



A fragmented landscape: barriers to independent media in Iraq

LSE Research Online URL for this paper: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100991/>

Version: Published Version

Monograph:

Al-Kaisy, Aida (2019) A fragmented landscape: barriers to independent media in Iraq. LSE Middle East Centre Report. Middle East Centre, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

Reuse

Items deposited in LSE Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the LSE Research Online record for the item.



Middle East
Centre



CONFLICT
RESEARCH
PROGRAMME

Research at LSE

A FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE

BARRIERS TO INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN IRAQ

AIDA AL-KAISY



About the Middle East Centre

The Middle East Centre builds on LSE's long engagement with the Middle East and provides a central hub for the wide range of research on the region carried out at LSE.

The Middle East Centre aims to enhance understanding and develop rigorous research on the societies, economies, politics and international relations of the region. The Centre promotes both specialised knowledge and public understanding of this crucial area and has outstanding strengths in interdisciplinary research and in regional expertise. As one of the world's leading social science institutions, LSE comprises departments covering all branches of the social sciences. The Middle East Centre harnesses this expertise to promote innovative research and training on the region.

Publications Editor

Jack McGinn

Cover Image

Cameras record an interview with workers at Mosul Zoo before the team is evacuated, 30 March 2017.

© Gabriel Romero via ZUMA Wire

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) or the Middle East Centre. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) and the LSE Middle East Centre should be credited, with the date of the publication. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this paper, the author(s) and/or the LSE Middle East Centre will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this paper.

The London School of Economics and Political Science holds the dual status of an exempt charity under Section 2 of the Charities Act 1993 (as a constituent part of the University of London), and a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act 1985 (Registration no. 70527).

A Fragmented Landscape: Barriers to Independent Media in Iraq

Aida Al-Kaisy

About the Author

Aida Al-Kaisy is a Media Reform Advisor and has worked extensively on media development projects across the MENA region. She is currently working on a number of projects, focusing on issues related to youth engagement in media, media in conflict and social cohesion. She is completing a PhD at SOAS, where she also teaches on a part-time basis, on the performance of the media in conflict, using Iraq as a case study. Aida is a programme consultant for the Ethical Journalism Network and a keen promoter of ethical values in journalistic practice and media governance.

Abstract

The Iraqi media landscape has been characterised by partisan ownership, mainly based on political and religious affiliations. Comparative ethnographic research has revealed highly irregular practices and the struggles of Iraqi journalists to adhere to the norms of professionalism, suggesting that these practices are contributing to and fuelling the ongoing context of conflict and violence in Iraq. Within this challenging environment, there have been some attempts to develop media platforms that carve out spaces which can contribute to better journalism and, ultimately, better local and national governance. This report explores, in the context of this environment, the challenges that these platforms face. It examines a number of barriers to the development of independent media in Iraq, providing some recommendations as to how these obstacles might be tackled. Based on interviews with key media and political stakeholders in early 2019, it provides some insight into the complex interaction between political and social conditions, structure and agency in Iraq.

About the Conflict Research Programme



The Conflict Research Programme (CRP) is a three-year programme designed to address the drivers and dynamics of violent conflict in the Middle East and Africa, and to inform the measures being used to tackle armed conflict and its impacts. The programme focuses on Iraq, Syria, DRC, Somalia and South Sudan, as well as the wider Horn of Africa/Red Sea and Middle East regions.

The Middle East Centre is leading the research on drivers of conflict in Iraq and the wider Middle East. Our partners in Iraq are the Institute of Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, and Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, Baghdad.

For more information about the Centre's work on the CRP, please contact Sandra Sfeir (s.sfeir@lse.ac.uk).



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

Executive Summary and Recommendations

This policy report seeks to unravel the challenges faced by, and barriers to, independent media in Iraq. Based on key stakeholder interviews and ongoing work with media outlets in Iraq, it demonstrates that a number of fundamental structural challenges to the growth of independent media on a global level, combined with a very fragile post-conflict context and a lack of credibility on the part of Iraqi media, are stifling the landscape and ability of independent media to thrive. The historical context of the country's media, and the particular journalistic practice that became endemic under the Ba'athist regime, is still defining and guiding the development of the media landscape and there remains a lack of will at a political level to address the situation. Public institutions continually fail to provide the necessary grounds from which to build a healthy media environment.

Within the scope of these barriers to independent media in Iraq, a number of recommendations are outlined for consideration:

1. Further legislative work and reform is imperative in order to create enabling circumstances within which independent media can perform. A greater focus is needed on enabling more independent media regulation as well as encouraging self-regulatory practice among media professionals and journalists, simplifying access to information processes, protection of sources, and transparency of media ownership and financing.
2. While the last few years have seen a number of projects aimed at transforming news media, the teaching of journalism has been largely disregarded, with few projects focusing on improving the quality of media studies programmes. If journalism is to play an important role in Iraq, aiding in the development of democratic practice, more support needs to be given to further and higher education institutions. Greater consideration also needs to be given to the lack of employment opportunities for media students. The absence of teaching on new media, a shortcoming which is exacerbated by the conservative nature of many university faculties, reflects the need to modify curricula to address the rapid social transformation seen by the industry.
3. Greater provision for innovative content and business models will create an ecosystem in which independent media could grow. Business models which focus on local and community media types are leading the way in some Global South countries. Content-sharing is also slowly becoming recognised amongst independent media as a means of developing a larger repository of diverse and distinct output. Content-sharing can provide opportunities to grow audience share and break down echo chambers and confirmation bias in Iraq's polarised media landscape.
4. Iraqi media stakeholders need to recognise that their plight is not unique; that many of the challenges they face are common in the Global South. If the Iraqi media begin to take part in existing international initiatives to develop new business models for sustainable media, and define the role of journalism in a rapidly transformative age, they can benefit from a greater agency in their profession. Working in close partnership with international networks and organisations would be the first step to ensuring deeper engagement with the global media and communities concerned with freedom of expression across the world.

Scope and Objectives of the Research

The importance of independent and diverse media is universally regarded as a key component of a democratic society. The ideal-type media's role is to ensure a diverse and critical mix of news and information, free from bias or interference.¹ This in turn creates a better-informed public. It is viewed as part of the democratic state's responsibility to enable an environment where independent media of trusted and varied sources can compete in terms of quality and coverage. Successful media governance and organisations are considered key stimuli for democratic participation. This paper takes its definition of independent media to denote any public service, private or community media that 'works largely in the public interest and is reasonably free of influence from government, political, commercial, factional or other interests.'²

This paper was borne out of a notion of understanding 'civicness' in the media and an attempt to map examples of media platforms which are contributing to better governance in Iraq.³ It had hoped to focus on the positive in an arena defined by the negative, exploring opportunities where Iraqis were carving out spaces that could contribute to better journalism and, ultimately, better local and national governance. A normative concept of civic media in Iraq was defined using the following criteria which were selected based upon the notion of public interest and the function of the media in supporting the public to fully participate in political processes.⁴

- Exposing corruption
- Focusing on diversity and giving voice to unheard groups
- Providing success stories in the vein of positive journalism or solutions journalism
- Impacting on public opinion
- Remaining financially independent
- Promoting the public interest rather than the 'national interest'
- Adhering to ethical journalistic practice/professional norms

Following a fieldtrip to Iraq and a series of interviews with journalists, editors and media owners, it became evident that this concept of civic media was too normative and, in fact, highly problematic in this context. Interviews, and in some cases participant observation,

¹ For further information, see Nick Couldry, Mirca Madianou and Amit Pinchevski, eds, *Ethics of Media* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

² James Deane, 'The role of the independent media in curbing corruption in fragile settings', Policy Briefing 16, *BBC Media Action* (September 2016). Available at: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/curbing-corruption-in-fragile-settings-report.pdf>

³ The LSE Conflict Research Programme aims to use the concept of civicness to examine the constitution of humane forms of public authority in extreme circumstance. Further information available at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/conflict-and-civil-society/conflict-research-programme/about-us>

⁴ The Ethical Journalism Network defines and lays out indicators for the notion of public interest in journalism, available at: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/the-public-interest>

demonstrated that even in the case where media might be developing content that deals with key social and political issues in an accurate, fair and transparent way, there remained a number of significant impediments to independence and civicism. These serve to both inhibit the development of an independent media scene in Iraq and impact on the delivery of sustainable independent media content. This research was therefore repositioned in order to explore the barriers to the development of Iraq's independent media.

Using three key paradigms to understand the media – political economy, sociology of news and Bourdieu's concepts of doxa and habitus – this paper will now seek to address the ongoing challenges that the Iraqi media is facing and unravel the key factors that are contributing to its failure to provide new and improved spaces for debate. These paradigms formed the basis of interview questions and served to provide structure and focus for the research analysis. Political economy of the media allows for a more macro-level analysis of the landscape by looking at the structural constituents of power in the media industry, from funding to regulation to political control, as well as an understanding of the impact of the media on political engagement by the public.⁵ A more 'critical approach' to political economy will allow a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed through other modes of power.⁶ Introducing sociological approaches to understanding the media provides a greater understanding of newsroom processes and the agency of the journalists involved in these processes⁷ while Bourdieu's theories of doxa and habitus allow for a deeper engagement with the nature of journalistic practice and the conditions from which journalists emerge and within which they are operating.⁸ This triangulation of approaches will provide a deeper understanding of the challenges for independent media and journalistic practice in Iraq.

⁵ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, 'Manufacturing consent: A propaganda model', *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1988); Francesco Sobbrino, 'The political economy of news media: Theory, evidence and open issues', in Francesco Forte, Ram Mudambi and Pietro Maria Navarra, eds, *A Handbook of Alternative Theories of Public Economics* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2014), p. 278; Jonathan Hardy, *Critical Political Economy of the Media: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

⁶ Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, 'Culture, communications and political economy', *Mass Media and Society* 3 (2000), pp. 70–92.

⁷ Michael Schudson, 'The sociology of news production', *Media, Culture & Society* 11.3 (1989), pp. 263–82; Michael L. Tushman and Ralph Katz, 'External communication and project performance: An investigation into the role of gatekeepers', *Management Science* 26.11 (1980), pp. 1071–85.

⁸ P. Bourdieu and L. J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); P. Bourdieu, 'The political field, the social science field, and the journalistic field' in R. Benson & E. Neveu, eds, *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 29–47.

Method

This research is guided by fieldwork that took place in Iraq in January and February 2019. This comprised a number of structured and semi-structured interviews with previously identified news media stakeholders. The focus was on journalists and media practitioners whose journalistic output was predominantly produced for non-mainstream media, in order to understand what role new voices and smaller platforms are playing in the information sphere in Iraq. Interviews with the proprietors and editors of private media platforms which were not directly linked to political parties or partisan financing also took place. Three local media outlets were also interviewed as well as six journalists who were producing investigative work aiming to expose high level corruption and tackle issues of post-conflict integration and reconciliation. In some cases, participant observation in newsrooms in Baghdad during this fieldwork period also informed the analysis. A focus group was also conducted at Baghdad University Media School with undergraduate and postgraduate media students.

This paper draws upon a number of studies and conceptual frameworks used to understand independent media, particularly in conflict and post-conflict countries.⁹ The research also draws upon the researcher's previous experience of working with Iraqi media and on media development projects in Iraq as well as an understanding of the types of content which resonate with audiences in Iraq, based on previous research and analysis.

The Global Challenges to the Information Sphere

This research took place at a time when the media is facing a crisis of purpose on a global scale and the Iraqi media is also plagued by issues that are resonating across the industry as a whole. There have been multiple shifts in the dynamics of the information sphere in the last few years. Advances in technology, increased access to the internet and mobile telecoms have seen the rudiments of journalism and the media challenged and transformed. Who and what makes journalism is being questioned with new spaces for dialogue and content emerging with increasing regularity. On the one hand, this has enhanced access to information, with an increase in diversity and communication made available to the public. On the other hand, the growth of online media has also been one of the chief instigators of disinformation, misinformation and hate speech. With technology and the increased influence of digital media on journalism and the industry's business models, questions of media financing and the growth of media capture as a phenomenon are at the fore.¹⁰ A recent report by the Reuters Institute for Journalism recognised the growing

⁹ Most notably, these are: James Putzel and Joost Van der Zwan, 'Why templates for media development do not work in crisis states: Defining and understanding media development strategies in post-war and crisis states', (2006); Deane, 'The role of the independent media in curbing corruption in fragile settings'.

¹⁰ 'Media capture' refers to surreptitious forms of control over the media that impact upon conditions for democracy, pluralism and media freedom. See Anya Schiffrin, ed., *In the Service of Power: Media Capture and the Threat to Democracy* (Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance, 2017).

susceptibility of the media to political and commercial influence globally as funding for it, and for the news in particular, becomes less secure.¹¹ The financial sustainability of independent media and news platforms is also under severe threat, with the future of journalism unclear as traditional forms of independent revenue in the form of advertising and circulation become fluid.¹²

At the same time, the mainstream media is viewed by many identity groups to have failed by denying them spaces for self-expression and interaction. Media, often weakened by problems of restructuring of the media market and political pressures, have also been failing to provide a clear and accurate narrative to counteract the growth of widespread fake news and disinformation campaigns and a surge in online hate speech, both of which threaten the principles of democratic society and pluralism. In a global information environment, these add further to the problems of media and journalism in the Global South, particularly where political, economic and social crises are present. The 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer shows media to be ‘the least trusted institution in the world’. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) recently established the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI) in response to the concern that a decline in trust in journalism is ultimately leading to a decline in safety and security for journalists.¹³ The JTI aims to support the ability of media platforms to provide ‘transparency, verification and correction methods’ as well as ‘editorial independence and compliance’.¹⁴

This decline in trust has been further exacerbated by the rise of digital and social media in particular. Social media giants have failed to address the crisis of falling public trust and are seemingly reluctant to recognise and give support to the need for reliable and ethical information streams. They have been unsuccessful in filling the gaps left by news providers and journalists. Recent developments have exposed key players such as Facebook and its contemporaries as unethical and prone to corrupt practices, putting their users and the public at risk. While this should have resulted in growing awareness of the importance of professional journalism, it has actually meant that the public are turning to alternative sources of information which are free and delivered by platform aggregators such as Google.

¹¹ Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Meera Selva, ‘More Important, But Less Robust? Five Things Everybody Needs to know about the Future of Journalism’, Reuters Institute of Journalism (2019). Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-01/Nielsen_and_Selva_FINAL_o.pdf

¹² The UK’s Cairncross Review report is available online at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf

¹³ The RSF annual barometer to measure media freedoms on a country by country basis has seen an increase in violence and fear amongst journalists in 2019 and the number of countries where the media work freely on the decline once again. Further information available at: <https://rsf.org/en/2019-world-press-freedom-index-cycle-fear>

¹⁴ Further information on the JTI is available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/more-100-media-outlets-and-organizations-are-backing-journalism-trust-initiative>

The Iraqi Media Landscape: Historic and Current

The relationship between media and governance in Iraq has always been ambiguous. In a country where state interest has always been the dominant political force, the public information sphere has been owned or, at best, defined by the state and its associates. In post-colonial Iraq, an initial diversity and non-state ownership of the media was curtailed by overt external control which reduced the opportunity for a democratic public sphere to exist. Mainstream media ownership was almost entirely controlled by the government or party of the time. Newspapers existed as propaganda vehicles for their proprietors: *Al Qadisya* for the military, *Al Thawra* for the Ba'ath party and *El Taakhi* for the Kurdish Democratic Party. By the late 1970s, and with a further clampdown on the media by the Ba'athist regime under Saddam Hussain, a landscape where party propaganda dominated and oppositional voices were silenced was established. Journalism was neither challenging the state's authority and position nor providing citizens with the information they needed to participate in political processes. Iraqi audiences continued to consume news and content that was manipulated and controlled by the Ba'athist regime.

After the 2003 Iraq war and the Ba'athist regime's fall, a project to support the growth of a more diverse and pluralistic media landscape was implemented by the Coalition Provision Authority (CPA). CPA orders 65 and 66 created a public service broadcaster, the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) and independent media regulator, the Communications and Media Commission (CMC). A lack of consideration of historical and political context, as well as very little consultation with media development experts, contributed to the creation of a landscape which allowed partisan media financed by political parties and businessmen to flourish.¹⁵ Private broadcast media in particular was financed by individuals and, although attempts to strengthen public media institutions such as the public broadcaster took place, public media institutions and related ministries remained highly politicised and were guided by the *muhhasasa* system, remaining so to this day.¹⁶ The CPA's focus on facilitating private ownership in the media, in an attempt to support diversity, was usurped by their lack of concern for proper and nuanced regulation of the media that would support Iraq's diverse and minority groups as well as provide a solid platform from which political plurality can build. It is also worth noting that, at this point in time, donor engagement in Iraq grew in significance and a number of donor-funded projects to strengthen democratic values and independent media were implemented.

The sectarian conflict that became more heightened after 2005 saw conditions become much harsher for the media. Distribution of newspapers became impossible in certain areas, with media associated with the dominant Shi'a narrative banned from Sunni districts and vice versa. This also resulted in broadcast media only having access to interviews in affiliated areas, meaning audiences had little access to diverse views and

¹⁵ Abir Awad and Tim Eaton, 'The media of Iraq ten years on', *The Problems, the Progress* (2013). Available at: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/bbc_media_action_media_iraq_ten_years_on.pdf

¹⁶ The *muhhasasa* system is Iraq's political quota system based on ethno-sectarian apportionment of ministries and public institutions.

opinions. *Al Sharqiya* could only go to Adhamiya to report the news; *Al Iraqiya* to Karada, for example. Many journalists were not by-lined for fears over safety and reprisal. Many media operations relocated from Baghdad to Erbil and it was at this point that political parties began to interfere more directly in the media and offer financing.¹⁷

Today, despite a number of attempts to develop an independent public sphere, the Iraqi media landscape reflects some of the key issues and challenges that plague the political landscape. Corruption, politicisation and a growing lack of trust in official institutions afflict the media industry across the board.¹⁸ The media remain subject to growing constraints on media freedoms, in particular in relation to exposing corruption, and the threat from paramilitary actors is omnipresent.¹⁹ It becomes challenging therefore for the media to fully contribute to better governance, to foster an environment receptive to plurality of opinion or, indeed, to challenge power and authority in Iraq. The majority of attempts at developing financially and editorially independent media institutions have floundered, as the sources of funding remain linked to political, commercial or donor agendas. How effective these platforms can be in mediating between public officials and audiences or contributing to democratic transition and a post-conflict society remains unclear.

Media in a Fragile Post-Conflict Context

A survey conducted by BBC Media Action in May 2018 looked at media consumption habits in four provinces in Iraq: Baghdad, Anbar, Ninewa and Salahuddin. Its key findings are that social media is widely popular in Iraq, with 44 percent claiming they access the internet on either their computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone daily. Television is still, however, the most consumed media platform with 56 percent saying that television is their main medium for breaking news. The survey also analysed levels of trust in the media, focusing in the main on pan-Arab channels such as *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya*, national and local television and radio broadcasters as well as the Facebook pages of government and key institutions. It revealed declining trust in channels and pages associated with the ethno-sectarian narratives that were widely prevalent between 2005–14.²⁰ The negative impact of political ownership of the mainstream media and the subsequent ethno-sectarianisation of media outputs on levels of public trust in the media in Iraq is readily apparent.

The increased consumption of social media and digital news in Iraq is a cause of concern amongst media professionals in Iraq and is impacting upon their professional capacity. For economic reasons, websites are becoming the main platforms of news for many

¹⁷ Meetings Baghdad January and February 2019.

¹⁸ See Transparency International's definition of corruption and Corruption Index, available at: <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>

¹⁹ For further information regarding attacks on journalists and specific case studies, see the websites of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights and Committee to Protect Journalists online at: <https://www.gc4hr.org/country/index/country/8> and <https://cpj.org/mideast/iraq/>

²⁰ 'Iraq media consumption survey report', *BBC Media Action*, May 2018.

organisations but they struggle to compete with platform and technology giants. As social media continues to play a leading role in providing news, smaller privately funded media are focusing on more feature-led or story-based content, making them less likely to gain large or regular audiences. Journalists talked of salaries being commensurate with social media presence, forcing them to develop social media profiles and content, meaning they are less able to focus on journalism. Media platforms also discussed using Facebook as a recruitment tool for potential journalists.²¹ With a lack of proper training, this often results in journalism which is not fact-based, as new recruits are operating with little professional background or skills.

Global trends are clearly influencing the media landscape in Iraq and impacting on the ability of independent media to perform effectively. They are further complicated by the fact that Iraq is a fragile post-conflict state continuing to be plagued by both economic and political instability.²² The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that ‘a fragile region or state has weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society.’²³ Corruption is endemic in Iraq, further emboldened by networks of power based on lineage, nepotism and identity politics. This has led to increased radicalisation, both politically and at a grassroots level, as well as public disenfranchisement from institutions and authority. Media institutions are subject to these similar conditions of corruption and as such continue to be vulnerable to media capture and political co-option by a myriad of political and commercial actors. Media co-option by political and larger corporate actors further squeezes smaller media outlets, with the landscape increasingly dominated by a limited number of powerful players. Revenue from advertising and commercial projects are almost absent with the majority of funding coming from mobile operators, regulated by the CMC, a constitutional body subject to the machinations of the muhasasa system, or from government-controlled public advertising. These revenue sources are used to control opposition and anti-state narratives, a practice particularly prevalent under the former government of Nouri Al Maliki.²⁴ Within this environment, there remains little inherent desire amongst the establishment to support independence or professionalisation in journalism for fear that their corrupt practices might be uncovered and exposed. Without any political will for the reform of media systems, there is very little chance for meaningful and lasting change or the development of alternative independent media platforms. Limited funding opportunities means that costlier forms of journalism, such as investigative reporting, are less likely to be supported.

²¹ Meetings in Baghdad, January and February 2019.

²² Further information is available on Iraq from the Fragile States Index, at: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>; see also Renad Mansour, ‘Iraq’s 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction Between Reform and the Status Quo’, LSE Conflict Research Programme (2019). Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100099/1/Mansour_Iraq_s_2018_government_formation_2019.pdf

²³ OECD, ‘Fragile States 2013: Resource Flows and Trends in a Shifting World’, OECD Development Co-operation Directorate (DCD) International Network on Conflict and Fragility (2012). Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/development/resourceflowstofragilestates.htm>

²⁴ Meetings in Baghdad, January and February 2019.

As with the majority of fragile post-conflict states, the legal and regulatory frameworks that guide the media in Iraq currently offer very little in the way of supporting independent media.²⁵ Media regulation and licensing has unsuccessfully taken into account spectrum and broadcasting allocations according to representation and the needs of Iraq's many minority groups and sectors, fuelling a landscape of partisan media ownership. This is something that needs to be redressed. In the United Kingdom, for example, OFCOM's licensing system has been developed to consider the wider social benefits of each license application, incentivising applicants either financially or with higher value broadcasting spectrum based on their contribution to a representative and diverse media ecology. There are also very little financial or spectrum concessions or government subsidies made available in order to encourage the growth of a diverse independent media landscape.

Underpinning this landscape lies a weak economy with little opportunity for economic growth or business development. As stated previously, the very limited external income for the media comes from advertising revenue with the remainder derived from political and government subsidies and, increasingly, international donors.²⁶ Issues with over-reliance on donor funding for independent media range from a lack of sustainability and long-term security for media platforms to over-adherence to donor agendas. Media platforms in Iraq that receive funding from international donors are often obliged to focus their efforts on providing training and capacity building or monitoring media and human rights violations rather than content creation and production.²⁷

Who are the Journalists?

As a result of these historical and structural conditions of the media, journalism is perceived as a less than desirable profession in Iraq. Low wages, a lack of long-term security and a lingering distrust of journalism which stems from political control of the media mean that younger generations are less inclined towards pursuing a career in the media. Saba Bebawi, references the 'culture of journalism' in the MENA region and the need to define 'professional identities' which reflect the media context.²⁸ In Iraq, this culture manifests itself with a small elite of journalists who have been attempting to develop independent platforms and spaces for free expression for nearly twenty years. Many of the members of this network have learned their skills through donor-funded projects and training and they continue to dominate the 'alternative' media scene, meaning new and diverse young voices remain unheard.

The fragile status of civil society and academia is also having a negative effect on the media industry's ability to create and support an environment which can deliver independent programming and content. Media schools and colleges are operating in isolation from the

²⁵ Deane, 'The role of the independent media in curbing corruption in fragile settings'.

²⁶ Mary Meyers and Linet Angaya Juma, 'Defending Independent Media: A Comprehensive Analysis of Aid Flows', Centre for International Media Assistance (CIMA) (June 2018). Available at: https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/CIMA-AidData-Report_web_15oppi_rev.pdf

²⁷ Meetings in Baghdad, January and February 2019.

²⁸ Saba Bebawi, *Investigative Journalism in the Arab World: Issues and Challenges* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

media industry itself and courses aimed at developing journalism skills and professionalism are rarely underpinned by real world expertise. This rift between academia and journalism is nothing unique, but in Iraq it is exasperated by an academic curriculum that has not been updated since the 1980s and limited opportunity for internships and on-the-job training. Media and journalism modules are often combined with public affairs and public relations training. This lack of coordination between the academic and practitioner worlds also means that curriculum is lacking other industry-relevant skills such as financial and business management. Iraq's archaic education system, which sees students placed in colleges according to the grades they achieve, places media schools and colleges very low down the pecking order. The higher education system in Iraq is one that is based on a combination of merit and nepotism. Rather than choosing a preferred subject of study before attending university, students are allocated places on specific courses according to their overall mark when they graduate from secondary school. Those with the highest grades study medicine and law, followed by engineering and the sciences, with languages and media languishing behind. To enter media college or study media at university requires fairly average grades of between 70 and 80 percent. It is rare that a person achieving grades above 80 percent will actually study media at university. There are, however, also a limited number of places on courses. It is not unknown for those without government or senior connections to lose their opportunity for a place on a course so that a diplomat or senior government official's son or daughter can take it. Corruption and nepotism remain rife in the allocation of university places. Media practitioners complained about the quality of education that young media students are receiving, claiming that many fresh graduates lack the basic writing skills required for journalism.²⁹

As a result, the skills and will required to develop strong independent media platforms in Iraq do not currently exist on a wide scale. Basic professional principles of accuracy, transparency and impartiality are compromised by a lack of understanding of what it means to be a journalist and provide content that will ultimately serve the public interest.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, this paper argues that the lack of political will combined with the failure of state-building processes to develop the frameworks and institutions to support independent media is maintaining a media landscape that reflects the key political challenges of Iraq. The politics of successive Iraqi governments continues to affect the functioning and the perception of the media, leaving them unable to provide content that can support democratic and transparent political processes. Attempts at media reform or support for sustainable, relevant, independent media platforms must take into account the wider context of Iraq and its political structures as well as the existing conditions of corruption and fragility. They also require much deeper consultation with local media stakeholders combined with a greater coordination with global initiatives to support the development of independent media.

²⁹ Meetings Baghdad, January and February 2019.



Middle East Centre
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London, WC2A 2AE

 [@LSEMiddleEast](#)

 [@lsemiddleeastcentre](#)

 [lse.middleeast](#)

 [lse.ac.uk/mec](#)