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Media, War & Conflict

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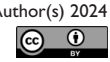

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# A cog in a wheel? Journalism under pressure during coups d'état in Burkina Faso

**Marie Fierens**
Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

**Emma Heywood**
The University of Sheffield, UK

**Lassané Yaméogo**
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et Technologique(CNRST), Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

## Abstract

This article explores how the (attempted) coups and popular uprising that occurred in Burkina Faso between October 2014 and January 2022 have impacted the professional boundaries of journalism. These events are considered crucial in understanding the complex and ongoing interactions between political actors and the media, and contribute to a better understanding of the broader reality of journalism's boundary-making process across Africa. Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted with journalists, editors and journalism teachers in Ouagadougou in 2022, this article investigates the roles that private and public media journalists aimed to play in these extreme conditions and how their reactions reflect the constantly evolving nature of the journalistic profession.

## Keywords

Burkina Faso, coups d'état, journalism, politics, private and public media, professional boundaries

## Introduction: Journalism – a context-dependent profession

The situation across West and Central Africa has recently been marked by increasing political tensions, leading to a succession of coups since 2019 in Sudan (2019 and 2021),

**Corresponding author:**
Emma Heywood, The University of Sheffield, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.
Email: e.heywood@sheffield.ac.uk

Mali (2020 and 2021), Chad (2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (twice in 2022), Niger (2023) and Gabon (2023). Journalists and their media find themselves, willingly or not, at the heart of coups d'état. Their willingness to support or oppose the putschists, or even their desire to remain 'neutral', make them part of the power shift and shows, if needed, that journalists do not operate in isolation. Coups d'état, which can be defined as 'illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive' (Powell and Thyne, 2011: 252), are therefore key moments that force journalists to consider their perceptions of their own profession, the extent to which they are prepared to defend it, and how it is, or is not, connected to politics. Coups also serve as key events which make the shifting dynamics between media and political spheres visible.

This article focuses on how the (attempted) coups d'état and the popular uprising that occurred between October 2014 and January 2022 in Burkina Faso contributed to the ongoing process of (re)shaping journalistic professional boundaries. As elsewhere (Fierens 2016, 2017, 2021), politics and media in Burkina Faso have forged transient and evolving links since the colonial era. This reality has given rise to different ways of considering and practising journalism. The 2014–2022 political upheaval in Burkina Faso has offered us a powerful case study for analysing the interactions and dynamics at play between journalists and political actors that have shaped the values and practices of Burkinabè journalists. We consider the results of these interactions as part of the process of redefining journalistic boundaries. Burkina Faso is a particularly relevant example here as, since 2014, it has experienced one popular uprising (2014), one attempted coup (2015) and two effective coups d'état (2022). By examining the above-mentioned events in Burkina Faso, we offer a way to consider the media realities of other African countries, especially those that have faced recent political turmoil. Amid the ongoing unrest in West and Central Africa, this article is significant as it illustrates how struggles within political spheres go hand in hand with struggles within journalism spheres, but that these struggles always assume different forms, resulting in different visions and practices regarding journalism as a profession.

The article therefore questions how extreme political contexts (a) challenge journalists' professional ideals and practices, (b) redefine the boundaries of the profession, and (c) constitute key moments for observing the boundary-making process of journalism. We first provide an overview of the historical connections between media and politics, then we review the existing literature and discuss the methodology. In the results section, we examine journalists' professional visions and the professional practices that these visions prompted during the extremes of the 2014 popular uprising, the 2015 attempted coup and the 2022 coup d'état. The discussion section and conclusion argue that political changes lead to media value and practice changes, and vice versa, highlighting the importance of analysing the myriad of context-dependent connections between the various actors to understand the media's roles and practices, and the issue of journalistic autonomy in the face of political and social power.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with Burkinabè media actors who witnessed the above-mentioned major political events, the article uses an interactionist approach (Strauss, 1992) to place the actions of journalists within the specific context in which they operate. It examines the profession from a media system perspective, stating that

'journalists are involved in networks of interdependencies that influence in one way or another their way of working, and therefore the information they produce' (Chupin and Nollet, 2006: 16). Indeed, as one editor-in-chief stated, 'journalists are not mere robots, reporting, but express their own ideas, and are influenced by others – a cog in a wheel.' The term 'interdependence' (Elias, 1991) is used in preference to 'dependence' because relationships between the journalistic and political spheres are rarely unidirectional but impact each other. In other words, this article does not consider journalism as the fourth estate per se but rather looks at the alleged power of journalists in relational terms. Echoing this approach, a Burkinabè private television journalist explained that 'media already constitute a power, now it is in the test of the balance of power and realities that things will take shape' (private 1).[1] The historical and political context in which journalists operate is therefore of utmost importance here. Each of the events discussed below is driven by unique dynamics that shaped the journalists' attitudes and roles.

## Context: Looking at the past to understand the present

Since French colonization, profound political changes have systematically led to a reconfiguration of Burkinabè journalistic professional roles and practices. They have shaped the strata of influence which, superimposed today, give shape to the profession as it stands. However, there is one constant. As one private media journalist explained, 'the media have always been privileged by those in power so that they either have a channel for their information or so that they have a monopoly and control of communication and information' (private 1). Such 'complicated relationships' have continuously challenged the normative independence of journalists and built 'an autonomy . . . always under threat' (Champagne, 1995: 217).

Within a context of multiple attempts to establish a one-party rule system following independence in 1960, Burkinabè media, particularly television and radio, were used as a tool to consolidate government power and silence dissenting voices (Kabeya, 1987). In 1966, 1980, 1982 and 1983, when successive governments were overthrown by coups d'état, public radio and television, which could be labelled 'state media', continued to be used as political tools. In April 1984, Thomas Sankara's revolution launched the daily [newspaper] Sidwaya (still associated with government views), tasking it with the sole mission of spreading revolutionary ideology and hunting down reactionaries (Yaméogo, 2016).

By the early 1990s, multipartyism brought a radical change in the political and media landscape and, for nearly 30 years, private and public service media functioned alongside each other in Burkina Faso, under Compaoré's semi-liberal-authoritarian leadership (1987–2014) (Hilgers and Mazzocchetti, 2010). The new political configuration led to the easing of authoritarianism (Loada, 2010) and introduced political and media pluralism. Political parties could officially exist and participate in public debate. Likewise, private media (print, radio and television) witnessed a media boom with the creation of newspaper titles, FM radio stations and, to a lesser extent, television channels and more recently a rapid growth in social media use. Civil society formed mixed relations with the media, especially state media, which it considered to be a government tool, regardless of who was in power. Since 1998, following the murder of journalist Norbert Zongo,

public media journalists have been subject to jibes, attempted lynchings and death threats from citizens at almost all demonstrations against political governance, and have been accused of being an accessory to political power (Yaméogo, 2022). Replicating the era of media monolithism under the party states and emergency states of the 1960–1990 period, Burkina Faso's publicly-funded media remained 'a natural extension of state power' (Le Champion et al., 2000: 18). Unlike the public media, most private media sought to be a counter-power, denouncing abuses and injustices. Perceived by audiences as professional and as comrades during pro- or anti-coup demonstrations, they helped inform the public in 2013 about President Compaoré's attempts to amend Article 37 of the Constitution to allow him to extend his 27 years in office. This contributed to the fall of Compaoré's regime. The private media also helped foil the 2015 coup attempt. In contrast, public media were controlled by coup leaders who were aware of the private media's mobilizing capacity, and vandalized and ransacked many of them as a result.

While public and private media currently coexist, public media in Burkina Faso, as in many other African countries, still tends to mean 'state' media and Radio Télévision du Burkina Faso (RTB) and the daily Sidwaya, which focus essentially on government actions, are considered by public opinion to be under government control (Balima and Frère 2003; Tozzo, 2005). Radio is the most important medium, followed by television and the press. Social media are also popular, but access remains limited (ARCEP, 2022) due to insecurity, poverty and poor connectivity.

Since 2015, the country's deteriorating security situation has impacted both politics and the media (Afriyie, 2019; Amoah et al., 2017; Idaewor, 2020). At least two community radio stations have been ransacked throughout the Sahel, forcing many to close. In regions with high insecurity, 'journalism under siege' is apparent with journalists and presenters being forced to change jobs or resign (Yaméogo, 2018a) or threatened with kidnap or murder by armed terrorist groups. Between 2014 and 2022, and in this unstable political context, the country experienced a popular uprising, an attempted putsch, and coups d'état. Each time, Burkinabè journalists played a key role and, whether they were supporting or opposing the coup, assumed a form of media power. As one private broadcast journalist explained: 'Those who tend to *lose* power and those who tend to *take* power place the media at the centre of their concerns' (private 16,).

## Literature review: Media, politics and professional boundaries

Political changes have traumatized the African continent over recent decades, and coups, in particular, have foregrounded the socio-political landscape and the media as actors that cannot be ignored (Capitant and Frère, 2011). Bleck and Michelitch (2017), for example, discuss the effects of rebel-controlled radio exposure on populations following Mali's coup in 2012. Media's overall role in conflicts and its links with politics have been studied broadly (e.g. Meyer et al., 2018), in francophone Africa (see, e.g., Frère 2016, 2022) and as part of country-specific research, such as the DRC (N'sana, 2021) and Burundi (Fierens and Rovetta, 2022). Scholars have also analysed popular reactions in Burkina Faso to the 2015 terrorist attacks (Kibora, 2019) and restrictions on freedom of

expression about terrorism on social networks since 2015 (Dakuyo, 2023). Yet there is little, if any, research on the media's role since Burkina's 2015 coup (Ouédraogo, 2022; Heywood, 2022a, 2022b, Heywood et al., 2024) where, as in other African states, the daily lives of citizens, journalists and politicians have been shaped by the ongoing (political) insecurity. Initial work on Burkina Faso has addressed terrorist violence and media in the country and the effects of the security context on journalists' discourses and practices (Yaméogo, 2018a, 2018b); specific aspects of Burkina Faso's media (Bagare, 2019; Balima, 2001; Capitant, 2008); and Burkinabè radio. Yaméogo and Heywood (2022) have also contrasted the trust placed in radio with that of social media, considered by radio audiences to be sources of misinformation.

Media and journalists are often perceived as either supporters or opponents of the political opposition (Singh, 2014), or as pawns for both democratic and non-democratic authoritarian regimes to gain popular support and provide positive information (Boas and Hidalgo, 2011; Thyne et al., 2019; White and Mabweazara, 2018) or as a counterforce to those in power. But they are less frequently considered part of a specific media system inside which they could actively assume a variety of roles, depending on the context. This article is part of a field of knowledge that examines journalism from a sociological perspective (Neveu, 2009). It places journalism in its past and in relation with its political, economic and social environment. The interdependent relationships are at the heart of the analysis. This approach underpins much work on journalistic roles, questioning journalists' willingness to define and protect their professional space and their working procedures (Ruellan, 2007), the process of structuring their professional identity when practising online journalism (Le Cam and Pereira, 2022), and observing the relationships between journalists and communicators/press officers (Legavre, 2011). African journalists' professional identities have been discussed from this perspective in French-speaking sub-Saharan African countries, for example by M. Fierens who observed the interdependencies that shaped professional journalistic roles in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Côte d'Ivoire (Fierens, 2017).

Drawing on the above research, this article focuses on professional boundaries and the apparently 'simple question of how journalism comes to be demarcated from non-journalism' which, here, means from political or military actors. Carlson (2015) promoted a 'view of journalism as a varied cultural practice embedded within a complicated social landscape', considering that 'journalism is not a solid, stable *thing* to point out, but a constantly shifting denotation applied differently depending on context' and that 'whatever is distinct about journalism must be continuously constructed' (p. 2,).

The article uses this theoretical perspective to investigate Burkina Faso's journalistic realities during the extremes of coups d'état. It makes a significant contribution to the field of African studies by examining recent political conflicts in Burkina Faso from the perspective of journalism. It provides an insight into the unique challenges faced by journalists in an African context marked by the war against terrorism, coups d'état and an increasingly visible information war involving international actors such as Russia (Affagnon, 2022; Ajir and Vailliant, 2018). Whilst the media in anglophone Africa have been widely researched (e.g. Bosch and Wasserman, 2023; Gondwe, 2024; Mabweazara 2018; Omoera, 2023; Willems and Mano, 2017), this article enriches knowledge in African media studies by exploring francophone journalism in Africa and by mobilizing

francophone literature within anglophone academic literature dedicated to media in Africa. It also complements knowledge in media studies by making the professional reality of Burkinabè journalists resonate with those of other journalists globally, using sociological concepts used by researchers interrogating other contexts and geographical areas.

## Method: A qualitative and field-based approach

A methodological approach was designed to address the article's key research questions: how do extreme political contexts (a) challenge journalists' professional ideals and practices; (b) redefine the boundaries of the profession; and (c) constitute key moments to observe the boundary-making process of journalism.

Twenty-eight individuals were interviewed to investigate the crossover between political and media action during the (attempted) coups and uprising under discussion. As the interactionist perspective used here focuses on the concept of action in its structural environment (the contexts), we approached journalists from public (n = 7) and private (n = 16) media who had worked as journalists during some, if not all, of the events under discussion. The aim was to understand the context in which media and journalists operated. Additional interviews were conducted with media specialists to obtain their analyses of the situation. They were an advisor (n = 1) to the CSC, the media regulatory authority, and Burkinabè academics (n = 4) specializing in Burkina Faso media. All had lived through the above-mentioned coups, attempted putsch and uprising as Burkinabè citizens. The interviewees and their responses were anonymized and coded in line with ethical approval.

The interviews were semi-structured to obtain qualitative data and an interview guide was designed to collect interviewees' perceptions about the relationships between the media and politics during the chosen events. The interviews focused on five main themes: the alleged power of the media; the possibility of media neutrality; the past, present and future of the journalistic profession; personal ways of living the profession as a journalist; and the role and significance of social networks.

We focused on the personal experiences and perspectives of Burkinabè journalists, paying attention to their discourses about the profession as these are crucial to understanding their vision of journalism. Their testimony offered insights into their past and present experiences (Demazière and Dubar, 2009).

The hour-long interviews were conducted by Burkinabè Level 2 Masters students from the *Institut panafricain d'étude et de recherche sur les médias, l'information et la communication* (IPERMIC) at Joseph Ki-Zerbo University as part of one of the authors' 'Media and Power' module, who supervised the ethical collection of the data. All the interviews were recorded in French and then anonymized and translated into English by the three authors. The latter coded the data using an inductive approach, allowing analysis categories to be identified to form the core of the discussion. For clarity, we have presented the data in chronological order in the results section.

The interviews were conducted in February and March 2022 in Ouagadougou, the capital, as it houses both the national media and political institutions. Only one woman was interviewed. This obvious gender imbalance was not intentional but reflects the country's professional reality. Burkina Faso's level of human development is ranked

'low' with a gender-based index of 0.631, placing it 183 out of 188 countries (PNUD, 2023).

For each of the three events under discussion, we investigated the professional roles and practices that the Burkinabè journalists wanted to assume.

## Results: Three key moments to consider

As one private sector journalist explained, 'there is no politician without media [in Burkina Faso], just as there is no media without a politician' (private 7), an understanding that has been the driving force behind the actions of Burkinabè journalists, particularly since 2014. On 31 October 2014, when the popular uprising overthrew President Compaoré following his 27-year rule, journalists played an active part in the pro-coup demonstrations. In contrast, a year later, on 17 September 2015, when members of the military supporting former President Compaoré attempted to regain power through a coup against the transitional government, journalists used their media outlets to mobilize the public against the coup. By 24 January 2022, both traditional and social media played a key role when Lieutenant Colonel Damiba declared himself President and forcibly replaced Kaboré who became Head of State in 2015[2].

### *The popular uprising of 2014 and overthrow of power*

In 2014, the main debate centred around a modification to Article 37 of the constitution that the then President Compaoré wanted to introduce. Without this modification, Compaoré, who had been in power for 27 years, could not run for office again. A popular uprising led to the overthrow of power. The public – or state – media, Radio télévision du Burkina (RTB), was considered to be controlled by the regime, which civil society, including media associations and journalists from both the private and public media, considered to be failing. The popular uprising led to the ransacking of national state radio and television on 30 October 2014.

State media journalists experienced pressure to align their arguments with those of the state. RTB journalists, for example, were aware of intimidation from above and adapted their work accordingly, notably through self-censorship. One TV presenter commented:

> It's not that someone would come and tell you that you have to do this or not to do that, but internally, there were measures that people took, especially those in charge of managing the public media, so it was much more self-censorship than censorship itself. (public 6)

Despite these constraints, the journalists' drive for professionalism and their inner desire to maintain their journalistic independence emerged clearly in their discourse. Many were prepared to pay the consequences of not supporting a particular power, be it the incumbent or opposition party, or of not acceding to self-censorship. This was particularly salient in the discourse of journalists working in the public media. The same journalist explained that he and his colleagues had already started the struggle to defend their professional integrity some years prior to the 2014 uprising:

> Between 2013 and 2014, many of our comrades received punitive assignments simply because they protested against government interference into the treatment of information itself, and into the way the public media is run. (public 6)

He explained the professional values that guide them when struggling with such government interferences.

> As for RTB, we hadn't chosen a side . . . We'd worked to be an impartial media, which doesn't take a stand in favour of this or that, even though we're aware that we're a government media, controlled by the government . . . As journalists we don't try to preach to the choir . . . Only professionalism could save the day by being as impartial as possible, objective and in good faith. (public 6)

Despite aspirations of impartiality, the presenter stated that he and his state media colleagues did not feel they had public support, rather that they were considered to be acting as a mouthpiece for those in power. There were widespread feelings that this voice needed silencing, resulting in RTB's equipment being ransacked and destroyed on 30 October.

In contrast, many private media journalists considered it their responsibility to act as alternative media both in the lead-up to, and during, the coup. According to one private media journalist, the private media sector was pivotal in the fall of the regime and in rendering Compaoré's power unpopular. The media generally, he said, 'were only doing their job, and in this respect they contributed a lot, but they were fed the arguments to use' (private 1). A journalist from *Sidwaya*, the pro-government daily newspaper, asserted that attempts by Compaoré's regime to win the media battle had clearly failed. Instead, it was the opposition that gained the upper hand in this battle by relying on the private media to rally popular opinion to its cause, in turn allowing significant numbers of the population to mobilize (public 4).

In 2014, political issues clearly became media issues, and the battle for power triggered a battle for the media, given their alleged ability to make or break a new government. While the public radio and television were instrumentalized by the ruling power, the private media were busy denouncing Compaoré's abuses, which RTB could not do, despite its journalists' attempts at 'professional resistance'. In doing so, private media contributed to mobilizing Burkinabè citizens against Compaoré. RTB was then targeted by the popular uprising and its ransacking symbolically marked the fall of the ruling regime.

## *The attempted coup of 2015*

A one-year civil–military transition regime was established following the 2014 coup, creating a specific socio-political context. This regime was disrupted in 2015 by the military coup led by ousted President Compaoré's Presidential Security Regiment (RSP), who were denouncing the transitional government's ban on Compaoré's supporters running for election. The private media, who mobilized so strongly in favour of the popular

coup in 2014, contested the 2015 military coup, contributing to its collapse. As in most coups, the putschists seized control of the state media.

One private media journalist explained:

> In the first hour of the [2015] Burkinabè coup, the military quickly took control of the RTB. Even though they didn't come inside to interfere with the programmes, they came with sufficient heavy weaponry to take over the RTB just because it's a key player. (private 1)

As in 2014, the coup leaders expected the RTB journalists to act as their mouthpieces. Once again, public sector journalists reacted in line with their visions of the profession:

> In 2015 . . . when they arrived, they wanted us to go on stage and broadcast. We said: 'no, we're here, but we have to justify our salaries, we're paid for the work we do, we can't be your allies just because you took power by force. We have to remain equally distanced from everyone. To preserve our freedom of expression, our freedom of opinion, we must be able to keep our distance from everyone.' (public 6)

The media sector reacted to this attempt at political and media control and, for some media and journalists, this meant resisting the ongoing coup. In response, the putschists ransacked several private media outlets (Article 19, 2015) leading to forms of resistance. One example of the active resistance in 2015 was the pirate radio – then called the invisible radio (private 7) – created to rally the people and mobilize Burkinabès against the coup. This was successful and helped to thwart the coup. Radio was thus perceived as having a dual purpose: serving the resistance movement by countering the putschists' control of the media and sharing their vision with fellow citizens as a form of 'rebellion' (private 7).

The pirate radio disseminated information, provided a voice for the opposition, gave instructions and organized the resistance's struggle. A private media journalist detailed the political consequences of this pirate radio.

> The coup leaders thought they had won in every respect by controlling the national radio, but it turned out that the pirate radio destabilized this plan and General Diendéré, the chief coup leader, had to set up a team to hunt down the pirate radio, which diluted the coup leaders' efforts. (private 16)

This media struggle obliged journalists to react to the ongoing political situation, sometimes at the expense of their professional ethics. Some supported the putschists, but most contributed to defeating the coup. As one media specialist explained, 'We know that the media did not necessarily respect ethics then, and that some media were borderline pro-putschist. Nonetheless, they did contribute to awakening public opinion, and to galvanizing resistance and all that followed' (academic 4). But one public TV presenter qualified this statement, emphasizing what he considered to be the professional role of the journalists: 'People wanted to think that we helped the resistance. Our role wasn't necessarily to help the resistance. We just played our role as journalists who were not putschists, and who aren't subversive' (public 6).

Professional ideals have shaped the attitude of many journalists, driving them to practise their profession despite the risks involved. Risks of physical attack could occur when gathering material, producing reports, or presenting them. Many of those interviewed, particularly those in the private media, stated they had risked their own physical and psychological well-being, but that this was needed to be able to do the job properly.

> When the coup happened in September 2015, we had to go into the field. We had to deal with members of the RSP [Presidential Security Regime] in the chase, and we were caught up in it. We were the victims of accidents, we were injured and our motorbikes even broke down. So despite all that hard work in the field, no, I didn't want to abandon the profession. Because above all, it's a question of passion. (private 3)

Another private sector journalist agreed, 'We were beaten up by the RSP soldiers. But upholding one's ideals was the priority' (private 7), but this could have resulted in additional risks as it meant not aligning fully with any side in a conflict. Having witnessed private radios being ransacked by putschists, a private press journalist described his bitter experience of this, having been targeted by both the demonstrators and the putschists. The military first opened fire on him and his colleagues, yet they managed to escape the bullets. Then, the demonstrators wanted the journalists to take a wounded anti-putsch protester to hospital, a request which the journalists had to refuse, 'Unfortunately, we couldn't transport wounded persons in our vehicle because it wasn't appropriate.' As a result they were lynched by the demonstrators. The journalist concluded, 'So that day we were targeted twice. First by the military, then by the demonstrators who didn't want to understand what was going on.' He added immediately: 'But this didn't stop me carrying on.'

In 2015, the media and much of the population opposed the attempted military coup. The media assumed or were assigned different roles, with the putschists trying to convert the RTB into a political instrument. A pirate radio station assumed an undeniably political stance by organizing resistance and journalists reaffirmed their professional ideals, despite the risks involved.

## *Coup d'état of January 2022*

A period of relative stability occurred following the 2015 attempted coup. But, in 2022, a military putsch deposed Président Roch Kaboré, who had been in power since 2015, and replaced him with Lieutenant Colonel Damiba. The rebel troops stated that Kaboré had failed to unite the nation or deal with the security crisis caused by the armed terrorist groups. Following Damiba's call for a 'sincere accompaniment of the transition by the media', public media journalists were forced to give a voice to the putschists on air as they carried out their political act, from which journalists wanted to keep their distance.

> The journalist is not a supporter of a political party or a cause that takes power by arms. On the 24th [January 2022], when they [the military] arrived, they read their statement and made the communiqués themselves. No journalist intervened to say anything. Because that's simply not our job. (public 6)

One journalist also cited the law to justify his professional standing and to quash the eagerness of trainee journalists who wanted to push statements from the President of the MRB political party calling on the Burkinabè army to disassociate itself from Kaboré's government: 'I said no, we are not allowed, under the law, to incite a coup d'état or even to authorize language that encourages coups d'état' (private 16).

The military elite close to Damiba assumed what could be called a 'journalistic mission' by collecting and processing news related to the security crisis, especially news from the frontline, and then transmitting it to the professional media for broadcast.

By the January 2022 coup, a sizeable shift in social media habits had occurred. Social media is only accessed by 8.9 percent of the Burkinabè population, mostly located in the capital, Ouagadougou (DataReportal, 2023). In urban areas, social networks are becoming the main information channels for the population as traditional media have limited coverage of the territory and do not always cover the subjects that interest them (Saidou, 2019). The popularity of social networks amongst the urban population was significant by the time of the 2022 coup. One state media journalist said they played a role in the circulation of both fact-checked news and fake news: 'We've seen activists giving out false news that was never substantiated in the field. Social networks have contributed to providing information, but they have also contributed to misinforming citizens' (public 6).

Social media also gave citizens some insight into the presence of other political players, such as Russia, who were involved in the media and political battle that is still ongoing in Burkina today (Heywood, 2022b).

The state encountered significant difficulties in controlling online social networks, which had been mobilized in protest against it. In the lead-up to the January 2022 coup, the state adopted a radical position, frequently suspending information circulation via both mobile internet and radio to hinder protests (Engels, 2022). A media specialist explained:

> For a regime, it's very difficult . . . to manage. These are situations that we [Burkinabè people] discovered and faced with the security crisis. Information was coming from everywhere, there was false information which only made the anger rise and which highlighted the government's inability to find solutions in the light of this security crisis . . . So the State has assumed its responsibility and shut down these radios. But I don't know if it was the right thing to do. (academic 1)

Public and private media journalists displayed different attitudes towards the news circulating online. State media journalists said they had to wait for information from official sources, justifying this by claiming their professionalism required only fact-based information to be broadcast. Private media were more inclined to push out information without waiting for official information. They claimed to have maintained their professionalism by quoting a source even if that source later proved to be inaccurate. A private media journalist stated,

> In the first hour of the coup [2022] we broadcast the news that the head of state was being held by the rebels and we quoted the international media, but when we said that, people insulted us. By the way, this was false information. We were lucky to have quoted international media. For

> me, this was being honest. Several media outlets picked up the story without quoting the source. (private 1)

In contrast, a public radio colleague said:

> I'm a public media journalist. I can't just give out information and then go on to deny it. So I stick to what is official and generally what is official is what the authorities give us. In order to say that people went to the Place de la Nation and asked the military to take power, we needed to go and get this information ourselves, for example. But to say that the head of state has been arrested without the information being official, I can't allow myself to give this information to the national radio and television. (public 1)

Journalists again asserted that ethics guided their practices and helped them take a step back in a context of extreme political turmoil, preventing unconfirmed, inaccurate or inappropriate messages being aired by the new incumbents. Whilst social networks were already active in previous coups, they were now recognized as key tools both for the political and media struggle. Public and private media adopted contrasting attitudes to it, with each being driven by what they considered to be the most appropriate professional attitude. During the 2022 political crisis, journalists' attitudes remained partly shaped by the organizations they worked in.

## Discussion and conclusion: When one moves, the other adapts

### *Past, present and future interdependencies – key moments*

This article's analysis of Burkina Faso's pivotal political events in 2014, 2015 and 2022 has shed significant light on the interdependencies between media and political actors, and has underscored the changing nature of the robust and enduring dynamics between media and political spheres. The political and media orders exert a mutual influence, not in a unidirectional or linear fashion, but rather 'fluidly', contingent upon the issues at hand and the prevailing balance of power. The article addressed questions about how extreme political contexts (a) challenge journalists' professional ideals and practices, (b) redefine the boundaries of the profession, and (c) constitute key moments to observe the boundary-making process of journalism.

The article also briefly outlined the historical context that shaped contemporary media–politics dynamics, highlighting their fluid nature. These relationships are inherently provisional. By evoking the past, the article has underscored the need to view these relationships both through the historical lens of the journalism that emerged during French colonization and through a long-term future lens which extends beyond this study's timeframe. The second coup and correlated media response in September 2022 highlights this ongoing process which transcends our period of research.

## *Media status and boundaries – ideas and practices*

Both public and private media maintain relations with political power today, and vice versa. Many private outlets are now positioning themselves as counter-powers, while increasing numbers of public media journalists are asserting their roles and practices. The research revealed that, during the extreme political events of 2014–2022, journalists tended to define their role and practices depending on whether they worked for public or private media. Discourses about what journalism was and should be often diverged between public and private journalists. Public media journalists, aware that their outlets were seen as cogs in the political wheel by citizens, repeatedly affirmed professional autonomy. Private journalists also claimed autonomy but seemed less threatened by political interference and freer to adopt an active role.

The autonomy claimed by public media journalists was, however, tinged with realism as they were fully aware that the term 'public media' was somewhat misleading and that 'state media' was more appropriate. One public radio journalist in Burkina Faso made no secret of this.

> If you're in the public media, you have to make sure that what you're going to publish is in line with the government's vision. If the regime changes, you have to change your way of thinking . . . Because, whatever we say, we are employees of the state. (public 1)

One of his colleagues went further, saying,

> The public media and public authorities and politicians have an adulterous, incestuous and harmful relationship, a relationship that is anything but common sense. Because the media will never be able to have enough distance, enough independence, to be able to play their role; just as the public authorities will never agree to release themselves from their control over the media. You're always going to have interlocking, complicated relationships. (public 6)

This explains why, during coups, the seizure of public media also symbolizes the seizure of power. In contrast, those working in the private, non-state media appeared to have greater freedom to report events and greater agency to challenge, or support, the coup in line with society's demands. The failed coup of 2015 is significant in this respect. Private radio journalists were keen to play a role in the resistance, despite the risks, and some went so far as to create a pirate radio station to support the resistance movement. Moreover, these two media forms – public and private – were both challenged in their endeavours to provide accurate information by the emergence of social media at the heart of the media battle during the coup d'état in January 2022. Social media provided counter-narratives to those broadcast by traditional media either through deliberate disinformation or through citizen-generated or alternatively sourced material. Legacy media and political actors alike adapted their strategies to accommodate these new media actors. Private media did not hesitate to use them as a source, whilst public media chose to exercise caution, and Burkina Faso's political authorities were prompt in taking drastic measures, including suspending radios and cutting internet access.

## A cog in a changing wheel – redefining boundaries

Political actors displayed a strong belief in the power of media, which motivates their desire to be featured in news coverage. During each of the events discussed here, just as in the past, the media were at the centre of the political struggle. In 2014, the public media were ransacked as a symbol of the contested political power. In 2015, an underground radio was created for political purposes, and, in 2022, Damiba, the coup leader, ensured that the military version of information was accepted as journalistic truth. In all cases, the media served, but also influenced, the political powers. The media order acts as the centre of gravity around which attention and the struggle for self-legitimation or the officialization of desired political change are focused. In this perspective, access to power and the loss of political power could trigger a variety of tandem forces.

More specifically, a coup d'état or a popular uprising, whether military or civilian, could enjoy popular support if deemed 'normal' and legitimate by the media, even though democracy and rule of law prohibit the seizure of power by force. Similarly, a coup d'état that is on the verge of being won could fail if it does not have the necessary media support. Political contexts can partially shape the roles that journalists play and media behaviour can partially shape the outcome of political contests. This ongoing and changing movement makes the media/political boundaries become extremely porous, shifting and redrawing the contours of both the political and media spheres.

The extreme circumstances of the coups and popular uprising provided an opportune moment, or snapshot, which allowed us to analyse the contemporary multifaceted interactions and associated influences between political actors – or the military, when discussing a putsch. As one moves, the other adapts, to such an extent that these constant adaptations could give the impression of a form of collaboration. A media specialist spoke of the 'balance of terror' between two dominant actors.

> Because of the importance of both, there is a kind of balance of terror. As a result, those in the media are suspicious of the army and the army is suspicious of the media. But in an almost consensual way, the two parties collaborate. Because the uniformed men understand that they cannot work without the media and the media also need the uniformed men as an essential source in their work. (academic 4)

Likening the interactions to those between a man and a woman, a public media journalist said:

> The press and power are a bit like a man and a woman. They're together without necessarily being together, each one knows that they need the other but each one believes that in reality it is the other who needs them. This is not true. It's just that everyone needs to play their part and the country would be better off. (public 6)

Journalists' continuous actions and reactions within these bidirectional relationships shape and reshape professional values, practices and boundaries. Both political and media roles remain in flux. While their relationships persist, the modalities evolve, impacting the profession. They function as cogs, but their place and role in the wheel constantly shifts.

Examining the interactions between media and politics, the journalistic values, practices and boundaries they shape has allowed us to address the perennial question of journalistic autonomy in the face of political and social power. By selecting a long research time frame, we were able to provide a detached observation of the urgent realities of coups d'état and popular uprisings and, by specifically looking at the 2014–2022 period in Burkina Faso within an ongoing process, we have been able to focus temporally and geographically, contributing to a better understanding of the broader reality of journalism's boundary-making process across Africa.

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## ORCID iDs

Marie Fierens: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3374-3815
Emma Heywood: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6548-6713

## Notes

1. The seven public media journalists are coded as 'public + number 1–7'; the 16 private media journalists as 'private + number 1–16'; the CSC advisor as 'CSC'; and the academics as 'academic + number 1–4'.
2. On September 30, 2022, Ibrahim Traoré, a young military captain, seized power in a new coup d'état, ousting Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba. In the wake of the coup, a number of national and international media outlets were suspended for, according to the government, lacking professionalism in their coverage of the security situation.

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## Author biographies

Marie Fierens is a lecturer and researcher at Université libre de Bruxelles. She has conducted extensive research into journalism in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa. She is the author of books and articles (https://difusion.ulb.ac.be/vufind/Search/Home?lookfor=marie+fierens&sort=pubdate+desc&submitButton=Recherche&type=general) and realised "research podcasts" (https://mo-saic.blog/). Address: Université libre de Bruxelles, Avenue Franklin Roosevelt 50 - 1050 Bruxelles [marie.fierens@ulb.be]

Emma Heywood is a Senior Lecturer in Journalism, Radio and Communication at the University of Sheffield. She has conducted extensive research into radio in conflict-affected areas and is author of Radio and Women's Empowerment in francophone West Africa (2024) (Palgrave) *Address*: The University of Sheffield, The Wave, 2 Whitham Road, Sheffield, S10 2AH. [e.heywood@sheffield.ac.uk]

Lassané Yaméogo is a researcher in journalism at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique et technologique in Burkina Faso. He is also an associate researcher at the Université libre de Bruxelles in Belgium. He has published numerous articles on the subject of media and conflict. *Address*: Université libre de Bruxelles, Avenue Franklin Roosevelt 50 - 1050 Bruxelles [lyameogo@ulb.be]