

Hybrid Media and Hybrid Politics: Contesting Informational Uncertainty in Lebanon and Tunisia

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Abstract

This paper investigates the dynamic relationship between hybrid media and hybrid politics in Lebanon and Tunisia. While previous research on the media in hybrid regimes has mainly focused on regime strategies of restricting and manipulating public debate, our analysis moves beyond repression. We argue that the ambiguities of hybrid politics, which combines democratic and authoritarian elements, not only constrain independent and critical reporting but also open up opportunities for journalistic agencies. We draw on Schedler's concept of informational uncertainty to capture the epistemological instability of hybrid regimes and the strategies of political actors to control public knowledge. Distinguishing between three dimensions of media hybridity - economic, cultural and technological - we show how the new hybrid media environment significantly increases the volatility of hybrid politics and informational uncertainty for political actors. Our empirical analysis is based on seventy-one semistructured interviews with journalists in Lebanon and Tunisia conducted between 2016 and 2019. The material reveals a broad range of strategies used by journalists who employ the internal contradictions of hybrid politics to pursue their own agenda. The comparison between Lebanon and Tunisia also highlights contextual conditions that enable, or limit, journalistic agency, such as clientelistic dependencies, economic resources, and civil society alliances.

Keywords

hybrid media, hybrid regimes, informational uncertainty, journalism, Lebanon, Tunisia

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Introduction

Hybridity has become one of the most salient concepts across a broad range of disciplines. Originating in the life sciences, the term hybridity is now widely used in the social sciences and humanities to come to grips with an increasingly complex environment where well-established categories fail to describe newly emerging patterns of social organization, practices, and identities (Chadwick 2017; Kraidy 2002).

In this paper, we employ the hybridity concept to examine the relationship between media and politics in contexts outside the established liberal democracies of the West. For our analysis, we draw on two strands of scholarship each of which has developed a distinct understanding of hybridity: comparative politics on hybrid regimes on the one hand and media and journalism studies on the other. Within the conceptual framework of hybridity, we aim to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ambiguity of the media–politics nexus that goes beyond the rather simplistic focus on censorship and struggles for press freedom that has dominated both research and policymaking over the past few decades (LaMay 2011; Simon 2014).

In comparative politics, the notion “hybrid regimes” has become a conceptual tool to categorize political systems that are characterized by a juxtaposition of democratic and authoritarian institutions and practices (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010; Morlino 2009). Although more countries than ever call themselves democracies, many of the democratic newcomers struggle to develop into full democracies, while in other cases the transition got stalled in a hybrid state of neither–nor (Carothers 2002). Despite having adopted the main institutions of democratic rule, such as multi-party elections, other essential elements, most notably rule of law, effective checks and balances, and civil liberties, remain weak (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Jakli et al. 2019; Merkel 2004).

Contemporary hybrid politics is embedded in, and interacts with, an environment of unprecedented media abundance which itself is the result of a far-reaching process of hybridization that has fundamentally transformed the way in which information is produced, disseminated, and consumed both globally and within nation states. Accordingly, different sub-fields of communication scholarship have developed different conceptualizations of hybridity to describe a rather diverse range of changes that affect existing media institutions, journalistic practices, and communication technologies. We base our analysis on three particular aspects of media hybridity that are of central importance for the understanding of the relationship of media and politics in hybrid political contexts: economic hybridity, hybridity of journalistic culture, and technological hybridity. Through the lens of these three dimensions, we examine the dynamic interaction between hybrid politics and hybrid media: How do ownership structures, journalistic cultures and the transformation of media platforms impact on the ability of journalists and political elites to control public discourse?

Method and Data

The article builds on empirical investigations of journalism in two countries from the Arab world: Lebanon and Tunisia. Although these countries represent two different trajectories of political development and are ranked on opposite sides of the democracy/autocracy cut-off point, they are also similar with regard to particular constellations of political and media hybridity. *Lebanon* has a long tradition of political pluralism and is counted as a “hybrid regime” in the 2019 Democracy index (EIU Democracy Index 2019). Nominally democratic processes are stalled by elite arrangements whereby each of the country’s major religious communities monopolizes certain key positions (e.g., the president is a Maronite Christian, and the Prime Minister is a Sunni Muslim) while, internally, each community has been controlled by the same politicians and families for decades. Civil liberties are compromised and corruption is a growing problem. Lebanese journalism has historically thrived on greater freedom of speech than what was found in other Arab countries. It has played an active political role in the country’s complex history, which, however, has made it a frequent target of outside influences (Dajani 2019). *Tunisia* was until 2011 an authoritarian regime but entered a professed transition to democracy following the Arab Uprisings. However, the country has been facing obstacles in consolidating its achievements (Fassihi 2018) and is classified as a “flawed democracy” in the 2019 Democracy index (EIU Democracy Index 2019). Despite successful presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019, the legacies of authoritarianism continue to mark largely unreformed state sectors such as the judiciary and the security apparatus, and there is evidence for the elites of the old regime to re-emerge in political life (Wolf 2018). Extensive patronage networks coexist with formal power structures and are responsible for endemic corruption that encompasses all layers of society. Tunisian journalism does not have the history of political engagement of its Lebanese counterpart but has blossomed, thanks to the post-2011 liberty of expression. It continues to be torn between democratic ambitions and legacies of the authoritarian past (Høigilt and Selvik 2020).

Our empirical analysis is based on seventy-one semistructured interviews with journalists, thirty-three in Lebanon, and thirty-eight in Tunisia, that were conducted during several field trips to the two countries between 2016 and 2019. Starting with a set of participants in major media outlets, we further expanded our sample by using snowballing. In the societies of Lebanon and Tunisia, personal connections are essential for establishing trust and play also an important role in professional life. Snowball sampling that employs personal recommendation is therefore an effective way of recruiting study participants (Arksey and Knight 1999; Berger 2016). Throughout the process, we monitored the composition of the sample and corrected biases where necessary. The resulting sample includes journalists from different types of media, both traditional and digital, and across the political and ideological spectrum, thus ensuring that all relevant viewpoints and experiences are represented in the data. More than half of the participants were experienced journalists at senior level whose insider knowledge was particularly valuable. However, female journalists are underrepresented in our sample despite our aim for a more balanced sample. This is probably an unintended

effect of the snowballing approach and the fact that both field researchers are male. On reviewing the interview material, we found no systematic differences related to the gender of interviewees. (Details of the sample and the research instrument can be found in the Supplementary Information file.) For the most part, the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min. They were conducted in Arabic and then transcribed into English. The interview guide covered issues of journalists' role perceptions and their relationship with political power holders. The research is part of a project on "Journalism in struggles for democracy: Media and polarization in the Middle East" funded by the Research Council of Norway (principal investigator: Kjetil Selvik). In this paper, we focus on segments of the interviews that reflect on the way in which journalists experience political manipulation and their own capacity to control information flows.

The article is divided into two main sections. In the first section, we take a more detailed look at the inner workings of hybrid regimes by focusing on the notion of informational uncertainty suggested by Schedler (2013). Unlike most theories of authoritarianism, Schedler's approach systematically considers information dynamics and the role of the media in hybrid politics and therefore proves particularly useful in the context of our analysis. In the second part of the paper, we analyze the above-mentioned three major dimensions of media hybridity and their interdependence with hybrid politics in the light of the experience of journalists in Lebanon and Tunisia, countries that have received limited attention in media and communication research so far (but see Chouikha 2013; El Issawi 2016; El-Richani 2016; Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012).

Hybrid Regimes and the Politics of Uncertainty

The juxtaposition of democratic and nondemocratic elements in hybrid regimes results in a multiplicity of frictions and structural contradictions that have the potential to destabilize the regime. According to Schedler (2013), these incongruities generate an environment of pervasive uncertainty which, he argues, is a defining feature of hybrid politics. Schedler identifies two distinct, yet interrelated dimensions of uncertainty: institutional and informational. The main source of *institutional uncertainty* is multiparty elections and the resulting competition between different contenders. While elections are vital to provide the regime with legitimacy, their outcome and consequences are fundamentally unpredictable. Since in hybrid regimes commitment to democratic rules of the game is largely instrumental, elections are frequently fought out as zero-sum games on the assumption that if losing there might not be another chance to win back majorities in the future.

The toleration of a certain degree of electoral competition opens up a space of public debate beyond the tightly defined government agenda, which characterizes authoritarian regimes. This discursive pluralism is the source of *informational uncertainty*, as issues, frames, and narratives can take unexpected turns and be exploited by different groups in the power struggle. Controlling public knowledge is therefore a vital part of the regime to maintain existing power arrangements. However, outright suppression of

deviant voices is a risky strategy because it undermines the regime's claim of being democratic and would therefore invite popular resistance. Instead, to manage informational uncertainty hybrid regimes use a more indirect "menu of manipulation" (Schedler 2002). One particularly effective mechanism to silence critical voices—journalists, activists, or critics within the system—is the selective use of the law, such as libel and defamation laws, while at the same time the appearance of legality is maintained. The effect of this strategy of "legal repression" (Levitsky and Way 2010: 9) is a pervasive ambiguity as to where exactly the boundaries of tolerated speech are and what the potential consequences are of any transgression. Another strategy involves building a firm "cordon sanitaire" around the inner workings of political decision making—who is responsible for which decisions and how resources are allocated—thus blurring transparency and preventing a meaningful public debate to hold power holders to account.

While uncertainty works primarily as a constraint that permeates the institutional and epistemic workings of hybrid politics, it is also a strategic tool for all actors involved in the political struggle, as they aim to minimize uncertainty for themselves and to maximize it for their opponents. This also applies to the media as key knowledge brokers in public communication. On the one hand, they are subjected to numerous restrictions and manipulations by political and economic actors as to which and how news items are covered. On the other hand, the ambiguities of hybrid politics open up opportunities for journalists to play an active part in the "uncertainty game." For sure, media cannot change political reality. But they can change the perception of political reality of both citizens and elites, which has been shown to alter individual and collective decision making (Chong and Druckman 2007). Thus, challenging the boundaries around sensitive issues or reframing the narratives that legitimize the status quo has the potential to mobilize public opinion and fuel demands for change. Moreover, new issue agendas can trigger a reconfiguration of elite coalitions or invite the emergence of new actors, which might destabilize existing arrangements of power sharing.

The dynamics of informational uncertainty in hybrid regimes differ from both authoritarian and democratic contexts in significant ways. In authoritarian regimes, strict censorship monopolizes information control at the centers of power, while in democracies competition over the public agenda is played out on a level-playing field across a broad range of actors. Hybrid regimes, by contrast, tolerate a certain degree of pluralism, but the rules of the game are ambiguous and can be shifted in either direction at any time, thereby imposing a constant state of uncertainty on journalists who are taking high risks when stepping outside the official discourse. Meanwhile, for political actors coping with informational uncertainty involves more than coping with unexpected agenda shifts. Since in hybrid regimes the regime question is not finally settled—neither in favor of a liberal democracy nor in favor of an authoritarian order—political conflicts over day-to-day political issues can quickly turn into conflicts over the legitimacy of the regime itself. These internal contradictions of hybridity apply to both countries of our study, albeit to varying degrees, as the following analysis demonstrates.

Media Hybridity: Dimensions and Cases

Unlike the concept of “hybrid regime” that has a well-defined focus in comparative politics—even though the boundaries and empirical evidence are disputed (see Bernhagen 2019; *Varieties of Democracy*, n.d.)—in media and communication studies, the notion of hybridity takes on different meanings, which makes it difficult to arrive at a unified definition of media hybridity. Arguably, different media hybridities exist side-by-side owing to the multiple faces of what we mean by “media”: social institution, cultural product, technologies, etc. Three dimensions of media hybridity are of particular relevance in the context of the present paper, each of them influencing journalistic practices and their impact on the level and distribution of informational uncertainty in hybrid regimes.

First, on an institutional level, we can expect hybrid regimes to bring about hybrid media systems that reflect the specific structural and normative ambiguities of the political systems in which they are embedded (Vltmer 2012). This argument follows Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) approach to comparative media studies who argue that the institutional structures of western media systems, such as regulation and ownership, are largely congruent with the institutional design of the political systems in which the media operate. However, due to the assemblage of democratic and authoritarian logics, it can be assumed that the politics–media nexus in hybrid regimes is particularly prone to incongruences that have the potential to increase informational uncertainty.

Second, while institutional factors set external rules for the working of journalism, journalistic culture constitutes the internal rules that define what “good journalism” is, that is the norms by which the quality of its products is evaluated. According to Hanitzsch (2007), journalistic culture incorporates the professional worldviews of journalists that define how they perceive their role with regard to both political power and their audience. While the globalization of the media industry is a driving force for the homogenization of journalistic products, local cultures and the divergence of political regimes suggest diversification of journalistic cultures and the values and practices involved in the production of news.

Finally, Chadwick’s (2017) analysis of the “hybrid media system” takes a very different approach. Chadwick developed his theory of hybridity from a technological perspective and analyses how the digital revolution of the past few decades has transformed the way in which power is exercised in modern societies. He argues that in the new hybrid media system the distinction between “old” and “new” media has become meaningless, as online and offline media, traditional and digital media converge into a largely overlapping sphere of meaning construction where messages are produced and controlled by a growing number of both professional and nonprofessional gatekeepers. As a result, the emerging hybrid media system presents an assemblage of different media logics, thereby creating a new “media ecology” (Scolari 2012) that incorporates new actors, new practices of message production, and new avenues of information flows beyond the elite-dominated system of traditional mass media, which has been the cornerstone of information control in traditional authoritarian regimes.

In the following, we explore these three aspects of media hybridity in the context of hybrid politics, using evidence from Lebanon and Tunisia to demonstrate how the interdependence between political actors and media actors creates for both parts specific constellations of uncertainty and opportunities to control it.

Economic Hybridity. The often assumed link between media independence and private ownership rarely materializes in transitional and hybrid contexts. Rather, political elites use private media ownership as an effective resource to control the public agenda without exposing themselves as censors (Dragomir 2018). Frequently, media outlets and licenses are not given to the most competent and economically viable bidder, but to close allies of the ruling elite and even family members to ensure that media coverage does not cross the “red lines” of tolerable content. Media ownership as an instrument to buy and reward loyalty has led to a specific form of media crony capitalism where media owners and editors are closely entangled with the political class (see Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002; Hughes and Lawson 2005; Roudakova 2017). In the two countries of our study, we see similar patterns as described by these authors, but also the unintended consequences of politicized ownership.

In Lebanon, several of the most important media conglomerates or television channels are owned by individuals with a leading position in one of the politico-religious groups on which Lebanon’s consociational political system is built. The clearest example is al-Manar TV and website, which is a mouthpiece for Hizbullah and enjoys very little editorial freedom. Further, Future Media Group, owned by Saad Hariri, is the main media outlet associated with the Sunni elite, while OTV is owned by supporters of Lebanon’s Maronite President Michel Aoun. Thus, the media ownership structure reflects and stabilizes the existing balance of power and constrains journalistic agency as notions of the congruence between political and media institutions would suggest.

Due to the competition among the elites who share power, news coverage is rarely uniform across the channels, as it would be under a unitary authoritarian regime. Even though these competing agendas that emerge from different segments of the media system remain largely within the established boundaries of power sharing, the resulting pluralism is like the proverbial genie in the bottle who once released cannot be controlled anymore.

Politicized ownership not only leads to a deeply fragmented media landscape but also to an often toxic polarization between societal segments. This happens when media owners use their outlets to launch smear campaigns against political opponents or business competitors (Sakr et al. 2015). Even though this often brings up hidden information about dubious business practices and corruption, the resulting watchdog journalism is a highly skewed form of investigative reporting where the truth is frequently sacrificed for personal gains (Waisbord 2000).

Yet the hybridity of private ownership also opens up unexpected degrees of freedom. Given sufficient economic resources and political savviness, some media owners may choose—for profit or other reasons—to detach themselves from the existing arrangements by encouraging the media they own to engage in critical coverage

even if it disregards the political fault lines. This is the case with Pierre Daher and Tahsin Khayyat, owners of the popular Lebanese TV channels LBCI and New TV, respectively. They have branded their channels as counter-currents to the system of sectarian power sharing, which has earned them a large viewership. As part of this strategy, they pursue an editorial policy of giving civil society actors a voice, as a program director at New TV stated when interviewed about the parliamentary elections in 2018:

We had an ambition in our channel, which supports civil society: if civil society could manage to unite in a single list, we were prepared to support them with TV coverage, campaign posters etc. That did not happen, but we support individual candidates, having them speak on TV without paying and even advertisements companies supporting them for free. (Interview with TV journalist, Beirut, 3 May 2018)

The fact that the channel gave airtime to civil society actors without charging them is noteworthy. In Lebanon, a significant part of a TV channel's income is the money it charges for airtime given to political actors, especially during elections. Given the price for a half-hour interview between US\$30,000 and US\$60,000 (European Union Election Observation Mission 2018), forgoing this money amounts to substantial support for a cause outside the established power structure.

In Tunisia, the media's political affiliations are less transparent than in Lebanon but no less real for that. As testified by journalists interviewed, both private and public media are subject to recurrent instrumentalization—be it by parts of the government in the case of public media, or by powerful businessmen with vested interests in politics in the private media. The controversies surrounding the TV channel Nessma are an instructive example. This channel is controlled by the businessman Nabil Karoui, who actively supported Beji Caïd Essebsi's successful bid to become president. Later, Karoui used the channel to support his own political career. In 2017, he started the daily program "Khalil Tunis," which covered the activities of his charity organization of the same name. The program showed Karoui and volunteers of the charity distributing food, clothes, and other essentials to poor people in Tunisia's many marginalized regions, earning him wide support in the country. As Nessma aired daily footage of Karoui distributing Ramadan meals to the poor in May 2019, he gave an interview to the channel where he announced his intention to run for President in the elections later that year. Karoui has also been caught on tape instructing Nessma's journalists to fabricate negative news about a Tunisian NGO that accused him of tax evasion.

At the same time—and contrary to Lebanon—Tunisian journalists operate within a more regulated framework while enjoying the support of civil society organizations. Several factors contribute to this particular situation: First, the Tunisian revolution resulted in a sustained effort to reform and regulate the media sector (El Issawi 2016: 16–21). The most notable achievement is the *High Independent Authority of Audiovisual Communication*, which has proven to be able and willing to enforce existing regulations, for example by penalizing violations of election campaign coverage

regulations. Second, the *Syndicat National des Journalistes Tunisiens* organizes demonstrations and strikes to protest against harassment by the security sector and poor working conditions of journalists. Third, Tunisian journalists and civil society NGOs regularly cooperate to improve the quality of political reporting. For example, the organization *al-Bawsala* (Compass) provides training and counseling for journalists who cover parliamentary affairs (Interview with al-Bawsala official, Tunis, 4 May 2018). These support structures contribute to the quality of political journalism and help to develop resilience against economic and political manipulation.

Cultural Hybridity. Media system theorists have associated certain models of journalism with particular regime types (Siebert et al. 1963) or varieties of democracy (Hallin and Mancini 2004). However, comparative research has revealed large variations of journalistic cultures both within and across countries, even though professional journalism and its main product—news—remains clearly recognizable as such (Hanitzsch and Donsbach 2012). Mellado et al. (2017) found a multiplicity of “hybrid journalism” that mix and match elements of different ethics and styles of journalism.

Our empirical research confirms the juxtaposition of different journalism within a hybrid political environment. In Lebanon, the fragmentation of the media system along sectarian lines is reflected by the prevalence of a journalism of “views” rather than “news” (Dajani 2019). However, there are also journalists who oppose this culture and adhere to different norms and practices. Three main role perceptions stand out in our interview material and affect the kind and level of informational uncertainty in different ways. First, there is a group of “loyal interventionists” or “advocates” of a particular elite group (Hanitzsch 2007: 372–3). Their professional role is often determined by political convictions and their willingness to attack rival factions (Dabbous 2010). Paradoxically perhaps, this role may enhance the public significance of journalists because they are seen as the public voice for this or that elite player. As one journalist said:

For this reason, when you want to know what’s going on in the country, you don’t listen to the politicians, you listen to the journalists. (Interview with TV journalist, Beirut, 30 January 2018)

The second group is characterized by a more transactional journalistic culture. Journalists of this kind are potentially “for hire” but do not see the implicit contract with the political elite as absolute. On the contrary, they may curry favor with several rival patrons in parallel and even play them against each other. By way of illustration, a popular writer in Beirut interchangeably works for different and competing Sunni Muslim politicians. This strategy increases his room for maneuver because if relations sour with one patron he may switch to another (Interview with e-journalist, Beirut, 4 March 2019). For politicians, these journalists represent a threat because the information they collect may fall into the wrong hands. A corrupt politician knows that if a journalist has dug up some dirt on him, he may be able to prevent this information to be published in media controlled by his own sectarian group, but

not from being shared across other media outlets hostile to the politician or through online platforms outside formal media organizations. As a Lebanese journalist put it:

There are so many media outlets in Lebanon that you cannot control all of them with money (...) They are never able to unite on a common interest. One has an interest in exposing some instances of corruption, another pays attention to others. This variation is what creates our liberty in Lebanon. (Interview with print media journalist, Beirut, 29 January 2018)

The third group self-identifies as “change agents” and challenges the rules of sectarian partisanship altogether. As Hanitzsch (2007: 373) finds, some journalists are eager to adopt a more adversarial role that “openly challenges the powers that be.” This will not only satisfy their own ideals and professionalism but will also earn them reputation and credibility both among their audience and among their peers. This is because independent journalism has a significant market value in societies where large parts of the population, in particular the younger generation, have grown tired of the rituals of sectarian politics. In Lebanon, the two TV channels LBCI and New TV have become hubs of independent journalism, which coexist with the political agendas of their owners. For example, during the so-called “You Stink” crisis in 2015, when mass protests erupted in Beirut because Lebanon’s political system was unable to deal with the simple and fundamental task of collecting the garbage, New TV monitored the mobilization online and offline and produced coverage that was very embarrassing to the authorities (Battah 2015). By stepping outside the ties with established political forces, these journalists see themselves as acting in the interest of the citizens and their right to know and to be heard. As a senior reporter in New TV put it:

We were with the protestors and we really worked with them. The whole country was filled with garbage and we were staunchly opposed to that. We live-streamed the protests all the day. It was always at the top of our agenda. We were even accused of instigating the protests. (Interview with TV journalist, Beirut, 1 June 2016)

This coverage of popular protests expanded the scope of pluralism beyond the set agendas of the ruling elites who suddenly saw themselves taken to account for their (lack of) actions. The fact that at one point, one of LBCI’s reporters was assailed by security forces while covering the protests clearly illustrates the threat this poses to ruling classes.

In Tunisia, the shift from traditional authoritarianism to the hybrid politics of transition has been accompanied by the rise to prominence of a new category of journalist-commentators, known as *chroniqueurs*. They fill the screen and air of, especially, private TV and radio stations with opinion and analysis. The *chroniqueurs* take the lead in the public interpretation of contentious events, debating with guests and offering entertainment by turning up the heat in political talk shows (Interview with TV journalist, Tunis, 8 April 2016). From a producer’s perspective, it is essential that

the *chroniqueurs* are critical and outspoken for the sake of attracting viewers. This increases their political influence and raises potential challenges for the decision-makers. A *chroniqueur* we interviewed insisted that “every time I present my program, nobody knows what I am going to say” (Interview with TV journalist, Tunis, 3 May 2018). Other interviewees affirmed that politicians and businessmen have commentators on their payroll (Interview with a freelance journalist, Tunis, 10 October 2019 and an e-media journalist, Tunis, 9 March 2019). Obviously, hiring a hard-hitting commentator is a way for powerful actors to protect themselves from media-driven attacks.

The funders expect the opinion leaders to defend their political agendas. But since their rivals pursue the same strategy, communication becomes an ever-more important part of the political game and the journalist-commentators’ market value increases. These developments come with opportunities for journalists to make professional choices. We found that in both Lebanon and Tunisia, prominent media professionals are able to shop around to secure the highest possible degree of independence for their own work. Experienced journalists who have made a name for themselves can leave one media outlet for another once the margin of freedom becomes unacceptably narrow for them (Interview with a journalist and *chroniqueur*, Tunis, 7 April 2016). “Shopping around” is a luxury only a minority can afford, however. For most Tunisian journalists, the fear of losing one’s job is the Achilles heel that political actors can use against them. The private media sector offers only temporary contracts and the average salary level is low. As a consequence, journalists who struggle to make ends meet are vulnerable to corruption. To escape the economic constraints of the media industry, some journalists have developed separate sources of income to protect their professional integrity. There is indeed a category of “journalist-businessman” in both Lebanon and Tunisia, which adds to the professional hybridity of journalistic cultures. A well-off Tunisian entrepreneur and journalist explained the advantage of his business activity:

You need an alternative to become independent. I am lucky because I have an alternative. I run companies. I can express my agreement or disagreement. (Interview with TV journalist, Tunis, 20 November 2018)

Technological Hybridity. New digital communication technologies have fundamentally reshaped the way in which knowledge is produced, disseminated, and consumed. They are also transforming the power relationship between political authorities and journalists in hybrid regimes whose stability and legitimacy crucially depend on the effective control of information. The proliferation of channels has not only dramatically expanded the level of pluralism in the public arena, but digital technologies are also a powerful resource for collective action, as they enable citizens to share ideas and act in a concerted manner even though they are largely excluded from access to the mainstream media (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). While governments struggle to adapt to the new “hybrid media

system” (Chadwick 2017), traditional media are also losing their leading role as major brokers of public information, as audiences, especially the younger generation, are turning to online platforms for political news and entertainment. Some authors have even predicted the “end of journalism” as we know it (Hirst 2011; Picard 2014). In any case, the end of elite-controlled mass communication as the predominant mode of public communication suggests a wide-ranging re-distribution of informational uncertainty, as more players are able to promote alternative narratives through a multitude of channels.

However, the picture is more complex than that, as both journalists and political elites are adapting to the new environment. Our research in Lebanon and Tunisia shows that many journalists have bridged the boundaries between “new” and “old” media spheres and use the potential of the emerging “hybrid media system” to overcome existing restrictions and to (re)ascertain their own political significance. Operating across online and offline media platforms has brought about new hybrid forms of journalism combining traditional formats and styles, such as breaking news and factuality, with emerging online roles that emphasize commentary and ordinary everyday language (Chadwick 2017: 184–216). High-profile journalists such as Dima Sadek or Hussein Mortada have hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter and their accounts serve as sites of hard-hitting commentary. With the diversification of roles, the boundaries between who is a journalist and who is not become increasingly blurred. Several of the media professionals we interviewed in Lebanon were even hesitant to call themselves “journalists,” since they are not employed as political reporters. However, as successful current affairs bloggers and/or radio program hosts they have gained considerable influence as interpreters of the political events that are going on at local and national levels. The formats they use to interact with the public—blogs, public Facebook pages, Twitter, and radio talk shows—open up new spaces for innovative strategies for voicing criticism while avoiding repression. A particularly striking example is a Lebanese Salafi (ultraconservative Muslim) self-styled “media man” who has his own popular radio show, website, Facebook, Twitter accounts, and WhatsApp group, all of which he uses extensively to interact with the public. He sees himself as a “mediator,” both in the sense that he explains politics to people and that he intervenes in social affairs, raising money for the needy, for example. This figure has taken a deliberate choice to blend his private and public face to reach out to people:

There are things that I don’t do as a journalist and others I don’t do as an individual. But I do try to combine my two roles. For example, I am spontaneous when I present my programmes. I don’t adopt a special style. I use humour to talk about serious topics. (Interview with radio and online journalist, Tripoli, 7 May 2018)

Moreover, the new hybrid media ecology has brought about new forms of media organizations that oscillate between online and offline activities, journalism, and political activism. In Tunisia, the website *Nawaat* was originally a blog for

opposition activists. After the revolution, it registered as an NGO, put in place a proper editorial structure, and hired professional journalists, so that it now functions as a media outlet. It also joined forces with Wikileaks and published leaked information pertaining to Tunisia for a Tunisian audience, and currently, it cooperates with the above-mentioned NGO al-Bawsala (The Compass), which monitors the Tunisian parliament and trains journalists to cover political affairs. A senior staff member explained its function:

The NGOs that work to improve the state's accountability help each other. We provide publicity [to them]. They alert us about things that happen and we rely on them in the quest for information. (Interview with e-journalist, Tunis, 8 March 2018)

The low cost of internet-only production and the hybrid structure of *Nawaat* have enabled it to survive as one of Tunisia's few truly independent and influential voices. With its history and activities, *Nawaat* is a hybrid between whistleblower NGO, professional media outlet, and oppositional website, a combination that has made it a constant source of potentially damaging information for Tunisian political elites and the media owners who are part of that elite. A crucial question here is, however, the robustness of such new and independent media formats. In the context of hybrid politics, the business model of organizations such as *Nawaat* remains a political weakness that can be easily exploited. Since *Nawaat* is dependent on support from Western NGOs and other civil society donors, it is vulnerable to charges of serving foreign (and implicitly: sinister) agendas, an accusation frequently utilized by established elites to undermine its credibility (Gallien and Werenfels 2019).

However, the internet is no longer the exclusive domain of critical voices and has become a highly contested arena where the struggle for discursive dominance is fought out. Instead of suppressing information—the authoritarian option of reducing information uncertainty—politicians and business people with vested political interests are developing increasingly sophisticated ways of manipulating online communication, often by increasing the volume of information rather than restraining it. Manufactured messages, disinformation, and rumors are churned out in large quantities by trolls with the aim to spread confusion and mistrust among online communities (Diamond and Whittington 2019). Social media manipulation may also directly target journalists. In Lebanon, once a journalist acquires a reputation for taking on the powers that be, s/he faces the risk of becoming the subject of electronic defamation campaigns. In these cases, social media is used by powerful politicians and businessmen who have the resources to employ information mercenaries on social media platforms to incite public opinion against the journalist in question. Today, journalists no longer fear a knock on the door by the security agencies, but the wrath of the masses, whipped up by professional manipulators who exploit the digital domain to full effect. As an investigative journalist in Lebanon sighed:

Imagine that, when I have investigated, exposed and covered corruption, I worry about the flood of insults that will come from ordinary people! (Interview with TV journalist, Beirut, 6 March 2019)

Conclusion

Hybridity is a ubiquitous phenomenon that has fundamentally transformed institutions, practices, and discourses of modern societies. In this article, we explored the dynamics of different forms of hybridity and their consequences for the relationship between political power and the media in the Arab world. Contrary to fully authoritarian regimes, the juxtaposition of democratic and nondemocratic politics in hybrid regimes opens up numerous opportunities for journalistic agency to shape the political agenda and to push existing boundaries of public communication.

In our analysis, we drew on Schedler's (2013) concept of informational uncertainty to investigate the complex media–politics nexus in hybrid contexts. From this perspective, the relationship between journalists and political power holders can be understood as a struggle over uncertainty: How and by whom information is used to decrease uncertainty for oneself and increase it for others. Our qualitative interviews with journalists in Lebanon and Tunisia show that the emerging multiple hybridities of the media have made the “uncertainty game” for both players—politicians and journalists—even less predictable, frequently resulting in unintended consequences for the ecology of public knowledge.

Media ownership remains one of the most effective means in the hands of political elites to control uncertainty arising from unrestricted public discourse. However, in both Lebanon and Tunisia, the political economy of the media has brought about hybrid structures of ownership where political, economic, and media power converge. In particular in Lebanon, clientelistic arrangements and “political parallelism” have locked the media into economic and political dependencies with limited space for journalistic initiatives. At the same time, intra-elite competition has generated a form of competitive pluralism that allows journalists to engage in investigative activities that increase the level of uncertainty for political elites, as none of the competing factions is able to control the flow of information as a whole. The emergence of media outlets that go against the mainstream further intensifies the “uncertainty game,” as they challenge the elite consensus of acceptable issues and provide opportunities for whistleblowers. However, for most media outlets, economic constraints resulting from limited advertising revenues and shrinking audiences prevent this to be a viable option.

For western observers, the hybridization of journalistic cultures often appears as deviance from recognized professional norms, as it incorporates a range of journalistic practices that are informed by considerations external to “media logic.” However, hybrid journalistic practices can be seen as a strategy to navigate a volatile political landscape where the rules of the game are kept deliberately ambiguous to enforce self-censorship.

Our interview material suggests that many journalists play a double game of subservience and defiance, between a loyal-facilitator role and a watchdog role often couched

in ambiguous language to protect themselves against persecution. In many cases, journalists manage to do both, taking on an ambiguous position that allows them to constantly test the boundaries of public discourse and push them wherever frictions or realignments in the political landscape appear, but to withdraw whenever political pressure becomes too threatening. Some journalists have become remarkably skillful in playing the elites against each other to their own benefit. Others have chosen to act as the voice of ordinary citizens, earning them respect and stature among large segments of the population, which in some cases even turns out as economically beneficial. The consequence of the multiplicity of roles journalists can adopt (individually or collectively) is that it makes it more difficult for political elites to interact with journalists and to predict the response their actions or statements might elicit in news coverage and commentary.

Finally, new communication technologies have become one of the most dynamic forces to reconfigure control over informational uncertainty in hybrid regimes. The new “network media logic” of communication (Klinger and Svensson 2015) has enabled journalists to expand the repertoire and scope of public engagement, combining professional, institution-based journalism with new forms of commentary and investigation that are shared by and tailored around the affordances of digital networks. In addition, the possibility of building relatively low-cost digital news sites allows journalists to wrest back control from the powerful alliances of media owners and politicians that characterize many hybrid regimes. Unlike investigative campaigns as a political or economic weapon in the hand of powerful media owners, these emerging news sites do have the potential to break through the “cordon sanitaire” of secrecy that protects the inner circles of power. However, the extent to which technologies empower independent journalism depends on the offline context in which digital action is embedded, as the comparison between Tunisia with its supportive civil society sector and Lebanon with its entrenched clientelism shows. But the tables are turning again. After having ignored online media as the domain of a small group of young privileged, urban mavericks, political actors have developed an increasingly sophisticated arsenal of countermeasures to manage the new tide of uncertainty. Moving beyond crude censorship, they have now turned to proactive, invasive strategies of manipulating messages and controlling communication flow in digital networks (Gunitsky 2015).

To sum up, in this paper, we have made the case for a new understanding of the media’s role under hybrid politics, which emphasizes journalists as active participants in the struggle over informational uncertainty. Rulers may well use the media as one of several tools in their “menu of manipulation,” but as our two case studies suggest, the hybridization of journalistic repertoires and the digital expansion of communicative spaces and genres further intensifies the internal contradictions of hybrid regimes, as they navigate between democratic opening and authoritarian suppression of public communication.


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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The authors are grateful to Sara Merabti Elgvin and Khaled Zaza for assistance on this research project.
2. While writing, Future TV closed down due to economic problems. It currently continues as a digital news site, including some web-TV content.
3. LBCI, "Live on Air during Her Coverage of 'You Stink': LBC's Reporter is Assaulted (in Arabic)," LBCI, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlJq9esyrls>.

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