Digital and Political Transformation: A Perspective on the Discourse of Iraqi Media System

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the current nature of the Iraqi media system through the lens of two significant influences: the digitalization of global media and the country's political transformation in 2003. It discusses the important shifts in the digital environment and their reflection on the media discourse of media systems in their historical context. The concept of the media system, how historical studies of media systems evolved, and the stages of development of concepts and classifications that researchers have carried out for media systems in the world were reviewed. The paper also explored the problematic changes that are taking place in contemporary media systems due to the digital changes that have changed the close relationship between the media and political systems in societies. The analytical descriptive approach was used to gain an accurate and detailed understanding of the media system in Iraq. The paper concluded that the discourse of the media system in Iraq was simultaneously associated with digital and political transformation when political change led to an openness to the new digital environment, but the features of this system at the micro-level are linked to the determinants of the turbulent political scene in Iraq that created a plurality of conflicting discourses enriched with a unique sort of political parallelism and political conflict-related interests.

Keywords: Digitization, Iraqi media system, media discourse, political transformation.

1. Introduction

Contemporary media systems are going through a transitional phase, in which the process of transferring, distributing, and consuming media materials, both at the national and international news levels, has changed as a result of the digital transformation witnessed in the world. In the midst of this transformation, the features of media policies have been determined according to the perspective of technological development, which has imposed changes in the structure and work of media institutions. In addition, the relationship between media systems and political systems is typically beyond question. According to literature in the fields of communication and political science, the media system and the political system of any nation are closely related. Numerous theoretical and empirical studies by communication and media scientists refer to this relationship through terms such as media policy, political communication, and media democracy (Engesser & Franzetti, 2011). This relationship is obviously affected by any political change, as was the case in Iraq in 2003 when the radical transformation of the political system led to qualitative changes in the nature of the media system's work.

Iraq's media landscape has changed since the US invasion in 2003. It was forcibly transformed from a Baath Party-controlled context to a liberalized one in which hundreds of outlets compete for an audience and few independent voices struggle to avoid state and partisan pressures. In the past, there were only two newspapers, one broadcast station, and one satellite channel. Numerous media outlets are available now (International Media Support, 2005).
In light of the above, the current research sheds light on the Iraqi media system as a variable influenced by both digitalization and the internal factor of political transformation, which has witnessed profound changes. To comprehend the impact of these two dimensions on the Iraqi media system, the author first develops a thorough understanding of the technological and political influences that play a role in the evolving environment of media systems globally. For the purpose of determining the dimensions of studying the subject, the research seeks to answer the following broad questions:

1. What is the historical context of media system classifications and their relationship to the political and digitization variables?
2. In light of the aforementioned variables, what are the most significant characteristics and effects of the political transition on the Iraqi media system?

2. Background

Perspectives have dominated research on the evolution of the Iraqi media system and its interactions with the political arena. Al-Rawi (2012) provided an overview of the Iraqi media and the significant milestones in the history of the various Iraqi media channels. His research centered on the history of Iraqi mass media and its development according to the nature of the media and the political climate of each era. Price et al. (2007) categorized the media development in Iraq into stages during prewar and postwar, with each stage characterized by aspects of evolving media policy and new media forms on the ground. They discovered at least two areas of concern: the development of a competitive broadcast market and the establishment of a domestic regulatory agency. The first entails establishing an administrative structure for licensing and content regulation, as well as the expansion of non-state entities. The second entails determining what kind of institutions should arise from the ashes of the former state monopoly. According to their research, it is erroneous to consider the Saddam era to have been completely devoid of voices, political differences, journalistic capacity and infrastructure, and creative sources for the post-war process. Al-Kaisy (2021) examines the dominant disinformation narratives in the discourse of the Iraqi media system. It includes an analysis of the statements, agents, motivations, and effects of the widespread dissemination of disinformation in Iraqi political media. Al-Deen (2006) investigates the changes and challenges confronting Iraqi media. The research covered three major epochs. Period I (prior to 1958) is concerned with the monarchy; Period II (1958–2003) is concerned with the media under strict discipline; and Period III (2003 to present) is concerned with the media following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s ruling. It concluded that the Iraqi media transitioned quickly and sharply from a dictatorial regime to free-for-all media and that the situation continues to evolve with various types of interventions. Because the situation in Iraq is still developing, it is impossible to predict what the future holds. Upon questioning the interviewees about the various types of political interventions, the responses were entirely negative and can be categorized as follows: The legislation and legal regulations that are interpreted and applied negatively against freedom of expression and have led to the arrest of journalists for flimsy reasons, the threats and intimidation practiced against journalists by pro-partisan interest groups, and the ideology of the institution and its affiliation with parties that prevent the publication of any criticism that contradicts its policy and agenda.

Most of these studies presented different visions of the media system in Iraq as a country in the process of democratic transition, with a focus on forms of political and partisan interference in the media environment. The emerging media systems in new democratic countries are characterized by state-media relations, political parallelism and new hybrid types of political communication. Political parallelism appears to be the norm rather than the exception in the majority of new democracies. It seems to become problematic when partisanship goes beyond advocating for a particular political issue and includes defamation and hatefulness of political adversaries (Volmer, 2008). As Hollifield and Jillson (2014) suggested, new democracies do not adhere to the same pattern of transformation and have varying degrees of success in consolidating the new democratic order. In this regard, they presented three main paths of democratization in new democracies that can be applied to the Iraqi situation: the transition from communist oligarchy as in Eastern Europe, the transition from military and dictatorship as in Latin America, and the transition from and one-party dictatorship: both in the context of statism and rapid modernization in East Asia and in the context of imperfect nation-building in and ethnic fragmentation in Africa.

Dictatorship or Military-ruled media, as in the last two pathways and their contexts, were censored as in any autocratic regime. Unlike communism, military dictatorships used censorship to suppress opposing views, while propaganda to re-educate the masses played a minor role, if any. Military dictatorships have no ideology beyond retaining power, which limits the media’s role. Fear and public
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quiescence secured power, but it was not popular support. This state-centered industrialization project included the media. Their influence was to validate and focus on promoting government actions (Voltmer, 2008).

3. Methodology

The analytical descriptive approach was used to investigate the Iraqi media system because it is a research methodology that helps in reaching an accurate and comprehensive understanding that leads to anticipating future policies and procedures (Bryman, 2019). Interviews are also conducted to gain insight into the journalists’ perceptions of the difficulties currently facing the Iraqi media landscape, political parallelism, the effects of political transformation, media pluralism, and the journalists’ perspectives on political and technological changes. Journalists’ perspectives on how digital and political transformations affect Iraqi media systems are highly essential because they play an active role in shaping the media landscape and its future. Participants must include both respondents and informants, and the nature of the response may be based on opinions or facts, respectively. The interviews included eight journalists from various Iraqi media outlets. Interviews are conducted both in person and via email during a period of a month from September 15 to October 15. Furthermore, as a continuing second method, the researcher conducted a review of relevant literature as well as official documents and recent media reports. The information gathered was analyzed thematically and was sufficient for a thorough investigation.

4. Results

4.1. Iraq’s Media Landscape: Historical and Political Course

Iraq is a multi-party system with a federal parliamentary representative government. It is a relatively small nation with a lengthy history dating back more than five thousand years. It is distinguished by the presence of a variety of racial, ethnic, sectarian, and national groups. Arabs, Kurds, Turkomans, Assyrians, and others make up the Iraqi population, while Islam (Sunni and Shi’a), Christianity, and others make up the religious makeup. Arabic is the country’s official language, while Kurdish is the primary language in Kurdish areas. Other languages, such as Turkish, Assyrian, and Armenian, exist there (Al-Deen, 2006).

The first official newspaper published in Baghdad marked the beginnings of the media in Iraq. In 1869, during the Ottoman rule of Iraq, the first issue of Al-Zawra’ was published. Soon after, in 1885, Al-Mosul, a weekly newspaper, began publication in Mosul. The Al-Basra weekly newspaper first appeared in Basra in 1889. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, these newspapers continued to publish until the British occupation in 1917. British occupants controlled the Iraqi press. They did this by acquiring public and private publishing houses. All Ottoman-era newspapers were closed, and new ones started (Al-Rawi, 2012). During this time, newspapers flourished and published anti-British content. Several political parties were founded then. These parties used the partisan press to express political and reform ideologies. Thus, the media were relatively independent (Salim, 2021). The Iraqi government conducted the first experimental radio broadcast on March 22, 1932. The television service began in 1954, during a manufactured and commercial goods exhibition in Baghdad when the British BAY Company erected a mobile television station (AREACORE, 2019).

The Iraqi monarchy was overthrown by a revolution in July 1958. It signified the beginning of republican rule in Iraq, which also marked the end of the British presence in the country. Numerous newspapers representing various political and racial groups of society were published. But when the Ba’ath party took power in 1968, the government seized control of the media. The party’s official newspaper, Al-Thawra, was established as its mouthpiece. Saddam Hussein ascended to the throne of Iraq in 1979, and he completely monopolized the media during his reign (1979–2003) (Al-Husseini 2008).

An Iraqi Internet-based television channel debuted in 1998. Nobody had equal access to Internet services. They were legally under the control of the Iraqi government at the time and subject to strict security measures. Furthermore, international sanctions imposed following Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in 1991 rendered the infrastructure unfit for this service. There were 45,000 subscribers out of a total population of 24 million Iraqis (Al-Rawi, 2012).

From 1969 to 2003, Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime imposed severe restrictions on the media. The Iraqi News Agency served as the government’s sole television news network. Five additional daily newspapers and four radio stations provided censored information to the Iraqi people. Every other form of media was forbidden. Any violation of the restrictions on the limited press was punishable by
imprisonment, torture, or death. Consequently, during these years, numerous journalists fled or went into hiding (Sadoon & Tariq, 2019). It can be noted that in the light of the political conditions that Iraq has faced throughout its modern history, the hegemony of successive Iraqi governments continues to impact the functioning and perspective of the media. Ethnic and religious diversity has become an important factor in determining the nature of the media system and its functions in society within the framework of the state’s interests as will be described in broader context below.

4.2. Iraqi Media Systems After 2003

Iraqi media reflects the state’s and key political actors’ narratives and is utilized for control and violence (Al-Kaisy, 2020). Post-invasion media-political relations was changed. The American Provisional Governor promptly liquidated all media organizations and staff. He issued Order No. 6 to replace the Ministry of Information with the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) in June 2003. The Coalition Provision Authority (CPA) wanted the IMN to be independent, honest, and professional like the BBC, but the IMN started to hold government positions because its president and board members were appointed by the government or governing party and based on a sectarian criterion (Salim, 2021). Thus, the CPA media pluralization effort ignored Iraqi sociopolitical context and history. Most Iraqis see the media as propaganda after 45 years of multifaceted dictatorship (1958–2003) (Al-Kaisy, 2021). Despite Iraq’s constitution providing free speech and expression, media is restricted, and laws overlap. Radio, TV, print, and satellite are government-controlled. Powerful players dominate online news. Government, political parties, and other powerful institutions spend significant sums to promote misinformation online and further their political objectives.

Iraq has established organizations to control the media, such as the Communications and Media Commission of Iraq (CMC), which was established in 2004. The CMC performs similar duties to the UK’s Office of Communication (OfCom) or the American Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The CMC is an organization created to serve as an independent regulatory body for Iraq’s communication sectors, which include radio, telecommunications, wireless internet, satellite and terrestrial television, and radio. The 2005 Constitution states that the CMC is governed by the Iraqi parliament (Al-Marashi, 2007). In this regard, some journalists and media practitioners interviewed pointed out some characteristics of the Iraqi media authorities. They alleged that the CMC lacked impartiality in its work due to the numerous closures of satellite channels and media outlets that were deemed to be in opposition to government officials or political parties. The CMC’s rules, such as the prohibition on “spreading sectarian, racial, and religious sedition information,” appear to be subject to a sort of “look the other way” attitude, according to Sa’ad Ibrahim of the Newsroom Social Network (personal communication, October 7, 2022).

In the field of press and media freedom in particular, the Iraqi legislator did not adopt strategic laws to control the pace of journalistic work, but rather relied on the principle of referral in information crimes, and on separate legal articles overlapping with the Iraqi Penal Code of 1969. Articles of the penal code from 1969 that criminalize libel, defamation, the disclosure of state secrets, and the dissemination of ‘false news’ are still in effect and continue to restrict the press. These provisions establish severe penalties for press-related offenses, including fines and up to seven years in prison for those who insult the legislature, the government, or public authorities (Al-Marashi, 2007). Additionally, according to the Director of the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory (JFO) Hadi Gallo Mareithe, the CMC issued ambiguous guidelines for how the media should cover national events as part of the war against the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014. “These guidelines are still active. Only positive news stories were to be disseminated, and stories that did not comply with the moral and patriotic order required for the war on terror were prohibited”.

This political influence on the media system in Iraq was accompanied by a widespread introduction of digital communication technology. In the years following 2003, technological advancements, increased access to the internet, and mobile telecommunications spread widely. According to Internet World Stats (n.d.), the number of internet users in Iraq increased from 7.1% in 2012 to 71.9% in 2022, with 30,029,700 Facebook users in January 2022. So, media professionals in Iraq are concerned about the increasing use of social media and digital news, which has an impact on their work. Smaller privately funded media are emphasizing feature-driven or narrative-based content, making them less likely to attract large or consistent audiences as social media dominates the news on the internet. Iraqi Journalists reported that their salaries were dependent on their social media presence, limiting their ability to concentrate on journalism (Al-Kaisy & Mcginn, 2019). It is the evolution of communication that necessitates a shift in the journalist’s perception of their role and daily work routine. The journalist’s role, which previously included gathering information, responding to feedback, and promoting their work, has undergone significant change (Safori, 2018).

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4.3. Parallelism and Pluralism in the Media System in Iraq

Conditions resulting from the political transition in Iraq imposed characteristics that continue to define the Iraqi media system. Several studies examined the democratic transition from a political communication perspective. Some tell how the media helped build solid democracies. Others describe democratization advances but also point to factors that hinder mature democratic practices in political communication. The third group of studies explores the persistence of old regime practices and cultural profiles, which perpetuate a corrupt or authoritarian new order or both. In all cases, a society’s democratization success or failure is measured by its ability to meet Western democratic standards, especially the fourth estate ideal (De Albuquerque, 2013).

The Iraqi media system can be viewed as a hybrid of the pre-transition and post-transition media systems. This scene depicted a negative pluralism due to a clear trend in the structure of the Iraqi media system toward political, sectarian, and ethnic blocs. When pluralism originates from such a scene, it has negative consequences. Iraq’s media pluralism permits sectarian and ethnic political factions to construct formidable print, radio, and television empires.

This “democratic” pluralism in a country afflicted by unilateralism in the media decision is still based on various political interventions in the media’s agenda, which necessitates addressing the concept of political parallelism, which refers to several phenomena amongst which are recognizable media-politics patterns in a given society; convergent agendas, worldviews, and organizational ties between certain media outlets and political parties, groups, or tendencies and a political communication system defined by a strong connection between media and political groups (De Albuquerque, 2013).

The media landscape in Iraq serves as a unique case study of a shift towards vitality and variety that has not been accompanied by genuine democratic practices or political freedom, nor has it been preceded by a comprehensive, all-encompassing overhaul in the economic, political, and social spheres. As noted by comparative media experts like Hallin and Mancini (2011), it embodies an irregular and distinctive model that deviates from the anticipated trajectory of media standardization resulting from the convergence towards democratic reforms, commercialization, and secularism. This conceptualization holds relevance within the Western context.

Parallelism was prevalent for much of the 20th century when institutionalized social groups shaped social, political, and cultural aspects, as well as the media system. Throughout most democratic corporatist media systems, there are parallels between newspapers and political parties in content, staff affiliations, and audience partisanship (van der Pas et al., 2017). Political parties generally rely on the media to increase positive publicity and decrease negative reputation among the public at large. Parties specifically need to impact the media on a variety of issues, including their party platform, reputation, and also how current political issues are presented (Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2013). Beyond the West, parallelism is rare. It makes sense only under two conditions: the competitive political system with clear political cleavages that can be reproduced by the media and the stable enough relationship between both the media and political agents to recognize general patterns. In all cases, political parallelism assumes a high degree of stability in political cleavages and media behavior, enough to identify consistent alignments. Also, media behavior is evaluated based on how much it reflects party lines rather than acting as independent political agents (De Albuquerque, 2013). However, the case in Iraq is different; it is observable that the media in Iraq behaves as a variable that is influenced by various forms of partisan and political interference. Almost every Iraqi newspaper or media channel is supported by a political or religious entity, resulting in an environment where trustworthiness is frequently in question (Telesto, 2023).

Studies on the nature of the media system and its practical and functional dimensions in countries have identified some trends in the nature of the media system and its practical and functional dimensions. Some of them are linked to potential obstacles to any democratic transition, while others adopt a hybrid of the old and new regimes, retaining the political influence of the old regimes (Voltmer, 2008). Some theories about the democratic transition process were based on categorizing political regimes and the nature of their interactions with the media (Becker, 2004; De Albuquerque, 2013). According to the data of the analytical description shown above, the current reality of the media system in Iraq exhibits a similar procedural nature in aspects related to the political interference of the state and parties on the flow of content since 2003. This perception was founded on causal relationships and correlations between, on the one hand, the dominance of political interests over the media and, on the other, the reality of journalistic work in an environment governed by conflicts and turmoil, which would limit freedoms and the transmission of information to the public in accordance with the standards of free media systems. A survey conducted by the Press Freedom Advocacy Association in Iraq (PFAA) in 2019 comprising 385 journalists about the main common challenges the Iraqi journalists face showed that (71%) answered that they and their institutions are subjected to political pressure to alter their broadcasted messages and content, (61%) suffered arrests and detention, (45%) of their institutions faced threats of closure, and (70%) faced coverage and duty obstruction (PFAA,
The results of another survey conducted by the Organization of Empowering Women in the Media revealed that 91 percent of Iraqi female journalists face difficulty in obtaining information, which hinders their work and constitutes a major challenge to the profession. The results of the questionnaire, in which 100 Iraqi Arab and Kurdish journalists working in written, visual and audio media and social media participated, showed that government agencies got the highest percentage in refraining from giving information, which is 51%, followed by security sources with 28%, and partisan authorities ranked third in refraining from giving information. Giving information to female journalists with 9%, followed by unofficial armed bodies with 8% (Iraqi Media House, 2020).

In a country with a parliamentary system of governance, the case of the Iraqi media demonstrates a unique form of parallelism that remains undeveloped and does not promote democratization. This phenomenon has evolved primarily through informal patterns and various streams of thought, grassroots movements, and alternative media outlets. The absence of strong and dynamic civil society groups and effective political parties brings together apparently contradictory dynamics such as the official and popular spheres, private and public ownership, authoritarianism and opposition.

In a personal interview on October 2, 2022, A. Samir, the deputy manager of an Iraqi Media House, confirmed that the majority of media channels are politicized and biased as a result of the constant political pressure exerted by the various political powers to manipulate media content in support of their own interests. He indicated that his institution, which is an independent Iraqi institution established by a group of Iraqi journalists, academics, and lawmakers, has monitored the media phenomena in Iraq this year and that the levels of violations and obstacles against media work in Iraq are not decreasing and no steps have been taken to eliminate them.

5. Conclusion

From the view of countries in democratic transition: The democratic transition that Iraq experienced after 2003 had a profound impact on the discourse of the media system, allowing for a broad margin of media freedom and political and media pluralism. It was a sudden shift, roughly equivalent to Hollifield's classification of dictatorial regimes or one-party systems in contexts similar to the transformation of regimes in African and Latin American countries (Hollifield & Jillson, 2014). This transition in these types of countries and political systems is characterized by negative characteristics and consequences that vary between them. It has been demonstrated that, despite the political transition, the media system discourse retains the characteristics of the old media system and its traditional relationship with the political system, which is evident in countries undergoing democratic transition. Different types of interventions and staff affiliations, as well as the emergence of political forces and groups attempting to impose their presence on the media discourse agenda, determine the political parallelism in the Iraqi media environment. This indicates the intensity of political parallelism, which is the norm in democratic transition countries (Voltmer, 2008).

In terms of technology and digital transformation, it was linked to the political transformation in Iraq after 2003, the emergence of hundreds of media channels and newspapers, the expansion of Internet service, and the increased use of social media, which serves as a major source for the dissemination and exchange of media materials among Iraqis. The media has tended to diversify in digital forms of public communication, relying on hybrid media that combines old and new forms of providing information and news. The media in Iraq benefited from the spread of new communication technology after 2003. They used social media platforms and mobile journalism apps to spread their media materials and reach the public, as well as the modernization of infrastructure for digital integration in their institutions. It can be concluded that the modern media system in Iraq is comprised of many significant strands: political conflict-related and interest-related actions regarding media policy, the significant growth of faction-related and parties broadcast and journalism networks after the war, the efforts by competing internal interests to influence the media environment, interventions by pressure groups and political parties throughout the media environment. Currently, distinctive ethno-sectarian and political groups or media personalities dominate the Iraqi media discourse landscape. Ethno-political groups in Iraq have access to print, radio, and television media, which are amassing influence in the media discourse. Iraqi Kurdish, Turkmen, Arab Sunni, and Arab Shi’a factions each have their own means of communicating with their respective ethno-religious constituencies in Iraq and abroad. This splitting along sectarian, ethnic, and ideological lines could be viewed as a reflection of the pluralism regarded as desirable in the majority of media landscapes. In spite of this, it is evident that Iraq’s politicians and sectarian groups tend to view the media as a tactical instrument, obligated to support the government, the parties, or the groups that sponsor them. Sectarian divisions are potentially troubling in a society where violence together across ethnic and religious lines is on the rise, and Iraq appears to be progressing rapidly in this direction. The media
closely associated with political organizations do not necessarily adhere to the principles of a free press espoused or adopted by their organizations.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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