe as a result of the global financial crisis, but also because of increasing political pressure. By 2020, leading media investors had already left Bulgaria. Their places were occupied by new owners, often Bulgarian. Crucial media were captured to serve political-oligarchic interests. Threats and judicial harassment against critical journalists and media became more common. During this period, self-censorship in journalism increased (CID, 2015; Valkov, 2022).

However, Dzhambazova (2022) identifies two key elements that distinguish the capture of media in Bulgaria from the classic "Hungarian" case. Firstly, media ownership as well as the business interests of key media owners remain largely opaque due to a weak regulatory framework. Secondly, there are competing centers of power in condition of media-political symbiosis – phenomena facilitated by high levels of corruption and weak democratic institutions (Dzhambazova, 2022, p. 6). The four-component model of media capture (Dragomir 2019, IPI, n. D.) is also applicable to Bulgaria indeed Dzhambazova (2022) also uses it.

REGULATORY CAPTURE

Regulatory capture is achieved through political control over the formally independent regulatory organ for radio and television operators and "weaponizing the financial supervision commission (Dzhambazova, 2022, pp. 20–22), and influence on the formally independent antitrust commission (concerning its part in "ownership takeover").

The Council for Electronic Media (CEM) issues licenses to radio and television operators to broadcast content (recently it has gained regulatory functions over video sharing platforms) and appoints and dismisses the CEOs of both BNR and BNT. Three of the CEM's members are elected by parliament, two are appointed by the president, there is no "civil" quota. Reporters Without Borders finds in Bulgaria that "the political affiliation of the members of the Council for Electronic Media negatively affects the editorial independence of the public

media, while the independence of private media is threatened by their owners' interests in regulated sectors" (RWB, 2023).

In 2019, four of the five members of the CEM "having been nominated directly or by people close to GERB" – the ruling party (Dzhambazova, 2022, pp. 20–21). In the same year, under GERB's government, we witnessed emblematic actions to capture BNT through the regulatory authority. The CEM appointed the former politician, TV producer and private television anchor Emil Koshlukov as CEO. He, however, had worked for Nationalist Party Ataka's *Alpha TV* and was considered to be close to GERB and the now former Prime Minister Borissov. "Koshlukov was installed to present the work of the ruling party in a positive way," media researcher Orlin Spassov said (Dzhambazova, 2022, p. 19). The OSCE observers for the elections on July 11, 2021, when the Borissov party was no longer in power, found that "GERB received a greater coverage on BNT during the election campaign" (Penkova, 2021). In 2022, the CEM failed to appoint a new CEO, and Koshlukov continued to hold the position temporarily.

There are also more powerful institutional "clubs" against media. Reporters without Borders called the Financial Supervision Commission (FSC) a "media police" because of the fines it imposed demanding that journalists disclose their sources and thus preventing them from shedding more light on banks' problems and the regulation in the banking system of the country (Ureport, 2016). These are of course the massive sanctions (amounts equivalent to 25–50 thousand euros) that the FSC imposed in 2015 over several publications in editions of the authoritative media group *Economedia* and two other regional editions.

Political scientist Anthony Todorov (Indzhov, 2020a, expert interview) explains the behavior of the regulatory authorities toward the media should be considered within the broader framework of replacing the traditional statism approach of the Bulgarian state in various public spheres. The approach uses regulation "as a pressure apparatus" against the media particularly "when some political actor literally captures it". According to sociologist Zhivko Georgiev (Indzhov, 2020b, expert interview) the state (the ruling majority) continues to influence media "through some regulatory functions it has retained as well." Occasionally, the state selectively uses tools such as the formally independent Council for Electronic Media, as well as "the dependent judiciary branch to solve certain problems" (Indzhov, 2020b, expert interview).

CONTROL OF PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

The transition of former state radio and television in Bulgaria to public media is incomplete. Apart from their CEOs being appointed by the politically dependent CEM, the Western Europe-approved model for funding radio and television through fees paid by each household was never introduced. Both BNT and BNR are underfunded, and simultaneously dependent on the state, or, more

precisely, on the ruling majority, which could act against them with an iron fist in a velvet glove. The almost complete dependence of the two national media on the state budget affects their editorial independence differently. While BNR has achieved the status of a more autonomous media organization and practices more independent journalism, BNT has been adorned with the unenviable fame of acting as pro-government television.[6]

At the same time, as with the pressure experienced in the 1990s, BNR managed to mobilize against the attempts of power centers to take the reins. On September 13, 2019, BNR's lead station, *Horizont*, stopped broadcasting for five hours. This was a first in the history of BNR, supposedly because of "technical issues". The interruption was obviously related to the removal of journalist Sylvia Velikova as host the previous day. Many of her colleagues suspected that the BNR CEO had been pressured to dismiss her because of her criticism of the only candidate for the attorney general, considered to be close to the ruling party. Following a protest by BNR journalists (and Prime Minister Borissov's intervention), she was restored as a host. The CEM later fired the CEO because of the broadcast interruption.

USE OF STATE FINANCING AS A CONTROL TOOL

Reporters Without Borders found that in Bulgaria:

> The media are almost entirely dependent on income from advertising, in which the state plays an important role. Distribution of national and EU funds to the media by the government is completely non-transparent, which allows the trading of public funding for favorable coverage. (RWB, 2023: Bulgaria).

The criticism in the report of The European Commission "2022 Rule of Law Report" is more diplomatic but similar: "The lack of a clear regulatory framework to ensure transparency in the allocation of state advertising remains a concern, despite some measures having been taken to improve transparency" (European Commission, 2022, p. 1).

The role of the state as an advertiser increases during periods of crises in the advertising market. Certainly, as *Club Z* reveals, Bulgarian television and radio stations have received more than BGN 68 million (approximately EUR 34 million) through direct negotiation with the government to promote various European programs between 2007 and 2021 (Valkov, 2021). Among the recipients during

6 BNT 1 has a very low market share compared to its two large private competitors – 9% vs. 23% for Nova TV and 25% for bTV (data is for the first half of 2021; 18+). In the highly fragmented radio market, BNR fares significantly better with an 18% market share, slightly behind music radio Vesselina, but more than twice ahead of its main competitor Darik Radio (June 2021; 15–69). (Source: GARB, 2021, in Media Club 2021, p. 16, p. 26)

the first programming period (2007–2013), when most of the money were distributed, the media such as *TV7*, *TV Europe, Channel 3, Radio Focus, Radio K2*, which generally supported the government of GERB, but did not have big audiences. Media law expert Nelly Ognyanova is of the opinion that "that the existence of such budgets pushes media to be permanently dependent on the government". She also believes that this is also one of the reasons for the rise of custom journalism in the country, although the main reason should be the "captured state" (Free Europe, 2019). The total amount for promoting European programs is certainly much greater because the cited amounts do not include the money given to advertising and PR agencies, which then distribute sums to all types of media. Sociologist Zhivko Georgiev is of the opinion that the EU funds have led to a large-scale corruption and the power-oligarchic symbiosis: "(…) EU membership enabled the government to receive foreign money to buy loyal media and media service" (Indzhov, 2020b, expert interview).

Media, most notably the regional media, are also subjugated by municipal governments through contracts the so-called "media service", which have turned the notion of independent and objective journalism on its head. Between 2013 and 2015, for example, 10 Bulgarian municipalities both large and small, spent over BNG 2.7 million (approximately EUR 1.35 million) to buy media influence and control the content of publications on "municipal" topics, found a study by online media *Dnevnik* (Spassov, 2016) There are 265 municipalities in Bulgaria.

OWNERSHIP TAKEOVER

Taking over private media by political-oligarchic interests will be discussed using four cases, occurring almost entirely during the second decade of the 21st century:

THE BANK OF POWER AND THE MEDIA OF POWER

In 2014, the Corporate Commercial Bank (CCB) with majority owner Tzvetan Vassilev went bankrupt. It was also associated with media mogul Delyan Peevski, who was member of the party of Bulgarian Turks DPS. Under Borissov's first government (2009–2013), state-owned companies deposited most of their money in the CCB despite the low interest rates; this process had begun during the previous coalition government. In 2014, a public clash between Peevski and his alleged former ally Vassilev following the bankruptcy of this captured bank:

> led to revelations about how the two men had used the bank for personal gain, and funds for the media aligned with them. (…) Prior to the collapse Peevski's media had attacked the CCB's viability which may have contributed to the loss of confidence and subsequent bank run. (Dzhambazova, 2022, p. 11).

In 2020, the Anti-Corruption Fund (ACF), published revelations about siphoning off the bankrupt CCB. The ACF claims

> that investors' money of the in CCB, disappeared without a trace in the Bulgarian media, is between BGN 350 and 500 million leva (approximately EUR 175 – 250 million). CCB funders include publishers of over 50 newspapers, over 20 popular internet sites and at least three national private television stations with offshore ultimate owners. With one small exception, all these media provide media comfort to the Bulgarian prosecutor's office, which must investigate them as part of the scheme that led to the bankruptcy of CCB (Dnevnik, 2020).

Most of these media supported Borissov and GERB. The bank credits were not paid off.

DELYAN PEEVSKI: FROM MEDIA "EMPIRE" TO THE "MAGNITSKY" LIST

In 2007, the newspapers controlled and later owned by Delyan Peevski were also bought with loans from CCB. Among them is the daily *Telegraf*, which subsequently had the largest circulation in Bulgaria. Although it sounds schizophrenic, when the party of Delyan Peevski was in opposition, his publications supported Prime Minister Borissov (GERB) and at the same time carried out black PR campaigns against opponents of himself and Borissov. Galya Prokopieva, managing director of *Economedia*, called Peevski "one of the architects" of media capture in Bulgaria (Dzhambazova, 2022, p. 10). Indeed, "[w]hile GERB campaigned on ending corruption, Borissov built a strong network of patronage supported by oligarch-owned media. And as Borissov was enjoying the loyal support of the media, Peevski's accumulation of wealth, power and influence appeared to grow (Dzhambazova, 2022, p. 11).

At various times, Peevski's influence had been mentioned in relation to other newspapers and websites, and three smaller television channels. An analysis by the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) reported that:

> The '*Empire*' became more prominent after the Peevski-Krasteva[7] – CCB configuration acquired the largest printing house in the Balkans – IPC "Rodina". The *Empire* became formidable the moment it acquired about 70–80% of the firms that distribute print publications. (Bezlov et al., 2016, p. 15).

7 Peevski's mother.

In 2013, Peevski as a Member of Parliament, was at the epicenter of a huge scandal. He was elected head of the State Agency for National Security by the then-majority in which his party was junior partner to the socialists, but resigned a day later after mass protests that turned into year-long anti-corruption demonstrations. In June 2021, he was sanctioned under the Magnitsky global anti-corruption law. The U.S. Department of the Treasury press release described Peevski as:

> an oligarch who previously served as a Bulgarian MP and media mogul and has regularly engaged in corruption, using influence peddling and bribes to protect himself from public scrutiny and exert control over key institutions and sectors in Bulgarian society. (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021)[8].

Another "character" from the "Magnitsky" list is the gambling entrepreneur Vassil Bozhkov, adjacent to political power, especially to the then GERB government, whom the US Department of Treasury describes as "a Bulgarian businessman and oligarch, has bribed government officials on several occasions. These officials include a current political leader and the former Chairman of the now-abolished State Commission on Gambling (SCG)" (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021). In 2020, Bozhkov had his gambling business "taken over" by the state, had numerous charges raised against him and re-located to Dubai. Bozhkov announced that under the pressure from Prime Minister Borissov and Finance Minister Goranov, he had promised BGN 200 million (approximately EUR 100 million) in advertising for a period of 10 years on Kiril Domuschiev's *Nova TV*, in return for "full support in the gambling commission with the aim of regulating the business and complying with the laws". Domuschiev called the note "manipulation", but did not reject its authenticity (Drumeva, 2020)[9]. The other major private broadcaster, *bTV*, also received large amounts of advertising from him, although on paper the law prohibits gambling advertising.

8 In December 2020, seemingly out of the blue, it became known that Peevski was selling his newspapers, in the meanwhile with greatly reduced circulation and characterized by their low quality at the beginning, to the company that bought Nova TV – the United Group. Most likely, the sale was related to his subsequent sanctions under the Magnitsky Act.

9 In December 2023, the prosecutor's office announced that the case for the blackmail of the gambling boss Vasil Bozhkov from former Prime Minister Borissov and his finance minister Goranov was terminated. The main motive is a lack of evidence of a crime.

THE CAPTURE OF *NOVA TV* (2019–2021).

Kiril Domuschiev, one of the richest Bulgarian businessmen, with interests in the pharmaceutical business, maritime transport, football and other fields, bought together with his brother the most powerful media group in Bulgaria – Nova Broadcasting Group (NBG), which included the Net Info Group (an online market leader) from the Scandinavian MTG in 2019. After the change of ownership of the media group, its editorial policy in support of the ruling party GERB, which until then was more moderate, became more evident. Domuschiev, who was also the chairman of the Confederation of Employers and Industrialists in Bulgaria (CEIB), demonstrated close relations with the governing body. "According to the Media Pluralism Monitor report, over the past two years, under Domuschiev, "the company has dismissed more than 60 people from different departments, including prominent anchors, reporters and editors" (Dzhambazova, 2022, p. 13). In early 2021, Domuschiev sold NBG to the foreign United Group, which had previously acquired Bulgarian telecom *Vivacom*.

The most scandalous aspect about Domuschiev's purchase of *Nova TV* is that Czech billionaire Petr Kellner wanted to acquire it before him for the same price of 185 million euros.[10] Kellner already owned *Telenor Telecom* in Bulgaria and had successful experience in media management in the Czech Republic. The deal was not authorized by the Commission for the Protection of Competition (CPC), headed by the former deputy mayor of Sofia from GERB, Yulia Nenkova, citing the risk of concentrating the advertising market. But in principle, the CPC does not effectively counter the high levels of media concentration seen in the oligopoly of the two leading TV groups in the advertising market.[11]

"The captured country also has captured media. Borisov's state, through its close businessman Domuschiev, took over a normal media group and turned it into a propaganda one," Nelly Ognyanova summarized the situation in *Nova TV* for the Bulgarian portal of *Free Europe*. (Mitov, 2020). Journalist Ivan Bakalov explains that in this transaction:

> a Bulgarian oligarch bought a television (referring to the acquisition of *Nova TV* by Kiril Domuschiev – I.I.) (…). What is suspected and is obvious is that he was made to buy it by the sole feudal lord Boyko Borisov. The strongest leader in recent years, who, like Putin, has good and bad oligarchs. (Indzhov, 2020c, expert interview).

10 In late 2019, Kellner bought bTV Media Group from US media company CME without issue.

11 bTV Media Group and Nova Broadcasting Group account for 92% market share of total gross TV advertising revenue. This is equivalent to almost 80% of the entire advertising market. (Data is for the first half of 2021, source: GARB, 2021, in Media Club, 2021, p. 12).

In this regard, the sociologist Zhivko Georgiev, drawing parallels with the countries of the Mediterranean media model, comments that because of the rule of law, real political pluralism and strong civil societies, with the potential to exert pressure, does not exist in any

> southern European country in more recent times – after the Franco era and the "Regime of the Colonels" in Greece, the state has never had the tools to subjugate the media that the states and the ruling elite hold in much of Eastern Europe. (Indzhov, 2020b, expert interview).

CAPTURE AND CESSATION OF THE SMALL *TV BiT*.

The TV station *BiT* started broadcasting in 2015 and was owned by two Bulgarian businessmen brothers who emigrated to the USA. Through the quality and pluralism of viewpoints on the station's talk shows, including criticism of GERB, the television provided an alternative which was favorable to large televisions. However, *BiT* could not support itself just through advertising. In 2018, it was sold to a TV producer, apparently a "straw man" who allegedly wanted to produce interactive TV. Soon after the sale, it was gagged: all non-news and sports programs were suspended, and sometime later it ceased broadcasting altogether.

THE CAPTURE OF BULGARIAN MEDIA AS A RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The article emphasized, through the methods employed, the differences between the two concepts of the subjugation of the media: instrumentalization and capture in the Bulgarian context. Based on an international typology (Dragomir, 2019, IPI, n. D.), the article distinguished between the four forms of media capture in Bulgaria. The first is regulatory capture, such as of the Council for Electronic Media, the Financial Supervision Commission and the Commission for the Protection of Competition. The second is the control of public service media (BNT and by a small degree of BNR). The third is the use of state financing as a control tool in the state funding of public service media, state advertising, inclusive promotion in line with the EU-programmes and media service of municipalities. The fourth is ownership takeover as explained in previous section. The articles described how seriously deteriorated is the media environment in Bulgaria in the second decade of the 21st century. In the future, it could be studied whether the increasingly more frequent application of all forms of pressure against critical journalists and media (e.g. the "legal harassment and the intimidation of media" and "smear campaigns" (Dzhambazova, 2019,

pp. 22–23, pp. 25–26) could be singled out as an independent form of media capture, aimed mostly at imposing self-censorship.

The weakness of free media in Bulgaria and their political-oligarchic dependencies show that the key to the study of the Bulgarian media system should be sought not only in the specifics of national development but through parallels, especially with some of the former communist countries in Europe, and with flawed democracies in other world regions, e.g. Latin America. In such countries, media capture is an existential problem for the future of their societies and democracy, in contrast to the more "traditional" instrumentalization of the media in countries such as southern European ones. As sociologist Zhivko Georgiev notes, in the countries in Southern Europe, there are:

> a developed civil society, developed political pluralism and even, a developed corporate media world, which is not an oligarchic one. In our country, there is a symbiosis between the political and oligarchic elite and the media elite, subordinate to the former two. And there is no rule of law – neither in our country, nor in Hungary, nor in Poland, there is hardly any in Slovakia either. So, we are a world apart. (Indzhov 2020b, expert interview).

Georgiev emphasized in that interview that "Bulgarian oligarchs without a state umbrella and public procurement would be incapacitated economic entities. That is not like Berlusconi".

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Media Capture and Perspectives for Media Development in a Fragile Media System: Debating Journalistic Roles in Guinea-Bissau

Johanna Mack
0000-0002-5039-631X
Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism, Germany

Abstract: Guinea-Bissau's media have negotiated their roles and freedoms within the postcolonial national construct since its official independence from Portugal in 1974. While the current media landscape is relatively pluralistic, journalists experience constraints from various sides: political pressures, unaccommodating regulations, lack of resources. The concept of media capture (Mungiu-Pippidi & Ghinea, 2012; Mabweazara et al., 2020; Schiffrin, 2021) allows the analysis of complex, subtle and structural constraints limiting media's ability to fulfil their roles. This paper traces the phenomenon on the macro level (context), meso level (organizations) and micro level (journalists) in Guinea-Bissau to interrogate how the concept plays out in a context shaped by fragility. The article draws on a literature review, official documents and semi-structured interviews. Following Dugmore's (2022) idea of precarity as an endogenous condition in many Sub-Saharan contexts, this paper argues that capture is engrained in a fragile system rather than being an exception or disruption. This has implications for international media development action, which can be hindered by or become a part of the capture.

Keywords: Media Capture; media development; fragile states; Guinea-Bissau; media freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Guinea-Bissau's media have been experiencing aggravated restrictions of their freedom since the beginning of President Umaro Sissoco Embalo's government in 2021. Next to threats against journalists and an attack against a radio station (Darame, 2022), the government has increased licence fees for media outlets and attempted to close all radio stations who fail to pay them (MFWA, 2023). These measures happen in a nation state which has been debating its relation to democracy and the role of media since its independence from Portugal in 1974.

It has been described by international organizations and media with titles such as "fragile state", "least developed" or "narco state" (Bybee, 2011; Da Santos, 2019). While the media operating in this context face various intersecting challenges, they are also addressed by Guinean and international actors as potential key contributors to the stabilization and democratization of the multi-ethnic and both culturally and ecologically rich country. Following the idea that media can be drivers of multidimensional development, international actors support the work of media with funding, capacity building and advocacy. However, these efforts are impeded by continuous political and economic instability as well as by the (media) development sector's own biases – and the current setbacks raise questions about how efficiency could be increased.

To understand those factors that impact the media, this article attempts to analyse the situation of the Bissau-Guinean media through the lens of media capture. The concept of media capture, developed by scholars such as Mungiu-Pippidi (2008) and Schiffrin (2021), allows researchers to grasp a variety of aspects limiting media's ability to fulfil their functions freely and independently. In contrast to concepts like censorship or control, which often put an emphasis on authorities as restricting actors, capture includes constraints caused, for example, by the private sector, through ownership structures, financing or subtle dynamics (Schiffrin, 2021, p. 4). As the appearance of various academic publications on media capture in recent years shows, it is a concept that scholars find valuable to apply to a variety of contexts, from authoritarian countries (Coşkun, 2020) to more liberal ones (Foroohar, 2021). This also indicates that the question should not be *if* media capture is present in one context or another, but rather *how* it plays out in relation to a given contextualization. Mabweazara et al. (2020) have adapted the concept to Sub-Saharan African contexts. Despite the obvious differences between countries and media systems in the continent, they find shared histories that foster media capture: While many Sub-Saharan African countries have experienced a wave of liberalization including multipartyism and increased media pluralism, many of them have since re-descended into 'strong-men politics', which captured media help to maintain (Mabweazara et al., 2020, p. 2155f.).

So far, there is no academic literature that uses the concept of media capture to analyse Guinea-Bissau's media, but various publications include perspectives on media freedom (Barros, 2012; Bussotti et al., 2015; Sampaio-Dias, 2019). However, media capture seems to be a useful tool for describing the complexity of constraints Bissau-Guinean media are facing. While media development assistance aims to improve media's conditions and capacities, capture may help to understand the difficulties of such undertakings.

To delineate how media capture plays out in Guinea-Bissau, this contribution will differentiate between the macro level (the context for media, e.g.,

the legislative, political and economic system of the country), the meso level (media outlets, organizations) and the micro level (journalists). Fengler and Jorch (2012) use the differentiation between the three levels to distinguish the types of media development assistance and where they locate in the hierarchy of influences. The paper is based on a review of academic and grey literature and official documents, as well as qualitative interviews with journalists and media development experts in Guinea-Bissau. The article is exploratory and does not attempt to cover all the facets, but to contribute to the debate through the perspective of a little researched case study. It aims to provide a brief introduction to the current media context in Guinea-Bissau and raise a discussion on how the concept of media capture can be applied in fragile contexts, and also the roles international media development efforts can play. The article opens with a brief overview of media capture and the specificities of fragile media contexts, followed by a short overview of the Bissau-Guinean media landscape and how capture at the macro, meso and micro level impact on it.

MEDIA CAPTURE: COMPLEXIFIED CONSTRAINTS

Schiffrin (2021, p. 4) argues that "[w]hen journalists come under the control of business and government, they can no longer perform the multiple critical roles the Fourth Estate plays in a democratic society". According to her, media capture is a concept that allows researchers to complexify the analysis of various constraints that journalists and media outlets face while trying to fulfil their roles. In contrast to other terms used for describing limitations of media freedom, media capture includes indirect dynamics, which can refer to control "either directly by governments or by vested interests networked with politics" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012, pp. 40-41). Media capture can be an analytical framework to research media control through soft power and by various actors (Schiffrin, 2017, p. 1033) and has often been applied to describe challenges with the consolidation of the media-politics relationship in states which have experienced transformations, especially young democracies.

Authors are adapting the concept to various local conditions, e.g. to clientelism in Latin America (Márquez-Ramírez, 2017). Other scholars specify the types of capture, such as ownership or cognitive capture (Stieglitz, 2017) or big tech platform (Usher, 2021). For Sub-Saharan Africa, a range of case studies is available (Asomah, 2022; Cagé & Mougin, 2023; Powell, 2017). In a qualitative meta-analysis of the existing research on capture in all regions of the continent, Mabweazara et al., (2020) conclude that there is a shared context of "well-oiled structural systems of political patronage in which the strongmen and their allies are deemed inviolable. A heavy stranglehold on the media is a key element

of this structural system of political patronage" (p. 2156). This is combined with complex economic conditions that increase the dependency on those in power (p. 2159). In Guinea-Bissau, a phase of political liberalization in the early 1990s, including the start of multipartyism and the foundation of various new media outlets (Lopes, 2015) was followed by civil war in 1998 and 1999 and an ongoing phase of political instability and coup d'états (e.g., Dabo, 2009). Katar Moreira (2020) describes the core characteristic of the strong-men politics determining the political scenery ever since as *matchundadi* (hegemonic masculinity).

Mabweazara et al. (2020) define three main types of capture: regulatory; through ownership; and via fiscal (financial and economic) enticements and controls. Legal or regulatory capture can happen when legislative measures are used to constrain media with political or other forms of motivation. For instance, registration, licensing or authorisation obligations are sometimes imposed on the private press, which is often closer to the opposition, but not on state media (p. 2164). Another example is when laws meant to address actual problems are misused against journalists, which has occurred with anti-terror laws introduced in Cameroon in the fight against Boko Haram (pp. 2164f). Ownership capture is closely tied to legislative and administrative issues. If media belong to powerful actors or their networks, this can influence their work and content. The authors cite examples from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Tanzania, e.g., a newspaper being publicly called out for not putting the president on the front page (p. 2167). Such actors can also use the fragile economic situation of media to affect capture through financial and economic incentives or controls, as the outlets will be more likely to accept income with "strings attached" (p. 2168), e.g. brown envelope journalism. The effects of capture on audiences still requires more research to fully understand its implications for public sphere and political processes (Dragomir, 2022, pp. 16f.).

MEDIA CAPTURE IN FRAGILE STATES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

Next to the complexity of media freedom constraints, Schiffrin's quote (at the start of the previous section) points to the roles that are ascribed to journalism as the Fourth Estate in a democratic system. Looking at media capture helps to understand more about whether, how and why media are able or unable to perform certain roles that are expected of them. Because role understandings and especially role performance (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2019) may differ greatly based on the media system and the wider society they are embedded in, it is important to take the structural, political and social conditions for journalistic work into account. The importance of free and independent media

as an indispensable part of democratic systems (Kumar, 2010) and national development (Anderson, 2016), is widely accepted, although it remains debated how exactly media and context impact each other and how these interrelations could be measured (Stremlau, 2014, pp. 2ff.). While roles that traditional media can play in democratic processes are newly discussed regarding the rise of social media as well as new intersecting global crises, in fragile states the debate departs from another starting point: the frequent experience of dysfunctionality of the media-politics nexus. The OECD defines state fragility as "the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks" (OECD, 2023b), which takes into account economic, environmental, human, political, security and societal aspects. The OECD in 2022 describes Guinea-Bissau as having high or severe fragility in the political, economic, environmental, human and societal dimension (OECD, 2023a). Other NGO prescribe similar categorization, such as a "least developed country" (UNCTAD, 2022) and a "small developing island state" (*List of SIDS* , 2022). Since the early 2000s, the country has also been called a narco-state, which means that important public institutions are infiltrated by or complicit with international organized crime, especially the cocaine trade (UNODC, 2011). State fragility hinders the performance of many sub-systems within a country – for example the health and education sector (WHO, 2022; Dansó, 2022) and also the media, which have to navigate a context of economic paucity, weak institutions and lack of accountability. In this sense, one could argue that media capture is experienced as a status quo in fragile states rather than a disruption, because the system does not provide stable conditions and reliable freedoms that would be limited by capture. Dugmore (2022) explains that in many African media contexts, 'precarious professionalism' is "inherent to employment environments and not exogenous interruptions to an expected pattern of stability and levels of remuneration conducive to a base-level sense of security and wellbeing." (Dugmore, 2022, p. 151). The same could be argued for media capture, which in contexts of fragility may be engrained in the system rather than an experience of crisis. This perspective might change the view on the concept of media capture and on the habits of journalists working within unstable contexts.

Especially in fragile contexts, there is often a lot of influence on media from outside the country, for example by international media development actors. Media development refers to a variety of practices by which media are seen as drivers of social change – either using them as platforms for public debate, as distributors for messages that further development or supporting media as actors needed for development and democratization efforts (e.g. Manyozo, 2012; Scott, 2014). Usually, donors and implementors of media development assistance aim at supporting free and independent media and can thus offer an antidote

to capture tendencies. Frequently, for instance, media development actors push for the introduction of media accountability instruments to prevent certain capture effects within newsrooms (Fengler et al., 2022). However, in systems dominated by media capture, structures such as media accountability instruments may be unable to avoid being instrumentalized, too. An analysis of this nexus, in the context of Afghanistan where various international actors have tried to establish a new media system after 2001 concludes:

> [T]hat in countries with heavy foreign intervention, where imported journalism values are layered upon previous and continued institutional arrangements and where violence and instability continue unabated, news media work is prone to 'capture' by a variety of actors outside media organizations. We suggest that future research could refine a typology with six distinct forms of capture – economic, political, cultural, legal, bureaucratic, and societal. (Relly & Zanger, 2016, p. 1233)

One aspect the study hints at is that dependencies can occur when media receive funding from international donors, e.g., through NGOs or UN agencies. Fengler (2022) calls this a 'mimicry model' for the context of accountability instruments (p. 572): certain measures wanted by media development actors, for example press councils, may be introduced but rather than really fulfilling the functions they were initially meant for, they are integrated into the old systems and practices. Schiffrin (2018) and Mabweazara et al. (2020) discuss how capture may also happen through donors such as philanthropic organizations which finance or own media outlets (Mabweazara et al., 2020, p. 2170). This is similar to capture effects that can happen when political actors finance media, because financing through donors may render media outlets unable to criticize them. Stremlau (2014) mentions that in conflict-affected contexts, supporting media can mean supporting specific political or ideological sides.

METHODS

The research for this paper has been conducted as part of a PhD project which analyses the media system of Guinea-Bissau, with media capture as one of several shaping factors. It is a qualitative study, which includes desk research (review of academic and grey literature and documents); as well as semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Bissau-Guinean journalists, media experts

and international media development experts[1]. The interviews and debates, conducted in 2022 and 2023, was analysed using the software MaxQDA, following Kuckartz' qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2019; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). A summary of the findings shedding light on media capture is selected here. In addition, descriptive information about the media outlets were collected (e.g., number of employees, sources of income etc.). Descriptions of the media landscape in the following section thus derive from the author's own data collection if no other source is mentioned.

The quotes have been translated into English from Portuguese, French or Guinean Creole by the author. For data protection, no names of interviewees will be disclosed. Instead, interviews and focus groups have been numbered and direct or indirect quotes will be denoted with (IV) for interview and (F) for focus group plus a number that has been allocated to each individual and the year.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF GUINEA-BISSAU'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Guinea-Bissau's media landscape comprises state-run, private and community media. The state finances the news agency *Agência dos Notícias da Guiné-Bissau*, the weekly newspaper *Nô Pintcha*, the radio broadcaster *Rádiodifusão Nacional* and the television *Televisão da Guiné-Bissau*. Among the private media, there are 16 radios, 2 newspapers but currently no TV station (Bodjam, 2022, p. 34f.). Community media[2] are non-profit broadcasters with little funds, some of which are supported by NGOs. Among the community media is 1 television broadcaster located in the capital, and approximately 31 radio stations (Bodjam, 2022, p. 34f.).

Media are centralized in the capital city Bissau. Bodjam (2022) claims 88% of the private radio stations are in Bissau. While there are no regularly updated data concerning media use, a survey commissioned by the United Nations Peacebuilding Office (UNIOGBIS) shows that radio is regularly consumed and by most people (António, 2020). Online and social media are of increasing importance and several media outlets have started online issues.

Guinea-Bissau's media development sector is rather small by regional comparison. Many development actors focus on issues such as peacebuilding or health and media are a tool they use to advance these goals, rather than focusing on the media more specifically, although this may be a side effect. Among the actors who have tried to develop the media directly was UNIOGBIS, which closed

1 For this paper, the quotes have been translated into English from Portuguese or French by the author.

2 While the definition of community media is debated (Bosch, 2014, p. 426), in Guinea-Bissau those media that are part of the National Network of Community Radios (RENARC) are counted in that category.

in 2022, and UNESCO, as well as the Media Foundation West Africa, funded by the European Union.

MACRO LEVEL

By the macro level, I refer to the context that media are embedded in and the relation of media to other subsystems of society, such as politics. The lack of reliable infrastructures can be counted into this category. The most important aspects emerging from the analysis were capture through legislation or the implementation of laws, and the weakness of state institutions which are meant to provide the context for securing the media's rights, but do not fulfil their functions.

Regulatory capture is one of the most common threats curtailing media freedom in Sub-Saharan Africa according to Mabweazara et al. (2020, p. 2162). In Guinea-Bissau, media freedom is guaranteed in the constitution since the political liberation in the 1990s (Lopes, 2015). Bissau-Guinean citizens have the right to inform and be informed (CRGB, 1996). In addition, a number of other legal texts and amendments regulate the role of the media, including the Press Law (Bodjam, 2022). However, there are implementation gaps, and the existing law does not sufficiently regulate all types of media. These two shortcomings weaken the medias position within the state system and leave room for constraints.

An illustrative example to highlight the effects of absent legislation is the current discussion about radio licenses. On 31st March 2022, shortly after "a very murky coup attempt" (Schipani & Munshi, 2022), followed by an attack on a private radio in the capital, the communication ministry launched a communiqué stating that the licences of all radios who had failed to pay the fees for their renewal in recent years were cancelled (Cardoso, 2022) – affecting a majority of private and community radio broadcasters, most of which have little to no income. According to a list assembled by the National Network of Community Radios, the radios accumulated taxes of up to 1,956,250 GBF each (approximately 3000 Euro) by April 2022. The communiqué has been interpreted by experts as an attempt to limit press freedom:

> The government takes advantage of the fragility of the organs to harm them, knowing that many organs have difficulties to pay license each year (…) because they think that these organs are bothering them. This strategy adopted by the government is a strategy that less serious people use to silence organs when they want. (F1:3:2022)

The communiqué accused the radio stations of not following the license fee regulation: while media outlets had to pay fees for their initial permission to start working, they did not pay for renewal and apparently were not asked to do so. In the existing media laws, the private media are only granted provisory

licenses (Bodjam, 2022, p. 32). This included the community radios, which are the most widely spread, yet in general the least regulated, despite attempts by local and international actors, including the UN, to improve the regulation for community media. Thus, this conflict is only possible because of a lack of clear legislation and a lack of both institutional and governmental interest in following up the law in recent years. Consequently, the outlets remain vulnerable to political arbitrariness. A decree published in October 2022 aggravated the situation as it raised the previously determined licence fees for all media (MFWA, 2023). Although as of now, none of the radios which have not yet paid the licence fees have shut down. But as IV:8:2023—a Bissau-Guinean human rights activist—notes the decrees will offer the possibility to shut radio stations in tense times, e.g., around elections.

This is not the only example showing the weakness of state institutions. Typical for patrimonial systems, the state institutions in Guinea-Bissau are highly susceptible to influence through "strong men" (Katar Moreira, 2020). The National Council for Social Communication, meant to hold media accountable for following the laws and ethical standards (Bodjam, 2022, p.26), is in practice, as various interviewees explained, an instrument without much power that is unable to perform its tasks but can be used by the government. In consequence,

> The council only appears during the election campaign (…), when an outlet does not obey the rules for the diffusion of an advertising spot, the person is notified, but I don't know… I know in the true sense of the word the role of the council is much more than that. (F:4:2023)

For example, the council should be responsible for issuing press cards, which journalists associations as well as international partners have been advocating for. They believe press cards could help to "institutionalize" the journalistic profession and thus simplify protecting journalists and holding them accountable, but no action has followed. Another example is the lack of judicial investigation into attacks against media. A private radio station with the reputation of being critical towards the president was, in 2021 and 2022, attacked and destroyed by armed men, with one employee being severely injured, and despite calls by the journalists' associations, the attacks have not been investigated.

Media development actors engage on the macro level in Guinea-Bissau by training the military, police and politicians how to deal with media and what roles each of these actors should have in a democracy. They also advocate for the adaptation and implementation of media laws, for example providing a clearer regulation for the community media.

MESO LEVEL

Concerning capture on the meso level (media outlets, journalists' associations, etc.) the data mostly point to ownership and organizational structures. While the state media are state financed, there are two types of private radios: seven commercial stations and nine religious stations (financed by Catholic, Protestant or Muslim stakeholders) (Bodjam, 2022, p. 33). Guinea-Bissau's advertising market is small and does not constitute a big portion of a media outlet's income. Financing thus comes through other sources and political parallelism is key in this respect: Among the commercial private media, many are either owned by politicians or receive occasional economic incentives. The director of a private radio station owned by an important political figure explains:

> (…) you have good journalists and technicians, but you don't have money to afford them, so you must depend on politicians. On a certain political philosophy and so on. Then a radio station is opened, but a radio with a politician who pays salaries or rent. So, you cannot call this independence. (IV:6:2022)

Other than ownership, powerful actors influence media by granting or denying them invitations to official press conferences, access to official information, advertisement or the technological infrastructures needed for their work. The political affiliations of a media outlet are sometimes quoted as a reason for denying them access to these crucial services. The owner of a private newspaper, known to have been founded by a member of a political party, and which depends on the national printing press, recounts: "(…) sometimes they just say that they are busy and they cannot print our papers because the national press has many things to do, they always block us from printing our newspapers." (IV:9:2022)

There are various examples of media development on the meso level, e.g. radio stations that have been set up by international organizations, but also capacity building and management training, business models etc. In addition, international organisations pay radio stations to broadcast spots or programmes for them. In Guinea-Bissau, there are often actors that do not deal with media first and foremost, but with topics such as environmental protection (Barros et al., 2018). In consequence, airtime is spent on topics that have not been chosen by the newsroom. Barros, a Bissau-Guinean sociologist (2012) calls this phenomenon "agenda setting upside down" (p. 99-100). As Choudry and Kapoor (2013) explain, dependency on money from development actors can result in an "NGOization": Media start to accept tasks besides their journalistic work and mirror bureaucratic structures of NGOs. Such a non-journalistic character can sometimes be appropriated by the media outlets for strategical reasons. When the annulling of radio licenses was announced, representatives of community media negotiated

with the government by claiming that they provide important services to the communities and are key actors for local development and education (IV:7:2022). Here, journalistic roles sometimes merge with activist or developmental attitudes.

One journalist mentioned that when development organisations influence the editorial agenda of local media, "this is a good type of capture" (IV:1:2023) because beneficial values are promoted in these programmes. However, the complexities of international media development work, a field that has long been based on Western-centric values and only recently started to mainstream practices of monitoring and evaluation (Noske-Turner, 2017, p. 7), needs to be considered. Another point that cannot be explored in detail here, but which is of increasing importance throughout the region is the international actors engaging with the media who are not coming from a tradition of press freedom. A relevant example in Guinea-Bissau is Chinese engagement, although as far as the interviews have shown, this is mostly limited to occasional donations of technical equipment and to public diplomacy efforts. Media initiatives possibly coming from Russian, Turkish, Saudi Arabian and different religious actors should also be investigated in future.

MICRO LEVEL

> Well, despite everything, the people try to do an independent journalism. But it is an illusion. Because you go until a certain point (…) but when it comes to sensitive topics, they will not go in depth. (…) Firstly, because they do not have the means, and secondly, because it is dangerous. (IV10, 2022)

On the micro level, individual journalists are affected by capture through self-censorship, economic enticements, their relation to authorities and lack of access to information. Pointing to low professionalization and specialization, journalists and media development practitioners have repeatedly named education as the key factor for strengthening professional identities. Journalists have disclosed being conflicted about their journalistic roles at times due to contradictions between their ideals and their everyday reality.

The most dangerous topics to report about are criticism against individuals in power, political issues and organized crime (IV:10:2022). A journalist and blogger (IV:6:2023) known for critical publications has experienced repeated verbal and physical attacks. Showing a WhatsApp conversation between himself and the Bissau-Guinean president, he imparts: "I write what he doesn't like, (…) and then he called to insult me. I recorded it just to have a proof." Many other journalists self-censor to manage these insecurities. There is no significant tradition of investigative journalism, although occasional trainings and awards have been offered by international actors. However, there are no sustainable mechanisms

to ensure journalists' security in case they get targeted because of their investigation on sensitive topics. Recently, a network for investigative reporting was established, aiming to achieve better results through joined forces and to protect individual journalists by signing publications with the network's name.

Much of the capture on the micro level is related to precarious working conditions. Almost all journalists and technicians in community media work on a voluntary basis, except for one community radio station, which is funded by an NGO and provides annual contracts. In private radios, 77% of journalists do not have a work contract (Bodjam, 2022, p. 33). Even in the state media, the budgets are scarce and there have been regular strikes of the staff asking for salaries and equipment (African Insider, 2021). Consequently, journalists of all media are highly susceptible to accepting financial benefits in return for favours. A study by Sampaio-Dias (2019) uncovered that per diem payments are a common practice. Per diems "are smaller fixed amounts of money paid by sources in exchange for media presence or coverage" (p. 2350). In contrast to bribery or corruption, practices like brown envelope and per diem payments are not officially illegal, but according to Sampaio-Dias it is risky to overlook or underestimate them, as they can be just as detrimental to freedom of expression (p. 2363). Capture is a useful concept to grasp such issues because it allows the inclusion of subtle dynamics beyond official breaches of law. For example, in Guinea-Bissau, many media outlets lack the financial means to send reporters to other parts of the country. Politicians who travel to the regions during election campaigns often transport journalists in their cars and pay "30000 GBF per day for each journalist, and your accommodation 50000 GBF, so it's compulsory for you to support them, no way out" (IV:6:2022).

Interviewees mentioned that this explanation goes along with learned expectations concerning the relationship between journalists and politicians, which can be traced back to the time of the one-party-system that governed Guinea-Bissau for 20 years after independence. According to Reporters without Borders, the president called journalists *bocas de alugar* (mouths for hire) (RSF, 2022). One interviewee, a reporter said: "There are ministers, they say they have a news, so we have to call this or that journalist to cover it. As if the journalist was the boy of the minister, but a journalist cannot be a civil servant." (IV:7:2022)

As this and other quotes confirm, most journalists are aware of the professional role expectation of independence, which is also fixed in the code of ethics that the journalists' associations set up with the support of UNIOGBIS:

> 3. The Journalist must refuse to be an instrument of political propaganda, economic interests or any other illegitimate interests;
> 4. Journalists shall reject all forms of coercion, bribery, pressure or any benefits arising from the exercise of the journalistic function which are not in line with

> professional ethics, (…) (Código Deontológico dos Jornalistas da Guiné-Bissau, codes translated by the author.)

However, several journalists admit that they are not always able to abide by these ethical and professional standards. It seems that due to the "endogenous precarious professionalism" (Dugmore, 2022, p. 151) and the lack of trust in the reliability of state actors, institutions, regulations, and security, such practices are deemed inevitable despite their contradiction to professional ideals. A consequence, in the context of roles, could be a conflict between understanding and performance (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2019, p. 53). This complexity is of relevance when it comes to media development. For example, trainings might emphasize the professional standard of independence, but are insufficient to generate it in practice. As Sampaio-Dias mentions (p. 2352), the practice of giving per diems to participants in trainings exists in the development sector, as well as a debate around this practice. The giving of per diems is a response to the precarious conditions of the journalists, enabling the donor development actors to contribute to normalizing the exchange of favours against money in the journalism sector. Furthermore, most media outlets do not hold reporters accountable for following the code of ethics – again, the implementation of an initiative pushed by development actors is challenged by the structural conditions. However, the director of one private radio station financed by the Catholic church mentioned that the station had fired a reporter who accepted payments from a politician (IV:8:2022).

The contradictions that journalists experience lead to the issue as to whether the normative expectations that journalists are measured against must be adapted to the context, like Rao and Wasserman (2007), Wasserman and Rao (2008) suggest in their demand for more context-sensitive, glocalized journalism ethics that consider both history and values. Dugmore (2022), Matthews and Onyemaobi (2020) and Sampaio-Dias (2019) all make a similar point when emphasizing that the Western understanding of concepts such as precarity or bribery and corruption, rooted in historically shaped experiences, needs to be reconsidered in Sub-Saharan contexts. Such sensitivity should also be key in international media development work.

CONCLUSIONS

The media in Guinea-Bissau seem to be constrained through various intersecting actors and dynamics, of which the state authorities are only one. This analysis attempted to spotlight media capture on the macro, meso and micro levels. They are closely connected, and issues related to regulatory and economic capture

permeate all the three levels. The juxtaposition of the levels shows how capture on one level fuels it on another. For example, the introduction of new licence fee regulations aggravates the economic paucity of media outlets, and the resulting precarious working conditions make it more likely for journalists to accept per diems or other dependencies. Macro level capture limits journalists' freedom to criticize the authorities, but self-censorship and dependencies on the micro level also hinder the establishment of a journalism that holds those in power accountable. The contradiction between verbalized rules or ideals and actual practices might be interpreted as a social or cognitive component of capture. The stretching, trespassing and redefining of boundaries of journalistic roles and professional standards seem to be tactics journalists apply to navigate the context of media capture.

The media capture lens is useful for analysing the situations of media in fragile states like Guinea-Bissau because it allows research to show the structural, systemic constraints media are facing. Instead of an occasional shock to an otherwise functioning system, capture permeates the media system and journalists find ways to creatively appropriate and adapt some elements of the process to be able to do their work. More attention should be paid to the implications that capture could have for media systems research, where there are still gaps regarding fragile contexts and the factors that influence transformations. A relevant line of study to draw on is the comparison of Post-Soviet states and the factors that influenced the diverse directions into which their media systems have developed (e.g., Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008). As Rodny-Gumede (2020) suggests, the insights from these analyses could be adapted to help describe the situations in postcolonial societies. The similarity is the need to nation-build and establish a new state-media relationship after the end of foreign domination, with contrasting results. Capture may explain dynamics that happen as the distribution of power and freedom are negotiated in a new national construct, which cause either fragility or stability.

It will be a topic for another paper to explore how far media capture has been embedded in the Bissau-Guinean system as a historic continuity, from laws to organizational structures and in the "socialization" of journalists, authorities and audiences. Path dependency (Frère et al., 2018) is a key concept to explore here.

In a captured system, even actors who would like to fight this dynamic may end up being part of the capture process. They can include media development actors, who aim to implant ideas that are counter-intuitive to the captured context. While this analysis does not suffice to make statements on the nature of these relations, it provides food for thought on the roles of "unexpected" agents of media capture. Media capture should be further researched regarding media development, in which the process acts as both a counterforce and a hindrance to media development, and also as an unintended side effect. This argument

ties in with debates concerning universal versus contextualized norms and values of journalism. The concept of media capture can contribute to the study of media system transformation in fragile states and in regions, which remain under-researched like Guinea-Bissau. This is relevant regarding new global crises and the need for media to provide spaces for free and independent information in ever more complex situations.

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Captured by Elites: The Portuguese Media System in Liberalism (1820–1926)

Isadora Fonseca
0000–0001–9019–9794
Catholic University of Portugal, Portugal

Abstract: This article argues that the concept of 'captured media' is invaluable to a deeper understanding of the roles performed by media systems throughout European liberalism and early democratization of nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This case-study explores the structures of the media system during Portuguese Liberalism (1820–1926) in the scope of the Portuguese empire. The concept of the 'Imperial Public Sphere' is applied to show how imperial and colonial elites captured the media system to exercise and spread its political and ideological power. As a methodological approach to analyze the roles performed by press, the case-study relies on the model developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), which is applied to three empirical cases. The use of the concept 'captured media' in the field of media history is a contribution to understanding the political roots of the press during colonialism and its legacy to contemporary media systems in Lusophone countries.

Keywords: Imperial Public Sphere; Portuguese media system; liberalism; captured media.

INTRODUCTION

This article argues that the concept of 'captured media' is invaluable to a deeper understanding of the roles performed by media systems throughout European liberalism and early democratization of 19th and 20th centuries. This case-study explores the structures of the media system during Portuguese Liberalism (1820–1926) in the scope of Portuguese empire. With this socio-political perspective and temporal dimension, the concept of 'Imperial Public Sphere' is used to show how imperial and colonial elites captured the media system to exercise and spread its political and ideological power. As a methodological approach to analyze and discuss the roles performed by press, the case-study relies on the

model and guidelines developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to characterize media systems.

Three empirical realities are brought together to demonstrate the main dimensions, characteristics and roles performed by media systems. With the concept of a dialogical Imperial Public Sphere in mind, the first is the micro-level case of *Abelha da China* (1823–1824), a Macao newspaper which inaugurated the public sphere in colonial liberalism. The second is a meso-level case, which presents the press system of Angola during the Constitutional Monarchy (1854–1910). The third is the macro-case of *Gazeta das Colónias* (1924–1932), an informed newspaper that promoted the debate and discussion in the Imperial Public Sphere (IPS) during the last years of the Portuguese Liberalism period.

The first section of the article develops the theoretical approach to this study and discusses the concepts of 'captured media', the IPS and 'media systems'. In the second part, the study presents the empirical cases, with a focus on the emergence of the press in Macao, the media system of Angola and the role performed by *Gazeta das Colónias*. published in Lisbon and with an imperial circulation. All the empirical cases are paradigms of the capture of press by elites. The article concludes that during Portuguese Liberalism the media was guided by and for elites. The strong political parallelism between the media system and political and economic groups and the low level of professionalization also corroborated the capture of media by elites. The use of the concept 'captured media' in the field of media history is a contribution to understanding the political roots of the press alongside colonialism and its legacy to contemporary media systems in Portuguese speaking countries.

THEORETICAL ROOTS

IMPERIAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The concept of IPS follows the assumption of 'entangled media history' developed by Cronqvist and Hilgert (2017) who define the concept as including such ideas as overlapping, convergence, dissemination, imperialism, resistance, adaptation, crossovers, interference and hybridization. On this basis, the concept of IPS is a requirement for understanding the history of the media in Portugal and in Portuguese colonialism since it is intended to reflect the press' emergence, convergence and evolution.

Habermas's (1991/1962) public sphere theory contributes to the political theory of democracy in which he shows the process by which public opinion emerges and how the press is its structural platform. The IPS hypothesis follows that of Habermas a priori because of the intention here to constitute the public

sphere as a dimension of analysis and as an explanation for the socio-political dynamics of the Portuguese colonial empire in the context of political liberalism from 1820–1926. A critical reading of Fraser (2014) remains essential to develop the concept of IPS and demonstrate its pertinence for the study of empires.

First, the idea of the public sphere correlates with the modern and sovereign state within a delimited territory, which also applies to the Portuguese colonial empire of the 19th and 20th centuries. Second, the participants in this public sphere were members of the same political community. In the Portuguese empire, this 'community' included colonial government structures and economic sectors as well as intellectual groups. Third, the theme of IPS was its political and economic organization, the capitalist market and state regulation. During the last two centuries, the structures and the manner of exercising power at the imperial, national and colonial levels were the focus of discussion and conflict within the public sphere. Fourth, associated with the modern press and media, the public sphere requires national (and imperial) infrastructure linking and uniting a dispersed public. The decrees of Queen Maria II in 1836 to install the 'national press' in the colonies and print the 'official bulletins' were the first steps in the construction of this communications network. The linking of the African colonies to the network of European and global submarine cables took place between 1874 and 1883, enhancing communications between the territories and the metropolis while improving the role of the press. Fifth, in every colonial territory, Portuguese was the common language of the press and was used by all social groups.

Barton (1979) and Ochs (1986) in their studies on the media in Africa argue the legacy of European colonialism and its press system, European languages and geography have all been central to the historiography of the press and the media. Assuming the influence of Harold Innis (1986), we can see the growing importance of the imperial context for studying the media. Potter (2003) shows the emergence of an 'imperial press system' in the British empire between 1876 and 1922. Kaul (2006) brings together a set of studies on the British media in the imperial context. In the Portuguese empire, with its imperial approach but not a common public sphere, the studies collected by Garcia et. al (2017b) and Machado et. al (2023) are good references.

This research used the concept of an IPS that recognizes a common public sphere and media system, which integrates the territories of the Portuguese empire, bringing together its media while also assuming its interdependence in the exercise of colonial power. Thus, the IPS is configured as the geographical area, and public debate within empire has the press and journalism as privileged structures, the imperial and colonial elites as protagonists and the political and economic dynamics derived from the imperial situation as the fundamental issues.

CAPTURED MEDIA

The concept of 'captured media' is invaluable for understanding and discussing the performance of media systems in a historical perspective. The concept has been explored and applied to comprehend and unveil the forces that restrict or bias the media and journalistic roles in contemporary political regimes, for instance Italy (Stille, 2006), Latin America (Guerrero and Márques-Ramirez, 2014), and Turkey (Finkel, 2015). Precisely because the idea is seminal to explain the contemporary developments of media in relation of the features of political systems, the use of the concept from a historical perspective contributes to a better and deeper understanding of the historical heritage of media systems. The historical perspective also helps to connect the dots between the past and present of media and political systems. In addition, the multidisciplinary roots and the nature of the concept – in Economics, Political Sciencec and Media Studies – reinforce the usefulness of the concept in Media History, especially in combination with the idea of IPS.

Mungiu-Pippidi (2013, 41) defines media capture as "a situation in which the media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous… [and] have persisted in an intermediate state, with vested interests, and not just the government, using them for other purposes". Stiglitz (2017, 10) argues that "media capture occurs when one or more of the parties that the media are supposed to be monitoring on behalf of society 'captures' or takes hostage the media, so that they fail to perform their societal function". Stiglitz (2017) focuses on capture by corporate interest and governments and defines four broad and overlapping dimensions to examine the phenomenon: ownership, financial incentives, censorship and cognitive capture. The latter relates to the world's perception of journalism activity and the translation of this understanding in media reporting, which in turn shapes societies' views. Stiglitz argues that rather than developing the watchdog role, the media "are little more than a reflection of the views widely shared within it. Indeed, they can become part of the echo chamber that amplifies and solidifies conventional wisdom" (2017, 14). Media capture should not be the preserve of government but also the focus of 'vested interests', because when "media are captured by vested interests, these interests use their influence to change the politics" (Schiffrin 2021, p. 5).

In order to discuss the nature of media capture throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in Portuguese IPS, the study applies the four dimensions proposed by Stiglitz. The study explores the connection between ownership and economic and political forces ('vested interests') and how incentives at the state (imperial) and government (colonial) levels to publish affect the dependency of the press upon social and economic groups. The study also examines not only the use of the censorship, especially against the voices divergent from government and imperial policy; but also the closeness of journalism to social and political groups.

MEDIA SYSTEMS

Hallin and Mancini (2004) reinvigorated studies of media in historical and contemporary perspectives. Hallin and Mancini argue that to evaluate the media, it is fundamental to examine the nature of the state, the political system, the pattern of relations between political and economic interests, and the development of civil society. The present study follows the methodological approach established by Hallin and Mancini, and analyzes the media system in four dimensions: 1) the development of the market, with emphasis on the circulation of the press; 2) political parallelism, i.e. the nature and degree of relations between the media and politics and the way in which the media translate political divisions within a society; 3) the development of journalistic professionalism; and 4) the nature and degree of state intervention in the media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, 21–45).

In sum, the concept of 'Media Captured', the proposition of the 'Imperial Public Sphere' and the methodological approach of 'Media Systems' are the theoretical framework to explain the roles performed by media and press system during Portugal's Liberalism. The next section will present three case studies, the Macanese newspaper *Abelha da China*, the media in Angola and the newspaper *Gazeta das Colónias*, bringing together micro, meso and macro-levels perspectives to examine the process of capture by imperial and colonial forces.

EMPIRICAL CASES

ABELHA DA CHINA (1822–1823)

Alves (2000) uses a study of public opinion and the press that gave it a voice in Macao in the first decades of 19th century to illuminate and explain the origin of the Portuguese IPS. The imperative of legitimization of the Liberal Revolution (1820) was the push to the development of public opinion in Macao. The confrontations between liberals and absolutists, the disagreements between local and imperial elites that ruled from Lisbon and the economic fragilities of the territory were the privileged topics of the Macao press between 1820 and 1840. The *Abelha da China*, 1822–23, affirmed the end of the absolutist regime and gave voice to a liberal and commercial elite that required intervention in public affairs and who sought to regulate the opium trade to survive.

The interests and the convergence of local commercial owners, members of the military forces and the catholic clergy were the catalysts for the emergence of *Abelha da China*. The main topics of the first newspaper of Macao were the promotion of liberal ideas and revolution and the freedom of local enterprises. For instance, the paper reported the discussions and decisions of the colonial

administration (*Leal Senado*) and proposals to regulate commerce. Although *Abelha da China* endorsed the governments of Lisbon and Macau, the newspaper also promoted the controversy over the political orientation of the regime and the administrative issues of the territory. The weekly newspaper of Portugal and its empire, also gave voice to the events in Europe, United States and South America with reference to reports from European newspapers (Costa, 2022).

Abelha da China inaugurated the public sphere of Macao and the local elites promoted the press as a strategy to politicize the public space, to affirm liberalism and to improve the economic power of local elites. In research of natural born Macanese linked to the press (which include elites with Portuguese and Chinese origins through family connections), Sena (2022) shows that social relations in Macao were influenced by ethnic, cultural and religious issues, as well by the dynamics of political and economic factors. Throughout the 19th century, the press of Macao was strongly related to the political, economic and social demands of colonial elites and the press performed a strategic role in the propagation of their worldviews. The restoration of the Old Regime (1823–1834) and the ensuing re-instatement of censorship of the press in September 1823, enabled the government to force the *Abelha da China* to change its political orientation. Shortly, thereafter the paper ceased to be published. In this context, imperial and colonial administration' imposed censorship and persecution to journalism, aiming to eliminate the criticism and divergences of the local *intelligentsia* and its press.

ANGOLA (1866–1910)

At the end of the 19th century, the mass press was affirmed in Portugal. In the context of the empire, both press and journalism had asserted themselves in the colonial territories as: the main platform for information and discussion; channels for mobilizing political forces; and as the setting for conflict among social groups. The press focused on the political situation in the Portuguese empire, which included central government affairs in Lisbon, the governments of the colonies and local administrations. As previous research shows, it was common for colonial newspapers to have pages set aside for metropolitan, colonial and local topics, in addition to news and features on events in other African and Asian colonies (Fonseca, 2017).

Angola's media system is fundamental to understanding the role developed by journalism in the scope of the Portuguese empire due to the political and economic importance of the colony (Duffy, 1959). The *Civilisação da África Portuguesa* (1866) was the first unofficial newspaper in Angola and emerged 21 years after the implementation of the official gazette (1845). Throughout the Constitutional Monarchy almost 70 newspapers appeared in Angola, but the press flourished mainly in Luanda, reflecting the concentration of elites and

political and economic power in the capital of the colony. Meanwhile, newspapers circulated in the main cities of Angola, which can be seen by the letters from the readers, the existence of correspondents in locations across the territory and by the news contents. The regionalization of the press started in 1880, with the appearance of newspapers in Moçâmedes, Catumbela, Benguela, Ambriz and Novo Redondo. Print runs were minimal: in 1881, the weekly *Jornal de Loanda* printed 800 and in 1883 the weekly *O Mercantil* printed 700. The print runs reflected the size of the target audience of the natural born elites due to the empire's denial of the status of citizen to Africans (Lopo, 1964; Gonçalves, 1964).

Civil servants, merchants, liberal professionals (especially lawyers) and politicians were the owners of newspapers at this time. They also acted as editors and journalists of the titles, but they did not perform journalism exclusively nor did they depend on newspapers for their financial independence. In fact, political activity motivated the emergence of newspapers, as well as defined their editorial line. The set of variables for the analysis of the origin and development of the press shows that it had above all a political and non-commercial character; a low level of circulation despite the regionalization and the ownership by elites (Fonseca, 2019).

In the dimension of professionalism, journalistic activity was related to the political action of those who exercised journalism, and, in most cases, journalists were the founders and owners of the newspapers in which they wrote. Journalism was a hobby of the European and African intellectual elites because journalists did not yet exist in the form a professional category organized in clubs, associations or unions. However, Lourenço (2002) suggests the first signs of a professional identity among Angolan journalists are from this period. Lourenço (2002) argues that the mutually supportive behavior across titles and workers, visible in the texts published in the press, points to a journalism identity, as did the proposal of the newspaper *O Sul d'Angola*, in 1894, to create an association of professionals in order to hold accountable those who acted as journalists.

Journalists were linked to the social and political groups (in most cases informal) to which they belonged and made the press a platform for the propagation of their ideas. In their texts, journalists proclaimed to write the 'truth', to make use of 'partiality' and 'justice', but they did so in accordance with their beliefs and the interests of the groups to which they belonged. There exists a correlation between the ownership of newspapers and the exercise of journalism, as well as a direct relationship between the ideas of those who exercised journalism and the content of newspapers. Consequently, neither the instrumentalization nor the professional autonomy of journalists existed although journalistic exercise was attached to political advocacy. Or, the 'cognitive capture', and the fight to adopt and shape the imperial society worldviews.

The previous indicators – political press, property linked to political groups and journalistic activity attached with political activism – point to a strong parallelism between the press and the political forces of the time. Throughout the Constitutional Monarchy (1834–1910) two political groups stood out, both consisting of intellectual, economic and social elites: Portuguese settlers and the ethnic natural born Africans (Corrado, 2008). Such duality manifested itself in the press and appears as its main cleavage at this time. In a broad approach, it can be said that the Portuguese supported the colonial project while the Africans fought for the autonomy of Angola. Although most newspapers in Portugal defended the colonial project and criticized the policies of local governments, there were titles that supported either the republic or the monarchy. Some Portuguese owned newspapers defended the rights of Africans, others propagated the distinction between the races and the inferiority of Africans. Another segmentation within the scope of Portuguese owned newspapers was the demand for decentralization and autonomy of Angola in opposition to those who fought for the continuity of a centralized political power in Lisbon. Newspapers founded by Portuguese settlers were also divided between supporting or criticizing local governments, which was most often explained by their political and economic ties. Other features of the press were the conflicts among newspapers (which translated to disputes among political groups), the creation of newspapers in response to the editorial line of the titles in circulation, and the persecution promoted by the government against the newspapers that attacked it. These factors reinforced the strong parallelism between journalism and political forces in Angola throughout the period.

State intervention and capture of the press was strong. The government owned the official gazette and through it produced the propaganda of the administration and of the colonial project. There is a record of persecution of newspapers and journalists, such as the arrest of journalists; the transfer of journalists to other colonies due their criticism of government; and the prosecutions and persecution of several African journalists. It should be noted that the African press and its journalists were the main victims of the persecution of the Angolan governments, which implied the dismantling of their periodicals and the silencing of the press that opposed the colonial project. However, since there are no indicators of public subsidies to newspapers, over time several titles have collaborated with the government to the extent that they supported its policies, including being created for this purpose, which reveal public support and capture by government.

Portuguese elites promoted the flourishing of the independent press in Angola mainly to affirm itself and to fight the policies of both the central government and that of the colony. From the 1870s onwards, the ethnic African elites made the press an inclusive space of struggle and demand, because their political and economic power continued to decline with the progress of the colonial project.

Concerning ownership, links to corporate interests, the cognitive nature of journalistic content and state intervention, the press system was captured during the period of the Constitutional Monarchy, primarily by the elites and the imperial government.

GAZETA DAS COLÓNIAS – AN IMPERIAL NEWSPAPER

The public sphere was both a demand and a legacy of the 1820s liberal revolution and sociocultural modernity (Tengarrinha 2013, Alves 2015). In the context of the Portuguese colonial empire, the regime change revolutionized the elites and the empire's administration, to bring about an IPS. News and opinion articles on colonial issues in general and each of the territories in Africa and Asia were present in the Portuguese press throughout the 19th century, gaining new life after the British Ultimatum of 1890. It is notable that from 1912 the *Jornal do Comércio*, which had been published since 1853, changed its masthead publication data from "Jornal Propriedade da Empresa do Jornal do Comercio" (Newspaper Property of the Company of the Journal of Commerce) to include the suffix "e das colónias" (and the colonies). Meanwhile, the weekly *Diário de Notícias* started a section devoted to colonial affairs.

The weekly *Gazeta das Colónias: Semanário de Propaganda e Defesa das Colónias* (1924–26) was a journalistic landmark that claimed the IPS and inserted itself into Portugal's media system. Advertising had an important role in the newspaper that was associated with the economic interests of the metropolis operating in the colonies, companies like the Banco Nacional Ultramarino (National Overseas Bank), the Sociedade de Angola e do Congo (Angola and Congo Society), Sá Leitão & Co. Import and Export and the Companhia de Moçambique (Mozambique Company). Regarding circulation, Gazeta was sold and circulated in Portugal and in colonial territories, but with a low level of issues and limited to the elites.

Another variable of this dimension, the nature of the newspaper and its relation with the public, the *Gazeta* was published by Oliveira Tavares (a member of the armed forces), António Leite de Magalhães (Governor of Guinea, 1927–31) and the intellectual José Veloso de Castro. Its regular writers were members of the military, politicians, civil servants, intellectuals and scholars of Africa and Asia with experience in the field who were concerned with colonial issues and who thirsted for an intervention in the Portuguese imperial project through the press system (Fonseca, 2023).

The contents were organized along colonial themes and territories in this weekly publication owned by the Colonial Advertising Company. In the letters from the publisher, there was a preference for topics related to the management of the empire, including colonial autonomy *versus* political centralization; colonial public services and workers; the finance and economic situation;

the religious question; the problem of indigenous labour; and the international image of the empire.

Looking to the role of *Gazeta* in the context of liberalism and colonialism, the ideological propaganda of the empire stood out. For instance, in its first issue, published on 19 June 1924, an article by Colonial Minister Mariano Martins noted that 'the propaganda of our colonizing action is one of the missions imposed on itself by the *Gazeta das Colónias*'. Through this imperial 'propaganda', the political and cultural ideology of colonialism spread, in which the 'civilizing mission', economic and productive dimension and the religious issues were underlined.

Regarding political parallelism, the newspaper was closely connected to public and private corporations, for instance *Banco Nacional Ultramarino* and *Mozambique Company*, which showed the ties between paper and political and social forces of Portugal and the Empire. Illustrative of political parallelism and the power of the imperial and colonial elites exercised through the public sphere and the *Gazeta* was the announcement in issue 21, in April 1925, of the departure of Oliveira Tavares from being one of the newspaper's publishers to become the head of the Companhia de Moçambique. The importance of the press as a structure of the public sphere and as a crucial space for intervention in the political process was reaffirmed when Leite de Magalhães became a member of the government of Angola in the second half of 1926 (issue 37, September 1926).

Concerning relations with political forces and parties, these became transparent when we analyzed the journalists and writers of *Gazeta*. For example, contributors included the engineer and politician Alfredo Augusto Freire de Andrade; historian and colonial administrator Armando Cortesão; Artur Tamagnini de Sousa Barbosa, the Governor of Macau; General José Augusto Alves Roçadas; Goan intellectual and politician Luiz de Menezes de Bragança; and Brito Camacho, a physician, republican politician and colonial governor. The newspaper also had journalists working in offices in Angola and Mozambique – even in the interior of these territories – which highlights its connections as a communications company with the press in the colonies.

Analyzing the third dimension, the level of the professionalism was low, as the history of Portuguese press has demonstrated. At this time the journalistic field had no professional norms; most contributors were amateur hobbyist writers, which enabled the instrumentalization of journalism to respond to elite interests and sometimes to personal ambitions. Meanwhile, it's also important to highlight the orientation of newspaper contents to public problems of Portugal and its empire, namely economic, political and social challenges.

Finally, looking to the role of the state, through the publication of *Gazeta*, there were not any indications that censorship had affected the contents and circulation. However, the military coup in 1926 affected the irregularity of the

circulation statistics and caused the demise of the paper. The main topics of *Gazeta* were concerned with state and public governance, throughout the Empire and the analysis revealed a high level of involvement of politicians and public servants with the paper.

The case of *Gazeta das Colónias* as an imperial newspaper with circulation in all the colonies of the Portuguese empire, demonstrated the attachment and the capture of media system in four dimensions: ownership by imperial elites; financial incentives through public and private advertisement; censorship with the advent of military government and cognitive connection with the world-views of the colonial and imperial program.

CAPTURED BY ELITES

The goals and methods of the colonial enterprise were the main topic of discussion between the imperial elites of the early 20th century (Roberts, 1986). The historian Roberts (1986) demonstrates how the political, economic and military elite were protagonists in determining the response to imperial problems, highlighting the role of institutions in the colonial territories and the conflicts created between the metropolis and these territories due to the 'cost' of the colonial enterprise. Beasley (2005) identifies the role of the founders of the Colonial Society in the emergence and affirmation of imperial ideology in the United Kingdom from 1870, which depended on flourishing journalism and popular literature. In the Portuguese empire, as the case of the press of Macao and Angola showed, the imperial and colonial elites appropriated the press and journalism as favored channels of affirmation and conflict with the colonial project. Press systems were used by elites to promotes and pursue their vested interest related to economic benefits connected to private enterprises and also related to public policies and rules.

The imperial and colonial elites, fully aware of their condition and power, represented themselves through the press and used journalism to capture the colonial enterprise. The concept of imperial and colonial elites used here is that used by Xavier and Santos (2007), where the 'imperial elite' are those who were engaged in the imperial space to exercise political, economic or cultural functions. On the other hand, the 'colonial elite' was composed of groups in the imperial territories in which they owned interests and exercised power. In this respect, the *Gazeta das Colónias* was associated with the imperial elite and the newspapers published in the territories were associated with the colonial elites. The elites used the IPS and Portugal's media system to propagate their ideology, defend their political and economic interests, articulate their ambitions and disseminate their cultural practices. These elites interacted and debated with each

other, promoting, questioning and fighting metropolitan ideology and directives in accordance with their interests. By integrating the IPS and media system, these elites demonstrated an understanding of the empire as an entity formed by a continuum of local structures and, as such, played the role of an ideological device shaping the worldviews through press and journalism.

CONCLUSIONS

The IPS emerged from the liberal struggles of the 19th century and promoted public debate and the press in the colonies belonging to the Portuguese empire. Politics and the economy were the theme of public opinion in an interdependent geographical space. The Portuguese language and shared intellectual culture, in addition to regional and local peculiarities, shaped the development and growth of a press that was the stage for all social life, provoked conflict and built consensus. Imperial elites, whether they were based in Lisbon or in colonial governments, economic enterprises in the territories, colonial elites and the native elites, were all protagonists in the IPS.

Portugal exercised political, economic, social and military power over its domains throughout the last two centuries (Newitt, 1981). The imperial project and colonial issues were themes that were intrinsic to the life of the country and overseas colonies, and this was reflected in the information and opinion content that shaped the media system. The continuous contestation of the empire in the territories, as well as the permanent disagreements over the direction of the colonies, were also reflected in the IPS and media system. In the context of public space and opinion, the metropolis and the colonies were an integrated imperial and discursive public sphere. An appreciation of the IPS is essential to understanding the press and journalism (the media system) as a structure of representation and political conflict in the imperial and colonial context.

The economic, political, military and ideological forces – the four sources of social power identified by Michael Mann (2012) – were protagonists in the discussion and conflict in the IPS and capture of the media system. The colonial and imperial elites took control of the press system and were agents in an IPS that propagated the colonial ideology of that period and shaped the imperial Portuguese worldview.

Applying the concept of media capture and using the dimensions developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to explore the roles and features of the Portuguese imperial media system during liberalism, the research revealed the following characteristics. First, journalism performed roles typical of liberalism, but demonstrated a cognitive capture, presenting the agenda, political views and ideologies of the social groups that were attached. Second, the press did not become

a means of mass circulation and remained a political and non-commercial institution, with a restricted audience and owned by political and social forces. Third, both the press and political systems revealed a strong political parallelism regarding ownership and the manifestation of corporate and government connections with journalism. Fourth, the processes of professionalization and professionalism were in their infancy and the performance of journalists was linked to their political action. Finally, the imperial state and the government maintained a strong intervention in the press through advertisement, incentives to create newspapers, censorship and the persecution of journalists and titles.

Several studies have identified the roles of propaganda and the ideological device of the Portuguese media system during the authoritarian Estado Novo (1933–1974), for instance Garcia, Leonárd and Alves (2017a). In the scope of the Portuguese transition to democracy during the 1970s, the media also performed a political role and was related to the dissemination of ideologies of political parties and social movements (Maxwell, 1983; Rezola and Gomes, 2014). Discussing and analyzing a Lusophone media system in contemporary societies, Figueiras and Ribeiro (2019) brought together case studies that showed the connections among media systems, governments and private corporations. Against this background, I suggest research on imperial Portuguese media history and contemporary studies on the media of Lusophone countries will benefit from the adoption of the concept of media capture. The idea of media capture is a theoretical insight that could improve media studies and gain a deeper understanding of the impact of legacies on contemporary political and media systems; the comprehensive analysis of the continuities and ruptures on media performance; and the roles developed by journalism.

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Media Capture Theory: A Paradigm Shift?

Péter Bajomi-Lázár
0000-0002-8624-2005
Budapest Business University, Hungary

Abstract: This paper consists of three parts. First, it suggests that a paradigm shift has taken place in political communication, as the advent of social media allows political elites to assert and frame their agendas in more efficient and economical ways than the capture of legacy media. In consequence, a paradigm shift is taking place in media studies as well: because traditional media capture theory does no longer fully account for contemporary media/politics interactions, media systems scholars now study the effects of disintermediation on media and political landscapes. Then this paper returns to traditional media capture theory and discusses some definitional issues. Finally, it recalls how party colonization of the media, a version of media capture theory, accounted for the deficit of media freedom in the former communist countries a decade ago.

Keywords: media systems research, media capture, Central and Eastern Europe

A PARADIGM SHIFT IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION – AND IN MEDIA `STUDIES

Studies on media capture have been an important paradigm in comparative media systems research since the early 2000s. Based on theories of state capture in political science, they establish a link between political and media systems, and help explain variations in media landscapes, especially in levels of media freedom and pluralism. Media capture theory is particularly popular in young democracies such as the countries of Southern Europe and of Eastern Europe where media freedom is often curtailed by political elites (but media capture is also prevalent in many other countries such as Taiwan, Turkey, and South Africa, among others).

Owing to changes in communication technology, however, a paradigm shift has taken place in political communication in the 2010s and, in consequence, in media studies as well. These changes include at least five key developments:

1. *Direct communication:* Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow politicians to directly communicate with voters. Politicians may now assert and frame their agendas, bypassing legacy media and professional journalists whose gatekeeping function has been undermined (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2019). Social media also enable them to gather instant feedback and shape their messages accordingly.
2. *The weaponization of fake news claims:* The frequent use of the term 'fake news' as a political label to describe and to discredit independent critical media allows populist politicians to undermine trust in all media, and particularly in outlets that those politicians associate with liberal values (cf. Reuters Institute, 2022, see also Bajomi-Lázár & Horváth, 2023).
3. *Influencers:* The enhanced role of social media in news consumption enables politically motivated influencers to deliver micro-targeted messages to particular groups of voters (Reuters Institute, 2021) in more economical ways than the capture and funding of traditional news organizations (e.g., Hanula, 2022).
4. *Disinformation:* The decentralization of news production allows politicians to systematically disseminate disinformation via online platforms, manipulating public opinion both at home and abroad (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).
5. *Smear:* Character-killing campaigns that cause a chilling effect enable politicians to discredit and silence critical journalists and public intellectuals (Örnebring, 2012). On social media, such campaigns are accompanied by civil volunteers harassing those targeted, thus boosting the efficiency of said campaigns (cf. Tófalvy, 2017).

In short, new communication technologies allow for more efficient and economical methods of information management and manipulation. Overall, the emergence of new platforms of communication means that politicians seeking to manage and manipulate information no longer need to control, formally or informally, many media outlets to get their messages through to voters and to marginalize, or silence, critical voices.

The traditional media capture approach does not account for these recent developments. Hence a growing body of literature has addressed the question of how the new means of political communication affect relations between media and politics. A new explanatory theory accounting for the issues above and modelling their effects, however, is still to be developed.

MEDIA CAPTURE THEORY: SOME DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

Early writings in media capture theory discussed media capture as a phenomenon synonymous with the political instrumentalization of the media (cf. Mancini, 2012) or with informal censorship. For example, Corneo (2005, p. 2) suggests that "captured media can seriously distort collective decisions" while Besley and Prat (2006, p. 721) argue that "media capture (…) affects the voters' information and hence their voting decisions" and "the presence of media capture reduces political turnover". Petrova (2005 p. 1) states that "mass media, being the most important source of information on public affairs for the general public, provides a convenient means for manipulating public opinion." In other words, media capture is a means to convert political capital into media capital, and then media capital back into political capital again, i.e., it establishes a dynamic link between political and media systems.

This approach, however, is problematic in that it assumes that media have a major influence on voters' decisions, as reception studies looking into the political impact of legacy media tend to question this assumed impact, at least in democracies with plural and free media landscapes where most of the relevant research has been conducted (cf. Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980). While the situation may be different in countries with less diverse and less free media landscapes where hegemonic media might exert a greater influence upon voting decisions, it remains that electoral behaviour is also dependent on a number of factors other than the media, including personal experiences and interpersonal communication with opinion leaders. Yet from this assumption it follows that the primary reason behind media capture is the management of information, while other considerations are largely or entirely overlooked.

Other motivations behind media capture may be numerous, including the extraction of media resources from the media such as well-paid senior positions, airtime, radio and television frequencies, state advertising revenues, newspaper subsidies, and funds dedicated to public service content production. All these resources may be used for the purpose of clientele building, i.e., in the final analysis, for the purpose of consolidating the incumbent political actors' rule. Media capture theory should also account for these possible outcomes.

Recent studies have echoed the definition of media capture in the seminal work by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2008, p. 92) in that it is a situation where the media are lacking autonomy because "vested interests, and not just the government, [are] using them for other purposes". In this sense, it is a "government-business cartel" that is politically instrumentalizing media. More precisely, the aspect that "fundamentally distinguishes media capture from other forms of government control of the media is the involvement of the private sector" (Dragomir, 2019, p. 4), i.e., politicians commission oligarchs to extend their informal control

over the media. This approach certainly allows for the inclusion of other motives behind media capture such as financial considerations.

However, while the early approach seems narrow and restrictive, the more recent one is too broad and inclusive and only offers a too vague definition, which makes it practically impossible to distinguish media capture from all other forms of political instrumentalization of the media including informal censorship. What kind of political interference is not media capture then? What about, for example, state advertising in private media owned by government cronies with the intention of influencing political coverage, which is the case of Hungary under Viktor Orbán's rule (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2019)? Some scholars argue that this is also a media capture strategy. For example, Dragomir (2019) suggests that media capture has four components, including: 1) regulatory capture, 2) the control of public service media, 3) the use of state financing as a control tool, and 4) ownership takeover. But the question once again arises: what is *not* media capture?

I cannot come up with a better definition for media capture. Instead, during my former research, I have suggested introducing the notion of 'party colonization of the media' as a potentially more accurate concept. What follows below is a brief outline of this approach. Before offering some details, I should add that I conducted my research a decade ago. This means that my research focused on legacy media, and my findings may be of a limited use in the contemporary media environment defined by the emerging new communication technologies described in Section 1 of this paper.

PARTY COLONIZATION OF THE MEDIA IN EASTERN EUROPE

The historical freedom of the press data issued by Freedom House suggest that media freedom has been compromised more often in Eastern than in Western Europe. These data also suggest that there have been major variations in the level of press freedom in and across the countries of Eastern Europe in the post-transformation period. These quantitative assessments are in line with numerous qualitative descriptions. My research, published in the monograph *Party Colonisation of the Media in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014) aimed at explaining the relative deficit of media freedom in Eastern as opposed to Western Europe, and the spatial and temporal variations in media freedom within Eastern Europe[1].

1 For a brief description of my findings in the *Central European Journal of Communication*, see Bajomi-Lázár (2015).

Following the tradition established by Seymour-Ure (1974, p. 157) who observes that "there have been very obvious historical associations between press and party systems," I tried to explain variations in media freedom in terms of variations in party systems. But why parties and not other political actors? I focused on political parties for the simple reason that parties in Eastern Europe have a *de facto* monopoly in the regulatory process and are therefore the single most influential actors shaping media landscapes. Media regulation is often the outcome of inter and intra-party bargains and deals and is therefore shaped by the relative powers of parties and party factions. In contrast, other potential agents such as Presidents, trade unions, religious institutions, and professional and civil society organisations are not in any position to exert much influence on the regulatory process.

The research team of *Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe* (2009–2013), a European Commission FP7 project based at Oxford University, was led by Jan Zielonka and Terhi Rantanen, and involved Henrik Örnebring, Václav Štětka, Ainius Lasas and myself. We conducted over 300 interviews in 10 former communist countries that had joined the European Union in the 2000s. The interviewees included senior politicians, as well as state administrators, media policy experts, leading journalists, civil society representatives and media scholars. One of the recurring findings in multiple countries was that many of the political elites did not think that the media could affect voting behavior. Instead, various interviewees repeatedly suggested that control over the media may eventually backfire in terms of election outcomes. This suggested that other motivations for media capture should be considered.

Political science has studied 'state capture' for long (World Bank, 2000). Political parties in young democracies are young and have weak social roots (O'Dwyer, 2004; Kopecký, 2006; Kopecký & Scherlis, 2008), and need "to compensate for their feeble position in society by a strong grip over the public sector" (Kopecký, 2006, p. 264). Kopecký (2006, p. 258) further describes 'party colonization of the state' as a strategy whereby "state resources are traded for political support." These are 'cartel parties' that rely on subventions and other benefits and privileges afforded by the state (cf. Katz & Mair, 1995).

Following this tradition, I suggested introducing the concept of 'party colonization of the media', to be defined as a strategy aimed at extracting resources from the media and channeling them to party supporters to reward them for past and future services. This observation is in line with several qualitative assessments describing how political parties have divided media resources (Jakubowicz, 2012; Balčytienė, 2013). For example, Sparks (2012, p. 44) observes that:

> …the allocation of [media] resources was very often directly the product of political factors. The protracted wrangling over the legal position

of television, and in particular the bitter struggles over the award of commercial franchises is an obvious case in point.

Now, differences in levels of media freedom between Western and Eastern Europe may be explained in terms the different levels of embeddedness of political parties in society. Parties in Western Europe have twice as many members (Mair & Biezen, 2001) and twice as much public trust (IDEA, 2007) than those in Eastern Europe. Also, electoral volatility has been about three times higher in Eastern than in Western Europe (Mainwaring & Torcal, 2005). It follows that parties in the West could rely on membership dues and local party structures for party organization and voter mobilization. Parties in Eastern Europe, by contrast, had to compensate for their weakness by capturing the state *and* the media, which explains why media freedom is more often curtailed in the East than in the West.

But what explains variations in media freedom in and across the countries of Eastern Europe? I argued that different party configurations in parliament may lead to different patterns of party colonization of the media. I compared 10 governments with even mandates, i.e., potentially similar opportunities in terms of party colonization of the media, in five countries in the period 1993–2013, involving Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia. I identified three recurring patterns, including: 1) one-party colonization, 2) multi-party-colonization with a dominant party, and 3) multi-party colonization without a dominant party (see Table 1).

Table 1. Patterns of party colonization and levels of media freedom in five former communist countries and the pertinent political leaders in 1993–2013

Pattern of party colonization	Media freedom	Country and Political Leaders
One-party colonization	low	Hungary: Orbán (2010–) Poland: Marcinkiewicz and Kaczyński (2005–2007) Romania: Năstase (2000–2004)
Multi-party colonization with a dominant party	medium	Bulgaria: Kostov (1997–2001) Poland: Miller and Belka (2001–2004) Slovenia: Janša (2004–2008)
Multi-party colonization without a dominant party	high	Bulgaria: Simeon II (2001–2005) Hungary: Horn (1994–1998) Romania: Tăriceanu (2004–2007) Slovenia: Drnovšek (1993–1996)

Source: author

The bottom-line is that one-party colonization of the media leads to lower levels of media freedom than multi-party colonization. The more parties are involved in the colonization of the media, and the more evenly they are involved, the more veto points there are in the system. Veto points make sure that there

is no political party in the position to control all media, which leads to higher levels of media freedom.

The recurring pattern in the five countries studied is that the more centralized the decision-making structures within a government, the greater the likelihood of one-party colonization, and the more fragmented a government's decision-making structures, the smaller the likelihood of such colonization. In other words, the stronger the government, the weaker the media, and vice versa.

What has been the main lesson of this research? It suggests that media freedom is not just a function of media regulation, which in consequence alone cannot improve the status of media freedom. It is the constitutional framework of the nation that in the final analysis defines media freedom. Proportional electoral laws that favor coalition governments and party laws that improve party funding and internal party democracy may ultimately restrain parties' needs and opportunities to colonize the media and hence may be conducive to higher levels of media freedom. If you want to improve media freedom, focus on the constitutional framework, not on media law, for even the best media regulation may be poorly implemented if veto points are missing from the system.

Are these findings still valid in the new, changed, media environment? This is difficult to answer. To be sure, media freedom is still lacking in many of the former communist countries, and media capture remains an established practice, even though the means and methods of political communication have changed a lot. But if we suggest that media capture, or the party colonization of the media, is motivated by factors other than just the management of information, and in particular the extraction of resources that parties can use to ensure informal party support, then these findings may still have validity.

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Patronage Media in Post-Communist Mongolia

Undrah Baasanjav
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, USA
0000-0002-1088-3092

Poul Erik Nielsen
University of Aarhus, Denmark
0000-0002-2988-2540

Munkhmandakh Myagmar
Director of the Press Institute of Mongolia, Mongolia
0009-0007-6600-672X

Abstract: We provide a historically informed analysis of the media in post-communist Mongolia thirty years after the transition. In 1990, Mongolia chose a peaceful transition towards liberal democracy following the seventy years of the communist regime. Our analysis first establishes that amid the challenges and changes since the new constitution was adopted, a plural and commercial media system has undeniably been established. However, only a few established themselves as independent media with editorial, business, and ethical norms. While the plurality of media outlets created a media landscape aberrant from the socialist-time propagandistic media, the media market failures, along with rudimentary legal and professional institutions, contributed to the media instrumentalization and media capture in Mongolia.

Keywords: media capture, instrumentalization of media, Mongolian media, market failures

This article provides a historically informed analysis of the recent media situation in post-communist Mongolia thirty years after the transition. In 1990, Mongolia opted for a peaceful transition to liberal democracy, and the Constitution of 1992 adopted the fundamental tenets of liberal representative democracy. Those tenets included freedom of speech and press and the separation of the legislative, executive, and judiciary powers. Consequent legislation abolished the Communist Party's control of society and dismantled government-run state media. Since then, this sparsely populated landlocked country between Russia and China has undergone dramatic social, economic, cultural, and media changes. Political science researchers have often studied regime change and the post-communist transition without paying particular attention to the role of the media in these processes (Voltmer, 2013).

Moreover, media researchers have only sporadically analyzed the long-term role of the media in consolidating democratic processes (Gross & Jakubowicz, 2013; Hrvatin et al. 2004). This article focuses on the historical role of the media in the democratization processes in Mongolia and aims to answer two primary research questions: 1) How have the post-communist context and the media development mutually shaped one another? 2) To what extent has the media contributed to democracy in Mongolia and how?

In investigating the above research questions, we first briefly present the Mongolian context, then employ the theoretical framework of the media system approach in transitional democracies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Voltmer, 2013) and the concept of "media capture" by political and business interests, as well as by global digital platforms in Mongolia (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013; Schiffrin, 2017). After briefly presenting the methodology, we conduct an empirical analysis of the Mongolian case.

In the last 30 years, the Mongolian economy has grown dramatically, primarily due to a mining boom and consequently the economy has become resource-dependent on mining, producing 85% of the total exports (World Bank, 2021). Along with the economic growth, migration from rural to urban areas has doubled so that almost 70% of the population lives there. The wealth derived from mining increased social stratification. A small political and financial elite has exploited the privatization process and mining wealth. A prosperous middle class in the capital—Ulaanbaatar—contrasts the poverty and depressing conditions among ordinary people in both rural and urban areas. The influx of significant foreign investments into mining also relates to a geopolitical notion of 'the third neighbor' policy to attract Western investment to counterbalance the country's dependency on the two giant neighboring economies, Russia and China. These specifics of the Mongolian context of post-socialism, mining dependency, "third neighbor policy," and rampant social stratification will be interwoven into our analysis. The rapid integration of the country into

the world market economy with digital social media and significant mining investments further accelerates the transformation of media spheres.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The role of media in a democratization process and democracy has been fiercely contested, especially in transitional countries. As Voltmer (2013) points out, "neither democracy nor the notion of a democratic media – nor that of related ideas such as press freedom, objectivity, and the watchdog role – has a fixed meaning" (p. 233). The domestication and reinterpretation of Western models of democracy and democratic processes, in general, are not fixed or static, even within long-established consolidated democracies

Considering the varying notions of the democratization process, we analyzed the media's role in the Mongolian democratization processes following the media system approach proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), that involves four dimensions:

> "(1) the development of media markets; (2) political parallelism, that is, the degree and nature of the links between the media and political parties; (3) the development of journalistic professionalism; and (4) the degree and nature of state intervention in the media system" (p. 21).

Hallin & Mancini (2004) define the three core elements of professionalization in journalism. i) journalists' relative autonomy that justifies control over their work processes within the media organizations. ii) a set of distinct shared professional norms, e.g., codes of ethics and "to maintain a separation between advertising and editorial content" (p. 35). iii) public service orientation to secure public trust. Hallin and Mancini (2004) further juxtapose professionalization with instrumentalization, where journalism is controlled by specific external interests rather than public trust.

Scholars have applied the framework by Hallin & Mancini in the analyses of media systems in the democratization process of Eastern Europe (Voltmer, 2008), Brazil (de Albuquerque, 2005), East Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa (Voltmer, 2013) and South America (Mellado & Lagos, 2013) despite criticism of the model's shortcomings (Humphreys, 2009; Norris, 2009). Hallin & Mancini (2012) endorse the raised criticism of shortcomings and invite other researchers to develop the framework further (p. 207). Voltmer (2013) has, in her work on media and democratization processes in transitional countries, further developed the framework in a way that stresses the importance of the notion of 'path

dependency' among other issues. "Path dependency" focuses on how characteristics of the old regime mold the democratization processes in various ways.

The Mongolian media system has been characterized by a high level of media instrumentalization, external pluralism with various outlets, a lower degree of professional journalism, and the continued socialist-time tendency of state control of media in the last three decades. These commonalities of media development characteristics resemble some of those of the media systems in southern Europe, which differ from northern European and Anglo-American versions, which are characterized by: long-standing media rules, established journalistic autonomy, and rational-legal authority (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.73), In Mongolia's media system, political parallelism distinguishes political control of media from that of economic regulation. Hallin and Mancini (2004, p.37) refer to the former as instrumentalization and the latter as commercialization. We argue that neither is immediately applicable in Mongolia because the media rarely support specific parties or party ideologies, but instead mainly serve the interest of specific politicians, who often possess both political and commercial powers. Instead, politicians on all political spectrums instrumentalize the media for their political and business interests. In that sense, the "media capture" concept, defined as controlling the media by political and business interests to serve their interests, is more useful in our analyses.

We take Hallin & Mancini's (2004) framework as a point of departure and provide empirical analyses of these characteristics concerning political clientelism, journalistic integrity, market failures, and social media influences. Hallin and Mancini's define clientelism as a "system where patrons control social resources and deliver to clients for support and exchange" (2004, p. 58) without formal rules and no qualms for serving the common interest. This definition provides a valuable explanation for our analysis of the linkages between media organizations and the government in obtaining government contracts and concessions in Mongolia. Additionally, we apply the media capture concept that helps render the colluded political and business interests that deter the media from performing their watchdog functions and informing the public (Mabweazara, Muneri & Ndlovu, 2020; Nelson, 2021; Schiffrin, 2017). Both theoretical approaches have overlaps when defining media capture, the instrumentalization of media, and clientelism. Hallin and Mancini (2004) juxtapose journalistic professionalism against the instrumentalization of media by political and business interests, a classical form of media capture. News media's economic vulnerability that incentivizes plutocratic interests to take over news business and disseminate propaganda, distraction, and opinion manipulation (Nelson, 2021), is reflected in our analysis of the Mongolian media market, as suggested by Hallin & Mancini (2004).

We also elaborated upon Mellado and Lagos' (2013) inclusion of the impact of technology and social media in our analysis and how the oligopolistic digital platforms, Facebook and Google, siphon off the funding from local media, which are already struggling. Their approach emphasizes how the exponential growth of smartphones, tablets, and social media in developing countries changed media by encouraging more independent news analyses and counter-narratives. Mongolian institutions' practices and media organizations' norms are being shaped in previously uncharted, uncertain political contexts and amidst digital acceleration that was not the case in media and journalistic development in other established democracies. Anya Schiffrin (2021) explains how the low entrance threshold for digital media increased the number of online media outlets globally, which compete for purportedly infinite ads, thus lowering the cost of advertisement. This condition makes news media economically vulnerable and easy to capture.

Furthermore, unfettered oligopolistic platforms, Facebook and Google, have facilitated media capture policies worldwide, increasing pressure on local media's content and self-censorship. In the digital age, traditional media's role and gatekeeping function are circumvented, and scholars caution that even though social networks have increased viral communication and deliberative possibilities, social media use contributes to "the digital capture" by Facebook, Apple, and Google around the world (Schiffrin, 2017). Because of social media's mode of operation, emotionally charged, polarized, and sensationalized information tends to circulate virally and widely, contributing to the "echo chamber" and disinformation order that distorts and distracts news media's roles and functions.

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

The case study used the following resources: available academic historical studies, various Mongolian and international reports on the Mongolian media situation, systematic monitoring of the Mongolian media landscape since 1999, and relevant media legislation. Additionally, in May 2022, the authors conducted 14 interviews (30 to 90 minutes) with media experts who are journalists, editors, university researchers, television executives, former board members, and leaders and employees in non-governmental organizations. The interviewees were chosen for their expertise in various aspects of Mongolia's media systems. The interviews supplemented each other and in some cases, one interview led to the next. Finally, the interviews were analyzed and interwoven in the context[1].

1 The interviews were transcribed and translated by the authors.

MEDIA DEVELOPMENT AND MEDIA MARKET

Throughout the post-Communist era, the Mongolian media market has had a great variety of media outlets and content indicating intrinsic plurality.

As of January 2022, there were 428 media outlets, including 7 national daily newspapers, 135 television stations (of which 20 are national), 50 radio stations (7 national), and 191 online news websites (PIM, 2022). Behind these statistics is a media market undergoing fundamental, complex, and ambivalent changes.

PRINT PRESS

The number of legacy media, especially print media, has steadily decreased over the last decade. Newspapers were the first independent media that took advantage of the new freedom of expression and broke the strict government and Communist-party control of the media. The first independent newspaper, *Shine Toly*, was launched in February1990, followed by a plethora of political newspapers. However, unlike other post-communist countries like Poland and Estonia, the independent and oppositional print media achieved limited impact, as Myagmar and Nielsen explain:

> The new independent newspapers were financially vulnerable, while the government media enjoyed considerable material and financial support … Newsprint became a scarce commodity because of the suspension of supplies from Russia in 1993, and the rationing of newsprint, predictably, favored government newspapers since the primary publisher in Mongolia at that time was the state-owned Suhbaatar Publishing House, which published about 70% of Mongolia's printed material. (Myagmar and Nielsen 2001, p. 4)

Because market failures render free and fair competition impossible, the government-run daily newspapers *Ardyn Erkh* and *Zasgiin Gazryn Medee*, the off-shoots of former government newspapers, maintained their dominant market share throughout the 1990s. Following the adoption of the Law on Media Freedom in 1998, which prohibited government-owned media, both newspapers were privatized and renamed respectively *Udriin Sonin* and *Zuuny Medee*. Despite some growth in titles and circulation till 2006, the daily newspapers did not manage to create mass circulation. The total circulation of daily newspapers was by 2021 only 27,700. The limited circulation and a moderate print advertisement market indicate that newspapers were established to serve mostly political interests. Except for a few weekly newspapers such as *Khumuus* (established in 1997) and *Seeruleg* (established in 1996), which had significant circulations of 35,000 and 26,200 at some point around 2006, newspapers have not established themselves as media businesses. Instead, they serve the political and

business interests of patrons, or individual politicians because many of them operate as smaller units in business corporations.

The total number of newspapers and magazines by titles has dropped by 50% in each of the past two decades, and the annual sales of newspapers have dropped by 300%, while that of magazines has dropped by 1800%. Despite the declining exposure among the public, the few remaining print newspapers still impact the political agenda among public administrators and business decision-makers, owing to the institutional subscription and online circulation on social media. Bayarmagnai, the general manager of the second largest newspaper *Unuudur*, explains how the newspaper is distributed nationwide and how subscription is prevalent in public administration by saying:

> Even though our newspaper subscription in print has declined in recent years, ninety percent [90%] of the readers of the print versions are decision-makers, including local *sum* (province administrative units) governors, principals of schools, directors of kindergartens, and business managers. Subscribers are different from readers or kiosk buyers demographically (Bayarmagnai, interview, May 11 2022).

The reduction in the number of kiosk sales has resulted in a significant decline in the newspapers' advertising revenue and has been reflected in changes in politicians' election campaigns. Most existing newspapers have disassociated themselves from political party affiliations. Nevertheless, the advantages of having a political affiliation with the Mongolian People's Party (MPP), has allowed a few newspapers to survive while other newspapers gone bankrupt. The share of election advertisements in newspapers has decreased by 75 percent from the election in 2012 to the election in 2020[2], and the candidates for the 2021 presidential election neglected the use of daily newspapers as a platform for advertising and focused mainly on social media campaigns.

BROADCAST MEDIA

The broadcast media in the 1990s followed the path of the printed media. The government-run Mongolian National Broadcaster (MNB) maintained a stronghold in national broadcasting. Since the 2000s, television has become the dominant medium, and MNB lost its stronghold, especially in the capital Ulaanbaatar. From 2003 to 2006, 11 new private television stations were launched in Ulaanbaatar, a few of which had high-profile in-house news production, including *TV5, TV8,* and *TV9*, while others were low-budget cable-fed stations distributed by newly established cable operators that also provided neighboring and international

2 PIM (2020). Election information monitoring during the Parliamentary Elections 2020.

television. Since 2004, 4 private Ulaanbaatar TV stations began broadcasting nationwide via satellite distribution, which led to MNB losing its dominance in the country. In 2005, MNB was transformed into a public service entity, which we discuss below.

Mongolian households have experienced a dramatic boom in access to a plethora of local, national, and international television stations thanks to the newly launched stations, high penetration of cable subscriptions in urban areas, and satellite distribution in rural areas. The national and Ulaanbaatar's major television stations have produced comprehensive news and entertainment programs, and recently the television sector has successfully managed the digital transition (Baasanjav, 2016). Additionally, most stations have an active online presence: 83 percent of them have their own Facebook page, and most stations re-post programs online on a daily basis.

The television sector has consolidated, yet many stations do not have sufficient income to spend on expensive equipment and program production due to immature and limited advertisement markets. Revenues of television stations that are generated by private and government advertisements as well as fees collected from cable service providers are often insufficient, so most stations are still supported by and serve political and secondary business interests. As we will show in the next subsection, this lack of finance for television stations makes them vulnerable to political instrumentalization. Indeed, a few television stations are affiliated with politicians through their owners and founders, and some make the most income during elections. The Law on Broadcasting established a broadcast development fund collected from the fees multichannel cable and satellite operators must pay for carrying television programs. The provision of the law has been criticized for privileging broadcasters and disparately treating cable and multichannel operators. This situation shows the lobbying power of the broadcasters, who either own television stations or have political connections to them.

ONLINE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The number of online news media has tripled over the last decade reaching 190 online news sites, indicating that the desire to exploit the freedom of expression has endured over the years. Around half of the online news media have their own editorial offices and provide journalistic content and few even produce excellent investigative journalism. The remaining news websites re-cycle national and international content already disseminated by other media. The fundamental

changes in demand for news are technology driven, mainly due to the high penetration of mobile phones[3] and Internet access.

Mongolians have enjoyed unrestricted Internet access since its arrival in 1996 and internet use has dramatically increased because of the improved mobile phone technology and new inexpensive services. *Facebook* has in collaboration with the main mobile phone service providers offered free of charge access to *Facebook Basics*, a limited text-only version of *Facebook*[4]. Consequently, *Facebook* is hugely popular with 2.1 million Mongolians having a *Facebook* account. According to a Press Institute survey, a majority of people consider Facebook the most important source of domestic information (PIM, 2022). The dependence on Facebook as the main source of news and information challenges the role of legacy media as gatekeepers. To a limited extent, the exponential growth of smartphones and social media in Mongolia contributes to more independent news analyses and counter-narratives in line with Mellado and Lagos' (2013) study, as discussed below in the section on investigative journalism. While *Facebook's* features afford some civic discourses and online deliberations, the dependency on *Facebook* as the foremost news source leads to an increase in unsubstantiated, emotionally charged, and sensationalized news. Furthermore, *Facebook Basics* creates an infra-structural dependency on *Facebook* and has internationally been criticized for violating the "net neutrality" principle, for surveillance of users, and distorting the advertisement market for news and journalism (Pickard, 2022).

As was the case in print media, there is little information about the sources of income of the websites, but besides a few exceptions based on the content and personal interviews with owners of news sites, almost all the sites in addition to advertisements are financed by politicians and businesspeople based on contracts and 'collaborations' for mutual interests.

LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY CAPTURE OF MEDIA

The Mongolian Constitution of 1992 and the subsequent media laws secured the freedom of expression and created the legal framework conducive to liberal democracy. Nevertheless, several setbacks have taken place in media freedom, including defamation, curtailments of freedom of information, lack of access to ownership, and more seriously, poor implementation of media legislation.

3 According to the annual report from CRC in 2020, the mobile phone subscriptions (3,8 million) significantly exceed the total population (CRC 2020)

4 Zero Rating-Mongolia, Accessed Sep 6 2022 at https://zerorating.wordpress.com/mongolia/

Parallel with the specific media legislation, several other laws have impacted media freedom. The Law on State Secrecy of 2002 allowed broad and nontransparent secrecy classifications to be applied to government records to limit disclosures, and these secrecy classifications of government records remained in the revised law of 2016, the Law on State and Official Secrecy. Additionally, a new category, "official secrecy", was included, defined as information safe-guarded the government, which, if disclosed, can potentially harm the interests of the government branch, organization, or other legal entities.

The 2011 Law on Information Transparency and Right to Access Information obligated public institutions to provide comprehensive and wide-ranging information to the public. However, Article 18 of the law prohibits disclosure of information detrimental to the "national security and public interest of Mongolia," thus providing a loophole for institutions to avoid disclosing any controversial information. The law was revised in 2021 into the Public Information Transparency Law, which balances public institutions' informational transparency and the public's right to access information. The new version of the law introduces the process by which public information is sought and obtained and provides definitions of relatively new concepts such as personal information protection, consent, and notification upon disclosure of private information. However, the law left in place "open," "closed," and "restricted" classifications, where restricted and closed information clauses, along with provisions in the Government and Official Secrecy Law of 2016 and Private Information Protections Law of 2021, limit information access to the state, organizations, and individuals. This law redacts some advanced provisions regarding the rights to access information by media and the public in the previous Law. This situation, to some extent, undermines the media organization's right to get information exposing corruption and misdeed by politicians. The state and politicians use national security and corporate secrecy as an ignoble source to restrict media access and control people.

The defamation legislation has also impeded free and independent media development. Until January 2017, both criminal and civil law had provisions for defamation. The Criminal Code considered defamation a crime and contained provisions to penalize slander (Article 110) and libel (Article 111), with sanctions of up to three months detention, six months in the case of reiteration, and up to five years in limited cases. In 2017 the Criminal Code was revised, repealing provisions on defamation and insult, but it is continuously the defendant that bears the burden of proof in libel and slander cases. Additionally, new amendments made to the Criminal Code in 2020 consider spreading false information a criminal offense. The Criminal Code Article 13 provides that „The spread of obviously false information, causing damage to others' honor, dignity or business reputation of legal entities, shall be punishable by a fine […], 240 to 720 hours of forced labor or restrictions upon travel for a period of one

to three months". The vague and general term 'obviously false information' and the significant punishment impede the freedom of expressio and is indicative of the sheer instrumentalization of media to protect the interests of politicians, businesses, and power holders.

The legislation on media ownership is premature and inconsistent across different types of media outlets. There is the freedom to establish and run a print media outlet; but apart from formal company registration, there is no requirement to disclose ownership. The same goes for online news media, which are required to register with the Communication Regulatory Commission (*CRC*), but are not obliged to disclose ownership. By contrast, radio and television broadcasters and cable channels, according to a Law on Broadcasting from 2019, are obligated to disclose their owner and holders of more than five percent of the shares.

Despite the lack of publicly available records of ownership a joint study by Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2016a) and the Press Institute of Mongolia, was able to expose the ownership of 39 of the major media outlets. None of the owners had a dominant position within print or broadcast media, and despite a few of the owners controlling both newspaper and television stations, media concentration is not a threat to media pluralism or a major concern. However, the study revealed that 29 out of the 39 major media outlets had "political affiliations through their founders and/or owners." Consequently, the links between politics and businesses result in multiple pressures on media outlets and journalists. If media outlets are politically or financially dependent, it puts them in the position of serving the owners and particular political interests rather than the public. Hallin and Mancini (2004) and other scholars convincingly argue in regard to the weaker rational-legal authority that enables clientelism. Television stations have strong ties to patrons and the extent to which the latter instrumentalize the most used electronic media have consequences for public discourse and debates. The major concern is that most media outlets are instrumental to political and business interests without considering either journalistic integrity or standards.

STATE INTERVENTION AND CAPTURE

The general idea behind the law on Media Freedom from 1998 was to dismantle government control of the media. However, the implementation of the law has been slow and insufficient both in relation to dismantling ownership and more broadly in relation to the intention of setting the media free of government control. Despite the legislation, the state control of major media institutions continues.

The state-run *MONTSAME, National News Agency* established in 1921, has not been dismantled. Previously the director was politically appointed by the

Prime Minister, but in December 2021, the Government decided to transfer the *MONTSAME* agency to the Office of the President of Mongolia. Immediately after this transition, the head of the Policy and Implementation Department of the President's Office became the Director of MONTSAME.

MONTSAME acts as a mouthpiece for the government and publishes foreign language weekly newspapers in Russian, Mandarin, Japanese, and English and a website in Mongolian. Despite the high profile of the organizational structure, it has limited impact as a proper news agency in relation to the private Mongolian media. Along with the government news agency, several professional magazines are still owned by government organizations, and some local news media are under the jurisdiction of local governments.

The transformation of another state-run media, the Mongolian National Broadcaster (MNB), into a public service entity began right after the Law on Public Service Broadcasting Radio and Television of 2005. Although MNB is guaranteed independence, according to the law, the political party in power has a strong political grip on the governing body, the selection of senior management, the funding, and even the editorial policies. The MNB provides four national television channels, two national and one international radio channel, and has a strong presence on the Internet with a website and *YouTube* and *Facebook* channels. The MNB receives funding from the state budget, in addition to license fees, and a small income from advertising it generates and is governed by the National Council for Public Radio and Television, consisting of 15 members (4 nominated by the President, 7 by the Parliament, and 4 by the Prime Minister's Cabinet) appointed for a six-year term. The National Council is heavily politicized and usually appoints the Director General and key management in line with party affiliations. The former chairperson of the National Council of MNB from 2006–2012 explains how the political pressure trickles down to the programs and newsrooms of MNB:

> When the political situation changes, they [politicians] always change the General Director of MNB. The appointment of the General director has always been political… All programs of MNB should be independent; no one should be pressured. But… politicians are interested in MNB and its programs. Nowadays, MNB programs and most news, for example, are of Overkhangai province or about Overkhangai province [laughs] because the General Director [of MNB], the chairman of the party group in the parliament and a few parliamentarians are from Overkhangiai province (Enkhmandakh, interview, May 11, 2022).

The state also intervenes in media by allocating substantial national and local government spending on advertisements and public announcements in the

private media. The ministries sign closing agreements with private media outlets, so-called collaboration contracts, where the media outlets agree to publish information fed by the ministry and refrain from publishing any negative stories. *NewsTV* revealed on March 16, 2022,[5] the specifics of the signed "collaboration" contract between the Ministry of Mining and Heavy Industries and 13 named media outlets (5 television stations, 7 news sites and 1 newspaper) in January 2022. Each media outlet was awarded 20 million Tugriks (6,000US$) for publishing "information directly related to the activities of the Government and the Ministry of Mining and Heavy Industry." The media outlets were obliged to "not publish any negative information that may be detrimental to the client's [the Ministry of Mining and Heavy Industries] reputation." *NewsTV* further documented that there were close political and business affiliations between the government and some media outlets.

Due to dire financial conditions in the media market, many media outlets are financially dependent on revenues from government spending. Several interviewees in this study have confirmed that this practice of collaboration contracts is widely used between government agencies and media. The General manager of the second largest newspaper *Unuudur* acknowledges this contract by saying:

> It is the responsibility of newspapers to support the government by spreading the government's words out to the public. At the same time, newspapers are not a charity, and the government should pay newspapers to educate the public on issues… In general, the collaboration contract with the government is minor, in the amount of 5–10 million tugriks a year [1,500–3,000US$]. That runs out after placing two presidential greetings a year. (Bayarmagnai, interview, May 10, 2022)

Tsoojchuluuntseteg, the editor of the oldest daily newspaper *Unen*, points out how entrenched and extensive is the practice of collaboration contracts and how government interventions directly influence media content:

> Because of money shortage and thanks to the Government Procurement Law, which requires public agencies to place their procurement ads in daily newspapers, almost half of the text in daily newspapers could be government announcements (Tsoojchuluuntseteg, interview, May 29, 2022).

The state extends its intervention in the media by making private media dependent financially and editorially on government spending, thus making

5 NewsTV (2022, March 16) Evidence [Баримт]. Accessed June 8 2022 at https://www.newstv.mn/a/2116.

it difficult for the media to fulfill their democratic watchdog role to investigate and expose wrongdoings in public administration. Government contracts and concessions make a significant portion of income, this situation and the socialist-time culture that leverages party and provincial connections (*nutag*) still play a role in allocating public resources to clients for favors and benefits.

Established in 1995, the purportedly independent Communication Regulatory Committee of Mongolia (CRC) implements communication and media legislation on behalf of the government. The government appoints the chair and members of the CRC, who grant television and radio broadcast licenses. Via this personnel appointment, the government retains control of the CRC, distributing state funds for supporting commercial broadcasters and managing broadcast licenses. In recent years, the CRC imposed restrictions on digital content, television, and radio content in a broad sense, while it did not clearly define what restricted content was. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the CRC along with the police, created a directive limiting access to information sites deemed by the authorities to have spread pandemic-related falsehoods. Those considered to have spread Covid-related false information were fined two million tugriks (around 600 US$). These cases involving journalists and individuals posting on social media, especially during the elections, reveal uncertainties regarding the protection of media and free speech and equal protection under the law when public figures sue for libel.

The above-discussed state capture in Mongolian media reveals a fundamental schism between the ideals of free and independent media, expressed in the media legislation, and the actual political culture of clientelism at all levels of public administration.

RENEGOTIATED JOURNALISTIC PROFESSIONALISM AND INVESTIGATION

Despite the apparent need for critical investigative reporting in Mongolian society, prone to corruption, clientelism, and an obscure confusion of political and business interests, investigative journalism is in short supply due to the lack of professional norms. International donors have provided much training in investigative journalism in Mongolia, yet many media outlets and journalists pay lip service to the benefit of investigative reporting.

Consequently, Mongolian journalists work within two conflicting professional and ethical principles without distinct shared professional norms. A few strive to adhere to the basic principles of Western professional journalism. At the same time, many journalists have ‚renegotiated' the norms of journalism by accepting the economic and political "reality" in the media. The latter ‚renegotiated

journalistic professionalism' is characterized by a general acceptance of instrumentalization and clientelism.

When we interviewed rising investigative journalist Budragchaa, known for his reports of sexual harassment of young girls in the national under-15 women's football team that the National Soccer Federation covered up on *LiveTV.mn*, and recently on his independent journalistic website *nuuts.mn*, he explained the reality of investigative journalism by saying:

> Only a handful of journalists in Mongolia do genuine investigative journalism… because the pressure and threats on journalists from mighty politicians and business people are insurmountable (Budragchaa, interview, May 16, 2022).

The mainstream media do not pick up the story or amplify the reports, and they rarely invest money and time in producing genuine investigative reports, partly due to the self-censorship they impose upon themselves and partly due to the pressure exerted on the media by the elite. Budragchaa's report on sexual assault and harassment was picked up by mainstream media only after the British newspaper *The Guardian* critiqued the international football association FIFA's handling of the case (Aarons & Molina, 2021). Furthermore, Budragchaa faced five libel and defamation cases filed against him after he published another investigative report in 2022 about the corruption and public fund abuse case by the principal of the reputable joint Mongolian-Russian School in Ulaanbaatar. The school's principal and her cronies, including her influential lawyer husband, their judicial friends, and police officers, offered an unsuccessful bribe, after which they threatened and harassed him physically and verbally. Often, the police side with the people under accusation in the reports, and they are reluctant to initiate additional investigations. Instead, the police often tend to intimidate the journalists. All defamation cases against journalist Budragchaa were dropped because facts and evidence sufficiently backed his report. This brute exercise of power by the venal public and private officials to deter the media from informing the public about their wrongdoing has been on the rise in Mongolia.

Further, the judicial system might open court cases but drags the decisions and rarely imposes penalties on the disclosed misdeeds. In 2016, the chief editor of the private, independent television station *Mongol TV*, *Lkhagva Erdene,* worked with the international consortium of investigative journalists (ICIJ) on the case of the leaked Panama Papers. The investigative report "documented that many Mongolian politicians and public officials, including former Prime Minister S. Batbold, a foreign affairs advisor to the President and the son of the former mayor of Ulaanbaatar, were linked to offshore companies" (RSF, 2016b). However, the disclosures did not result in substantial political or judicial consequences for

those involved. Lkhagva Erdene recounted that in the parliament, "the implicated politicians and their party supporters condemned the reports, threatened to take us to court and tried to discredit the editorial team and reporters" (RSF, 2016b). This is the negative outcome of media capture by plutocracy by increasing censorship and lessening critical investigative reports.

Journalists cannot establish sufficient autonomy in their daily work practice under these conditions. Many journalists individually agree to write 'paid stories' to promote business and political interests or discredit other claims, or they agree to be paid off for not publishing critical stories. With few guiding basic professional principles, journalists refrain from publishing critical reports and are incentivized to accept bribes from corrupt authorities. The media organizations' economic dependency and poor pay for journalists make them venal. That is why collaboration contracts are prevalent not only between government agencies and the media but also between political and business interests and the media. These contracts fundamentally challenge the journalists and the media's self-determination, thus making the media outlets instrumental to specific external interests. The journalists are imposed upon to publish certain information on demand from the client uncritically, thus wholly obliterating the distinction between journalism, public relations, and advertisement.

Journalists are restrained or discouraged from publishing any critical news stories that could be detrimental to the client, thus potentially concealing vital information from the public. According to an opinion poll study among 300 journalists from rural and urban media conducted in 2020 by the Press Institute of Mongolia, every second journalist stated they face restrictions when publishing the stories they produce. Most news stories denied from publication or significantly edited were related to conflicts of interest concerning the 'partners' of the media organization. In 2019, the Parliamentary Election Law prohibited the signing of "silence contracts" by stating, "It is prohibited for any media organization to publish news or information about any party, coalition or candidate during the election campaign or to make a promise not to publish it or to conclude an agreement." Nevertheless, according to the abovementioned opinion poll during the 2020 Parliamentary election, over 70 percent of election-related content on primetime news programs was paid-for content surreptitiously promoting candidates.

Subpar journalism gets amplified and distributed faster online in the age of digital platforms. Journalists in Mongolia are ill-equipped for fact-checking and discerning falsehood in stories, constructed images, and deep-fake videos on social media. Nevertheless, they bear most of the burden and accept all the consequences of their reports, while media organizations dismayed by the digital platforms are in no position to provide policies and guidelines for journalists about dealing with either of both mis – and disinformation. The

political elites invited a *Facebook* representative in 2019 and have collaborated with *Facebook* to alleviate disinformation and misinformation on social media. Young journalists Nara and Duya have started a third-party fact-checking service on Meta's *Facebook, Instagram*, and *Messenger* at http://www.mfcc.mn, by checking suspected mis/disinformation submissions. However, *Facebook*'s limited financial support for fact-checking startups is more deflective of the criticism against the company than a healthy support for independent media and journalists. Meta's external influences on local journalism have been criticized because the company siphons off advertising dollars from the local media it purportedly supports and creates infra-structural dependency with its *Facebook Basic* in other countries (Pickard, 2022).

The consequences of these conflicting professional standards in journalism diminish public trust in the news media. This confusion and mistrust even shadow journalism that adheres to Western professional norms because it can be almost impossible for media users to distinguish it from instrumental journalism, and sometimes even difficult to distinguish between accurate and distorted information. The structural economic and professional deficiencies are often further exacerbated on digital platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper analyzed how the post-communist context in Mongolia shapes the media and how the media, in return, contributes to the country's young democracy. Our analysis first establishes that a pluralist and commercial media system has undeniably been established amid the challenges and changes since the new constitution was adopted. However, only a few established themselves as independent media with editorial, business, and ethical norms. We analyzed the hypes and troughs of newspapers and magazines starting in the 1990s, commercial television stations in the 2010s, and online news sites in the 2020s. The newspapers did not establish any form of mass circulation, and many local and national television stations have become politically affiliated and financially unviable. Many digital-born sites and legacy media online news sites operate on a shoestring budget unless funded by specific political or business interests.

These developments show that while the external plurality of media outlets created a media landscape aberrant from the socialist-time propagandistic media, the media market failures, along with rudimentary legal and professional institutions, contributed to the prevalent media instrumentalization in Mongolia as Hallin & Mancini (2004) and Voltmer (2008) warned. Hallin and Mancini's analytical frameworks, along with the notion of captured media, have both been helpful in our analysis of the media system in Mongolia, with

a short history of democratic politics, market economy, and media institutions. The drastic shift toward liberal media and economy, along with the convergence into digital media, has created unprecedented challenges to the analyses of the media system in Mongolia. The discernable "path dependency" of the communist past persists in the media sphere, as was seen in other post-communist countries where clientelism and patronage play essential roles in issuing media licenses and appointing the cadres in the media organization's boards and staff. Even though state ownership has been prohibited since 1998, the governments influence the public broadcaster *MNB*, news wire services MONTSAME, and independent communication regulator CRC on all levels, from selecting the board's chairman to programming and licensing policies.

Private ownership and the multiplicity of commercial media outlets do not bulwark against the instrumentalization of the media. On the contrary, as the market economy deepens, the media has been captured by entrenched political and business interests, which deter the media from functioning in society's interests. Our analysis shows that state and private actors capture the media as media scholars warn (Schiffrin, 2017; Nelson, 2021). Local and national government agencies enter "collaboration contracts" with the media to advance desirable information for patrons and silence criticism against patrons. Government advertisement and procurement laws are utilized to distribute public resources to media organizations and clients for their political gains and benefits. The plurality of media and private ownership does not fend off against the instrumentalization of media. On the contrary, new elites who often have risen from the "traditional" state institutions, now possess both political and economic powers and they have captured the media and instrumentalized them with no qualms about the media's normative expectations of informing the public. In this sense, the media capture concept renders better the media systems in Mongolia when analyzing the instrumentalization of media and clientelism in Mongolia than Hallin and Mancini's (2004) original framework emphasizing political parallelism focusing on the linkage between political ideology and partisanship press. In the Mongolian political context, the ideological and political differences between major political parties—the ruling Mongolian People's Party and the oppositional Democratic Party – are less pronounced, partly due to the election system with a single-member constituency that underpins the process.

Our second research question asks whether the media has contributed to the country's young democracy and how. Even though a few media operate as economically free and independent media companies, they are increasingly owned by politicians and business people, who blatantly use the media for their political and business benefits. These media practices mirror a current political and business culture, where clientelism is pronounced and corruption is ingrained. In Mongolia's loosely regulated free market and unsettled political

system, a powerful elite lobbies the parliament for their business interests, as seen in the Broadcast Law case, and the elite openly uses every tool available to manipulate the legal system and corrupt authorities. The immature legal and regulatory environment and market failures push media organizations and their editors and journalists to serve a few patrons only, who advance their political and commercial interests similar to captured media practices in other countries (Schiffrin, 2017, 2021). In the newsrooms, editors and journalists compromise ethics and professionalism under patron pressures, and consequently, the public has never found genuine trust in the news media. The media's democratic role as watchdogs has increasingly been pushed to the margins.

Furthermore, digital capture by big multinationals is starting to manifest in Mongolia, similar to other countries (Schiffrin, 2021). Even though the Internet and mobile phones have increased new online news providers, including exemplary investigations by then journalist Erdene in collaboration with ICIJ and Budragchaa's reports on livetv.mn, with few exceptions, online news sites have inherited and amplified the shortcomings of legacy media. The mainstream media rarely follow up on investigative revelations, and the political and economic elite often manage to contain their influence. Online news sites, mainly in the capital, have increasingly replaced local news, diverting attention from local issues. More locals receive news primarily on social media thanks to *Facebook Basic*, which replaces essential communication in the countryside. Because of these replacements of local news, news deserts in the countryside are one of the rising issues. Besides, online media face even more challenges because the news sites must share sparse advertisement revenue with the big tech companies *Google* and *Facebook* / Meta (Nelson, 2021; Schiffrin, 2021; Pickard, 2022). *Facebook*'s collaboration with local authorities must be watched as it serves politicians more at their request.

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Can Social Media Expand Public Discourse in a 'Captured' Mediascape? The Case of Greece

Michael Nevradakis
0000-0001-8766-7243
College Year in Athens, Greece

Abstract: The Greek public sphere has historically been regarded by scholars as not having developed as robustly as in the West. Instead, it is dominated by patronage, clientelism, and an 'iron triangle' between the government, media, and influential oligarchs, shutting ordinary citizens and independent media out of public discourse. Amid the economic crisis of the 2010s and along with an institutional credibility crisis, many new political and media-related initiatives were launched, all heavily relying on and utilizing social media. To what extent did they demonstrate longevity and help expand the Greek public sphere? Based on interviews from two case studies of the Independent Greeks political party and the *enikos.gr* news portal-blog, the results show the initiatives were ephemeral or were 'captured' by incumbent institutions. Accordingly, the institutional credibility crisis in Greece persists. The results contribute to an understanding of how 'alternative,' non-traditional and crisis-related media and political initiatives can become subject to the same forces of capture as traditional institutions.

Keywords: Greece; Greek financial crisis; public sphere; social media; media capture.

INTRODUCTION

Greece is a country of the European south that is a member of the European Union, Eurozone and NATO, but which lies at the crossroads of Western and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Scholars have long been regarded Greece as a country where the public sphere has not developed as robustly as across most of the West. Despite joining the Eurozone in 2002 and hosting the Summer Olympics in 2004—both widely touted in Greece as signs of the country's development—the first signs of destabilization prior to the onset of the financial crisis appeared in December 2008, when the police shooting and subsequent death of 15-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos fueled three weeks of riots (Nevradakis, 2018). As in other parts of the world, the 2010s were a time

of uncertainty in Greece, with tremendous political, economic, and social tumult resulting from the financial crisis. One of the primary attributes of social movements during this period shared was the significance of social media in their development, operations, and public outreach (Castells, 2015; Nevradakis, 2018, p. 1). Social media platforms such as Twitter and, later, Facebook, played a prominent role in the dissemination of counter-information to the public, bypassing the editorial filters of legacy media, with the 'Indignant Citizens' movement of 2011 serving as an incubator for a wide range of political movements and grassroots media initiatives (Giovanopoulos, 2011, p. 42, Nevradakis, 2018, pp. 329-334, 344, 396; Nevradakis, 2022).

Komninou (2001, pp. 37-38), as well as other scholars, describe the Greek public sphere as having historically been dominated by partisan interests; patronage; clientelism; and an 'iron triangle' between the government, the media, and the influential oligarchs who own most major media outlets. Dahlgren (1995) defines the public sphere as the realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place in order for public opinion to be formed, and as a "constellation of communicative spaces" which "permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates—ideally in an unfettered manner—and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion)" (p. 7). These are spaces where the mass media and 'new' media maintain a prominent presence and "facilitate communicative links between citizens and the power holders of society" (Dahlgren, 2005, pp. 147-148).

The lack of a strong public sphere in Greece is related to the perceived lack of credibility of national institutions, such as the government, political parties, and the mass media, as recorded by multiple public opinion surveys in Greece during and after the financial crisis (DiaNEOsis, 2017, pp. 27-30; DiaNEOsis, 2024, pp. 136-193; Eurobarometer, 2015; Gallup International, 2015; Kapa Research, 2016, pp. 5-6; OECD, 2017, pp. 1-4). Castells (2015, p. 222) describes the lack of credibility as "a fundamental crisis of legitimacy of the political system, regardless of the form of political regime, be it authoritarian or based on democratic elections." In Greece, patronage, clientelism, and *diaploki*—referring to the interplay between the government, state, political parties, and business interests—are widely recognized as significant contributing factors in the prevailing credibility crisis (Sims, 2003, p. 203).

Greece's credibility crisis has been consistently identified in the annual Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism/University of Oxford Digital News Report. In the 2016 edition of the report, Greece had the lowest levels of trust in mainstream news media and journalism across the 26 surveyed countries. The same report notes that Greeks were the third most active users of news content online, and the country had the highest usage of online-only news websites and the highest level of consumption of 'hard' news online. This trend

has continued, as evidenced by the 2023 version of the report, where Greece ranked last in news trust among a sample of 46 countries (Kalogeropoulos, 2023, pp. 78-79). This has occurred despite Greece's relatively low level of broadband penetration by European standards and, notably, during a time of widespread economic difficulty (Kalogeropoulos et al, 2016, pp. 28, 39, 45; Kalogeroupulos, 2022, pp. 82-83).

This institutional credibility crisis may also be a result of the widely held perception that domestic media is 'captured.' Media capture is defined as the interference of influential actors and "created interests in the news media, who act on their benefit, for private purposes, and to the detriment of the public interest and the democratic functions of journalism and the autonomy of journalists" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013, pp. 40-41). It can also be understood as a form of corruption. Transparency International's 2012 report on Greece says that corruption was to blame for "numerous malfunctions in Greece" (Transparency International Greece, 2012), while Danopoulos cites clientelism as the major contributor to Greece's financial crisis (2015, pp. 111-125). According to several scholars, throughout the crisis, Greek legacy media reinforced hegemonic and neoliberal narratives, 'naturalizing' the unpopular economic austerity measures, characterizing them as "necessary," and arguing "there is no alternative" (Doudaki, 2015, pp. 5-10; Pleios, 2013, pp. 113-117).

The concept of 'media capture' is derived from 'state capture,' or institutional capture, wherein powerful private actors impose their interests in the formation and implementation of public policy, primarily through illicit or opaque methods (Hellman & Shankermann, 2000, p. 546). Corneo (2006) makes a distinction between 'state capture' and 'media capture,' arguing that a multiplicity of private agents may capture the media, with a key factor being wealth concentration. Such capture, in which influential oligarchs leverage their media holdings to exert pressure over both the government and public opinion whilst securing business and financial benefits, is arguably one of the factors contributing to Greece's financial collapse and institutional credibility crisis (Nevradakis, 2018: pp. 1-2). As the 2023 Reuters Institute report notes, many media outlets in Greece operate at a loss, perhaps indicating that they do not operate based on market logic but, instead, by virtue of other benefits they provide to their owners (Kalogeropoulos, 2023, pp. 78-79). These characteristics have been identified by Hallin and Mancini's as attributes of the "Mediterranean" or "Polarized Pluralist" media model (2004). In this model, the traditional centrality of the state in southern Europe has resulted in the frequent intervention of the state in media institutions—and vice versa. Since the state is an important actor in the economy, the media becomes a battleground for influence and preferential access to state contracts, subsidies, relaxed regulations, selective enforcement, and other benefits.

Within this context, the parallel financial and credibility crises of the 2010s, along with a sharp uptick in activist and social movement activity, led to a blossoming of social movements, political parties, and alternative media initiatives. Scholars have proffered many definitions of alternative media. This study applies the definition that alternative media can be understood as outlets that are "devoted to providing representations of issues and events which oppose those offered in the mainstream media," (Haas, 2004, p. 115). Furthermore, these outlets advocate for political and social reform, and constitute either an alternative public sphere, or a sphere of multiple alternative publics (Haas, 2004). Contributing to this definition is Dahlgren's (2005) position that contemporary understandings of the public sphere must account for "specialized communicative spaces" (such as online spaces) and "alternative or counter public spheres" (pp. 147-148).

Combined, these factors have informed the following research questions, which guide this study and aim to examine the broader impact of social media in Greece during the country's financial crisis:

- *RQ1:* How did social and new media potentially bolster the public sphere and public discourse during the years of the Greek financial crisis? To what extent did the Greek public sphere expand to include new voices and perspectives that were previously marginalized?
- *RQ2:* How, and to what extent, did new political and media institutions that developed during the Greek financial crisis, act to a significant extent via social media platforms, as an 'alternative' to incumbent institutions, such as disseminating political, economic or social narratives distinct from and alternative to those commonly espoused by legacy media institutions and political parties?
- *RQ3:* Did such new media and political institutions that developed during the Greek financial crisis demonstrate longevity and an ability to overcome pressures to be 'captured'? Were they short-lived and ephemeral? Were they themselves 'captured' and did they end up replicating the narratives commonly espoused by legacy institutions?

This study focuses on two case studies: the Independent Greeks political party and *enikos.gr*, a blog-like news portal. These cases were selected because both entities emerged during the financial crisis in Greece via their prominent social media presences and publicly positioned themselves as 'alternatives' to incumbent political and media institutions. The two cases were also chosen with the goal of examining how such initiatives can rejuvenate an atrophic public sphere in a country with a long history of 'capture'—and the extent to which such initiatives can demonstrate longevity or were instead ephemeral. As part of a broader longitudinal study performed in Greece between 2012 and 2017 (Nevradakis, 2018), interviews were conducted with key individuals from both entities (see

Table 1) and transcribed and translated by the author. The interviews focused on how the interviewees' organizations utilized social media to intervene in the public sphere, influence public opinion, and position themselves as 'alternatives' to the status quo.

Table 1. Greek Media Capture: Experts interviewed between 2012 and 2017, their affiliations and roles

Name, 1st name	Entity (2-letter code)	Role at the time of the interview	Date of interview year. month. day	Cited Year of Interview	Full in-text citation format: Name/entity/Year of Interview
Baboussi, Alcestis	Independent Greeks (IG)	Social media Volunteer	2012.11.02	2012	Baboussi/IG/2012
Kammenos, Panos	Independent Greeks (IG)	President	2013.10.11	2013	Kammenos/IG/2013
Moiras, Ioannis	Independent Greeks (IG)	Secretary for Political Strategy	2013.02.15	2013	Moiras/IG/2013
Papadopoulou, Madalena	Independent Greeks (IG)	Head of Youth Wing	2013.11.11	2013	Papadopoulou/IG/2013
Quick, Terence	Independent Greeks (IG)	Press Representative	2013.11.14	2013	Quick/IG/2013
Syriopoulos, Vasilis	Independent Greeks (IG)	Communications Adviser	2013.10.13	2013	Syriopoulos/IG/2013
Tsatsaroni, Katerina	Independent Greeks (IG)	Communications Adviser	2013.10.13	2013	Tsatsaroni/IG/2013
Tsatsaroni, Katerina	Independent Greeks (IG)	Communications Adviser	2017.03.06	2017	Tsatsaroni/IG/2017
Makri, Rachel	Independent Greeks (IG)	Member of Parliament	2013.11.12	2013	Makri/IG/2013
Yalourakis, Dimitris	Independent Greeks (IG)	Director of Communications	2012.11.02	2012	Yalourakis/IG/2012
Baganis, Giorgos	Enikos.gr (EN)	Journalist	2012.12.12	2012	Baganis/EN/2012
Niflis, Manos	Enikos.gr (EN)	Editor	2012.12.07	2012	Niflis/EN/2012
Niflis, Manos	Enikos.gr (EN)	Editor	2017.03.15	2017	Niflis/EN/2017
Roupis, Valios	Enikos.gr (EN)	Social media Manager	2013.04.12	2013	Roupis/EN/2013

Source: Author

Diani and Kousis' (2014, p. 401) argue that "democracy, rather than the economy, was clearly at the center of popular reactions to the Greek crisis." Political polarization and various forms of populism predominated during the early period of the crisis (Papathanassopoulos, Giannouli & Andreadis, 2016, p. 8; Pappas & Aslanidis, 2015, p. 181), contributing to the establishment and/or rise of political parties with a populist rhetoric, such as the Independent

Greeks, and the development of sensational, populist news portals, including *enikos.gr*, which was launched by prominent media figures but which sought to capitalize on the broader populist sentiment previously epitomized by the widely read but amateurish 'news blogs' whose popularity peaked at the end of the 2000s (Nevradakis, 2018, pp. 184-185).

THE INDEPENDENT GREEKS (IG)

Founded in February 2012, the Independent Greeks quickly attained a reputation of being "the party of Facebook," as the party announced its launch via this platform and conducted many of its early public deliberations there. Its founder, Panos Kammenos, referred to the party as "a popular movement, not a political party" (Kammenos/IG/2013). In the May and June 2012 parliamentary elections, it achieved significant electoral shares and easily surpassed threshold to earn parliamentary representation. Despite a markedly lower electoral share in the January and September 2015 parliamentary elections, the Independent Greeks became the minority governing partner in a coalition led by the populist-left SYRIZA party.

FORMATION

Kammenos stated that the establishment of the Independent Greeks can be attributed entirely to social media and promised this momentum would continue:

> The founding of this movement, and its visibility and sustentation, are exclusively due to social media and will remain so … I often hold referendums, even for candidates [via social media]… the party's platform was developed with public deliberations which took place on Facebook. I can say that over thirty-five thousand [35,000] people participated… we were the first movement in Europe that was developed using these tools (Kammenos/IG/2013).

Kammenos added it was citizens with whom he "had a dialogue on Facebook" who convinced him to start his own party, after having served as an MP with the New Democracy party for 21 years. He also said the party "will continue to communicate with the citizens… and the citizens with us, deciding together the party's positions and policies via the social media, which will continue at a level of importance of over ninety percent" (Kammenos/IG/2013). He added that "[w]e will not turn to traditional media, and we will try to implement direct democracy via communication with the citizens" (Kammenos/IG/2013).

Ioannis Moiras further explained how Kammenos launched the party:

> Kammenos was very deeply involved himself in social media, with an … extremely popular Facebook page and… a frequent and very astute Twitter user… As a member of parliament, he already had a wide circle of friends and co-users… within the world of social media… He announced his decision to go against the existing political system and vote against the memorandum and he found not only wide popular support through social media, but also a huge massive claim for something new, for a political party that would actually vote and stand against… the memorandum… This political movement started from the social media with a direct involvement of two hundred thousand [200,000] users… something that had never happened in this country before (Moiras/IG/2013).

Yet Vasilis Syriopoulos noted that the online deliberation "had to be compatible" with "certain specific positions" the party established at its outset, adding that "this was the first time in Greek history that the president of a party came in direct contact with the public on a daily basis" (Syriopoulos/IG/2013).

Katerina Tsatsaroni said the party initially recruited candidates via social media:

> The selection of parliamentary candidates occurred through an invitation sent out via social media. Ordinary citizens sent us résumés, came to our offices, and were selected as candidates by a committee… most of our members of parliament right now do not stem from political backgrounds

(Tsatsaroni/IG/2013). Rachel Makri explained how she was invited to stand for a parliamentary seat with the party via social media:

> I heard a speech of Mr. Kammenos after he resigned from New Democracy… that led me to look for him on social media. I became his friend on Facebook, and together with others we contacted him, exchanging our views and concerns, and we asked him to establish a party. He was reluctant at first, but he later formed this party… I was invited by Kammenos' advisers to… become a candidate from my district [Kozani]. I ended up campaigning on my own exclusively via social media, with no office, no budget or anything else, coming into contact with the public only via the internet (Makri/IG/2013).

Regarding the public deliberation and selection of candidates, Terrence Quick said:

> We used social media, Twitter and Facebook and also blogs, to discover who would be interested in running as a candidate with us, as well as how we would organize, how we would develop our first volunteer organizations and local

> chapters in the periphery… We posted the names of our parliamentary candidates online to gauge local reaction. We all passed through a process of public deliberation (Quick/IG/2013).

According to Dimitris Yalourakis, the party's social media presence was influenced by the methods used by the participants in the movement of the 'Indignants' (Yalourakis/IG/2012). Kammenos said that "of our elected members of parliament, I was introduced to 90 percent of them through Facebook" (Kammenos/IG/2013). Notably, Tsatsaroni later said the party's use of Facebook during its inception was part of a broader communications strategy: "In November 2011, we developed our new strategy with Kammenos as the protagonist on social media and especially Facebook, and we were active around the 'yes-no' issue," referencing the heated austerity versus anti-austerity divide (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017).

Moiras stated that the participation of the public via social media was vital for getting the Independent Greeks elected to parliament:

> This movement became very massive because of the participation of so many users and the direct communication with the president… it really was a pivotal point for our electoral success, the use of social media, because getting ten percent the first elections was really surprising and a magnificent result for a new party (Moiras/IG/2013).

Alcestis Baboussi said that "without social media, what we accomplished in two months would never have been possible" (Baboussi/IG/2012).

SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT

Yalourakis described the difference between the way the Independent Greeks utilized social media compared to other parties: "For our party, social media listen. For other parties, social media speak. That's the key difference" (Yalourakis/IG/2012). Makri, accordingly, described the party's utilization of social media in the following terms: "We are the party that truly uses social media, as the other parties have not organized their social media presence. We even have a social media department… organizationally I have not seen this in any other party" (Makri/IG/2013).

Kammenos described the manner in which he used social media as the party's leader:

> I personally respond via Twitter and Facebook to all our voters. I post items before they are officially announced by the party. I am the only administrator. No one else has access to my account on Facebook and Twitter. I do not use communication experts; they have no place in my postings on Facebook and

> Twitter. I respond personally to the citizens and am available 24 hours per day… My postings are often not politically correct: I post videos, some songs or photographs… this is not the usual style of communication for a political leader of an elected party, but I remain who I was before the party was born and that is how I will remain (Kammenos/IG/2013).

Makri emphasized that she was not a career politician and that she administered her own social media accounts:

> I personally administer my [social media] accounts. I attempt to respond to all of the messages I receive from citizens, to read them all, and I have introduced many issues in parliament… even from individuals who are not from my electoral district but who contacted me … I am not a professional politician… I was an ordinary citizen… Therefore, I would not like somebody else to [post on social media] for me, as I consider it an expression of my own thoughts towards others (Makri/IG/2013).

Tsatsaroni agreed that social media played an immense role in the electoral success of the Independent Greeks but said that there were plans to better organize the party's social media presence, warning that "going forward, [social media] could be catastrophic, if you cannot place social media within a context, a structure, and assign roles and an objective to each page" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2013).

For Kammenos, one of the most significant ways in which social media impacted the Independent Greeks was by delivering the youth vote. Kammenos stated "Ninety percent [of our voters] are between eighteen and forty-four [18-44] years of age" (Kammenos/IG/2013). Madalena Papadopoulou noted that this demographic profile was reflected in the party's leadership ranks, "where even in organizational committees of the party there are people below the age of 30" (Papadopoulou/IG/2013).

Kammenos noted that the party's emphasis on social media contrasted with its stance towards traditional media, saying "We are totally isolated, by our own choice, from all the newspapers. We have no access to any newspaper, other than sending press releases" (Kammenos/IG/2013). Tsatsaroni said "[v]ery few [television stations] give us airtime, and when they do, their coverage is negative. Therefore, for us, [social media] are a necessity" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2013).

In response to this media blackout, Yalourakis stated that plans were in the works on the part of the party to develop an online television presence and an e-magazine (Yalourakis/IG/2012). He also stated the party's use of social media would not change even if it entered government (Yalourakis/IG/2012).

ENIKOS.GR (EN)

In the years preceding Greece's financial crisis, and in its early stages, 'news blogs' were widely viewed as 'alternatives' to the legacy media, where 'truthful' news could be found. This search for the 'truth' was specifically addressed by Giorgos Baganis, who said: "the public believed that the news [provided by news blogs] was the real news, without dependencies, without hidden interests" (Baganis/EN/2012). Yet, Manos Niflis argued that while online news portals inherited their audience, sites like *enikos.gr* were not directly derived from such blogs (Niflis/EN/2012). In a follow-up interview, Niflis maintained his belief that "portals are not the continuation of blogs. Portals developed from the need for quick and accurate information, while allowing the public to judge and to be heard" (Niflis/EN/2017).

Founded in 2011, *enikos.gr* combined elements of both legacy and online media, incorporating an online news portal, blogging, citizen journalism, and television. It was created by journalist Nikos Chatzinikolaou, a prominent television news presenter and talk show host. Today, Chatzinikolaou owns the widely circulated *Real News* Sunday newspaper, the *real.gr* website, and the popular *Real FM 97.8* news radio station in Athens. He is the central news presenter for national private television broadcaster *Antenna TV* and hosts the *Enopios Enopio* talk program on the same station.

Niflis described the concept behind *enikos.gr* as "combining the immediacy of news blogs with accurate reporting." According to Niflis, Chatzinikolaou envisioned a blog "not a portal with many different sections and long articles, but something very immediate and quick which would inform the public about everything, to be everywhere, with photos, video and short pieces" (Niflis/EN/2012).

Valios Roupis noted that the site carried the name—and credibility—of its founder in its branding ('e-Nikos'), and that as a result, the site's journalists were "very careful with what they are publishing to ensure that everything has been cross-checked and verified" (Roupis/EN/2013). Notably, in its original incarnation, the design of e*nikos.gr* bore a strong resemblance to *Troktiko*, once one of Greece's most popular news blogs. Remarking on this, Roupis stated that the site was designed purposely to resemble a blog, adding that Chatzinikolaou "already operates a news portal [*real.gr*], therefore he did not want *enikos.gr* to be yet another portal" (Roupis/EN/2013). Baganis stated that *enikos.gr* is indeed a blog and not a news portal (Baganis/EN/2012). Regarding the political stance of *enikos.gr*, Niflis commented that the site is accused of being both on the left and on the right, "which means we are neither" (Niflis/EN/2012).

On the topic of interaction with the audience, Roupis stated that *enikos.gr* actively seeks out news from its audience and provides ways for such stories to be submitted, adding that 90 percent of emails and Facebook messages were

replied to (Roupis/EN/2013). Niflis stated that "stories are published which are produced by members of the audience or who want to express themselves… it's something we want to invest in" (Niflis/EN/2012). Baganis added that Chatzinikolaou's own social media presence—particularly his popular Twitter account—helped deliver an audience to *enikos.gr*:

> Nikos Chatzinikolaou, with the presence he has developed on Twitter, responds to everyone who poses a question… he writes about the team he loves, he shares his philosophical musings, his thoughts on politics, economics. In doing this he won the attention of an audience who… knew him only as a television personality, and this audience in large part does not enter *real.gr* or purchase *Real News*. This audience came to *enikos.gr* because they saw a different Chatzinikolaou, who approached them and opened up to the public (Baganis/EN/2012).

Niflis described social media as the "the main pillar of our strategy," noting that many news stories were reported to *enikos.gr* via this avenue (Niflis/EN/2012), while Baganis said Facebook and Twitter were the main sources of traffic for *enikos.gr* (Baganis/EN/2012).

Another major driver of traffic for *enikos.gr* during the 2012-2013 period was the *Ston Eniko* online television program—the continuation of a conventional television program by the same name which Chatzinikolaou had previously hosted on broadcast television stations. *Ston Eniko*—a play on words incorporating his first name and the Greek term for speaking in the informal tense—was a live discussion program with invited guests interviewed before a studio audience that could also pose questions. Baganis described *Ston Eniko* as "an experiment which is being attempted for the first time in Greece, to show that it is possible in the future to combine the speed and liveliness of television, with the web" (Baganis/EN/2012). Roupis said *Ston Eniko* was a reflection of Chatzinikolaou's "desire to host a program as he would want to do it and as he imagined it… without the restrictions which any given television station could impose" (Roupis/EN/2013). Niflis also described the changes made by Chatzinikolaou when the program was transferred from broadcast television to the web: "Chatzinikolaou changed the format of the show… now there is a live audience—around 50 to 60 people who submit questions. In essence, Chatzinikolaou doesn't host the show, the citizens do" (Niflis/EN/2012). Roupis described the audience's response to *Ston Eniko*: "… the viewers literally bombard us with questions via phone calls to *enikos.gr*, via Chatzinikolaou's Twitter account, and via the Twitter and Facebook accounts of *enikos.gr*" (Roupis/EN/2013).

In remarking on the audience's engagement to *enikos.gr*, Niflis said that in its first 10 months of operation, the site entered Nielsen's top 10 websites in Greece

and Alexa's top 20. Nevertheless, Niflis stated he considered *enikos.gr* an "alternative" medium due to the way it operates: "speed, credibility, contact with the audience, integration of social media"—in other words, being 'alternative' to its main competitors (Niflis/EN/2012). Yet, Baganis noted the site's influence within the political sphere:

> Usually when we write about a politician or a government minister or ministry and we publish a complaint from a reader, within the next 20 minutes at most… there is a response from the ministry, or from the minister or politician (Baganis/EN/2012).

Notably though, in a follow-up interview in 2017, Niflis described the site as a *portal*—which he did not do in 2012—but one which visually resembles a blog and differs from a static news website. "Speed and immediacy" remained the site's selling points, according to Niflis, and though *Ston Eniko* had stopped its webcasts, he stated it would "probably return" (Niflis/EN/2017).

That a news portal such as *enikos.gr*, founded by a prominent media personality, was widely recognized—particularly during the early crisis period—as an 'alternative' to legacy media, is reflective of the broader credibility crisis afflicting 'traditional' media. It is also reflective of the often-blurred boundaries between 'alternative' and 'mainstream,' where audiences may value alternative *content* (neglected issues, diverse voices, mobilizing information) more highly than alternative *form* (being nonprofit, noncommercial, small-scale) (Rauch, 2015, p. 124).

EPHEMERALITY AND REPLICATION

At face value, it could be said that the Greek public sphere expanded during the years of the financial crisis and that social media served as 'incubators' for many such efforts, thereby 'strengthening' the public sphere by including new voices and counternarratives to those of the incumbent political parties and legacy media outlets. The Independent Greeks rapidly attained electoral success as "The party of Facebook," while *enikos.gr* rapidly adopted the populist tactics that had previously made 'news blogs' so successful, albeit aided by the broad visibility and name recognition of the site's founder. Both the Independent Greeks and *enikos.gr* capitalized on the broad popular dissatisfaction with incumbent political and media institutions by giving voice to alternative narratives that were critical of the politics of austerity, about which major political parties and legacy media said there was 'no alternative'.

But while the years of the financial crisis saw the birth of numerous new political parties and 'alternative' media initiatives, were these initiatives able to demonstrate longevity? Or, instead, was their existence ephemeral—a reaction to conditions at a particular moment in time, without broader staying power?

Or, perhaps, were these entities eventually 'captured' by the institutional forces they once professed to oppose?

The case of the Independent Greeks is indicative. After failing to enter parliament in the July 2019 elections, the party dissolved, while Kammenos today is not a visible figure in Greek politics. But even before the dissolution of the party, some notable contrasts were already evident regarding how it utilized social media as of 2017, when it was co-governing with SYRIZA, compared to the party's early days. In a follow-up interview in 2017, Tsatsaroni said the party's high-level members, including Kammenos, continued to use their own Twitter accounts, but the party's official Twitter account was defunct (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017). She attributed this to a lack of resources, saying a "huge team" was needed to effectively formulate and implement a social media strategy, describing this as "almost impossible" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017). Yet, she stated that the party operated, at the time, with approximately 100 people involved with its social media presence and a strategy focusing on promoting an "anti-corruption" message (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017).

Although the Independent Greeks openly campaigned as an anti-austerity party in 2012 (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017) this strategy changed in the January and September 2015 parliamentary elections, to a message portraying the Independent Greeks as the party that "can implement [austerity] in the fairest possible way" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017). Belying the party's shift away from online public deliberations, Tsatsaroni said: "whoever tells you that there is an organized dialogue on the part of any party with the citizens is lying" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017). Plans for a web TV station and e-magazine never materialized.

Unlike the Independent Greeks, *enikos.gr* continues to operate today and remains a recognized presence in the Greek online news market. However, the site has abandoned its previous blog-like layout, adopting a design like the news portals, with which it competes. Moreover, the *Ston Eniko* television program never resumed. Instead, Chatzinikolaou continues to be a prominent figure on 'legacy' television and radio. Cross-promotion of *enikos.gr* on Chatzinikolaou's other media ventures, including *Real News* and *Real FM*, is frequent. While *enikos.gr* has expanded into podcasting, its social media presence primarily reproduces the portal's content. As Iosifidis and Wheeler (2015, p. 14) argue, "it remains to be seen whether these movements will have lasting effects in terms of political change and a shift in economic direction." Perhaps, though, ephemerality is simply the confirmation of a longer-standing trend in Greece. Indeed, Panagiotopoulou (2013, pp. 453-454) notes that public spheres in Greece have traditionally been ephemeral.

It could be said that on the political front, the Independent Greeks (and its governing coalition partner SYRIZA) succumbed to state capture. Despite being elected on a populist, anti-austerity platform, the parties voted in favor

of the third memorandum agreement with Greece's 'troika' of lenders (the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission) that year—2015. In the case of *enikos.gr*, as the 'oppositional' influence of news blogs and 'alternative' online news portals waned in Greece, *enikos.gr* moved away from a format which closely resembled such outlets and reduced the public's level of interactivity and involvement with the site's content. This activity is evidenced by the fact that the *Ston Eniko*'s live audience-participation program never returned. Moreover, Chatzinikolaou and his media properties have come under scrutiny. In March 2023, SYRIZA MP Pavlos Polakis publicly accused Chatzinikolaou and the Real Group of owing tens of millions of euros in loans, taxes, and social insurance contributions, implying that these media properties were kept afloat due to *diaploki*-esque interests (CNN Greece, 2023, March 29)—hallmarks of media capture theory and Hallin and Mancini's (2004) "Polarized Pluralist" or "Mediterranean" media model.

Twelve years later, Hallin and Mancini revisited their 2004 comparative models of media systems, highlighting that in the "digital age", there was an increasing convergence toward the "liberal" model—but that replication of the existing legacy media system in the digital realm was a possible outcome (2016, pp. 162-165). Replication can be understood as a euphemism for "capture", in that established narratives and practices end up being *replicated* by entities purportedly opposed to them. In the case of *enikos.gr*, the portal was established in response to a popular demand for alternatives to the legacy media but ended up operating in a manner quite indistinct from legacy outlets. This reflects the replication of and capture by offline practices in the digital realm that has been observed with other similar outlets in Greece (Nevradakis, 2022). In one example, the 2022 Reuters Institute Digital News Report highlighted the "government's payments to particular news organisations for broadcasting COVID 'stay at home' messages in 2020" (Kalogeropoulos, 2022, p. 82)—a form of media capture wherein those same outlets were then unwilling to challenge the government's pandemic-related policies. Indeed, *enikos.gr* received 25,000 euros in such subsidies (Ioakeim, 2020). While this sum may typically not represent a significant amount for a major news portal, it is likely quite significant for an outlet whose ownership is reportedly heavily in debt. It is also likely that it is not the only such subsidy *enikos.gr* received, although this is difficult to ascertain due to the near-complete lack of transparency regarding state subsidies to the media in Greece.

Kalogeropoulos (2019) states that "[t]he abundance of news sources in Greece can be explained by attempts of some businesspeople to influence the political agenda or to gain revenue from state advertising." He argues this implies "that media owners see state subsidies as a potential offset for the marginal economic performance of their media properties (p. 88). Contributing to this

lack of transparency is the government's apparent reluctance to investigate its own activities. A parliamentary investigation examining the "Petsas List" was closed in January 2022 with no finding of wrongdoing on the part of the ruling New Democracy party (Voria.gr 2022, January 14). Then in June 2023, the government's registry of online media outlets was disbanded, eliminating another potential avenue for transparency for information regarding state subsidies provided to media outlets (Typologies.gr 2023). The lack of transparency makes it practically impossible to ascertain what additional subsidies *enikos.gr*—or any other media outlet—have received from the state.

Also worth noting is that "Petsas List" subsidies were intended for COVID-related public service announcements (PSAs), contradicting contemporary understandings of the purpose—and their free or unpaid nature—of PSAs, as recognized by Greek law, Greece's independent broadcast regulator, the National Council for Radio-Television, and global standards (McGuire, 2019; Ypovoli, n.d.).

The Independent Greeks and *enikos.gr* may well have represented a broad desire for a change from the political and media status quo in Greece during the financial crisis. They were two initiatives that, for a time, helped expand the range of voices and opinions heard in Greece's 'official' public sphere. They also firmly operated within the incumbent political and media 'system' and could not be said to have been part of an 'oppositional' public sphere as such. In turn, any expansion they made to the 'official' sphere was itself proven to be ephemeral.

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Media Capture in the Post-Truth Era: Media Freedom is a Function of the Quality of Democracy

Interview with Professor Alina Mungui-Pippidi

Though there are many surveys published, the Freedom House (FH) Reports are considered one of the most authoritative sources concerning the level of freedom and human rights across countries. For 2022, Freedom House reached the dire conclusion that democracy is under threat and that for 16 consecutive years global freedom has been declining. Would you agree?

According to the V-Dem Project, only 34 countries (home to only 13 per cent of the world population) still qualified as liberal democracies in 2021, down from 42 in 2012. The World Justice Project (2021) also reported that 74 per cent of countries covered, accounting for nearly 85 per cent of the world's population saw declines on their rule of law index (which also includes corruption) for 2021. While the current world has an unprecedented number of democracies, it has regressed on democracy, instead of progressing on corruption control, especially since the economic crisis of 2008. So, the high expectations of the nineties that electoral democracies would consolidate and increase their quality over time by reducing corruption have not really materialized.

Can corruption be blamed for democracy backsliding?

No country backsliding among those who control corruption well (are in the top tercile of charts), and all serious backslides are from the worst tercile on corruption. In fact, as I show in my forthcoming book (*Rethinking Corruption, Edward Elgar, 2023*), the worst you are on corruption and the more years you spend without solving your state capture problem, the higher the chances of a backslide. This being said, there are no cases of regression on behalf of corruption

only, since corruption is so widespread across all regimes. Triggers are rather gang violence, drugs, insurgencies and wars—mostly Islamist.

Another Freedom House report underlines the tendency towards hybrid regimes in the "post-Soviet space". Apparently democratic mechanisms are ineffective, and societies fall victim to dictators and populist delusions. How would you comment on that worrying situation from your perspective as both academic and journalist?

The post-Soviet space – we should stretch it a bit to cover the Balkans, which were not part of the Soviet Union – has never managed to achieve a high quality of democracy, with the notable exception of Estonia and maybe Lithuania. But even countries which did reach a good quality – the Visegrad countries – have been under strain after accession to the EU. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic are not backsliders in Freedom House scores – understandably, as no journalist has been arrested there. But sadly they have grown more like Moldova or Ukraine, so to speak, without having the same geopolitical challenges. But I would not consider our region to blame, although it is strange that EU influence did not matter more. The consensus of twenty years ago that we were building judicial independence, for instance, has been broken. Now politicians are openly using the judiciary against their opponents in a score of democracies, and where they cannot do that they merely 'reform' the judiciary with the same goal. India is the most notable case in point, but also Poland, Israel, Romania, and even Spain. The EU provided such advice with respect to the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova, so it is a total confusion. Francis Fukuyama's definition of rule of law, whereby politicians do not change the laws preceding them, is trespassed on a daily basis in the name of the good but factually for openly authoritarian purposes. Neither Brussels, nor populists, trust the judiciary to form and exercise its own will and in reality we witness political intervention in name only. It is hard to say that this is a path to develop the rule of law. On the contrary, anticorruption has been a very handy instrument to use against opponents in this context. Countries which do not jail any top politician stand accused of protecting a culture of immunity but maybe it is better to proceed like that, instead of arresting all opponents, as India, the world's largest democracy (which Freedom House ranked as partly free after ranking as free for many years), seems to be doing in 2023.

Free and independent media is the cornerstone of democracy. However, independent media are increasingly at risk from hostile forces as well as from a lack of sufficient, sustained funding. How is freedom of the press doing?

Not progressing. Indeed, despite the growth of digital citizenship globally – more and more people have broadband Internet on their mobiles, even in sub-Saharan Africa and thus the public is getting gradually more and more digitally empowered – media freedom has been declining on average for many years and no continent is an exception to this. Again, it is a fine matter of quality of democracy because in many countries the government cannot be openly blamed for infringing it, but still few countries have high rankings. The recent achievers are Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Estonia, but you can count them on the fingers of one hand. And I think in some old democracies' media is not doing so well, either.

At the same time, media are under threat "from within" since they facilitate propaganda, spread disinformation, and become allies of authoritarian regimes. What is your opinion on the role of the media today?

I am mostly a corruption scholar these days, so for me it has always been difficult to explain to my naïve Western colleagues that you cannot just be satisfied that media is a pillar of democracy and public integrity, since in environments which are authoritarian, nationalist, or corrupt, the media will also be authoritarian, chauvinistic, or corrupt. The media is a part of a political system and to cure a deeply defective political system, you need an exogenous, not an endogenous factor. I coined the 'media capture' concept years ago to make people understand this but I am not sure they did. Westerners hardly understand the media under Putin these days, for instance, and the fact that its effect is not achieved by one media outlet but by an entire system, where some independent publications are allowed to exist, as long as their reach is controlled.

Here we come to the concept of "captured media". It is no longer a metaphor but a despicable reality. It is one of the risks for free journalism and media. The latest report by the Council of Europe's Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists (2022) explicitly refers to different cases of media capture in Europe. These are no longer isolated examples. According to your definition, media capture is a situation in which the media are controlled "either directly by governments or by vested interests" which seek political influence rather than profit. The result is the creation of a hybrid regime, halfway between democracy and totalitarian state. Could you explain how this phenomenon flourishes in the current political situation? Are there any vivid illustrations of this?

At the time I came up with this (2007–2008), even if the most cited article "Freedom without Impartiality: The vicious circle of media capture" (*Media Transformations in the Post-Communist World: Eastern Europe's tortured path to change.* ed. Gross, P. and Jakubowicz, K., Lexington Books, 49–66) appeared

only in 2012, there was no social media. So I was talking only about legacy media and I was trying to explain the phenomenon we witnessed in the Balkans and the FSU, where media had become plural without becoming independent. I found a compromise theory in the Italian '*lotizazzione*' (allotment) because I was interested in public media (having been a reformer of Romanian public broadcasting in my youth). Italy was a good example of a particularistic society divided by interest groups that also divided media – you have pluralism and even truth if you piece the whole together but you do not have objectivity BBC style (the way BBC looked then). No owner thinks of media as a business in itself, just as an outlet to trade influence.

We have been accustomed to believing that the captured media phenomenon is typical of countries in transition or with unstable and weak institutions, or generally where the rule of law is disrupted. What are the conditions for the appearance of captured media and are there various models of such media?

Meanwhile, social media occurred and *lotizazzione*, in other words, a fragmented media system where each group promotes its own truth has become the norm, except that this is no longer part of an agreement between elites, it is just a fact. The internet ruined legacy media by making it more vulnerable to capture, so this triple loss of – authority, economic sustainability, and audience – made even top media outlets in the West vulnerable to capture. In the well proven case of the Gupta family, some South African oligarchs, it was shown that they purchased space in the venerable British media through PR agencies, space which promoted favorable content without indicating that it was advertising. I was offered to write op eds in a couple of most influential language newspapers in the EU by PR agencies, whose clients recommended me when my public positions seemed to side with what they promoted at the time. A market exists presently of op-eds which are sponsored, but not indicated as such. To know who the captor is, you should be able to see in detail not only the agency who purchased the op-ed space but also its clients, and there is no such transparency presently. We battle Sputnik, but our roots are also infiltrated.

Hallin and Mancini speak about the instrumentalization of the media. How do the two relate to one another? Or maybe captured media is the extreme form of instrumentalization?

Instrumentalization presumes that media is an autonomous agent which can be manipulated, while the media is a passive actor and not a contributor in the scheme of captured media. The media was instrumentalized in Wikileaks and in all the leaks. We look at the Pandora Papers, and Putin is not in there with

his fortune, but Zelensky and the real estate of his group was, the war came, and people did not bother to analyze this anymore. Who selected this and why? Of course, the media cannot resist the leaks, there is so much information there, and they may fall victim to a selection bias, but the media are not part of it, they try to do their job, even if they may end up being manipulated. In the captured media theory, media outlets are not autonomous but play in the influence games of its owners – very much as the media was in US and Europe in the nineteenth century and as it is in the greatest part of the world today – an industry where black and white PR government and political propaganda dominate, not information based on facts. I recommend the Netflix miniseries inspired by a Jack London story (London was a journalist) *"The Minions of Midas"* – for how perverse the media freedom game has become.

Public service media: The European Media Freedom Act proposed by the European Commission in 2022 explicitly points out that PSM comprise one of the pillars of free and independent media in Europe: "Independent public service media – where public service media exist, their funding provided should be adequate and stable, in order to ensure editorial independence. The head and the governing board of public service media will have to be appointed in a transparent, open and non-discriminatory manner. Public service media providers shall provide a plurality of information and opinions, in an impartial manner, in accordance with their public service mission." We have been dreaming of such ideal public service media systems since the beginning of the democratic changes in CEE more than thirty years ago.

You can dream on; this is legislation for the twentieth century and completely behind the times. Capture these days is like the pandemic – in order to cure yourself you need a general lockdown and in order to cure the media, one should address the entire media system. That requires a wide package with social media regulation, full transparency of ownership and advertising for legacy media, and regulations on universal state funding of the media. The public service is an anachronism, a problem and not a solution, due to its lack of audience. Exceptions remain – in Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Germany, but Hallin and Mancini are right that the roots of a media system are old – one hundred years or more, so if a country never had an independent public service prior to TV without borders directive and the internet, it will not have one that matters in the future. It's just water under the bridge.

Prof. Pippidi, you are a renowned scholar who has examined in-depth the transitions in Central and Eastern Europe as well as governance and corruption, and you have had the privilege of working with another legendary scientist in media studies

– Dr. Karol Jakubowicz. Both of you belong to a generation where you acted not only as researchers but also as fighters for democratic values. What is your assessment of media science and its contribution to media practice and democracy today?

I have stepped down from being a media scholar per se for some years now and I have noticed that another generation has kept the flag up, that 'media capture' is used more than before and became a small brand which rallies people, that the European Commission, for instance, has passed some rules of ownership transparency which would not have happened otherwise. We used to live in post-truth in former Communist Europe even before the appearance of social media due to plain capture. Now, due to social media, everybody lives in post-truth, and it's our job to help sort this out. Especially since we are not naïve. The main danger these days – and an impediment – is the war. Wars are times when propaganda flourishes. I became a journalist during the Romanian Revolution, and I still feel scarred by the sixty thousand dead at Timisoara, which were reported by most of West European media at the time, and which turned out to be a hundred and twenty or so. We should care for victory, but we should care for the truth more, and the role of academia is to be even more independent than the media, and to find some solutions in an environment where almost nobody welcomes the truth anymore.

Alina Mungui-Pippidi was interviewed
by Bissera Zankova
on March 27, 2023.

Where do Dangers to Modern Media Come from? "Captured Media: Exploring Media Systems in and after Transitions", Lisbon, December 5–6, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Threats to media freedom are real and worrying global trends. More than that, their impact on the state of democracy is truly dangerous, especially for young democratic states, which experience country-specific difficulties in building strong and viable media ecosystems. In these countries, political and economic pressures, self-censorship and the absence of serious criticism of power-holders have become a daily practice. Within this context, the concept of captured media signifies the complex risks that may effectively undermine the public function of the media and stifle the fundamental role of freedom of expression in democratic societies.

THE BEGINNING – HALLIN AND MANCINI'S THEORY

In their renowned book Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics, Hallin and Mancini (2004) talk about political parallelism, the effect of which depends on "the strength of connections between the media and political actors and on the balance between the advocacy and neutral/informational traditions of political journalism" (p. 27). The narrower concept raised by the authors is the "party-press parallelism proposed in some of the earliest work on comparative analysis of media systems." In their discussion of political parallelism, Hallin and Mancini conclude that it has "a number of different components, and there are a number of indicators that can be used to assess how strongly it is present in a media system" (p.28). According to the authors, "most basically it refers to media content – the extent to which the different media

reflect distinct political orientation in their news and current affairs reporting, and sometimes also their entertainment content" (p.28). In its extreme form, political parallelism can lead to radical political instrumentalization – a situation in which the media lose their editorial independence under pressure from either or both the government and private companies. "The concentration of media ownership in the hands of a limited number of businesses, often associated with politicians or government officials, is the main factor that enables such consolidation" (Dragomir, 2022). A similar deviation from media independence is party control over the media or "party colonization", which is widely spread in Central and Eastern European post-communist countries (Bajomi-Lazar, 2014). This is how we arrive at the idea of captured media which, according to the definition by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Ghinea (2012), is a situation in which the media is controlled "directly by governments or vested interests," seeking political influence rather than profit. The result is the creation of a hybrid regime somewhere between the democratic and the totalitarian state.

THE CONFERENCE – MAIN IDEAS

The conference "Captured Media: Exploring Media Systems in and after Transitions" brought together researchers from five continents to Universidade Católica Portuguesa in Lisbon from 5 to 6 December 2022. The conference debated how political structures and economic groups in countries that do not have a strong tradition of freedom of expression and adequate political safeguards have taken over the mass media and journalists. In politically unstable societies such tendencies could be particularly destructive due to the close ties between media organizations and the political class, the lack of a strong civic culture and the perception of a lack of media independence and ineffective regulation.

Mireya Márquez-Ramirez from the Iberoamerican University of Mexico ("Theorizing Media Capture: The Conceptual Challenges of a Widespread Phenomenon") and Peter Bayomi-Lazar ("Media Capture Research: Some Observations") gave keynote speeches. They highlighted the changes in the approaches to the concept of captured media which, from the narrow understanding of the early 2000s have become too broad and encompassing today based on the borrowings from political science theories. They have evolved to encompass any phenomena that hamper the independent functioning of the media and their role as the fourth power. The boundaries of the concept were one of the topics of the conference discussions. Another comprised national examples from various countries and the factors undermining media contribution to democracy.

Africa and the state of media freedom there was the focus of several reports in Lisbon. In the Afrobarometer surveys of 18 African countries in late 2019 and early 2020, most citizens stressed that corruption had increased, and governments were doing very little to control it. Perceptions and experiences of corruption vary widely across African societies but most of the respondents complained that they risk retaliation if they become involved by reporting corruption to the authorities. This situation also affects freedom of expression and, accordingly, media systems, which are in significant decline. Against this backdrop, Teddy W. Workneh and Harrison Lejeune, Kent State University ("The Politics of "Fact-checking" Communities in Ethiopia: Origins, Actors, and Networks") concentrated on the policies pursued by the "fact-checking" communities in Ethiopia: origins, representatives and networks. They also painted a broader picture of Ethiopia's media environment which proved to be rather troubled. Ethiopia's unfolding political transition is characterized by hyper-partisan media relationships, which in turn have spawned an epidemic of disinformation on social media. For a long time, the practice of journalism has been characterized by state-sponsored threats, intimidation and violence, which in turn have resulted in severe self-censorship, exile, imprisonment and the assassination of journalists.

Johanna Mack from the Technical University of Dortmund, Germany ("Media System Transformation in a Context of Stable Instability: Conceptualizing Media Development in Guinea-Bissau") presented her findings on the transformation of the national media system in Guinea-Bissau. For Mack, the object of research is a media system that is unstable and prone to changes (whether positive or negative). The role of international cooperation for media development proves to be important in this respect. Influential models such as Hallin and Mancini's (2004) cannot be unconditionally applied to the media environment in many African countries. Here, the transformation that takes place, according to Dragomir (2019), Voltmer (2019), Frère (2018) and Harris (2018) can best be followed by focusing on the role of actors in media processes. This approach entails carrying out interviews and organizing focus groups, field research and experimentation for „participatory mapping" of the various stakeholders in Guinea-Bissau.

For Jeff Conroy-Krutz of Michigan State University, USA ("Media Capture & Popular Support for Media Freedoms") the decline in the overall support of freedom of speech in Africa is due to the frequent cases of media capture in many countries, which manifests itself in expressions of bias, lack of trust and sometimes inflammatory hate rhetoric. To test this claim, a collaborative experiment was conducted using nationally representative surveys in four African countries: Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. The experiment shed further light on the origin of people's concerns about the media in Africa and the factors that can weaken support for such vital democratic freedoms.

It is striking that subjects do not agree with particularly harsh penalties against radio stations accused of partisan bias, lies, or hate speech. Kenya is the exception, where the legacy of 2007–8 post-election violence seems to have made the population particularly sensitive to harsh punishment for hate speech. Findings mainly suggest that other accusations against the media, including the failure to pay taxes and providing platforms for armed groups are significantly more likely to garner support for government-imposed restrictions than bias or lies.

Two other countries, Iraqi Kurdistan and Mongolia, whose media systems we know little about – were also on the agenda in Lisbon. Jiyan Faris, from the University of Antwerp in Belgium ("Advertising and Media Capture in Transitional Democracies: The Case of Iraqi Kurdistan") explained the theoretical and methodological aspects of advertising in an opaque media market in a transitional democracy. The financing of media organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan is non-transparent: ownership structures are hidden; circulation, consumption and revenue information is controlled by media owners, while public broadcasting information is controlled by the government. Faris' analysis related particularly to corporations, political parties, NGOs, as well as state institutions, which preferred to allocate advertising to specific media groups in a dubious manner. The results provided original empirical evidence on how uncertain socio-economic conditions compel media professionals to develop informal networks with advertisers (e.g., face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, brokering, patronage links, and informal points of contact). In turn, this approach allows powerful social players to use advertising as a tool to influence news media and expand their networks with ruling political parties. The findings also point to the creation of deliberate legal loopholes under pressure from the major players and particularly regarding legislation on media transparency and accountability.

Political science researchers rarely pay attention to the role of the media in processes of regime change and subsequent transition (Voltmer, 2019). Moreover, media scholarship has only sporadically dealt with the long-term role of the media in consolidating democratic processes. This conclusion also applies to Mongolia, where current media research is limited (Baasanjav, 2021). The boom in commercial print newspapers in the 1990s and private television stations in the 2000s, alongside the mushrooming of online news sites and social media since 2010 show that Mongolian legislation has somehow established an open and pluralistic media system. However, the political culture, prone to clientelism, corruption and the mental legacy of communism supplies the main conditions for the appearance of a media sector with significant market defects, dominated by media subordinated to political and business interests. In such an unfavorable environment, Mongolian journalists work within conflicting professional frameworks. Some have abandoned journalistic autonomy and have "renegotiated" the norms of free journalism in favor of the pragmatic acceptance of financial and

political benefits. Others, however, strive to adhere to Western principles and standards. A small group of exceptional investigative journalists face constant accusations of libel. Under these circumstances, it seems uncertain how long these new forms of investigative reporting will survive if the authorities, including police chiefs and judges, are reluctant to investigate corruption or, even worse, simply side with powerful figures. Researchers involved in the presentation of "Media and Democratization in Post-Communist Mongolia" were Undrach Basanjev, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Munkhmandakh Myagmar, Mongolian Press Institute and Poul Erik Nielsen, Aarhus University, Denmark.

Moving to Latin America, participants delved into the Brazilian context and the processes of "de-democratization" there. Ricardo Ribeiro Ferreira, University of Edinburgh ("Understanding the Roles of Journalism in the De-Democratisation of Brazil") argued that the "regress" of democratic regimes to authoritarianism was characterized by the decline of institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) and the contribution of the media to this state of affairs is considerable. Studies on post-Soviet states (Knott, 2018), India (Rao & Mudgal, 2015) and South Africa (Rao & Wasserman, 2015) show that journalism facilitates and, in practice, shapes "de-democratization" because of the ways news outlets fail or avoid either or both scrutinizing politicians and publishing content that is essential for vigorous public discussion. For this reason, cited studies concentrate on journalism's lack of success in performing pro-democracy functions – i.e., on journalism's "negative capacity", which is often explored through the theory of "media capture". However, this framework does not fully explain what is currently happening in Brazil. The quality of democracy in the country has been steadily declining since 2016 (V-Dem Index, 2022) and journalism can be considered to be the active factor in the process (Araújo & Prior, 2020; de Albuquerque, 2019; van Dijk, 2017).

The most typical case of media capture in Europe is the established power pyramid in Hungary, in which the state, the media and Orbán's party have all merged into one. Due to this situation, the conference was particularly interested in the contributions of the Hungarian colleagues, who provided details "from within." Gábor Polyák and Kata Horváth, from ELTE University ("Disinformation Infrastructure and New Tools of Credibility in the Hungarian Media System") discussed how the execution of the Hungarian media policy since 2010 had resulted in the complete transformation of the national media ownership structure and financing. Economic and professional decisions were replaced by political choices and loyalties to the ruling party and the topics, arguments and overall vocabulary of public discourse were determined solely by the government and the party in office. Among the entire arsenal for propaganda and suppression of critical voices applied in the Hungarian political discourse, disinformation occupies a prominent place.

Today, filter bubbles are one of the crucial phenomena that have the potential of tearing apart the democratic public sphere in Hungary. Although normally associated with social media, fragmentation, a world of parallel, contactless representations of reality has already reached traditional media. In this regard, the Hungarian case is interesting, not only in and of itself, but also because it is a model for many populist politicians in Europe and beyond.

In the same vein, Attila Bátorfy's presentation (ELTE University, Budapest, entitled "Conflicts between Fundamental Rights, the Government's Subsidized Speech and the Public Interest in Hungary") drew attention to the problem of the restrictions in communication imposed by the Hungarian government and their impact on fundamental citizens' rights. The issue was subsidized speech, capable of distorting the democratic public sphere without the classic tools of negative media control. Subsidized speech is a less spectacular instrument than outright censorship, physical threat, and intimidation, but it can ultimately be just as dangerous to democratic public discourse. Adam Shinar argues that subsidized speech is already a structural challenge in three countries: Israel, Poland and Hungary (Shinar, 2021). The problem lies in what Shinar calls "majoritarian entrenchment", which he claims is designed precisely to hamper democratic change. Although democracies have mechanisms to prevent entrenchment of political majorities, these focus on elections and related aspects, while the negative impact of entrenchment has to be also extended to the speech context in order to be properly understood. In conclusion, Bátorfy cautions that the Hungarian government's subsidized speech practice through public advertising could severely violate fundamental rights, a risk that future legislation should consider.

Papers about other European countries, including Bulgaria, revealed both specific and general problems in their media systems. In this respect, a gloomy picture of the Balkan media was painted by several presenters. "Media Capture, Prima Facie Pluralism, and Savage Polarization in the Greek Media Landscape" by Dr. Michael Nevradakis, College of Eyre (CYA) in Athens, Greece, summarized the basic characteristics of local media environment. In recent years, Greece has witnessed a sharp decline in its ranking according to the Reporters without Borders (RwB) media freedom index, to the lowest levels in Europe and the conditions which have led to this should be thoroughly explored. The author emphasized that media capture is a key feature of the Greek media reality. Several factors illustrate this in the Greek case: a "revolving door" between politics and journalists; generous (and far from impartial) government subsidies to the media; "iron triangles" and oligarchic positions held by a handful of economically and politically powerful media owners; the supremacy of political and party interests at the expense of objective journalism; lack of political independence of the public broadcaster ERT and almost complete absence of non-commercial and

non-profit media; an online environment that largely reproduces the biases of traditional media; and threats and wiretapping of journalists, leading to the total absence of investigative journalism.

The struggle for media independence and freedom of the press as a vital liberty in a democracy in Turkey have devolved into the resistance against basic control at the publication/editorial level and the complete blocking and filtering of all information (Murat Akser, University of Ulster, "Media Capture in Turkey: From Compliance to Resistance"). The sad conclusion by Akser is that over the past 20 years, Turkish media has witnessed media capture and control of dictatorial proportions. Media oligarchs are deploying new intimidation tactics against reporters, ranging from populist discursive attacks to self-censorship. The system of institutional intimidation has managed to accomplish top-down political coordination at the highest levels with distance interference through NGOs, or discreetly, through individual trolls on the government payroll.

The two papers from Bulgaria added more information about the reasons for media capture in this country. The presentation by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ivo Indzhov, University of Veliko Tarnovo, "The Bulgarian Media System: between the "Mediterranean model" and the "captured media?" is based on 30 interviews with experts about the national media system, journalistic culture and media transition. The opinions collected allowed possible parallels with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology of media systems to be drawn. Almost all quoted respondents share the view that, despite the initial successes of democratization in Bulgaria from 1989 onwards, the processes of progressive development stopped relatively quickly thereafter. During the last quarter of the century, the Bulgarian political system followed "a rather 'Balkan' logic, and features authoritarian tendencies, lack of rule of law (…) as well as an underdeveloped civil society" (Zhivko Georgiev, sociologist)

Against this background, European funding is the main source of corruption and oligarchic symbiosis in Bulgaria. The state no longer fulfills its neutral role but performs a management-distributive function. From a party or party-oriented, but relatively free press in the 1990s to the politicization of a part of the media environment: this is the conclusion of most respondents, who are of the opinion that during the first decade of democratic transition, Bulgarian media were at their freest, although the beginning of this period was marked by "wars" between party-affiliated newspapers.

The other report from Bulgaria by Dr. Bissera Zankova, "Media 21" Foundation, was dedicated to regulatory capture through the perverted implementation of control by regulators in the media sphere ("Media Regulatory Capture: Problems and Guarantees"). This occurs when private interests penetrate media bodies and divert the performance of their functions from the public interest. This phenomenon can ultimately threaten freedom of expression and undermine

democracy. There is a risk that an agency is exposed to regulatory capture by its very nature. The bottom line is that any regulator should be shielded from outside influences as much as possible.

Through the presentation of Ricard Parrilla Guix (University of Salzburg), Ruth Martínez-Rodríguez (Pompeu Fabra University) and Marcel Mauri-Rios (Pompeu Fabra University), the audience became aware of the media ownership structure of the most important news media in Spain as of 2020 ("The Media Ownership Structure of Spain's Most Relevant News Media in 2020"). The main findings reveal that, in Spain, very complicated and opaque ownership structures prevail (generally internationalized and including owners from the EU, USA, Mexico, Singapore and the Cayman Islands) and that strong convergence of media ownership with financial funds and instruments, a general lack of transparency about the actual media owners, journalistic staff, finance and government subsidies are conspicuous features of the media system. Indeed, the lack of clarity about media ownership is a basic prerequisite for the occurrence of the "captured media" phenomenon.

The main objective of the paper "Political Media Bias. The Case Study of the Most Popular Nationwide TV Channels in Ukraine" by Grażyna Piechota, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, Krakow University and Robert Rajczyk, University of Silesia in Katowice was to present a study of the political media bias based on the analysis of the most popular nationwide TV channels including five private and one public television stations in Ukraine, namely: *1+1, Ukraine, ICTV, Inter, Kanal 5 and UA: Pershyi*. These television stations belong to oligarchs, with the exception of *UA: Pershyi*, a Ukrainian public broadcaster channel. To ascertain the relationship between media bias and the agenda, three main issues were considered: (i) the issue of Joint Forces Operation in Donbas (conflict in Donbas), (ii) Ukrainian and Russian Federation relations and (iii) the question of state language because of the introduction of the controversial Law on State Language in Ukraine. These issues stand for the socio-political division of society in Ukraine before February 24, 2022, the date of the outbreak of Russia's unprovoked aggression against this state. The analysis found that the agenda of the main news programs of the most-widely watched TV channels in Ukraine do not differ in terms of content, but only in terms of gradation, which however, is not dictated by political inclinations.

Most potential conflicts related to journalism are governed by ethical norms, whose compliance is reinforced by institutions and mechanisms of a more informal nature. On this theme, João Miranda (in co-authorship with Carlos Camponez) from the University of Coimbra, Portugal, shared his views about the ""Mandated" Accountability and Transparency of the Media – Subsidies from the Portuguese Experience". Various examples of "empowered" accountability (Miranda & Camponez, 2019; 2022) and transparency can be identified

in Portuguese media, where the voluntary initiatives of news actors and civil society are replaced by legal requirements or recommendations. These procedures require the systematization of the various ways and methods of imposing responsibility measures on the media, as well as an examination of the limits to which state intervention may extend to.

Rethinking the transformation of journalists' work and precarious jobs in the age of digital media was the theme of the presentation by Salih Kinsoun, a PhD student at the University of Essex, UK ("Re-Thinking the Transformation of Journalism: Labour and Precarious Workplaces in the Digital Media Age"). The paper offered a discussion on the uncertain working conditions and the future of precarious journalism amid the widespread use of the new platforms. The operation of these platforms as captured media was also analyzed by Patricia Anezza from the University of Bergamo ("Social Media as Captured Media: Surveillance Capitalism from a Discursive Perspective").

The historical elements of media capture in Portugal were Isadora Ataíde Fonseca's focus (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon, "Captured by Elites: The Portuguese Media System during Liberalism (1820–1926)", and Carla Ganito and Cátia Ferreira, from the same university, reminded us that the defense against domination over the media is another crucial issue and alternative types of media outlets could be one of the paths for this effect ("An Exploratory Study of the Portuguese Alternative Media Landscape").

CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

To prove how workable capture media theory is, comparative studies, both geographically and on specific themes, are particularly useful. It is also necessary to clarify what capturing media means and to distinguish the concept from other cases that refer to assorted problems in the media sphere, such as interference, intimidation, and submission. Applying too broad a concept of "captured media", which covers almost any shortcomings, deficits, and deviations from the public role of the media, dilutes the whole idea and turns it into a hollow shell. However, more empirical and comparable data are needed to avoid depriving science of its social weight and inquisitive potential. The presence of scientists from a range of traditions and generations at the Lisbon conference is a precious asset for continuity and the enrichment of extant approaches aiming to solve this complex problem. An important step forward will be to discuss how to counteract this phenomenon in the most efficient manner. Particularly a phenomenon that is so difficult to identify and debunk.

The conference "Captured Media: Researching Media Systems in and after Transitions" brought together in Lisbon an international community of researchers

committed to examining media systems from a new angle and to apply innovative perspectives. The collaboration between the Research Centre for Communication and Culture at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, in Lisbon and the Bulgarian project "The Media System and Journalistic Culture in Bulgaria (Research in the light of the three models of media-politics relations of Hallin and Mancini" inspired this pioneering research initiative that could stimulate novel plans and opportunities.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

"The Media System and Journalistic Culture in Bulgaria" is a four-year project implemented by the Veliko Tarnovo University „St. St. Cyril and Methodius". The team of scientists is led by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ivo Indzhov, expert in political communications and journalism. Funding is provided by the National Scientific Fund. The research point of departure is the well-known "three model" theory of media relations with politics of Hallin and Mancini (2004): Mediterranean (polarized-pluralistic), North-Central European (democratic-corporatist) and North Atlantic (liberal) and subsequent theories explaining the transformations in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. These have been considered in the light of their applicability in other parts of the world over the past fifteen years, including and through the prism of the specific characteristics of the Bulgarian environment.

The project has been pursuing both international and national goals, the core of which is to present a full picture of the media system and journalistic culture in Bulgaria. An unalienable element is the pilot analysis of 30 expert interviews which revealed many deficiencies of these two and especially in the years after Bulgaria's accession to the EU. The conclusions have questioned the reliability of the comparison of the Bulgarian media system which was initially considered to be the "closest to … Hallin and Mancini's Mediterranean model". Some similarities but also significant differences have been encountered. Other factors have also been explored such as the semi-consolidated democracy in the country (rule of law entrenchment and civil society strength), the development of media market, advertising and its role, media ownership transparency, concentration and cross-ownership and non-efficient media legislation.

Within the project the National Representative Survey was conducted by the G Consulting Agency. It has provided valuable insights about the position of television in the life of Bulgarian society since it remains the most trusted source of information, followed by friends, relatives and colleagues and social networks at the third place. As usual the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) occupies the highest position in this ranking. Generally, the media is not a respected democratic

institution since it "informs mainly about scandals in order to have a larger audience (74.0% of respondents) and fuels the fears of Bulgarians by providing details about murders, wars, natural disasters (70.2% of respondents)".

So far the project "The Media System and Journalistic Culture in Bulgaria" has produced a variety of publications about the Bulgarian media system, the financing of Bulgarian media, media regulation, media journals during transition and the public image of Bulgarian media – before socialist revolution in 1944 and before democratic changes in 1989. One of its final propositions will be policy recommendations for the improvement of the Bulgarian media and its study.

Bissera Zankova
Media 21 Foundation, Bulgaria

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GUEST EDITORS

Nelson Ribeiro is Professor of Communication Studies at the Catholic University of Portugal, where he is the Dean of the Faculty of Human Sciences. His main research areas are media history, propaganda, disinformation, and media and colonialism. He is a co-author of *The Wireless World: Global Histories of International Radio Broadcasting* (Oxford University Press, 2022) and co-editor of *Media and the Dissemination of Fear: Pandemics, Wars and Political Intimidation* (Palgrave, 2022) and *Digital Roots: Historicizing Media and Communication Concepts of the Digital Age* (De Gruyter, 2021). E-mail: nelson.ribeiro@ucp.pt

Mireya Márquez Ramírez (PhD Goldsmiths, University of London, 2012) is a Professor of Journalism Studies and Media Theory at the Department of Communications, Universidad Iberoamericana Mexico City, and a Visiting Professor at Bournemouth University. Her research interests include media capture, media systems, press-politics relations, comparative journalism cultures, journalistic roles, journalistic professionalism, news making, the safety of journalists, and beat journalism. She is the Principal Investigator (PI) of the global studies *Journalistic Role Performance* in Mexico, *Worlds of Journalism* in Bolivia, and co-investigator in the project Sports Media Capture in Mexico and Greece. E-mail: mireya.marquez@ibero.mx

Bissera Zankova is the President of the Sofia-based "Media 21" Foundation, an independent media researcher and consultant. Her research interests are human rights, media regulation policy and new media. In the past, she served at the Council of Europe on policy documentation on new notions of media and public service media governance. Her latest international research projects include studies on applied social media and convergence alongside media systems in Central and Southeast Europe, with the specifics of the Bulgarian media law culture. E-mail: bzankova@gmail.com

AUTHORS

Undrah Baasanjav is an Associate Professor in the Department of Mass Communications at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). She has published dozens of articles and book chapters on Mongolian media, online civic discourse, and gender in gaming. In 2022, she was a Fulbright Fellow to Mongolia and conducted research on informational resilience and media use of Mongolians. E-mail: ubaasan@siue.edu

Péter Bajomi-Lázár is a Professor of Mass Communication at the Budapest Business University and the co-editor of the Hungarian media studies quarterly Médiakutató (The Media Researcher). His latest monograph in English is *Party Colonisation of the Media in Central and Eastern Europe* (Budapest & New York: The Central European University Press, 2014).
E-mail: bajomi-lazar.peter@uni-bge.hu

Marius Dragomir is the director of the Media and Journalism Research Center. He works as a professor at Central European University (CEU) in Vienna, teaching journalism and research design courses and practical advocacy and policy engagement classes. He is also a researcher at the University of Santiago de Compostela. Over the last 30 years, Dragomir has specialized in areas, such as media and communication regulation, digital media, public service media governance, broadcasting, journalism business models, and ownership regulation.
E-mail: marius.dragomir@datamediacenter.com

Isadora de Ataíde Fonseca is an Assistant Professor at the Catholic University of Portugal, where she is also a researcher at the Research Centre for Communication and Culture. Her main research areas are Media and Journalism Studies, the connections of culture and ideology, and the dynamics between journalism and political regimes in Europe and Portuguese-speaking countries. In 2024 she published "The Making of Imperial Public Sphere on Portuguese Colonialism", *Media History* 30 (1): 1–15. E-mail: iafonseca@ucp.pt

Ivo Indzhov, PhD, is an independent researcher whose work focuses on taboo topics in contemporary Bulgarian media, the image of Roma and other minority and vulnerable groups in the press and online media, and anti-Jewish propaganda in the Bulgarian press (1940–1944). Between 2015 and 2023, he was an associate professor of journalism at Veliko Tarnovo University "St Cyril and St Methodius." His main research interests are journalism studies, media systems, journalistic culture, and political communication. E-mail: iindzhov@hotmail.com

Johanna Mack is a research associate at the Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism (Technical University Dortmund), a doctoral candidate in the Medas21 – Media Development Assistance in the 21st Century graduate school attached to the University Duisburg-Essen. She is the editor of the German edition of the European Journalism Observatory (EJO). Her research interests include international journalism, media systems research, migration and media development. E-mail: johanna.mack@tu-dortmund.de

Munkhmandakh Myagmar is the executive director of the Mongolian Press Institute. She holds a journalism degree and a PhD in media and communication sciences from the University of Leipzig, Germany. With 26 years of experience in Mongolia's media and civil society sectors, she has led over 100 projects on media freedom, journalist training, and media accountability. Her research spans election coverage, gender-based violence, and media development. Email: munkhmandakh@pressinst.org.mn

Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D., is a communication instructor at College Year in Athens, Greece. His research interests include media and institutional capture, polarization and the media, alternative media, social media's impact on the public sphere, and media policy, primarily focusing on Greece. His dissertation, "From the Polis to Facebook: Social Media and the Development of a New Greek Public Sphere," will soon be published as a monograph.
Email: michael.nevradakis@cyathens.org

Poul Erik Nielsen (Lic. Phil.) is an Associate Professor Emeritus at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism at Aarhus University, Denmark. He has done extensive research on media and democratization processes in countries in transition in Southeast Europe and Asia. His current research has focused on new media and processes of sociocultural change in the Global South.
E-mail: imvpen@cc.au.dk

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residental address: ul. Koszarowa 3, 51-149 Wrocław, Poland
correspondence address: ul. Głęboka 45, 20-612 Lublin, Poland
www.ptks.pl
office@ptks.pl

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