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Journalism Under Instrumentalized Political Parallelism

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ABSTRACT

Media systems where political parallelism co-exists with political clientelism have contradictory influences on journalistic practices. Journalists are encouraged to actively defend a cause and influence public opinion while expected to remain subservient to their political masters. The media studies literature has analyzed the impact of political parallelism and clientelism separately, without reflecting on the tensions that emerge when they operate together. The article examines journalism under instrumentalized political parallelism and argues that it plays out in a field defined by both horizontal and vertical conflicts. We add an elite-grassroots analytical perspective to the inter-elite tensions associated with a polarized public sphere. Political parallelism in non-democratic contexts seemingly leaves little room for journalistic agency, as the politically powerful tend to instrumentalize media outlets. However, by looking closely at the case of Lebanon, we argue that journalists are still able to act independently of and contrary to the elite's intentions. The empirical analysis shows how journalists navigate vis-à-vis the politicians by playing the relations game, exploiting internal contradictions in the system and connecting with popular grievances. The article contributes new knowledge about journalists' resilience to instrumentalization in a context of media/politics connections that is commonly found outside the West.

Introduction

What is the role of journalism in media systems where political parallelism co-exists with political clientelism? Media systems that are simultaneously both polarized and instrumentalized exert contradictory influences on journalistic practices. On the one hand, political parallelism, defined as a system of stable links between political actors and the media and reporting that reflects political divisions, invites opinion journalism. Journalists are expected to embrace a political project and report from a partisan perspective. They are, as Mancini explains, "often driven by their own points of view, and (…) take part in the general cultural and political debate" (Mancini 2012, 276).

Political clientelism, on the other hand, works against journalistic autonomy. It denotes "a pattern of social organization in which access to social resources is controlled by patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for deference and various kinds of support" (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 58). Media-political clientelism manifests itself in the instrumentalization of media outlets – "the process whereby outlets' owners and sponsors use the media under their control to advance their particularistic interests" (Roudakova 2008, 43). In countries where oligarchs, industrialists, parties, or the state instrumentalize the news media, journalists have little room to move beyond the will of their masters (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002; Roudakova 2017).

The media studies literature has analyzed the impact of political parallelism and clientelism separately, without reflecting on the tensions that emerge when they operate together. Outside of Western liberal democracies, media instrumentalization tends to accompany political parallelism. We know little about how journalists navigate under such pressure. This article addresses that gap by examining the case of Lebanon, which has a polarized media system where the instrumentalization of media outlets is rife. Lebanon is a deeply divided society with a media scene that mirrors political and sectarian fault lines. It is also a deficient democracy, where entrenched elites monopolize access to all top political positions. Our article analyzes the room for maneuver for journalists in such a context. We make the case that, although professional autonomy is hard to attain, journalists may still push back against instrumentalization.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we establish the analytical framework we wish to interrogate and review literature on journalism in media systems where instrumentalization and polarization are combined. We discuss the analytic value of including a vertical analytical prism in investigations of political parallelism. Second, we introduce the Lebanese media system and explain how instrumentalization works in this context. Third, we present our method. Fourth, we analyze how journalists navigate instrumentalized political parallelism based on first-hand interview material. Fifth, we examine two recent examples of how vertical tensions in the system come to the fore. Sixth, we discuss our findings and conclude.

Analytical Framework

The concept of political parallelism refers to stable forms of media/politics connections that reproduce political cleavages within the media landscape. It manifests itself at the twin levels of content – "the extent to which the different media reflect distinct political orientations" – and organization – connections between media organizations and various parts of the political establishment, whether on the individual or the collective level (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 28). The existence of a partisan audience is also noted (Seymour-Ure 1974; Çarkoğlu, Baruh, and Yıldırım 2014; Kaiser and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2019).

Hallin and Mancini argue that parallelism affects journalistic role expectations and practices. In systems characterized by alignment between the media and specific ideological, political, and cultural views, the journalistic ideal is not to be a neutral provider of information but to actively defend a cause and influence public opinion. Parallelism is associated with external pluralism, i.e., pluralism at the level of the media system, but not with internal pluralism in the individual news organizations, which are aligned to specific political actors or views (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 29).

Mancini maintains that political parallelism is conceptually distinct from media *instrumentalization* (Mancini 2012). He defends political parallelism, which he calls a "noble" trait, against the negative attribute of instrumentalization (Mancini 2012, 263). In democracies, political parallelism creates a pluralism where elites rooted in different cultural, ideological, and political articulations of society argue in the public sphere. The citizens engage in the deliberation and determine the outcome of the political competition with their votes. This contrasts with the instrumentalization of the media in which "groups with different agendas and single political/business figures (…) use the media to intervene in the decision-making process, to reach specific goals at specific moments, or to support personal candidacies and alliances" (Mancini 2012, 271).

Instrumentalization is transactional. Roudakova (2008, 44) emphasizes that clientelist relationships between politics and the media are opportunistic and often of a temporary nature. Moreover, insofar as political-economic actors own or control the media organizations, journalists are, to a lesser or greater degree, coerced into maintaining such relationships. Thus, while political parallelism is characterized by stable politics-media relations and journalists who willingly champion some group or ideology, media clientelism denotes less stable relations and a degree of coercion: the journalist advances the cause of a political actor not out of a sense of mission, but for financial survival. This situation is well-known in Central and Eastern Europe, where both business owners and politicians have instrumentalized the media to damage opponents and improve their own public image (Örnebring 2012, 506–9; Zielonka 2015; Herrero et al. 2017, 4810).

What happens when these two phenomena co-occur? In countries where rational legal authority is poor and clientelism is common, political parallelism may devolve into a manipulated form of pluralism in which the space for negotiating different points of view disappears. We call this situation *instrumentalized political parallelism*. In such contexts, the elites monopolize the public discourse while exercising pressure on one another. They may deliberately use the media to stoke societal polarization with the aim of rallying support for their cause. One recent example is Iraq after the downfall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Political change led to a proliferation of all kinds of news media. The newfound media freedom was soon compromised, however, by the political elites' stoking of sectarian conflict and their authoritarian politics, as well as by foreign meddling in the media by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Today, competing religio-political elites orient and censor multiple media outlets, and a weak advertising market puts Iraqi media at the mercy of these powerful owners (Kim and Hama-Saeed 2008; Amos 2010).

Partisan Interventionist Journalism

Instrumentalized political parallelism is associated with partisan forms of interventionist journalism, in which journalists act as mouthpieces for groups or individuals within the political elite (Hanitzsch 2007, 372–73). Waisbord (2009, 374) argues that the weakness of the market and public funding undermines the viability of politically detached journalism in the global South. Journalists are expected to advocate for the politically powerful, who decide the media organizations' editorial lines.

The professional choices journalists make in such contexts is an under-studied topic. In her study of the Western Balkans, Camaj finds that clientelism and a weak market induce

journalists into self-censoring, cosying up to politicians, or simply leaving the profession. However, she also notes that the relationship between political elites and journalists is one of two-way communication and inherently unstable (Camaj 2016). Research from the Middle East and North Africa points in different directions. On the one hand, Mellor shows that prominent Arab journalists in the twentieth century have been able to negotiate partial autonomy by acting as eyewitnesses and authoritative historians under repressive regimes (Mellor 2009, 318). Furthermore, Pintak and Ginges' reference survey paints a picture of Arab journalists as interventionist "agents of change" who profess a belief in the transformative and emancipatory potential of journalism and subscribe to democratic values and the importance of civil society. On the other hand, the same survey shows that many of the journalists consider the independence of Arab media organizations to be "poor," the level of professionalism low and the practice of taking money from sources widespread (Pintak and Ginges 2008; Pintak 2011, 155–88). In a similar vein, el-Issawi finds that the Arab uprisings of 2010–11 made possible a critical, interventionist journalism in countries like Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. However, powerful political pressures and weak professional structures soon led journalists to fall back into clientelist obedience to their political masters (El Issawi 2016, 181–82). In their study of Palestinian journalism, Schwalbe et al. conclude that intersecting pressures, among them clientelism and violently enforced parallelism, have created "an untenable environment" for many journalists (Schwalbe et al. 2018, 1933).

Horizontal and Vertical Conflicts

To analyze the navigation space of journalists under instrumentalized political parallelism, we suggest conceptualizing it as the intersection of horizontal and vertical conflicts. In the abovementioned countries, journalists are situated on two axes of political conflict simultaneously. The horizontal axis is the competition between various elites who seek to use the media to hurt their competitors and boost their own legitimacy in the eyes of the public. However, journalists are also situated somewhere on a *vertical* axis of conflict. We call it a vertical axis since it describes an unequal power relationship between the elites and the grassroots. In flawed democracies like Lebanon and Iraq, large swathes of the population feel disenfranchised and oppressed, and the working conditions for journalists are also poor. Journalists may identify with the common man against the powerful and seek to give the voiceless a voice.

How journalists situate themselves vis-à-vis these horizontal and vertical conflicts is an open question, requiring empirical investigation. There are conflicting impulses at work. On the one hand, restrictions on political freedom and great power disparities in a society have been found to correlate with an interventionist role orientation (Waisbord 2009; Hanitzsch, Hanusch, and Lauerer 2016). On the other hand, political parallelism does not necessarily result in socially committed reporting, as journalists "may simply comply with editorial policy and the ideological stance of their news organization, rather than with the intention of changing society and making a political intervention" (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, and Lauerer 2016, 13).

Our contribution focuses on Lebanon, which is a paradigmatic case of instrumentalized political parallelism. Lebanese journalists are generally encouraged or pressured to join the horizontal cleavage between competing elites and confessional groups. However,

they need not necessarily act as obedient servants to their paymasters. Since the Lebanese elites are divided – as is the case in several other weak democracies – journalists may play the elite game of horizontal polarization to their own advantage, so that they secure their professional and economic position. They also have the option to connect with the vertical tensions between citizens and politicians, thus challenging the very logic of instrumentalization.

Politics and Media in Lebanon

Lebanon is a textbook example of what Lustick calls a deeply divided society where "ascriptive ties generate an antagonistic segmentation of society, based on terminal identities with high political salience" (Lustick 1979, 325). Religious cleavages overlap with deep political conflicts, which are played out in the context of a weak state. Diversity has had the positive effect on political pluralism that no group has been strong enough to deny the other groups a voice (Salamé 1994). On the other hand, the internal cleavages have at times been deeper than national cohesion and during the 1975–1989 civil war, the internal equilibrium broke down.

The political system rests on competition and compromises between elites in large part composed of the parties and militias that emerged from the civil war (El-Husseini 2004; Leenders 2012). The leaders represent "their" groups in the elite bargain for power and are expected to control their own constituencies in return (Johnson 1986). While there are (irregular) elections in the country, it is the confessional elites that decide on how to draw the boundaries of the electoral districts and in practice share power. They use access to the state to sustain clientelist ruling strategies, distributing services in exchange for political support (Corstange 2016). As a result, civil liberties and associational freedom are compromised, infrastructure and public services are poor, and corruption is a big problem (Salloukh et al. 2015, 175–176).

Lebanese journalism has occupied an important role in Arab media since the appearance of print news media in the late 1800s – long before the country gained independence in 1943. Its heterogeneous population, open urban culture, and location at the intersection of East and West were factors that contributed to this role. In the 1950s and 1960s, these factors combined with relatively relaxed laws to make Lebanon a regional hub for journalism. At the same time, however, various Arab regimes and local political actors began influencing the Lebanese press to advance their own interests by sponsoring equipment, paying salaries, and placing ads. This tendency was exacerbated by the very success of Lebanese journalism: by 1971, Dajani noted that there were far more publications in the country than the advertising market could sustain, leading papers to "seek outside subsidies" (Dajani 1971, 162). A "journalism of views" (Dajani 2019, 23) was institutionalized, and as the different media aligned with regional and national political forces a strong tendency towards political parallelism became apparent. Lebanon's media system was and continues to be marked by external pluralism: different media organizations propagate different views and ideologies, but inside the organization, journalists are usually expected to fall into line.

Political parallelism is today a "crucial characterization of the Lebanese media system" (El-Richani 2016, 91). The country boasts a rich media scene: 10 newspapers, 9 television channels (the most important medium), and about 40 radio stations. The 1994 Audio-Visual Media Law granted licenses to a limited set of TV and radio channels that had been mouthpieces of the prominent factions during the war, while others were barred from entering the fray (Kraidy 2011, 184). The overwhelming majority of media organizations, and the most important ones, are privately owned and politically affiliated (Samir Kassir Foundation and Reporters Without Borders 2018). Media coverage is in many cases overtly partisan: the main news broadcast on each of the national TV channels includes an "introduction" during which the presenter frames the day's news in a way that supports one political narrative and undermines another.

Media polarization is an institutionalized and seemingly stable system. As Dajani puts it, the "system" dictates "practices" that "reinforce Lebanon's confessional polarization, and the 'ghetto' mentality of its various factions" (Dajani 2013). El-Richani confirms that despite some exceptions, the Lebanese media are part of political life in the same way that political parties are, and that the "sectarian and political casing around the media outlets … . remains intact" (El-Richani 2016, 130). Political actors deliberately use media polarization to mobilize their supporters (Salloukh et al. 2015). They have an interest in from time to time accentuating the strain between religious identity groups, since inter-confessional fear or anger distracts public attention from the shortcomings of decision-makers.

Political leaders exert considerable control over journalists in Lebanon. Using informal influence within the media organizations, the security services, and the state adminis-tration, politicians can reduce access to employment, airtime, and information for journal-ists who threaten their interests. The competition for work opportunities is stiff and "connections" (*wasta* in Arabic) are required to enter the field. Generally, the media organ-izations prefer to hire politically loyal reporters and writers.

There may be serious consequences for those who refuse to toe the line. Lebanon has a dark history of assassinations of journalists; the most recent such incident occurred in 2005. Political leaders have several options to punish troublesome detrac-tors. They can make use of vague statutes in the criminal law to prosecute journalists, they may rely on thugs to attack individual journalists or entire media houses, or the security forces may systematically harass critical journalists – all of the above are well-documented tactics for silencing independent, critical coverage (Maharat Foundation 2019). In the World Press Freedom Index, Lebanon has hovered around 100th place (out of 180) for the last seven years, with a slight downward trend (Reporters Without Borders 2020a).

Important counterforces to the government's attempts to subjugate journalism exist, however. First, Lebanese media is characterized by a high degree of professionalism, thanks not least to its long tradition of media studies. Melki (2009) identified nine such university programs in 2009, with the oldest established in 1967. They are all bilingual or even trilingual and strongly oriented to professional values. Second, the country's long and proud tradition of politically influential journalism sets a precedent and offers role models for journalists aspiring to an active role. Third, the media outlets are not all equally beholden to sectarian interests. The TV channels *LBCI* and *New TV* have branded themselves as counter-currents to the system of sectarian power sharing, and

aligned with civil society actors to some extent. Tellingly, they are the most-watched channels for political news (IPSOS 2017). Nevertheless, the channels are also vehicles for political aspirations.[1]

Research Questions and Method

Based on the Lebanese context outlined above, our research questions are:

> RQ1: How do journalists navigate to carve out a professional space in media systems where political parallelism co-exists with instrumentalization?

> RQ2: What political role do they play?

Our article is a case study (Gerring 2004) of journalism in media systems where political parallelism and clientelism combine. It builds on qualitative interviews with journalists and civil society activists in Lebanon. We conducted interviews with 33 journalists and 5 civil society activists between 2016 and 2019. This period is interesting because it led up to widespread popular protests in 2019–2020, in which journalists played a significant role. Capitalizing on prior knowledge of the country and our command of written and spoken Arabic, we organized the fieldwork in five week-long trips. In Lebanon, informal channels are the most efficient way to get in touch with journalists. We used snowballing to recruit new journalists to the interviews and concentrated on well-known figures with long experience in the profession. We took care to interview people from as many different news outlets as possible, covering television, radio, newspapers and digital news sites representing different political and ideological tendencies. With a few exceptions, the journalists were based in Beirut, mirroring the heavy centralization of Lebanon's media (Table 1).

We relied on an interview guide outlining some central and common themes (see appendix), but left room for improvization when the conversation took unexpected turns. The analytic process was inductive and resembled the process often used in ethnographic research; we reviewed and developed our ideas and concepts after each fieldtrip and as the volume of transcribed interviews increased (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 160). All the interviews were coded using NVivo software, and the journalistic strategies that we present in the analysis emerged from the coding process. The research design, including method and data storage, was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, following the guidelines of the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities.[2]

Analysis

In our interviews with Lebanese journalists, three navigation strategies stand out. The first is playing the relations game, the second is exploiting internal contradictions in the system, and the third is connecting with popular grievances.

Table 1. Distribution of interviewed journalists per media, age and gender.

Media			Age			Gender	
Print	TV/radio	Electronic	20–40	40–60	60+	Male	Female
11	13	9	10	20	3	25	8

Playing the Relations Game

In countries characterized by political clientelism, the importance of "knowing someone," a power broker, is crucial. Social and professional life can be likened to a game in which the person who acquires the most influential connections wins. Journalists reduce their vulnerability to instrumentalization by multiplying relationships with influential actors and activating them at the right moment. The need for connections is basically a weakness: Journalists need political protection because they lack economic self-sufficiency and well-defined and enforced legal rights. "Lebanese journalists are unable to operate unless they have personal connections with politicians," affirmed a TV presenter.[3] According to the literature on political clientelism, clients seek protection from patrons in return for political support (Gellner and Waterbury 1977). However, in the context of a modern state and a complex media landscape, the number of potential patrons is high. Journalists may boost their relative strength by diversifying and counterbalancing political contacts.

Journalists are well placed to play the relations game for the simple reason that they know a lot of people. Over the years, they make contacts in different institutions and camps, which they mobilize for different purposes. By way of illustration, a popular writer in Beirut interchangeably works for different and competing Sunni Muslim politicians. It increases his room for maneuver because, if relations sour with one patron, he may switch to another. The same journalist also writes for a Saudi Arabian newspaper and has good contacts in that country. Since Saudi Arabia is the leading sponsor of Sunni Muslim politicians in Lebanon, his connections abroad increase his value in the eyes of Lebanese politicians.[4]

The relations game is part of how journalists operating under instrumentalized political parallelism exercise their profession. To access information, for example, personal contacts are a recipe for success. Sending a formal request to a ministry or another state organ will usually accomplish nothing. A journalist with a leading newspaper explained how he gets around this obstacle:

> You can build special relations with people in the security services and the judiciary to get access to information. You can create a personal network of informants. You provide them with services such as helping someone enter the hospital, helping someone cross the border. You offer such favors knowing that this person will help you access information. You may, for instance, know the minister of health and give them a call about someone who needs to get their daughter to hospital.[5]

Social connections mean influence. Taking advantage of their social capital, journalists may turn the clientelist system to their benefit. In the above example, the journalist trades information and services. Sometimes, a mere reputation for being connected to powerful persons is enough to get things done. At other times, the ability to push an institution or person unwillingly into the spotlight is a lever journalists can use. Where corruption and mismanagement are common, attracting the public's attention is a credible threat. The above-cited journalist was frank about why the minister was likely to comply with his wishes:

> Let me tell you how it works. When I call the minister of health to ask them to open the hospital's door to a person that I know, I say, 'You have to take her/him in now, otherwise I will send someone to do a report about them.'[6]

Exploiting Internal Contradictions in the System

As with the relations game, the second strategy is about turning a feature of the state to one's advantage. The internal contradictions that come with instrumentalized political parallelism give journalists another tool to play with. In countries where clientelism coexists with political parallelism, the state is often as divided as society. Lebanon is an extreme example because its confessional power-sharing system gives each sect a foot in the administrative apparatus. A female journalist with more than 20 years' experience explained:

> The irony is that because we have a sectarian system and because society is so polarized and there is so much division based on sect and each sect has its own institutions, its own media, there is no one single [authority] or autocrat that is running it. This is a positive thing that comes out of this![7]

State fragmentation opens opportunities for journalists to either ally themselves with one of the feuding parties or carve out an operating space between them. For instance, there are at least five parallel intelligence agencies, controlled by opposing identity groups (Rabah 2016). The agencies are charged with overseeing security developments in their own camp, but at the same time compete and spy on each other. Journalists are important sources of information for the intelligence agencies. Some have a reputation of working for the agencies directly. Co-opted journalists are let in on sensitive issues and serve as the agencies' mouthpieces. Others deal with the agencies on a case-by-case basis. In any given case, there may be overlap between the agenda of the journalist and that of the agency, as one part of the state may approve of the journalist digging up dirt about another. Such contradictions open a space for journalistic navigation, but this also requires journalists to walk a tightrope between different agencies with the power to disrupt their professional and private lives. As an investigative journalist explained: "I have been exposed to a lot of strain and threats. Nevertheless, I continue to find openings. If one side closes the door to you, another opens. It's always like that. You have to play on the contradictions."[8]

Enterprising journalists have also learned to exploit weaknesses inside the state institutions. Identifying disloyal servants is their favored way to proceed. A senior journalist described finding leaks in the bureaucracy as "easy," explaining that it only requires a network of informants and a bit of money:

> I can choose someone who works in a ministry. Let's say that this person serves drinks and food to people who attend meetings. I can ask the person to collect the papers and documents that were left by participants in the meeting. It is so simple. Journalists have different sources who have different positions and are paid according to their status.[9]

Other interviewees confirmed and expressed no anguish about paying for such services. "We commit a small crime to uncover big ones," was the standard reply. They rhetorically asked what the alternative would be. A journalist who specializes in corruption cases put the blame on the politicians, saying, "they have created the chaos and must bear responsibility for that."[10]

Connecting with Popular Grievances

The third strategy is to connect with popular grievances. Journalists may increase their relative strength by raising questions and agendas that pit ordinary people against the elite. In democracies, the ability to ignite public anger is the journalists' ultimate crowbar against the decision-makers. Under instrumentalized political parallelism, the politically powerful use clientelism and polarization to reduce the efficacy of this tool. Clientelism constrains journalists because it is costly to criticize "the hand that feeds you." Polarization creates opportunities for the politically powerful to reframe and dismiss criticism of their governance as an attack by "them" on "us." Nonetheless, the politicians' survival strategies do not erase the rank-and-file's grievances. On the contrary, they help perpetuate corruption and mismanagement and thereby increase societal frustration in the long term. A gulf of mistrust and disillusion divides the elites and the mass of ordinary Lebanese who must live with the consequences of politician wheeling and dealing (Dajani 2019, 107–9).

Journalists may connect with this vertical tension to challenge the elites. A female TV reporter who self-identified with civil society said: "I am someone who confronts every problem in society and reports on it and denounces it. I report on corruption and fight against it as my mission, and I do it every day."[11]

Whether or not a journalist is willing and able to defy the barriers of clientelism and polarization depends on the person, the issue, and the situation. Personal disposition plays an important role. Some individuals are more courageous or have a stronger drive to confront abuses of power than others. Some are driven by ideology and some get energized by going against the flow. The nature of the issue impacts the room for maneuver. Security-related themes are inherently sensitive, making scrutiny of the army, the security services, and Hizbullah a high-wire act. Corruption is treated in general terms but becomes a bombshell when connected with specific names, parties, professional groups, and institutions. Referring to the example of a Lebanese actor who spent five months in jail based on fabricated accusations of having cooperated with Israel, an online journalist explained:

> Corruption is a very risky topic. I can report about an event like the accusation of the Lebanese actor Ziad 'Itani (…) but I cannot criticize the people who oversaw his arrest. If I investigate and discover that the chief of police who arrested 'Itani is corrupt and protected by some politician, I cannot publish this because I would risk my life.[12]

Certain themes are also more prone to get stuck in sectarian politics. May Fawaz argues that media discourse in Lebanon is polarized in stories of identity and hegemony and more neutral in the socioeconomic realm (Fawaz 2013). She compares media framing of "sectarian fears," the ongoing Syrian war and "Sunni radicals" with the coverage of wage protests and finds that the first three issues are characterized by opposing and inflammatory language whereas sectarian discourse is absent in the fourth. The economy and governance-induced problems that affect all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, are the politicians' weak spots.

The situation or circumstances in which journalists seek to connect with the power of the grassroots also impact the likelihood of success. In periods of public protests or active civil society mobilization, the effectiveness of playing the vertical conflict "card" increases.

Disruptive Journalism

Two recent episodes illustrate the potential power of the strategy of connecting with ver-
tical grievances. In both episodes, Lebanese journalists broke with the elite-managed *hori-
zontal, sectarian polarization* and connected with a *vertical conflict axis of citizens vs.
politicians* instead. The result was journalism that contributed to disrupt the Lebanese pol-
itical system.

In July and August 2015, thousands of Lebanese from different religious and socioeco-
nomic groups demonstrated in downtown Beirut to protest garbage piled up in the
streets (Abu-Rish 2016). A deadlock between politicians had paralyzed the entire political
system, and the government had failed to renew its contract with the private garbage col-
lector. The thousands who poured into the streets were angry about the garbage, but also
about the general corruption and ineptness of the government, and because they felt the
elites treated them like clients in a pyramid of power, or pawns in a political game, rather
than like citizens. They soon began demanding an end to corruption, the holding of par-
liamentary elections, and the resignation of the minister of environmental affairs. The
claims amounted to "nothing less than a radical reformation of the entrenched, sectarian,
political system" (Kraidy 2016, 23). The decision-makers went into alarm mode and started
smearing protesters in the media they controlled. Elite wrangling gave way to a cross-con-
fessional effort to silence the grassroots protests, including the use of batons, water
cannons, and arbitrary detentions. All the while political leaders across the spectrum
did their best to discredit the protesters, suggesting that they were acting at the
behest of foreign governments or that they were somehow immoral.

However, individual journalists and some news organizations chose to connect with
the vertical axis of conflict. The crisis unequivocally showed the chasm between a self-
serving political elite and ordinary citizens of all faiths, and both *LBCI* and *New TV*
covered the protests comprehensively during the first two weeks, airing embarrassing
footage of the mistreatment of ordinary people by security forces. As a result, the state
turned on the media. On 22 August, *New TV* reporter Nawal Berri was injured after security
personnel threw chairs at her. The following day a female reporter from *LBCI* was attacked
and beaten by security forces live on air as she was covering the protests from the per-
spective of the demonstrators. At least eight journalists were assaulted by security person-
nel during these two days alone (Committee to Protect Journalists, York, and Ny 10001
2015; 'LBCI' 2015).

In October 2019, a new and much more serious protest cycle erupted. It was precipi-
tated by the government's plans to impose taxes on IP telephony, gasoline, and tobacco,
but the underlying issues were corruption, deteriorating living standards, and a profound
sense of political alienation. The protests soon expanded to a denunciation of the entire
political system and the elite, irrespective of religious affiliation. Protesters carried pla-
cards with slogans such as "All of them means all of them" and "Down with sectarian
rule." Hundreds of thousands of people from all of the religious communities in
Lebanon participated in sit-ins and marches, demanding the resignation of the entire gov-
ernment and a major overhaul of the political system (The Economist 2019).

Many journalists from a variety of news organizations proved even more willing to con-
front the elite establishment during this cycle of protest than in 2015, despite the risks
involved. The journalists themselves claimed that the media was divided along new

lines: instead of the horizontal inter-elite conflicts, journalists now took sides for or against what they called a social "revolution," sometimes at the risk of being fired from their media outlet (Surprenant 2019). Refusing to take sides with one elite group against others, many journalists instead roundly denounced the entire elite for their corruption and ineptness. For example, Muhammad Zabib, a financial journalist for the newspaper *al-Akhbar*, wrote a series of articles on corruption and Lebanon's financial crisis, arguing among other things that Lebanon's richest drained the Central Bank of US dollars, thereby disabling the state from subsidizing medicine and bread for ordinary people (Zabib 2019). Many reporters provided sympathetic coverage of the protest marches, reporting live from the demonstrations at considerable physical risk. Several were beaten up by security forces and subjected to systematic harassment campaigns, including the aforementioned Zabib – but they struck back on social media and continued their critical reporting (El-Hage 2019; SKEyes 2019; Reporters Without Borders 2020b). The disruptive impulse was not confined to reporting: on the organizational level, some seasoned journalists joined forces with younger colleagues and took the unprecedented step of creating a new, alternative journalism syndicate. In their eyes, the two existing professional media syndicates in Lebanon were both lapdogs of the political elite and had betrayed their mission to protect journalists and encourage a free public sphere (Daraj 2020). In its founding statement, the group wrote that the new syndicate is a "part of the popular uprising [aiming] to bring down the system and replace it with a secular system based on social justice and liberty" (The Alternative Journalism Syndicate 2019).

Discussion

Journalists in Lebanon operate in a space defined by both horizontal and vertical conflicts and situate themselves differently with regard to each of these. Some of Lebanon's journalists self-identify with one of the political forces in the country and strive to advance its cause through journalistic work. They stand committed behind their news organization's editorial line and have few complaints about managers or owners interfering in their work. As a field reporter in *Future TV* put it, "I like them and they like me."[13] Journalists of this kind may try to influence the way the public thinks about different issues but will not seek to transform the system as such. They play along with instrumentalized political parallelism, although they do not necessarily relinquish their professional standards. By way of illustration, a female journalist of the partisan interventionist kind insisted:

> I don't spy on people to expose their scandals. I don't steal information. I cannot read something in a paper and just take it at face value, I must investigate myself.[14]

However, if a journalist chooses to connect with the vertical axis of conflict, this translates into advocacy journalism of a very different kind: for the weak and voiceless against the corrupt and powerful. The aim is to reveal, denounce, and prevent abuse of power, and not solely when it occurs on the opposing political side. An investigative journalist at *New TV* described their professional ideals as follows:

> I belong to the school of thought that says that journalists should challenge the rulers. Our role is to be a strong force. In the social contract, my role is to monitor on behalf of society. The more there is distance between me and the power holders and the security services the better, because it gives me a bigger space to constitute a strong force.[15]

Journalists who align themselves with the common man's struggle play a different role than the literature on journalism under instrumentalized political parallelism would lead us to expect. Waisbord (2009) associates political parallelism with a specific kind of advocacy journalism, where journalists promote the views of a political party or another strong, organized group. Likewise, in Halling and Papathanassopoulos' (2002) reference study, journalists are assumed to be dancing to the owners' tune. The situation we described in the previous sections is arguably more complex. The system of instrumentalized political parallelism seems to contain a self-defeating mechanism in that it produces journalists who take the entire political elite as a target and may contribute to disrupting the way the system habitually works. From the decision-makers' perspective, interventionist journalism of this second kind represents a latent threat. Roudakova (2017) is right to warn about a loss of professional standards when journalists are employed as tools in the service of competing elites. However, our findings serve to remind us that the simmering frustration at the grassroots level in systems characterized by political clientelism is an important professional and power resource for journalists that can be mobilized when the time is right. During times of social protest, the opportunities for journalists to act on this potential and negotiate their roles are particularly strong (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014).

To return to our conceptual starting point, our case suggests that instrumentalized political parallelism exerts contradictory influences on journalism. The system works both for and against journalists' politicization and leads those who take an interventionist role in different directions. Some engage in the horizontal conflicts between competing elites and identity groups whereas others intervene along the vertical conflict axis. We found evidence of journalistic interventionism both on behalf of and against the political establishment. Likewise, the political implications of the observed navigation strategies differ. Playing the relations game and exploiting internal contradictions integrate and comply with the system of clientelism, although the power dynamics are reversed. The strategy of connecting with popular grievances is potentially more disruptive to the system.

Conclusion

Our findings can be summarized in three main points. First, this article has contributed new knowledge about political parallelism in countries where rational legal authority is poor and clientelism common. We have argued that political parallelism in Lebanon is instrumentalized because it works as a self-serving tool for the elite. Corrupt state leaders use media polarization to distract attention from the shortcomings of their governance in a convoluted strategy of "divide and rule." Sociologically speaking, instrumentalized political parallelism works as a mutually beneficial arrangement between media owners and co-opted journalists. Currying favors with the politically powerful is the easy way for journalists to succeed; in this sense, the Lebanese system works similarly to the post-1990 Russian system analyzed by Roudakova (2009, 2017), where journalists came to be regarded as "prostitutes" for the political elites.

Second, while instrumentalization exerts a strong pressure on journalists, our findings suggest that journalists nevertheless find professional wiggle room. We have argued that journalists working under instrumentalized political parallelism navigate a terrain defined by horizontal and vertical conflicts. Their strategies are adapted

to the context in which they operate and, in Lebanon, we found three main ways for journalists to navigate vis-à-vis politicians. They may play the relations game, exploit the internal contradictions in the system, and connect with vertical grievances. The latter gives them the opportunity to challenge the political elites openly, because socio-economic grievances unite Lebanese citizens, rendering the elites' identity-based polarization ineffective.

Third, we have made the case for a nuanced understanding of the internal dynamics of media systems that takes the role of journalistic agency into account. Although at the bottom of the media food chain, journalists have ways to push back against the elites. Judging by Lebanon's experience of social unrest, journalists may even seek to disrupt the way the system habitually works. The elite strategy of instrumentalizing journalists under political parallelism is, in other words, a double-edged sword. Imposing top-down instrumentalization on a culture of publicist journalism is a recipe for systemic tensions and individual frustration, and it is bound to ignite resistance. Arguably, instrumentalized political parallelism carries with it the seeds of its own disruption because of the internal contradictions it entails.

Notes

1. The owner of New TV is described as a "rival" to the dominant Sunni Muslim Hariri family and is supported by the Qatari regime (El-Richani 2016, 76). As for *LBCI*, its staffing retains a "sectarian and political inclination" associated with the Maronite Christian sect and a former militia known as the Lebanese Forces (Nötzold 2009, 147; El-Richani 2016, 93).
2. See the Committee's web site at https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/about-us/our-committees-and-commission/nesh/
3. Interview with TV journalist, Tripoli, 31 January 2018.
4. Interview with electronic media journalist, Beirut, 4 March 2019.
5. Interview with newspaper journalist, Beirut, 29 January 2018.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with TV journalist and freelancer, Beirut 20 October 2018.
8. Interview with newspaper journalist, Beirut, 29 January 2018.
9. Interview with electronic media journalist, Mount Lebanon, 9 May 2018.
10. Interview with TV journalist, Beirut, 6 March 2019.
11. Interview with TV journalist, Beirut, 23 October 2018.
12. Interview with electronic media journalist, Mount Lebanon, 9 May 2018.
13. Interview with TV journalist at Future TV, Beirut, 27 January 2018.
14. Interview with TV journalist, Beirut, 9 May 2018.
15. Interview with TV journalist, Beirut, 6 March 2019.

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