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Newspaper Advertising in a Nontransparent Media Market: The Case of Iraqi Kurdistan (2014–2018)

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This article focuses on a particular aspect of media capture theory: advertising as a means of financing media outlets in a transitional democracy such as Iraqi Kurdistan. Its aim is to investigate the extent to which various social actors attempt to capture news media by choosing to provide financial support to some and withhold it from others through their allocation of advertisements and announcements. We report on the findings of a quantitative content analysis of the ads published in six major weekly and daily newspapers in the five-year period from 2014 through 2018 (N = 11,112). These findings provide information on the linkages between media organizations and powerful social actors within a nontransparent media environment, and shed new light on the nature and profile of both "partisan" and "independent" media outlets. We conclude by discussing the implications of these results with regard to the state of media capture in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Keywords: Iraqi Kurdistan, transitional democracy, newspaper advertising, media capture, partisan media, independent media

After the first Gulf War, the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq came into existence in 1991. Up until 2003, the region was controlled by two political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union Kurdistan (PUK), which established their own media outlets to advance their political agenda (Hussein, 2018). The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 set in motion a process of democratization: Both the political and media landscapes drastically changed, as many new political parties were founded and numerous media outlets were started. Iraqi Kurdistan became a transitional democracy (see also Hussein, 2018; MacQueen, 2015), characterized by the emergence of new institutions and a volatile political reality, where various sections of the elite, political parties, and other powerful social actors actively rethought their positions within the power structure (Mancini, 2012; Voltmer, 2013; Zielonka, 2015).

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Since 2014, the region has been suffering an economic crisis because of cuts in the transfers from the Iraqi central government and the budgetary implications of the long-term efforts of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The crisis has resulted in a dramatic deterioration of the media market, which primarily has affected independent media outlets: Hundreds of publications are believed to have closed because of financial difficulties, including the independent newspapers *Hawlati* and *Awene*. Their managers have been quoted as saying that they are failing to generate adequate ad revenue as most government and corporate advertising goes to media owned by political parties (Hardi, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Latif, 2015).

In the context of a weak economy, an unstable political system, and underdeveloped advertising revenues, some form of media capture can thrive. Media capture refers to the ways in which governments and dominant political parties build networks with other powerful social actors with the aim of controlling media, for instance, through advertising, the colonization of state resources, or clientelism (Bajomi-Lazar, 2012; Frisch, Gagon, & Agur, 2017; Yanatma, 2016). However, little is known about how this political and economic environment might impact Iraqi Kurdistan's media system.

The aim of the research is to investigate the extent to which various social actors attempt to capture news media by choosing to provide financial support to some and withhold it from others through their allocation of advertisements and announcements. It reports on the findings of a quantitative content analysis of the ads published in six major weekly and daily newspapers in the five-year period from 2014 through 2018 (N = 11,112). These findings provide information on the linkages between media organizations and powerful social actors such as state entities, private companies, political parties, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) within a nontransparent media environment, and shed new light on the nature and profile of both "partisan" and "independent" media outlets. That way, this research makes an important empirical contribution given that media organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan do not make any public announcements about their advertising revenues, and the government does not publish any data related to government advertising. This lack of economic transparency on the part of the government is generally linked to autocratic regimes and bad governance because it facilitates rent seeking and enlarges the authorities' room to maneuver (Hollyer, Peter, & James, 2019). At the same time, Iraqi Kurdistan is often regarded as a model for democratic pluralism in the Middle East region for successfully integrating democratic characteristics, such as political pluralism, free elections, a vibrant civil society, and a diverse media landscape (see also Hama et al., 2018; Hassan, 2015; Mohammad, 2020). A study on advertising as a means of financing media outlets in a transitional democracy such as Iraqi Kurdistan is therefore much needed.

In the following section, we address the history of media in Iraqi Kurdistan within the context of the changing political and economic conditions of the past decades. Subsequently, we explain the concept of media capture and introduce three potential scenarios on how media can be controlled through advertising within the context of transitional democracies. The Method section presents the research aims, the data collection process, and the method of analysis. In the following section, the findings are discussed by social actor. We conclude by discussing the implications of these results regarding the state of media capture in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Media and Politics in Iraqi Kurdistan

The Kurdish press has been an integrated part of the political and economic development of Kurds in the Middle East and more specifically in Iraq. The national project of the Kurds has been closely linked to journalism. As Hussein (2018) argues, this has been articulated through different phases for Kurdish journalism, such as "nationalism journalism" (1898–1918), when the first printed Kurdish press appeared; "resistance journalism" (1918–1979), when the Kurdish press was under strict control of the Iraqi central government; "mountain journalism" (1979–1991), with clandestine publishing against a revolutionary backdrop; and "partisan journalism" (1991–2003), after the first Gulf War (Hussein, 2018, p. 79; Taha, 2020, p. 48). Taking into account this particular history of the Kurdish press, this article focuses on a new era characterized by party/press parallelism.

To understand how this new era has developed, it is necessary to look at political events in the 1990s and 2000s. After the first Kurdish elections in 1992, the region quickly fell into civil war. Eventually, KDP and PUK came to control separate parts of Iraqi Kurdistan: The provinces of Erbil and Duhok came under the control of KDP, while Sulaymaniyah was controlled by PUK (Irwani, 2015; Khalil, 2016). Following negotiations, both sides agreed to share power and a council of ministers. In the process, both parties established their own media: In 1992, PUK launched its daily newspaper *Kurdistani Nwe*; in 1994, KDP launched *Khabat* in Erbil and *Payman* in Duhok (renamed *Evro* in 2009). *Hawler* was established in 1951 in Erbil and also came under direct control of KDP at that time. Gradually, satellite TV stations became part of this divided, party-controlled media landscape, with KDP launching Kurdistan TV in 1999, and PUK launching Kurdsat in 2000. This media landscape was thus defined by party/press parallelism in which media outlets operated parallel to the political parties that owned and funded them (see also Mancini, 2012). This did not stop the emergence of some private initiatives too: The foundation of the newspaper *Hawlati* in 2000 was seen as a hopeful turning point (Al-Rawi, 2012).

Between 2003 and 2018, the situation changed drastically, and a total of 831 newspapers and magazines, 33 TV satellites, 74 radio stations, and 82 local TV channels came into existence, as did online journalism (Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate, 2017). However, in the context of a lack of official data, the sources of funding for these media organizations remain unclear, and ambiguity even exists with regard to the ownership of the most popular and respected media outlets that profile themselves as independent/private media. Kurdish media scholars and international NGOs (Hussein, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2010) have previously categorized media outlets into three types: (1) Partisan media outlets refer to so-called party organs that are openly controlled by political parties, such as *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Evro*, *Hawler*, Kurdistan TV, and Kurdsat. (2) Independent media outlets refer to organizations that are financially dependent on sales, advertising, and aid from international organizations, and are thus considered to operate outside the influence of social powers, such as *Hawlati* and *Awene*. In this regard, numerous international foundations entered Iraq after 2003 to support media democratization and journalism, such as the United Nations Development Program and the U.S. Agency for International Development. However, some studies have emphasized the lack of clarity regarding these sources of international aid, casting doubt on whether particular media are truly independent or in fact funded by the U.S. government (Al-Rawi, 2012, 2015). (3) Shadow media outlets refer to media organizations that profile themselves as independent despite indirectly receiving funding from political parties or other powerful social

actors (Hussein, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2010). These outlets are often owned by high-ranking politicians who are also business tycoons. In fact, the two largest media companies, *Rudaw* Media Networks and *Nalia* Media Corporation, are considered examples of this type (Hama, Abdullah, & Jasem, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Wikileaks, 2012).

Several studies have expressed concern about the interference of the ruling parties in governmental institutions, business, and NGOs. Kurdish and international scholars have argued that the KRG's public administration and the Kurdistan National Assembly function as party organizations rather than as a regional government or parliamentary body, as both are actually operated by officials who also act as functionaries for political party leaders (Irwani, 2015). Furthermore, research has pointed out how this domination by two political parties has turned corruption and patronage into major issues in the KRG (Berwari & Ambrosio, 2008; Relly, Zanger, & Fahmy, 2014). These ruling parties have been found to exploit the KRG's budget for their own interests (Irwani, 2015). Mills (2016) describes the political economy of the KRG as a "classic 'rentier state,'" characterized by "a lack of domestic taxation, heavy subsidies to the populace, a high degree of state employment, . . . the prevalence of patronage and corruption, and an authoritarian government albeit with democratic elements" (p. 31).

It is no surprise then that the ruling parties also have a large impact on the economic sector. International research institutions and Kurdish scholars have established how much the political economy of the region is characterized by economic monopolies and nepotistic links (Finkel, 2015; Irwani, 2015). For instance, the major Internet and telecom providers are owned by the two ruling parties (e.g., Korek Telecom is owned by KDP leaders and Asiacell by PUK leaders). Finally, Hassan (2015) describes the KRG's political economy as an example of crony capitalism: the result of a strong interlocking between the ruling party and the state. The public treasury and private capital become indistinguishable, and the constitution and laws are manipulated in the interests of the ruling parties. Others have argued how this impact also extends to NGOs, with whom ruling parties hold a clear clientelist relationship (Finkel, 2015).

However, little is known about how this environment might impact the media economics in Iraqi Kurdistan. Previous research has highlighted how indispensable examining the overlap of interests among media ownership, politics, and business is to understanding the dynamics of media systems under democratic transition (Schiffrin, 2017a; Yesil, 2018; Zielonka, 2015).

Media Capture in Transitional Democracies

This study concerns the nature of relationships between media and politics in transitional democracies. The framework of media capture is particularly apt for understanding these relationships as it starts very much from the political realities on the ground (e.g., Bajomi-Lazar, 2012; Yanatma, 2016). Media capture has been defined as a "systemic governance problem where political leaders and media owners work together in a symbiotic but mutually corrupting relationship: Media owners provide supportive news coverage to political leaders in exchange for favorable government treatment of their business and political interests" (Finkel, 2015, p. 1). Research on media capture has focused on three particular mechanisms with which governments and dominant political parties attempt to control media: (1) state advertising (Kodrich, 2008; Schiffrin, 2017b; Yanatma, 2016); (2) the regulatory environment: media law, regulatory bodies,

and governmental bureaucracy (Bajomi-Lazar, 2012; Relly & Zanger, & Fahmy, 2015; Ryabinska, 2014); and (3) symbiotic linkages with journalists (Frisch et al., 2017; Morris, 2016; Stiglitz, 2017).

In this article, we focus on the first mechanism, advertising as a means of financing media outlets, with the aim of examining the development of Iraqi Kurdistan's newspaper industry as well as the linkages between media organizations and powerful social actors within a nontransparent media environment. The literature on media capture has put forward three possible scenarios for controlling media through advertising in the context of transitional democracies.

A first scenario is a situation known as "advertising as media capture," in which governments capture news media through state advertising and announcements. This form of control refers to how a biased and/or nontransparent allocation or withholding of state advertising increases the control over the economic viability and content of media (Kodrich, 2008; Yanatma, 2016; Yesil, 2018). This usually occurs when media organizations are vulnerable to financial difficulties, when the media market is small and fragmented, and when the newspaper industry is immature (Schiffrin, 2017b). Such impact is inevitable in small advertising markets given that small newspapers must survive entirely on advertising and governments continue to be the largest advertisers within the media market. Media outlets must therefore seek politically motivated subsidies. Studies have revealed that a state can interfere with the work of journalists either directly or indirectly under pressure from the editor-in-chief or the advertisers themselves. Such interference can also occur through self-censorship, as journalists might have the placement of advertising in mind when performing their jobs (Eberl, Wagner, & Boomgaarden, 2018).

A second scenario involves the influence of state advertising on the behavior of advertisers within private companies. Commercial advertisers have been found to loyally track state advertisers in terms of how they allocate advertisements to media outlets, thereby ensuring that their advertisements are published in media that have the support of powerful political actors. The symbiotic connection between private advertisers and media outlets that are friendly to the government can be voluntary, as some large-scale companies (e.g., telecommunications companies and banks) have strong connections to the ruling parties. Moreover, in many cases, business enterprises are owned by political parties, and their distribution of advertisements is heavily dependent on the direction of these parties (Yesil, 2018). Such linkages can help commercial actors strengthen their positions within political networks. Previous research has found journalists explaining how they are expected to write positive news stories about particular private companies as their media outlets depend on their sponsorship through either advertising or loans (Milojević & Krstić, 2018). Such is not always the case, however, and private advertisers do not always use advertising to meddle in the editorial content of the news media. Sometimes they are under state (i.e., legal) pressure to follow particular policies, specifically with regard to the distribution of advertisements to media outlets that are critical of the state. In such situations, governments thus exercise their power through regulations (and lawsuits) and inspections as a means of punishing private advertisers (Milojević & Krstic, 2018).

A third scenario involves media control related to the linkages between states and parties. Advertising can arguably be controlled directly by the ruling parties through their supermajority position within various governmental bodies. This situation is known as "state capture" (Zielonka, 2015, p. 26). Bajomi-Lazar (2017) uses this concept to explain the motivations of dominant parties attempting to control

state resources (e.g., state advertising). The majority of existing studies have proceeded from the assumption that powerful social actors seek control over advertising to suppress critical voices and gain favorable coverage, thereby influencing voting behavior. At the same time, however, they have largely ignored other possible motivations. Bajomi-Lazar (2015, 2017) establishes the extent to which ruling political parties rely on state subsidies that guarantee their organizational survival. The nature of strong relationships between parties and the state can be analyzed under a variety of patterns in transitional democracies. The first pattern has to do with the party's dependence on the state because parties receive public funding. This type of relationship is related to the notion of "cartel-style party politics," in which dominant political parties build strong networks with the state based on previous contracts in a process of "cartelization" (Zielonka, 2015, p. 80). The second pattern concerns the colonization of the state by a party. This type of relationship between the state and a political party is the most complex, referring to rent-seeking behavior on the part of ruling political parties within government institutions. In this respect, Bajomi-Lazar (2015, 2017) argues that dominant political parties use symbiotic connections with the state to take control of the media, for instance, by colonizing public broadcasting services for a variety of purposes (e.g., to control state advertising as a source of financing).

Method

Research Aims

Regarding media market development, the role of the state, and political parallelism, Iraqi Kurdistan is a clear example of a nontransparent media environment. The funding of media organizations in particular is nontransparent: Ownership structures are hidden; information on circulation, consumption, and revenue is controlled by media owners; and information on public service broadcasting is controlled by the government. There are no independent organizations that offer information about funding sources or about the affiliation of media outlets, such as the World Association of Newspapers or the World Bank. For that reason, we advance an innovative methodology to examine the allocation of advertisements on two levels.

First, whereas the majority of existing research in the context of transitional democracies has limited itself to examining the role of state advertising as a means of governmental control (e.g., Kodrich, 2008; Petrova, 2008), this study expands this approach to include other social actors as advertisers, such as political parties, private companies, and NGOs.

Second, whereas other scholars (e.g., Yanatma, 2016) have examined documents collected from the websites of advertising agencies to ascertain how much state advertisements are allocated to which newspaper, we focus directly on the published advertisements in a broad selection of newspapers because we have no such websites or databases at our disposal. We developed a content analysis method that allowed us to establish the (portrayed) source and size of advertisements and announcements, with the aim of drawing conclusions about how different social actors choose to financially support particular newspapers over others.

Finally, this methodological framework also sheds new light on the nature and profile of different types media outlets by providing important information on which newspapers can rightly present themselves as independent while others are really shadow newspapers. At the same time, it is interesting to see the

advertising patterns in the partisan newspapers, as it opens questions about which other social actors primarily advertise in them.

Data Selection

To establish the role played by different social actors in the allocation of advertising and announcements, this study involved a quantitative content analysis of six major weekly and daily newspapers between 2014 and 2018: *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Rudaw*, *Awene*, *Evro*, *Hawler*, and *Hawlati*. These newspapers were selected according to type and profile (i.e., partisan, independent, shadow) and region-wide distribution (see also Hussein, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2010).

First, *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Hawler*, and *Evro* identify themselves as partisan newspapers as they are openly funded by political parties. *Evro* and *Hawler* get direct funding from KDP, *Evro* being based in Duhok and *Hawler* in Erbil. *Kurdistani Nwe* gets direct funding from PUK, and is based in Sulaymaniyah. All are distributed in the other regions as well. Although these newspapers were born as partisan newspapers, there are no official data on the sponsorship of these media organizations. We raised this issue with the editors of newspapers (*Kurdistani Nwe*, *Hawler*, and *Evro*) when visiting their archives on location and we were told that it is not a secret that the respective political parties are replenishing the necessary amount after the revenue from ads and sales has been established (J. Haji, personal communication, August 4, 2019; B. Naci, personal communication, July 22, 2019; A. Stran, personal communication, August 21, 2019).

Second, *Rudaw*, *Hawlati*, and *Awene* profile themselves as independent newspapers. *Hawlati* (translated as "Citizens," founded in 2000) and *Awene* (translated as "Mirror," 2006) are regarded as the first independent newspapers in the history of Iraqi Kurdistan. They present themselves as critical media outlets that uncover corruption on the part of the government and political parties (Hussein, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2010). Two journalists were assassinated in recent years following news stories related to government corruption (Latif, 2015; Reporters Without Borders, 2010). *Hawlati* and *Awene* are based in Sulaymaniyah, but are distributed in all three regions. On location, we were told that both newspapers used to receive large donations from international foundations such as IKV Pax Christi and Free Press Unlimited. These were stopped, however, in the wake of Islamic State's military offensives in 2014, as these foundations redirected their aid to provide education and shelter to refugees, according to the editors of *Awene* and *Hawlati* newspapers (T. Fateh, personal communication, August 21, 2019; A. Hardi, personal communication, August 22, 2019). The *Rudaw* Media Network is regarded as the largest media institution in the history of Kurdish media (Hama et al., 2018). It profiles itself as an independent media outlet. However, previous research has revealed that *Rudaw* is owned by the current president of Iraqi Kurdistan (Hama et al., 2018; Hussein, 2018). Furthermore, according to information published by Wikileaks (2012) and Reporters Without Borders (2010), the government makes monthly payments to the newspaper. *Rudaw* is also distributed in all three regions.

This study focuses on the period between 2014 and 2018. This focus not only allowed us to integrate the potential implications of the ongoing economic crisis since 2014, but also the potential implications of four political campaigns. Indeed, in this period, four elections were held: the Iraqi parliamentary elections of April 2014 and May 2018, the independence referendum of September 2017, and

the Kurdish parliamentary elections of September 2018. Previous studies have pointed to the pressure experienced by news media in Iraqi Kurdistan during the authorized 40 days' election campaign because of their potential impact on voters, as political actors are likely to use their advertising expenditure to influence journalists or editors (Besley & Prat, 2006).

We collected all of the archival editions (as PDFs) of the six newspapers that were published between 2014 and 2018 and saved them to an external hard drive. Although the corpus includes every issue of the weekly newspapers (i.e., 48 issues per year), this was not feasible for the daily newspapers. To arrive at a comparable number of editions, we selected four issues per month, each published on a different day of the week. There were two exceptions: *Hawlati* ceased its operations between February 2016 and April 2018. The corpus therefore includes eight issues from 2016, zero from 2017, and 25 from 2018. Similarly, only 28 issues of *Awene* are included for 2018, as it stopped issuing its print version in August 2018. As shown in Table 1, this corresponds to a total number of 240 issues for *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Hawler*, *Evro*, and *Rudaw*; 129 for *Hawlati*; and 220 for *Awene*.

Table 1. Number of Issues per Newspaper (2014–2018).

Media type	Newspaper	Issues (*n*)
Partisan	*Evro*	240
	Kurdistani Nwe	240
	Hawler	240
Independent	*Hawlati*	129
	Awene	220
	Rudaw	240
Total		1,309

Data Analysis

Because it is impossible to examine advertising revenue in monetary terms in the nontransparent media environment of Iraqi Kurdistan (e.g., Besley & Prat, 2006), and we had no access to advertising agency websites or databases (e.g., Yanatma, 2016), we focused directly on the advertisements and announcements as they were published in the selected newspapers. For each advertisement or announcement, we coded (1) the size (in cm^2), (2) the portrayed source (i.e., state-based entities, political parties, commercial companies, NGOs), and (3) the province where the source was based.

Because we worked with PDFs, the advertising space in square centimeters reported does not reflect the actual size of the advertisements. We converted the advertising space to ratios for each category (e.g., state entities, private companies, political parties, and NGOs). This process can be explained as follows:

$X(i)$ = total area of advertisements and announcements for newspaper i.

$Y(i)$ = total area of advertisements and announcements from government entities for newspaper i.

Z(*i*) = total area of advertisements and announcements from private companies for newspaper *i*.

W(*i*) = total area of advertisements and announcements from NGOs for newspaper *i*.

K(*i*) = total area of advertisements and announcements from different political parties for newspaper *i*.

a = year value, ranging (2014 and 2018).

i = newspaper, with the following values: *Evro*, *Hawlati*, *Kurdistani Nwe*, *Awene*, *Hawler*, *Rudaw.* We calculated the total advertisement area for each source in each newspaper for the five-year period as follows:

$$Y(i) = \sum_{a=2014}^{2018} Y(i,a), \quad (1)$$

where *Y*(*i*, *a*) represents the total advertisement area from a given government source for year (*a*) for newspaper (*i*). Similarly,

$$Z(i) = \sum_{a=2014}^{2018} Z(i,a), \quad (2)$$

$$W(i) = \sum_{a=2014}^{2018} W(i,a), \quad (3)$$

$$K(i) = \sum_{a=2014}^{2018} K(i,a). \quad (4)$$

We then calculated the total advertisement area for each newspaper *X*(*i*) as follows:

$$X(i) = Y(i) + Z(i) + W(i) + K(i). \quad (5)$$

All portrayed sources were categorized according to source and region. Regarding private companies, a further distinction was made between local and international companies. Regarding political parties, the situation was more complex. According to the Ministry of the Interior, 29 political parties have been established in the region since 2003 (Irwani, 2015). In 2009, Movement for Change (Gorran) emerged from PUK and was regarded as an opposition party. Another opposition party is New Generation Movement (Naway Nwe), established in 2018. At present, there are three major ruling parties: KDP, PUK, and Movement for Change. The 111 MPs in the Kurdistan Parliament represent the diversity of political lists and parties, as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Election Results of September 2018 in Parliamentary Seats.

Party	Seats in parliament (*n*)
Kurdistan Democratic Party	45
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	21
Movement for Change	12
New Generation Movement	8
Kurdistan Islamic Group	7
Hevpeymaniya Ber bi Îslah (Toward Reform)	5
Turkman minority reserved seats	4
Chaldean Assyrian Council (Christian)	1
Modern Alliance	1
Freedom List	1

Source. "Kurdistan Parliament Federal Republic of Iraq" (n.d.).

However, essential to understanding the political situation in Iraqi Kurdistan is the concentration of power across the different provinces. Based on the parliamentary election results of 2013 and 2018, Table 3 shows how KDP is the dominant party in the provinces of Duhok and Erbil, and Movement for Change and PUK are the dominant parties in Sulaymaniyah. For that reason, the province of origin was coded for each portrayed source.

Table 3. Election Results of September 2013, 2018 in Percentage per Province.

	Sulaymaniyah		Erbil		Duhok	
Largest political parties	2013	2018	2013	2018	2013	2018
Kurdistan Democratic Party	11.00	9.77	48.00	49.31	70.00	73.32
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	29.00	35.95	13.00	22.00	6.00	8.37
Movement for Change	41.00	40.55	18.00	14.00	3.00	4.69
Kurdistan Islamic Group	8.00	6.28	7.00	7.66	1.00	12.75
Kurdistan Islamic Union	10.00	2.00	7.00	1.00	13.00	<1.00
Others	<1.00	1.01	7.00	2.73	8.00	0.80

Source. "Kurdistan Parliament Federal Republic of Iraq" (n.d.).

Findings

In this section, we discuss the findings by actor, starting with state-based entities and continuing with private companies, political parties, and international NGOs. Regarding state-based entities, it is clear that they served as the largest source of advertising between 2014 and 2018 in terms of both numbers (see Table 4) and space (see Table 5). However, Tables 4 and 5 also show that a large majority of these public advertisements and announcements were distributed to newspapers with direct ties to political parties (i.e., partisan newspapers).

Table 4. Number of Advertisements by Newspaper and Social Actor (2014–2018).

Newspaper	State entities	Private companies	Political parties	Nongovernmental organizations	Total (2014–2018)
Partisan					
Evro n (%)	1,998 (76)	370 (13)	35 (5)	152 (5)	2,555
Hawler n (%)	1,011 (84)	54 (4)	71 (6)	63 (5)	1,199
Kurdistani New n (%)	3,064 (90)	227 (7)	31 (1)	55 (2)	3,377
Independent					
Awene n (%)	586 (28)	1,466 (66)	41 (2)	24 (1)	2,117
Hawlati n (%)	381 (41)	400 (49)	71 (3)	8 (1)	860
Rudaw n (%)	13 (1)	989 (99)	2 (0)	0 (0)	1,004

In contrast, the other newspapers obtained remarkably fewer advertisements from the government. For example, although *Rudaw* has always been controversial in terms of its financial autonomy and has previously been identified as "shadow media," we found that it received the fewest advertisements in both frequency and size from government institutions between 2014 and 2018 (see Table 4; Hama et al., 2018, p. 3). For example, *Rudaw* obtained only 13 advertisements from the government during that period (see Table 4), accounting for approximately 2% of the total advertising space (see Table 5).

Table 5. Size of Advertisements by Newspaper and Social Actor (2014–2018).

Newspaper	State entities	Private companies	Political parties	Nongovernmental organizations	Total (2014–2018)
Partisan					
Evro % (cm2)	41 (57,170)	39 (54,808)	9 (12,496)	11 (15,350)	100 (139,825)
Hawler % (cm2)	69 (111,531)	11 (17,547)	15 (23,848)	5 (7,584)	100 (160.504)
Kurdistani New % (cm2)	75 (107,473)	19 (27.432)	3 (3,802)	3 (4,324)	100 (143,030)
Independent					
Awene % (cm^2)	13 (16,335)	81 (100,667)	4 (4,337)	2 (2,344)	100 (123,683)
Hawlati % (cm^2)	33 (39,578)	8 (10,536)	31 (37,102)	9 (10,575)	100 (97,791)
Rudaw % (cm^2)	2 (2,883)	98 (182,314)	<1 (429)	0 (0)	100 (185,626)

When we take a closer look at these results by year, it is remarkable how the size of state advertising in *Hawlati* dropped from 43% to 14% between 2015 and 2016 (see Figure 1). Between February 2016 and August 2018, *Hawlati* stopped publishing. In other words, this suggests that this drop in state advertising may have been a significant factor in negatively affecting its economic performance. As noted in previous studies, one mechanism used by governments involves suddenly discontinuing their allocation of advertisements to critical media outlets while continuing to grant large advertisements to other media outlets.

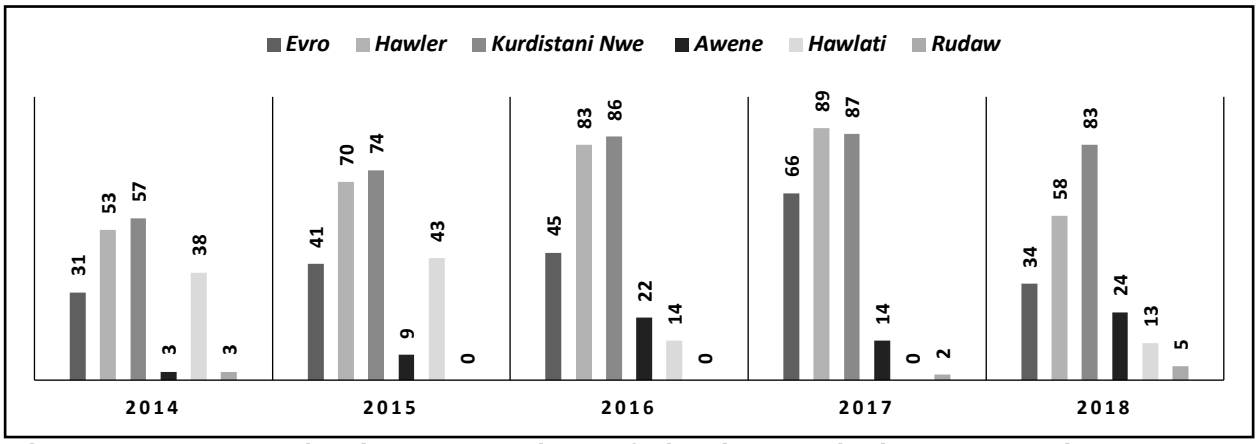

Figure 1. Government advertisements: Total area of advertisements in six newspapers (2014–2018).

Our results further indicate that political divisions have had notable effects on the distribution of state advertising. For example, the PUK-owned newspaper *Kurdistani Nwe* received the largest number of ads from state entities in Sulaymaniyah, where PUK is a dominant political party. At the same time, the KDP-owned newspapers *Evro* and *Hawler* received the largest number from Duhok and Erbil, respectively, where KDP is the dominant party (see Table 6).

Table 6. Total Number of Advertisements by Actor and Province (2014–2018).

Actor by province	*Evro*	*Hawler*	*Kurdistani Nwe*	*Awene*	*Hawlati*	*Rudaw*
State entities in Sulaymaniyah Province	0	20	3,061	585	346	0
State entities in Erbil Province	0	991	3	1	35	13
State entities in Duhok Province	1,998	0	0	0	0	0
Private companies in Sulaymaniyah Province	30	4	161	1,372	380	162
Private companies in Erbil Province	86	37	29	23	7	827
Private companies in Duhok Province	206	0	0	0	0	0
International private companies	48	13	37	71	13	0
International nongovernmental organizations	152	63	55	24	8	0
Parties based in Sulaymaniyah Province	0	0	31	38	63	0
Parties based in Erbil Province	0	71	0	3	8	2
Parties based in Duhok Province	35	0	0	0	0	0

In the case of advertising from private companies, we found these to allocate ads to all six newspapers, but with remarkable differences. The largest share of corporate ads was published in the independent newspapers: *Awene* recorded the highest in absolute numbers, and *Rudaw* recorded the largest advertisement space (see Tables 4 and 5).

For the partisan newspapers *Evro* and *Kurdistan Nwe*, corporate ads were the second highest source of advertising, but especially in terms of absolute numbers, this share was nothing compared with that from state-based entities. For *Hawlati*, there was a remarkable difference in the share of corporate ads between absolute numbers (the largest in comparison to other sources of advertising) and space (less than 10%). Similar to state ads, the distribution of corporate ads was nevertheless highly concentrated in terms of geography. Almost all of these in *Awene*, *Hawlati*, and *Kurdistani Nwe* came from companies based in Sulaymaniyah, where the newspapers were also based. A similar pattern was observed for the other newspapers, with Duhok in the case of *Evro* and Erbil in the case of *Rudaw* and *Hawler*.

In the case of political parties, we found that party advertisements were distributed only during the election periods: (1) the Iraqi parliamentary elections on April 30, 2014; (2) the Iraqi parliamentary elections on May 12, 2018; and (3) the Iraqi Kurdistan parliamentary election on September 30, 2018. The total volume of party advertising (frequency and area) distributed to the six newspapers is presented in Tables 4 and 5. As shown in these tables, the number of party ads was quite low (with percentages between 5% and 0%). To enhance precision concerning the allocation of party ads, we examined each election separately to identify the political parties from which the newspapers obtained their advertisements during the campaigns. The results clearly indicate that the newspapers identifying themselves as partisan newspapers obtained party advertisements from their owners during each of the election periods. For example*, Kurdistan Nwe* received ads from PUK, and *Hawler* and *Evro* obtained ads from KDP, the dominant party in Duhok and Erbil (see Tables 7, 8, and 9).

Table 7. Party Advertisements as a Percentage of the Total Advertising Space per Newspaper During the First Election Period (April 11, 2014–May 1, 2014).

Newspaper	Kurdistan Democratic Party	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Movement for Change	Other parties
Evro	16.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Hawler	46.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Kurdistan Nwe	0.00	57.00	0.00	0.00
Awene	0.00	22.00	21.00	0.00
Hawlati	5.00	32.00	28.00	0.00
Rudaw	8.04	0.00	0.00	0.00

With regard to party advertising, it is interesting that, although several political parties participated in the three parliamentary elections, the independent newspapers obtained advertising almost exclusively from the three dominant political parties: PUK, KDP, and Movement for Change (see Tables 7, 8, and 9). For example, during the first election, *Awene* obtained advertising from the two major parties in Sulaymaniyah: PUK and the Movement for Change. *Hawlati* also obtained ads from PUK and Movement for Change, as well as from KDP, the major political party in Erbil and Duhok, although to a much smaller extent. During the second election, both *Awene* and *Hawlati* obtained advertisements from a variety of political parties. This was particularly true for *Awene* (see Table 9). *Rudaw* received almost no party advertising. For example, it obtained only three ads from KDP during the first election (see Table 7). Similarly, *Kurdistan Nwe* obtained no party advertising in the second election (see Table 8).

Table 8. Party Advertisements as a Percentage of the Total Advertising Space per Newspaper During the Second Election Period (April 10, 2018–May 11, 2018).

Newspaper	Kurdistan Democratic Party	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Movement for Change	Communist Party	New Generation	Coalition for Democracy and Justice	National Coalition	Other parties
Evro	78.53	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Hawler	77.12	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Kurdistani Nwe	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Awene	0.00	9.11	13.89	7.73	16.25	0.33	2.77	0.00
Hawlati	12.84	14.17	23.47	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Rudaw	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Surprisingly, *Awene* stopped publication during the 2018 elections (see Table 9). At the same time, *Hawlati* received party advertisements only from PUK, the dominant party in Sulaymaniyah. In the third election campaign, the share of PUK ads even reached 87% of the total advertising space. This raises questions concerning the extent to which *Hawlati* might have been influenced by PUK.

Table 9. Party Advertisements as a Percentage of the Total Advertising Space per Newspaper During the Third Election Period (September 1–30, 2018).

Newspaper	Kurdistan Democratic Party	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Other parties
Evro	81.93	0.00	0.00
Hawler	78.07	0.00	0.00
Kurdistani Nwe	0.00	28.73	0.00
Awene		Ceased publication August 7, 2018	
Hawlati	0.00	87.10	0.00
Rudaw	0.00	0.00	0.00

As indicated in previous studies, political actors potentially use their advertising expenditures to influence journalists or editors by "buying" more positive media coverage (Eberl et al., 2018, p. 782). This influence can be substantial when the advertisers are political parties, as it represents both political and economic pressure on journalism (see also DeLorme & Fedler, 2005; Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

In the fourth component of our study, we examined how NGOs allocated their advertisements to the six selected newspapers between 2014 and 2018. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, the newspapers identifying themselves as party-owned newspapers received considerably more ads from NGOs than those that identified themselves as independent. Closer inspection of the geographic origins of the NGOs revealed that almost all of those that allocated their ads to party-owned newspapers were international foundations that had entered Iraqi Kurdistan for purposes of humanitarian aid (see Table 10). The majority of the content of the ads were announcements of job offers, international and national bids/tenders, and other procurement notices.

Table 10. Top Six International Nongovernmental Organizations That Allocated Advertisements to Newspapers Owned by Dominant Political Parties in Iraqi Kurdistan (2014–2018).

Evro	Hawler	Kurdistani Nwe
1. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit	1. International Organization for Migration	1. United Nations Population Fund
2. KURDS Organization Corporation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	2. Korea International Corporation Agency	2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
3. Norwegian Church Aid	3. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	3. Qandil (Sweden's humanitarian aid organization)
4. Peace Winds (Japan's humanitarian aid organization)	4. Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development	4. United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
5. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	5. The International Committee of the Red Cross	5. Reach (international humanitarian aid organization)
6. Lutheran World Federation Foundations	6. International Relief and Development	6. Qatar Red Crescent Society

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on a quantitative analysis of the ads published in six major weekly and daily newspapers, this study provides many significant findings regarding the use of advertising to study media capture in a nontransparent media environment. Not only does the analysis allow us to draw conclusions on potential informal linkages between media organizations and powerful social actors, but it also provides significant input for evaluating the nature and profile of both partisan and independent media outlets.

First, the findings show that the ruling political parties have clearly succeeded in capturing state resources when looking at the geographical distribution of advertisements: The party-owned newspapers (*Evro*, *Kurdistani Nwe*, and *Hawler*) received many more advertisements from the state than their counterparts did. On an abstract level, this confirms the existence of strong links among the government, ruling political parties, and the partisan press, at the same time as it shows how much ruling political parties rely on "state subsidies" to guarantee their organizational survival. This sets these results apart from classic work on the partisan press, in which case it was owned and funded directly by the political parties themselves (e.g., Mancini, 2012). Furthermore, the findings also demonstrate how much their reach extends to international NGOs, as the latter are clearly biased toward the party-owned newspapers in terms of advertising. This confirms previous studies that have shown how NGOs turn into apparatuses of the state and politicians (Atia & Herrold, 2018). This appears to be particularly the case within systems in which political parties engage in patronage and clientelism, with state officials using their positions within governmental bodies to build ties to various organizations at the local, regional, national, and even international levels.

Second, whereas almost no state advertisements were provided to *Rudaw*, both *Hawlati* and *Awene* were provided with some, but significantly less compared with the partisan newspapers. Withholding state advertising from independent media has most likely contributed to the recent financial difficulties and the subsequent cessation of their activities. However, other factors clearly play a role too, as *Rudaw* continues to publish, despite registering the lowest number of state ads.

Third, with regard to the relationships between the independent press and political parties, previous studies have demonstrated that when politicians become media funders, probably with the aim of influencing voting behavior (through party advertisements), they continue to maintain certain kinds of ties with those media. Independent newspapers are therefore likely to be subjected to political pressure too. In our study, *Hawlati* received party advertising from the three major parties in the first and second election campaigns, but this changed in the third election, when *Hawlati* only published ads from the ruling party in Sulaymaniyah (PUK). We therefore assume that the partisan allocation of advertising might be an indicator of high political parallelism within independent media organizations too. We further found that *Awene* was the only newspaper to receive advertisements from a variety of political parties, particularly during the period in which it was funded by the American embassy. In this regard, a previous study by Scott, Bunce, and Wright (2019) argues that international funding may help preserve journalistic autonomy by "reducing the likelihood of pressure from an owner or advertiser giving reporters more time to work on a story freeing them to pursue less-popular topics" (p. 2036). Immediately following the election campaigns, the American embassy's financial support for *Awene* stopped, and the newspaper shut down shortly afterward because of a lack of financial viability. According to its editor, the sponsorship by the American Consulate was to support a project called "democratic election campaigns in Iraq" (Hardi, 2018, p. 1). This confirms previous studies that argue how much the lack of financial sustainability of U.S.-sponsored projects remains one of the central challenges for independent media in developing countries (Ford, 2005; Myers, 2009). However, in contrast to *Hawlati*, *Awene* obtained direct financial support from the United States and had many more advertisements, yet it was unable to survive the financial crisis. This raises questions concerning who exactly is funding *Hawlati*.

Fourth, although corporate ads were published in both partisan and independent newspapers, they were found much more in the latter. At the same time, this support was clearly concentrated by area, suggesting that the geographical and administrative division by the major ruling parties also impacts the decisions by businesspersons. Khalil (2016) showed how "the PUK supporters would be prevented from investing in the KDP zone and vice versa. As a result, investors remained in their areas and supported the dominant party there" (p. 93). Indeed, our data show that *Awene* and *Hawlati* received advertisements from private companies in the area dominated by PUK, and *Rudaw* received the largest number from private companies in the area controlled by KDP. This also corresponds to previous research that has argued that the majority of large companies choose to allocate their advertisements to media that are either indirectly owned by politicians or have strong ties to ruling political parties, and this is to show their loyalty (Hussein, 2018). There is no public information on who funds *Rudaw* Media Networks. In line with previous studies, Hussein (2018) describes *Rudaw* as an example of "shadow media," meaning that it receives indirect monthly funding from the government, as it is owned by Iraqi Kurdistan's current president Nichervan Barzani (Hussein, 2018, p. 7; Taha, 2020, p. 71). Our findings indeed show that *Rudaw* has strong ties to private companies in the area controlled by KDP. Within the context of transitional democracies, Stetka (2015) notes that some private

media organizations are controlled by wealthy tycoons and politicians with good connections (e.g., prime ministers/presidents). According to the oligarchic ownership model, these actors build crony links to advertising agencies, thereby establishing conglomerates (Zielonka, 2015, p. 93). In this model, media owners act as philanthropists, funding media outlets without being transparently involved in their media management and production, thus using their news as an instrument for advancing their political and economic interests. Future studies should address the link between *Rudaw* and the private sector.

Overall, this study provides a guiding framework with which to better understand informal ties among various social groups (e.g., government, media owners, politicians, commercial actors, and NGOs). This new understanding could improve predictions of the impact of advertisers' control on media content, as well as the interdependencies among powerful social actors, in a context where reliable data are missing.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, media organizations make no public announcement of their revenues. This lack of information limited our ability to examine the budgets that advertisers allocate to each newspaper. These limitations notwithstanding, our study provides insight into the biased orientations of advertisers toward specific media outlets. The analysis has raised several issues that call for further investigation, such as the informal connections between advertisers and media outlets as well as the potential impact of advertisers on journalistic output. Additional questions concern the methods that media organizations use to obtain advertisements from powerful institutions and the role that authorities play in regulating (or not) advertising.

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