The Perception of Media Professionals About Freedom of Information Access and the Coverage of Political Issues in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Abstract

The media in Iraqi Kurdistan have a different agenda when covering the political issues and therefore they use different frames in their coverage as the ownership of the Kurdish media is divided among the ruling parties, opposition and independent media. This research examines the level of freedom to access information about the public sector and the restrictions on journalists in obtaining information, particularly relating to the identified political issues, which will allow examination of government transparency. Alongside this, the research seeks to understand the use of values and frames in the news coverage according to the views of media professionals in five media organisations. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from media professionals particularly the Chief News Editor and Managing News Editors of the television channels and websites. The research found that is the lack of freedom to obtain information in the public sector and present the news or report it without reference to its source, all of which need to be considered by news-makers. This problem aggravates the lack of transparency on the part of the government to allow freedom to publish and broadcast. This research suggests two major points as a solution and challenges to the media in Kurdistan through two legal regulations. The first would be the establishing of a public service media in order to strike a balance between the opposition and ruling parties and to offer coverage of the political issues without the influence of political parties on their output. The second regulation would be difficult to achieve quickly because it is related to the level of corruption in the government and ruling parties that have monopolised the biggest companies in order to provide funds to the independent media for advertising.

INTRODUCTION

In Iraqi Kurdistan, there is no national broadcasting service as the media is controlled by the main political parties (Bali & Cere, 2018). This research examines the level of freedom to access information about the public sector and the restrictions on journalists in obtaining information, particularly relating to the identified political issues, which will allow examination of government transparency. Alongside this, the research seeks to understand the use of values and frames in the news coverage according to the views of media professionals in the media studied in this research. The role of media ownership is important because they can drive the media's strategies to choose and cover certain issues for the sake of predicted impacts on the target audience (Bali, Karim, & Rached, 2018).

The media platforms in this research were selected according to their ownership since the political television channels are monopolised by the political parties. The media in Kurdistan have a different agenda when covering these issues and therefore it can be assumed that they use different frames in their coverage as the ownership of the Kurdish media is divided among the ruling parties, opposition and independent media. In this sense, the two channels, namely GK TV, one the main political TV, is owned by Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) which is

one of the main political parties in power, while KNN TV, the opposition political TV, is owned by the Gorran Movement which is also the main opposition party. Alongside the two television channels, this research selected three websites, the online versions of former or existing printed publications, namely Xendan, owned by the PUK and the Sbeiy Website which is owned by the Gorran Movement. Both these websites formerly had a print version but now they only retain an online presence. The final Eebsite is Awena which is independent and still has a print version, but this research focuses on its online output in order to maintain coherence with the other two websites and because online media have become more popular than print media.

To this purpose, five newsmakers were interviewed, three of them were Chief News Editors, and of the two remaining one was the Managing Editor of news and the final one was the Head of Public Relations. The interview with media professionals enables to evaluate how they view the coverage of political issues and to what extent they can access the public sector to obtain information about these issues.

1. THE RECENT HISTORY OF KURDISH MEDIA

Following the revolution in 1991, each political party started to establish its own media (Bali, 2016a), and several reasons are given for this. The first concerns political publicity and the need for each party to become more popular within the new political regime and system. At that time people's living standards were low, and there was no independent media until 1999, when the first independent newspaper *Hawlati* was published in the city of Sulaymaniyah, beginning as a weekly and becoming a daily from 2005. An independent radio station, Radio Nawa, was also established in 2005 in Sulaymaniyah and there is as yet no independent news TV channel, as this would require greater availability of funds and there is insufficient media freedom. On the other hand, today there are a number of commercial TV channels that focus on music and movies as news TV cannot depend merely on advertising in Kurdistan as yet. However, NRT TV claims that it is independent while at the same time others claim that NRT is not independent. In order to examine the structure and development of recent Kurdish media, the following section will explain in greater detail the role of the media involved in this research, namely GK TV, KNN TV, Xendan Website, Sbeiy Website and Awena Website.

1.1 GK TV

GK TV belongs to the PUK and it was the first Kurdish channel established by the Kurdish political parties after the revolution in 1991. The channel started broadcasting by the end of 1991, but to begin with, it was only local,

covering only the Sulaymaniyah area. On 1st June 2008 the PUK established a version of GK TV by satellite, which represented the first Kurdish satellite television news channel. Before this channel other public satellite channels had emerged, such as Kurdistan TV launched by the KDP in 1999 and Kurdsat TV launched by the PUK in 2000.

GK TV is a news channel but it focuses largely on international issues instead of the main current issues in Kurdistan. According to Mageed (2011) *GK TV* has a number of goals, such as the political promotion of the PUK's policies, democratisation and the right to express opinions and shedding light on the disputed areas currently administered by the Baghdad government but which the Kurdish people want to be incorporated into Iraqi Kurdistan. The channel has dedicated news bulletins to cover issues outside Kurdistan, particularly news related to the Kurdish part of Syria and Turkey to distract attention from internal issues such as corruption and the investigation into public sector services.

1.2 KNN TV

Kurdish News Network (KNN) was established by the company Wsha which in English means "the word" and started its test broadcasting in the middle of 2008. Wsha is a media company which consists of a radio channel, TV channel and a website. This company was established by Nawsherwan Mustafa, the previous vice-president of the PUK until 2006, since then Mustafa has split from the party with his group and established this media company. Mustafa argued that the aim of the split was to promote reforms in the political system in Kurdistan through his media company; he also argued that he was not able to introduce reforms when he was in the PUK due to the position taken by the other leaders within the party who rejected his plans for reform (*Gorran Movement*, 2009). The specific aim of the channel as stated on its website is as follows:

The channel does, though, conform to the wider agenda of the Wsha Corporation, which is to address the inequalities and barriers to reform which plague the Kurdistan area. KNN's aim is to promote political, social and economic reform by exposing corruption and highlighting the ways in which the interests of the Kurdish people are not being addressed and could be better served. The channel attempts to address such problems as the lack of distinction between the public and the private spheres which, especially in regards to business, have ensured that vested interests within the government have the power to undermine moves towards a more democratic state and society. KNN's philosophy is based on the assertion that freedom of expression is a right, and not a privilege, and seeks therefore to be both an information provider, a medium for people to express their views and a public arena in which debate is encouraged rather than suppressed (KNN Website, 2013).

KNN is mostly funded by the Gorran Movement, although Abdull-Rahman (2012) stated that it also obtains some funds from gifts and donations from wealthy citizens as well as through advertising.

1.3 Xendan Website

The Xendan Website is the online version of the Xendan Foundation for Media and Publication because the majority of online media outlets are simply an electronic version of the newspapers and magazines circulated in Kurdistan. Although the majority of the Kurdish print media began offering an electronic version during the last decade, they were not popular until 2011, largely because Internet facilities were unavailable to the majority of people and were only available to companies and foundations. Moreover, Internet contracts were expensive relative to people's incomes.

The Xendan Website is sponsored by the Xendan Foundation for Publishing and Broadcasting. According to Muhedeen (2012), the Xendan Foundation belongs to Barham Salah, the Vice-president of the PUK. Xendan has a number of aims: providing an objective media information service, focusing on democratisation and the development of a civil society, spreading the culture of moderation in order to create a climate where diverse views are accepted and tolerated. There are 40 media workers working for the Xendan website and its sister radio channel. Although, as mentioned above, Muhedeen (2012) argues that Xendan is also sponsored by the former prime minister Barham Salah, who is thereby able to influence Xendan policy. Xendan claims that it is independent by arguing that it does not receive funding from the PUK's finance department. However, it is clear that Xendan is supported by the PUK because it was established formally by Barham Salah when he was Prime Minister of the KRG and he is currently Deputy Chairman of the PUK. Since Barham Salih and other leaders in the ruling parties have their own influence and interests they use part of their own funds for the media to protect them and their position.

1.4 Sbeiy Website

The Sbeiy website was established by the Gorran Movement in 2007, and it has the same aim as KNN TV, as mentioned above. Sbeiy relies on obtaining news and information from other media workers in the Gorran Movement, such as those at KNN TV and the Voice of Gorran which is the sister radio channel. There are 8 media workers in Sbeiy and its budget is relatively small at only US$120,000 per month (Salih, 2010).

1.5 Awena Website

The majority of staff at Awena previously worked at the *Hawlati* newspaper, the latter was the first independent newspaper in Kurdistan established in 2000. The Awena newspaper was established in 2006 and its electronic copy is administered by separate staff in the same

building. This website largely focuses on political issues. According to Salih (2010) only the four editors are formally employed, due to lack of funding. Furthermore, he claimed that he is working as a volunteer at Awena, because each of the four news editors earns only US$ 400 per month. This salary is quite low compared to the average salary of media workers in Kurdistan, while some media employees can earn as much as US$ 8,000 a month. The monthly budget of Awena is around US$ 3,000 to 4,000, a very small sum which does not allow him to appoint enough news editors or correspondents, therefore most Awena correspondents work as volunteers (Muhedeen, 2012). Warty (2008) stated that the issue of media funding is related to the economic structure of Kurdistan, where the main companies are monopolised by the two ruling parties. In turn, these companies do not provide funds through placing advertisements across the independent media which frequently criticise both the companies and the two ruling parties. There are also no subsidies available to the independent media from the government.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

Why does each platform of the Kurdish media have a different style of covering the identified political issues according to its ownership and what is the level of freedom of access to information in terms of these political issues? This research question is designed to explore the opinions of the media professionals in each media platform through conducting an in-depth interview with the news managers of the organisations selected in this research. As well as to evaluate the level of freedom of access to information in the media according to the three types of ownership: ruling parties, opposition parties and the independent media.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Case Study

The case study approach is adopted to examine the views of media professionals concerning the editorial policy underlying the news coverage of political issues and their perceived freedom to obtain information about political issues. These are divided into different types according to their affiliation, namely the media controlled by the ruling political parties, by the opposition parties and the independent media. Each Television channel and website uses its own frames for covering the political issues and there are more likely to be significant differences between the coverage of the media owned by the ruling political parties and that of the opposition and independent media. The case study approach is helpful in finding the causal interpretation of a phenomenon, and this gives further justification of its application in this research. Gray

(2010) notes that the case study is useful for research which investigates media perceptions and measuring the perception of journalists. It allows the researcher to investigate a phenomenon through focusing on a part of the issue which means that its function is not limited to a descriptive explanation but reveals a more in-depth explanation. Yin (2009) also argues that the case study can be used for explanation and generalisation as it enables the researcher to investigate a phenomenon or a group of events in the context of society. Furthermore, Yin (2009) notes that the case study can help to interpret the causality of a phenomenon.

3.2 Conducting In-Depth Interviews With Media Professionals

In-depth interviews were used to collect data from media professionals particularly the Chief News Editor and Managing News Editors of the television channels and websites in the present research. The aim of the interview with media professionals was to Kurdish media platform has a different style of covering political issues according to its ownership and to evaluate the freedom to obtain information about political issues. The interviews with this group were important for this research because it was expected to reveal an evaluation of their editorial policy in particular with relation to corruption and government performance. This also helps explain their attitudes towards the research issues and their editorial policy, and another advantage of the in-depth interviews is to provide a context in which to examine several issues related to media freedom and transparency in government departments. This is particularly important in Kurdistan where the government does not provide information to all the media equally, particularly the opposition and independent media. In this regard, Hussain (2015) notes that there is no real transparency in the public sector towards the media and parliamentary members, particularly in the oil sector, which is the main sector in Kurdistan and Iraq as more than 90% of the budget comes from this sector (Salih, 2015). Moreover, Selamn (2013) notes that the majority of government departments do not have a media spokesman or public relations officer, which in turn means that the media cannot obtain information or investigate the corruption and shortcomings of the government, particularly

the opposition and independent media. Therefore, the interviews with media professionals facilitated investigation of this issue which contributes to the quality and performance of the media. Furthermore, there is a lack of research in this field, particularly in Kurdistan.

Freedom of the media is quite relevant to the discussion of political communication, particularly in the Kurdish media context, as both authors Salih (2015) and Sleman (2013) mentioned, the media in Kurdistan do not have an opportunity to investigate corruption and this thesis is largely focused on the issue of corruption. Therefore, conducting interviews with media professionals not only helps this thesis to investigate this topic, but also informs the textual analysis chapter, as thereby providing deeper understanding of political communication in Kurdistan.

In light of the above arguments about the importance of conducting interviews with media professionals in this thesis, I visited the five media platforms which represent the Kurdish media to conduct the interviews. I found that the Kurdish media are administered by a small staff, particularly the websites, for instance Awena has only four media professionals and the Sbeiy team had only 9 members. Therefore, I decided to choose only one member from each. Whilst this may appear a very limited sample, the professionals themselves argued that they preferred to conduct an interview with only one member, claiming that any one of them was able to provide the necessary details to address the research questions as the whole team were familiar with editorial policy and issues of freedom. They also argued that there is good interaction between media professionals as their numbers are small. Furthermore, the researcher was not able to compel their participation as they were working and therefore free to decide to what extent they were willing to help the researcher in terms of time and the number of respondents. Alongside this, the limitations of the number of media professionals will not affect this thesis because the 5 respondents selected provided the required information. In each of five media platforms one professional was interviewed, as shown in the following table detailing the respondent's position, the date, place and method of interview:

Table 1
Positions, Date, Place of Interview and the Method of Interview With Media Professionals

Positions of media professionals	Date of in-depth interview	Place and the method of the and- depth interview
News chief editor of Xendan	22/4/2013	Face to face interviewing in his office
Managing news editor of KNN TV	22/4/2013	Face to face interviewing in his office
The head of public relations of GK TV	14/4/2013	Face to face interviewing in his office
News chief editor of Awena website	19/2/2013	By Skype
News chief editor of Sbeiy	1/5/2013	Face to face interviewing in his office

According to the data in the above table the professionals were divided into three News Chief Editors, one Managing News Editor and the representative of GK TV was Head of the Public Relations unit of the channel because the channel preferred to select this respondent to be interviewed. All the interviews were conducted face to face and only the News Chief Editor at Awena was interviewed via Skype as this was the only possible method to conduct the interview.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The Perception of Media Professional About Freedom to Access Information and the Transparency Issue

According to the media professionals from the opposition and independent media there is no real freedom for them to access the government sectors to collect information, as the Managing News Editor of KNN TV said:

> Even if journalists enter the public sector to conduct an interview about some issues, the administrators and media offices of these departments do not provide us with real information and they refuse any personal communication. (In-depth interview, 22 April 2013)

Alongside the restriction of access, the government departments tend to provide information exclusively or predominantly to the partisan media controlled by the two ruling parties. Therefore, news items relating to the positive aspects of government performance and reform are covered much more extensively in these media compared to the media owned by the opposition parties and the 12 other independent media outlets. According to the Chief News Editor of Awena the media offices of the different government departments do not provide any news which shows a lack of transparency. In turn this leads to the media being restricted in fulfilling its role and functions by the government. He also argues that the media office of the government does not provide any negative information about the government and these offices are created to hide the information instead of providing them to the media and public, as he said:

> When we try to investigate some issue or verify any news that has been covered and broadcast by the other media with the media administration of the government sectors they send us to the media office. The media office argues that they do not have any information and when we try to contact them by phone they do not respond to us as they know we are from the non-ruling parties' media. Whereas the media office often calls the ruling media to cover their news and events. (Skype interview, 19 February 2013)

The above is a good example of how the media are not treated equally due to lack of transparency particularly in some departments, such as security, the armed forces, the economy and oil sector. As these sectors do not have

a media spokesperson any investigation becomes very difficult.

In terms of the transparency of the government and the providing of information by different departments, the Chief News Editor of Xendan has a different view compared to his counterpart at Awena. He argues that the government provides Xendan with more information and usually Xendan is the first media outlet to receive information due to the fact that the government trusts Xendan more than others and the reason is related to its objectivity (in-depth interview, 22 April 2013). This lack of transparency forces the media to depend on the second level to obtain information so the opposition and independent website try to gain information from the government in secret and by covert persuasion. This argument began to emerge when the independent and opposition media were asked during their in-depth interviews why they did not mention the names of any people who offered them information. The Chief News Editors of Sbeiy and Awena mentioned that the government did not provide them with information about certain issues particularly relating to corruption or the shortcomings of the government when they requested an interview or tried to conduct an investigation, so as a result they attempted to contact certain employees and promised to conceal their identities. This is because the government is more likely to punish those employees who provide information to the media, particularly regarding corruption and the negative aspects of the government's performance. This phenomenon of anonymity can reduce the credibility of the news and the media. On this issue the Chief News Editor of Awena said that there is no other choice for the media if they wish to provide up-to-date information if the government refuses to hold a press conference and its media offices do not provide timely information.

Alongside the lack of transparency mentioned earlier, anonymity becomes a significant phenomenon across the online independent and opposition print media for several reasons. The first factor is the development of the opposition parties, particularly the emergence of the Gorran Party which split from the PUK and the majority of employees who work in the public sector and support Gorran are willing to provide information to the Sbeiy Website and KNN TV. For example, the Chief News Editor of Awena notes that the opposition media can obtain more information compared to the independent websites, as the opposition parties have a huge number of employees who provide them with information and send them sensitive documents. Furthermore, the Chief News Editor of Awena believes that the other opposition media channels also depend on gaining information on government sectors from their affiliated government employees. The second reason is that each of the ruling parties consists of several political currents and groups and sometimes a specific current provides

information about corruption among other colleagues to the independent website by guaranteeing them anonymity. The aim of providing information is not only to interpret reality because some groups and leaders try to influence their colleagues or the other ruling political party in order to reduce their popularity. This means that the independent website face the prospect of being used for the settling of scores and rivalries that exist, whether inside the one ruling party or between the two ruling parties, however the Chief News Editor of Awena said:

> We do not allow Awena to be used for political interest and to favour any political currents or groups. We publish news and information that have positive consequences for society even when we obtain them from a certain party or political currents. (Skype interview, 19 February 2013)

The above paragraph demonstrates the lack of transparency in Kurdistan, consequently both the opposition media and independent websites are forced to find other ways to obtain information, such as the use of government officials and party leaders in order that they will provide the information secretly. The Chief News Editor of Awena said that a section of its website was devoted to allowing people to publish their comments and articles in order to encourage them to take the role of journalists due to the general lack of transparency.

4.2 The Perception of Media Professional About the Editorial Policy of the Coverage of Political Issues

This focuses on the nature of political news coverage to understand the factors in using the values and frames to analyze the coverage of news across the media selected in this study. The news content analysis found that each website and TV channel examined in this study are dominated by a specific set of values and frames. This allows an understanding of the arguments of newsmakers in those media in terms of how they rely on values and frames during their news coverage. In terms of the interest in political issues, both the Managing News Editor of KNN TV and the Chief News Editor of Sbeiy noted that KNN TV and Sbeiy focus more on corruption and the negative aspects of the government. This is due to the fact that KNN TV and Sbeiy are owned by the Gorran Party which is the main opposition in Kurdistan and they also mentioned that the government is more corrupt and people claim that the government does not offer good services to the public. Therefore the coverage of these issues has become the priority of both KNN TV and Sbeiy. Furthermore they mentioned that the media should criticise the government rather than being used as a means of propaganda for manipulating the people, as happens in the media owned by the ruling parties that do not focus on the negative aspects of the government, but focus only on reform and showing the government in a positive light. Specifically, KNN TV and Sbeiy work for the Gorran

Movement and this political party has clear political interests and specific targets as the Managing News Editor of KNN TV stated:

> The Gorran Movement argues that the Kurdish political system is corrupt and needs reform. The Gorran media seeks to focus on these political issues, however we are working completely independently and Gorran has no control over its media. For example, the team which is working in the Gorran media has different views to the Gorran Party and some of the individuals are even affiliated to other political parties. So I can say that we are just working according to the principle of objectivity and professionalis. (In-depth interview, 22 April 2013)

Regarding the use of reframing and magnified frames during the news coverage across KNN TV, the Managing News Editor of KNN TV claimed that the importance of the events or issues causes his television channel to cover them in several news items and at different times. In terms of inviting government officials to discuss political issues on KNN TV news programmes, the Managing News Editor of KNN TV claimed that government officials do not want to discuss political issues on his news programme. He said that government officials were asked several times to participate in discussions and they refused as they did not want to answer sensitive questions in particular relating to corruption in the public sector or the shortcomings of the government. The editorial policy of Awena is closer to that of Sbeiy compared to Xendan in terms of how it uses values and frames in its news coverage, however the Chief News Editor of Awena claims that he seeks to cover political issues independently. He argues that the nature of political issues in Kurdistan has made the independent website become similar to the opposition media rather than the ruling media. In other words, he claimed that the main political issue in Kurdistan is corruption and lack of social justice. Therefore, both independent and opposition websites try to discuss corruption and the shortcomings of the government to a greater extent than other topics of interest. In terms of covering the political issues and events in short and superficial news items on Awena, as detected in the news content analysis in this research, Awena clearly did not cover the news in much detail. The Chief News Editor of Awena admitted this and claimed it is due to several factors, as he stated:

> The main reason is the lack of a large Awena news team and we cannot cover all news and events in detail. We are only four editors and we do not have specific correspondents who send us reports. Furthermore, Awena correspondents work for alternative remuneration not for a real salary as we have a problem of funds. All of those working for Awena are kind of voluntary and we rely on other jobs because the salary of each editor is only around $300. (Skype interview, 19 February 2013)

The above example is also evidence that the independent media has funding problems and the views of the Chief News Editor of Awena on this situation raise a series of issues, particularly the reasons for Awena's

apparent lack of funding. He stated that the big companies in Kurdistan are controlled by the ruling parties and these companies do not give advertising contracts to those media companies who criticise the ruling parties, therefore it is hard to obtain any income in this way.

The Chief News Editor of Xendan argues that this is an independent website and he said that there are 27 editors and journalists working for it. He claims the monthly cost of Xendan is about $180,000 and this is covered by funding from NGOs and advertising. In other words, he claims that Xendan is an independent website as it does not rely on funding from the PUK which is one of the main ruling parties. In this respect, the newsmakers from Awena, Sbeiy and KNN TV argue that Xendan is completely controlled by the PUK and they claim that Xendan obtains moral and financial aid from the party. They said that it is clear that the ruling parties have opened up some media, arguing that they are independent and Xendan is one of them, and these types are called the "shadow media". The Chief News Editor of Awena argues that Awena can only raise $3500 and every year ends with a budget deficit, while Xendan claimed it does not have any funding problems at all.

The Head of the Public Relations Unit of GK TV argues that his channel has the same political attitudes as the PUK as well as focusing on the political issues related to that party's policies. He said the PUK is one of the main parties in Kurdistan and that Iraq and its situation make its media focus on several topics not only on corruption. The Head of the Public Relations Unit of GK TV acknowledged that the government is corrupt and GK TV has decided to cover corruption issues along with other topics since 2011. In terms of why GK TV uses more positive values and magnified frames regarding government performance and the projects carried out by the government, the Head of the Public Relations Unit of GK TV stated that:

> The opposition media tends to overrate corruption and use it as a political target and to gain popularity. The ruling parties have faced strong criticism from the opposition media. So, we need to respond to them by covering projects and plans that have been done by the government. We seek to show the reality of political issues on the ground, against the opposition media showing the wrong image to the public. (In-depth interview, 13 April 2013)

The above quote shows that the ruling party's television channel has been forced to take a defensive position towards the coverage of the opposition and independent media by focusing on the projects carried out by the government as reform news. Consequently, the ruling media try to avoid any news that relates to corruption or the shortcomings of the government, which in turn means that the ruling media fail to provide an effective platform for providing the viewers with information on corruption.

CONCLUSION

According to the findings, those working for the opposition television and both the opposition and independent website claimed that the government sectors did not provide them with information compared to the ruling media. They argued that some government departments did not have a media office such as the Security Department, the Peshmerga (Armed Forces) and the oil sector. As a result both the independent and opposition media seek to obtain information from employees and government officials in secret. In this regards, Sleman (2013) suggested that Kurdistan needs to solve the issues of freedom for journalists by issuing a new resolution to obligate government departments to allow them to investigate. This suggestion might be helpful but it will not solve the free issue properly because this issue is very complex and related to democracy and the political system. Accordingly, reducing the intervention of the ruling political parties in the public sector is supposed to activate freedom for journalists to investigate political issues in the public sector. This is further complicated by the fact that the whole public sector is monopolized by the ruling political parties and all public sector posts are distributed to people who are members of the political parties or have been appointed to protect the parties' interests even if it comes at the expense of freedom (Hussain, 2015; Bali, 2016b; Abdullah, 2017).

In terms of editorial policy, ownership plays a key role in the news coverage of their respective news media channels. Those who work for the opposition and ruling party's television and website claimed that their media relies on the political attitudes of their parties who provide them with their funds. The editorial policy or the attitude of the independent website was more similar to the opposition than the media of the ruling parties in their coverage of political issues. This is because the independent and opposition media focused more on corruption and reported the government's performance in a negative light. The findings showed that the independent website covered some news in scant detail, where it does not explain the issues through taking views from different political observers. The Chief News Editor of the media platforms complained about the lack of funds to appoint news editors, while the Chief News Editor of Awena noted that his team consists of volunteers who have to rely on other jobs to supplement their incomes. The problem of the independent media in Kurdistan is the lack of funds and they feel they cannot accept advertising from larger companies because these belong to the ruling parties and therefore they could be accused of collusion and participating in corruption.

The media ownership which is related to the fact that political parties exert greater influence on media policy. Most media workers in Kurdistan are obliged to have

the same political attitude as the party of ownership, particularly in the ruling media, where most of them should be members of the ruling parties. Ownership has another implication in particular relating to the independent media because most of the large companies are monopolized by the ruling parties. This in turn leads to the independent media facing a funding problem, which leaves them with a shortage of staff to cover the political issues with higher levels of quality and professionalism.

The findings of this research demonstrated that the website functions more objectively compared to the other media outlets. This means that the media worker culture element is related to the political values adopted by the organization, while those working in some independent media outlets are not motivated by any financial benefit as they work as volunteers.

The transparency or freedom of information issue, which is reflected in the framing of the news across the opposition and independent media. The media in Kurdistan seek to obtain information through those employees who work in the public sector and as a result they are forced to conceal the names of the providers of the news or information. This in turn affects the validity of the news content as some of the respondents thought that some information might not represent the truth. However, the findings showed that the Kurdish media is not restricted in relation to its freedom to broadcast and publish information. Some research which applied the framing analysis demonstrated that the laws and regulatory actions of governments can exert a major role in this respect. For instance, Eko (2004) notes that the framing analysis as used in the West may not be applicable in Sub-Saharan African countries due to the lack of freedom in those countries, and Mchakulu detected the same issue in Malawi (Mchakulu, 2011).

The aim of criticizing the political parties who both sought to gain their support because the views of the journalists working in these types of media were not always clear. Consequently, the future development of online print media seemed to become uncontrolled and outside the sphere of government influence. The problematic situation of these two websites is that their sponsors and funds are not stable and they use defamation messages against some political parties in favour of the other side. Moreover, it would require extensive effort to coordinate work between civil society organizations, pressure groups, syndicates of journalists and lawyers as well as the government to prevent this kind of journalism that is contrary to the professional ethics of the media and accepted democratic values.

In addition there are still issues surrounding the lack of freedom to obtain information in the public sector and present the news or report it without reference to its source, all of which need to be considered by news-makers. For instance the Awena and Sbeiy websites addressed some news issues without identifying the name of the persons interviewed while arguing that they wanted to protect their identities particularly in relation to sensitive issues. This problem aggravates the lack of transparency on the part of the government to allow freedom to publish. Therefore, media pluralism cannot be solved in Kurdistan without taking sufficient measures to promote democracy and political tolerance. Alongside this, the syndicates of journalists and other civil society organizations should take into consideration professional ethics for journalists through regulation and training. Another point is the importance of solving the transparency issue through developing the media offices of the public sector and expanding their powers in order to enable them to give press conferences on a regular basis and in an orderly way.

This research suggests some points as a solution and challenges to the media in Kurdistan through two legal regulations. The first would be the establishing of a public service media in order to strike a balance between the opposition and ruling parties and to offer coverage of the political issues without the influence of political parties on their output.

The second regulation would be difficult to achieve quickly because it is related to the level of corruption in the government and ruling parties that have monopolized the biggest companies in order to provide funds to the independent media for advertising. Al-Zaidi and Sadiq (2012) argue that the independent media have played a major role in improving the political process through developing the opposition parties and expanding people's critical thinking about democratization in Kurdistan. In addition, group pressure has become embedded in the independent media, while the majority of liberal members of the political parties publish their views in the independent media. Consequently, the actions taken to support the opposition media in Kurdistan will eventually have a positive effect on the political process and democratization because independent and opposition media tend to criticize government's policies and investigate corruption. The main independent media such as Awena and *Hawlati* have strived for objectivity, despite the lack of funds and the lack of transparency in the government.

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