

Political Parallelism in Transitional Media Systems: The Case of Libya

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Among the media systems in transitional countries of the Middle East and North Africa, political parallelism has become a widespread feature that has both promoted and undermined the transition to democracy. Political parallelism refers to structural ties between media organizations and political actors that often result in biased reporting. This article examines how political parallelism is shaping Libya's newly liberated media system. Based on an analysis of ownership structures, financial sources, and political affiliations of all media outlets currently operating in this fractured country, we show that the structures of the Libyan media system indeed reflect the anatomy of political conflict. At the same time, the analysis sheds light on a large number of local radio stations that do not follow the pattern of political parallelism, but instead refrain consciously from taking political sides. We conclude that this kind of media, if invigorated and developed, could help overcome Libyan polarization.

Keywords: political parallelism, political transformation, media pluralism, Libya, Libyan media, local media, media transition, media systems

Referring to the widely received study of Hallin and Mancini (2004), scholars often understand political parallelism as a particularity of countries in the south of Europe, such as Italy, France, and Spain, whose media systems can, according to them, be summarized as a "polarized pluralist model." Yet, comparative research on media systems beyond the Western world has shown that political parallelism is a feature of many media systems around the globe, unfolding differently and with different effects, depending on the specific context (Mancini, 2012). Countries that seem to move from authoritarian to democratic rule and undergo what political scientists call "transition" (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986) are characterized by often unregulated media privatization and liberalization and are thus prone to this development. This observation urges a reappraisal of what political parallelism means and how it actually plays out in transitional countries.

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In this article, we discuss the concept of political parallelism and how it can help explain media structures' development in transitional countries through the lens of a case study of Libyan media. The role of ownership and funding in fragile contexts is crucial here. After these theoretical considerations, we delve into the situation in Libya, a country torn by war and civil unrest following the overthrowing of Muammar al-Qadhafi's decades-long authoritarian rule in 2011. Through a media mapping of the current media genres in Libya as well as an analysis of ownership structures and political affiliations, we explain how the concept of political parallelism unfolds in Libya and what other media developments, both dangerous and promising, are likely to evolve alongside enduring political turmoil.

Defining Political Parallelism

The concept of political parallelism was first proposed by Seymour-Ure (1974) as "party-press parallelism." According to him, political parallelism is characterized by close associations between political parties and media, thus entailing a culture of journalism that openly promotes political parties and their positions. Hallin and Mancini (2004) develop this concept further, adapting it to the realities of the early 21st century in the Western hemisphere and disconnecting it from the party-as-organization notion. They argue that in countries with a high level of political parallelism, "media are still differentiated politically, [but] they more often are associated not with particular parties, but with general political tendencies" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 28). Hallin and Mancini (2017) name the main ways in which political parallelism manifests (p. 157): Typically, there are structural ties between the media and political organizations through ownership and financial support, as well as a tendency of media personnel (e.g., managers, journalists) to be affiliated with certain political actors. Furthermore, journalistic practices tend to differ in systems with high as opposed to low levels of political parallelism. Media audiences may themselves also be partisan.

Given this broad set of characteristics, Albuquerque (2012) criticizes the term *political parallelism* as being used too arbitrarily. He emphasizes that to distinguish between simply politically engaged media or media advocacy and "real" political parallelism, one has to identify whether there are clear or unclear relations between actors in the media and the political system (p. 93). Taking this suggestion seriously, the political involvement of media owners is a major driver of political parallelism. Thus, ownership patterns in addition to funding of a media outlet by political actors are the chief aspects that need to be investigated to ascertain the nature and degree of political parallelism. Journalistic practices and audience preference are additionally relevant, yet secondary to the ownership structures that distinguish the concept of political parallelism.

Aiming to further differentiate the concept, Mancini (2012) distinguishes political parallelism from the instrumentalization of media, which is understood as an effort by political interest groups with different agendas "to reach specific goals at specific moments, or to support personal candidacies and alliances" (p. 262f) through the use of mass media. In our view, the two phenomena are interrelated, but materialize on different levels: Whereas instrumentalization of media refers to the concrete and specific action of influencing media content, political parallelism is to be found on the structural level, as financial, organizational, or personal affiliations between media and interest groups. Given the prevalent structural dependencies of media on owners and their funding, we consider instrumentalization as one possible, particularly strong outcome of political parallelism instead of competing concepts. Thus, in this study, we

use the concept of political parallelism to characterize media as being actively incorporated into a political power play and aim to detect this through an analysis of structures.

Political Parallelism in Transitional Countries: Between Pluralism and Polarization

The concept of political parallelism is typically linked to a highly polarized political landscape and the tendency among the media to mirror that polarization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 130). As a consequence, the media may behave in a public arena as political opponents who compete for constituencies and fight their political foes.

Although Hallin and Mancini (2004) focus on the European countries of the Mediterranean region when detecting strong political parallelism and a related polarized pluralism, it is obvious that these features also apply to many transitional countries in the Middle East and North Africa—namely Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia (El-Richani, 2016; Richter, 2017; Wollenberg & El-Richani, 2017). Key elements such as instrumentalization and a lack of journalistic autonomy can also be observed in war-torn countries such as Syria and Libya. However, only a few scholars have made an attempt to analyze this phenomenon in more detail.

Voltmer (2013) identifies political parallelism as a common feature among transitional countries resulting from “savage deregulation” (p. 181f) in the aftermath of regime change. She argues that newly emerging parties and movements quickly occupy this newfound media space in order to secure lines of communication within a politically competitive environment. If political instability or armed conflicts prevent investments—and thus recovery of a market economy—party-financed media may be the only survivor and thus preeminent by default. This is how unrestrained media liberalization in the context of heightened political competition and weak markets almost necessarily leads to political parallelism during the course of transition. Political parallelism, then, can have two opposing effects:

First, according to Voltmer (2013), partisan media can provide orientation for the voter in a newly emerging party landscape that may lack transparency in the initial phase of transformation. Media that represent specific political camps help citizens understand and distinguish the emerging currents in times of change. Thus, partisan media contributes to an “informed citizenry” (Voltmer, 2013, p. 183). Similarly, Hallin and Mancini (2004) observed that among audiences, “a strong positive value was often placed on political engagement of the media and on ideological diversity” (p. 131) in the immediate postliberation period in France and Italy. Moreover, existing transformation research on the current situation in the Middle East and North Africa region indicates that partisan media help people become involved in the political process and hence pave the way for increased acceptance of change as well as trust among citizens for the new political elites (Voltmer, 2013, p. 179f; Wollenberg, 2018, p. 72f).

Second, however, depending on the nature of the political environment, political parallelism may also foster instrumentalization and media polarization, which can ultimately exacerbate conflict. This is likely to be the case if political opponents are not respectful of each other, resulting in a situation in which “one’s own position is taken as absolute” (Voltmer, 2013, p. 184) and legitimacy of the other camp is denied. The media may then “reinforce the persistence of divisional identities” and “may consistently undermine the

credibility of political solutions . . . or power sharing" (Price & Stremlau, 2012, p. 1080). Problematic aspects of political parallelism are particularly pronounced when conflicts concerning the redistribution of wealth and power follow ethnosectarian fault lines. Ethnosectarian polarization can more easily turn into violent conflict, and the media can more easily become part of that development if identity politics rule the game (Voltmer, 2012, p. 292). Continuing with this observation, Deane (2013) discusses the destabilizing impact of media liberalization in fragile states. Fragile states, he argues, are most often fractured states with ethnosectarian rifts dividing society (p. 3).

To avoid the shift from external pluralism to polarization, Voltmer (2013) and Deane (2013) emphasize the need for integrative types of media that serve as platforms for dialogue and exchange among different strands of society. For Deane, a highly fractured media landscape can be mitigated by media that focus on the construction of a "shared identity through dialogue and debate between groups that are confident that their own identity is secure and valued" (p. 20). As examples of such media, Deane mentions radio stations in Africa that are sponsored by the United Nations, peer-to-peer networks in social media, or the introduction of public service broadcasting. Voltmer sees a crucial role in "bridging communication" in the form of "forum media . . . where different groups can speak and—more importantly—listen to each other" (p. 185). However, media that aim for diversity, dialogue, exchange, and openness will not necessarily emerge by itself; it needs to be nurtured by political measures and incentives (Voltmer, 2013, p. 185).

In the same vein, Karpinnen (2013) suggests distinguishing the two types of media that are equally important in a transitional society: media outlets that "provide unifying, regulated spaces which bring together various divergent perspectives" (p. 78) and media outlets that "challenge and contest prevailing views and cultural codes" (p. 78). Thus, a democratic system should create protected spaces for both modes of communication in two spheres that are detached from one another but remain somewhat connected. One is characterized by fierce contestation, the other by mediation (Karpinnen, 2013, pp. 76–81).

Thus, political parallelism in transitional societies can be seen as an unavoidable and even necessary phenomenon to stimulate various elements of democratic systems, such as political competition and participation. However, the consequences of unregulated media pluralism can include polarization and even hatred among societal groups. Media that emphasize dialogue and unity could help mitigate that polarization.

The purpose of mapping the Libyan media structure is to show in which direction the pendulum swings in this fragile transitional state. Before delving into the actual analysis, we provide a brief overview of the political context in Libya and the development of media before and after the uprisings in 2011.

The Libyan Case: A History of Media Dependency on Politics

The history of media in Libya is a history of political dependencies that left little space for the development of diverse media. Since the early days of mass communication and already under Italian colonial rule, the Libyan media were exclusively in the hands of the ruling elites and were meant to educate the allegedly ignorant population (Rugh, 2004). When Muammar al-Qadhafi gained power in 1969, he turned

the media into a tool of political indoctrination. Qadhafi dreamed of a permanent revolution that would transform the masses into progressive revolutionaries who would eventually establish a direct democracy. In 1972, Qadhafi dismissed all existing newspapers and further on attached all media to newly formed people's committees. These committees were meant to represent professional entities, such as the teachers' union. Soon, Qadhafi even spoke of a "jamahirization," a total takeover by the masses, dismissing all institutions of representative ruling. However, Mattes (2009) argues convincingly that

the Libyan model of direct democracy shows . . . the deficit which is typical for this model of participation: the hyperactive state of participation of new, politically conscious citizens intended by Qadhafi was in reality always a fiction of its ideal. (p. 5)

Operating a newspaper or a radio channel in Libya always depended on Qadhafi's discretion and media policy was subject to his several radical turns. For example, Qadhafi announced 1980 the year of "ideological criticism on the mass media" (Mattes, 1986, p. 51), and consequently abolished all existing media institutions. So-called Revolutionary Committees took over the national news agency, national and foreign broadcasting, and most parts of the press, and they became responsible for all activities concerning distribution, cinema, theater, and culture. In 1993, media development was severely retarded by the sanctions that the United Nations had imposed on Libya. The sanctions were a result of Qadhafi's and the Revolutionary Committees' radical anti-Americanism in the 1980s and state-supported terrorism. Now, they strongly affected the import of information technology such as computers. Newspapers suffered from a shortage of paper, and television and radio became detached from the fast technological and professional developments that took place in the 1990s. After 2000 and in the context of rapprochement to the West to lift the sanctions, Qadhafi adopted a strategy of limited top-down liberalization. Regional people's committees were allowed to operate local newspapers and radios, providing a less tightly monitored space for publication. For a short period of time (2007–2009), one of Qadhafi's sons, Saif al-Islam, was permitted to develop the Libya al-Ghad (Libya of Tomorrow) initiative, which encompassed a political reform program and included several media outlets that paralleled the dull state media and tackled topics that were previously considered taboo (Richter, 2013). However, in 2009, authoritarian tolerance was overstretched when the Al-Ghad Foundation published a human rights report that demanded that authorities build up civil society and lift their "stranglehold" on the media (St. John, 2011). Al-Ghad's media was immediately stopped and therewith also the toddling steps into media diversity.

Even though some more autonomous initiatives on the local level and within Al-Ghad had been possible, when the uprisings began in early 2011, the Libyan media had experienced 80 years of strong dependency on ruling elites and tight control of any media outlet. Thus, in 2011, during the early phase of the transformation and when the rigid control mechanism vanished, one of the authors observed a "media stampede" in Benghazi and later in Tripoli (Media in Cooperation and Transition, 2012, p. 6). In Benghazi alone—a city in the eastern part of Libya with a population of roughly 600,000 people—120 new newspapers, five radio stations, and five TV stations were counted. The breakdown of state control in the field of mass media and public communication obviously allowed long-oppressed ethnic minorities, dissidents, and other outgroups in society to finally voice their opinions. To participate in the public debate on the future of their country was an opportunity that many had been longing for and that now, in the sudden absence of restrictions, led to an unprecedented blossoming of media outlets (Wollenberg & Pack, 2013). Although

most of the newly emerging channels eventually failed because of a lack of funding in the years following their establishment, the importance of public articulation in a formerly repressed society became clear.

What started in Benghazi also reached the rest of the country: In 2011, an alliance of oppositional forces—supported by a France-led NATO mission and funded by other foreign forces such as Qatar—fought its way along the populated coastal areas all the way to the capital Tripoli in the west of the country, and finally toppled the Qadhafi regime, killing the former “brother leader.” Yet, inasmuch as a variety of media appeared to fill the vacuum left after the regime had gone, an equal variety of political actors with vested interests appeared all around Libya. During the following transition process, fierce competition in the highly fragmented political sector brought Libya to the verge of becoming a failed state. Until summer 2014, various political-interest groups were still trying to fight out their divergent interests in institutionalized political bodies, such as the National Transition Council (until 2012), the parliament, and an elected government. Mutual distrust, conflicting ideologies, and desire to secure (economic) resources at the expense of others led to intractable conflicts that broke open into a war of militias in 2014 (Watanabe, 2016). Since then, Libya has been both geographically divided and politically fragmented. In the east of Libya, including the city of Benghazi, one main entity emerged: an alliance called the Libyan National Army (LNA), which includes remnants of the old regime and is led by former general Khalifa Haftar. This alliance also comprised the 2014-elected and displaced House of Representatives in Tobruk and the interim government in Al-Bayda. In 2014, the LNA launched a military campaign called “Operation Dignity” claiming to rid Libya of Islamist forces, and succeeded in conquering mainly eastern cities of the country. As a reaction, several changing coalitions have been set up in the western part of the country, including Islamist forces. The unifying umbrella was their opposition to the LNA, and they formed what came to be known as “Operation Dawn.” In particular, the Dawn-coalition consisted of dozens of rival networks (Lacher, 2015, p. 3; see also Pack, 2015) built on tribal interests and local loyalties. All actors are also competing for international support, for example, from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, which consider Libya a playground to enlarge their spheres of influence. Daraghi (2015) concludes that “Libya’s conflict has become more than ideological; it is also about the interest and relative power of different groups—and a fear of losing that power” (p. 50). This fear is also reflected in more recent developments: Since the December 17, 2015, Shkirat Agreement was negotiated by the United Nations, a government of national accord (GNA), headed by Fayaz al-Sarraj, has been established in Tripoli to follow up on the intermittent transition process. Observers argue, however, that instead of unifying the country, the GNA has become the political arm of an alliance of militias that exploits the resources of the state (Lacher, 2015). The de-facto separation of the state remains in place, with two main players—the LNA in the east and the GNA in the west— but there are also many local militias within and among these players. Thus, on a political level, the pluralism of the early days of the uprisings, a pluralism that reflected diversity and could have stimulated debates and mobilized participation, has turned into exclusionist polarization.

This situation has created immense difficulties for the media sector: There is no established liberal advertising market to allow for donor-independent media organizations. Possible donors with sufficient capacity to establish a media outlet are involved in power games that are shaped by a zero-sum logic. Thus, media have become part of a game in which “key actors use communication to compete for loyalty in the political marketplace” (Price & Stremlau, 2012, p. 1077). Against both this local context

and the conceptual considerations of the nature and effects of political parallelism, we analyze the current situation of Libyan media.

Method

We base our empirical analysis on a database of 172 Libyan media outlets that was compiled in March 2018 by a team of local Libyan analysts in response to a commission of, and with the partnership of, Libya-Analysis.¹ The compilation includes Libyan TV stations ($n = 14$), local radio stations ($n = 122$), news agencies ($n = 3$), and newspapers and magazines ($n = 11$), as well as relevant online publications ($n = 22$) throughout Libya in both urban and rural areas. Moreover, TV broadcasting and online publications from abroad that mainly target the Libyan market were also included. The analysts were asked to include all media outlets available to the Libyan public. Online publications were only included when they had a journalistic approach and offered a website. Social media-only pages were not included.

The analysts classified each media outlet according to 13 categories. Some of the categories were rather formal and descriptive and included "type of media" or "location." Other categories focused on "funding," "owner," and "manager/staff" and their respective political affiliation. These categories reflect our theoretical considerations regarding the concept of political parallelism. The question of funding was a rather difficult category because of the extreme lack of transparency not only in Libya, but in the region in general (see also the Media Ownership Monitor from Reporters Without Borders at <https://www.mom-rsf.org/>). The analysts often referred to secondary sources and interviews with experts to get information. Nevertheless, the category of funding must be interpreted cautiously.

In the first step of data collection, we compiled a preliminary list of Libyan media outlets based on the analysts' research and knowledge. For information on ownership and technical aspects, the analysts directly contacted media outlets. In most cases, telephone interviews with senior representatives from the media outlets were conducted. With regard to making statements about political affiliations, the analysts asked directly and verified via online research and through consultation with analysts and other experts.

The analysts were recruited from a network of journalists working for Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT), a nonprofit organization that had worked in Libya over the past four years as part of a capacity-building media development project in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. Based on this network, MiCT was able to select analysts with extensive knowledge of Libyan media and who had already demonstrated their

¹ The local aspect of the media mapping was carried out by Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT) on behalf of the New Jersey-based Libya Analysis LLC, a consultancy founded by Jason Pack, which then conducted its own analysis of the results. MiCT and Libya Analysis are both engaged as nongovernmental organizations on different topics in supporting Libya's transition. One of the authors of this article is head of research at MiCT. The proximity of the research to media assistance is reflected in the research question itself, insofar as the analysis of media structures is a standard starting point for the design of any media assistance program in transitional or crisis countries. It has also allowed access to the field for data collection that otherwise has become extremely difficult.

reliability, credibility, professionalism, and analytical skills. For verification, the entire data set was circulated among the team of analysts so that all data were scrutinized by at least one other colleague.

As a second step, and to deepen our understanding of the findings from the media mapping, we subsequently interviewed in total five senior media experts from Libya in Spring 2019, among them a former TV anchor now political analyst and journalist trainer, one editor-in-chief of a local radio and TV station, one journalist and manager of a media assistance program in Libya, a news editor for a TV station, and one academic who also works as a journalist trainer. We presented the results of the mapping to them, seeking confirmation of our interpretations, and enquired about further explanations to findings that were puzzling, particularly in regard to the role of local radio in the transitional process. Interviews of one to two hours were partly conducted in Tunis in April 2019 with Libyans residing there, and partly conducted in June 2019 via Skype with interviewees residing in Bayda and Tripoli.²

In the following sections, the results of the media mapping including some of the insights from the interviews are summarized and discussed in the context of theoretical considerations related to political parallelism.

Analysis: The Simultaneity of Polarization and Depoliticization

The media mapping process identified an extensive number of Libyan media outlets that have clear affiliations with parties and political movements. This indicates a high level of political parallelism. The TV sector appears particularly politicized: Ten of 14 channels are tightly connected to conflict parties either through political affiliations of executives or owners. If we also consider political affiliations of financial sources, 13 of 14 channels are considered as belonging to a political party (see Table 1). In most of these party-affiliated TV channels, the founders or executives have a history of political engagement, and the operation of these channels is but another feature of their political activism. Financial support is provided by either the owner himself or one of the conflict parties or their allied countries. Overall, support by Arab countries with geopolitical interests in Libya (e.g., Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar) appears to be a strong driver of politicization of media production in Libya.

Besides a vast landscape of party-affiliated media, the analysts identified an even greater number of media outlets that do not follow a pattern of political parallelism. Almost two thirds of the mapped media refrain from political programs and either follow an agenda of service, culture, sports, or entertainment. Most striking in this segment are the 82 local radio stations labeled by the analysts as media that “cover mostly local nonpolitical issues without any particular bias.” These radio stations seem to address local target groups through service, cultural, and social programs without catering to the interest of any political group.

Both observations—the strong politicization among TV stations as well as the conscious detachment from politics among small local media—need further detailing.

² For security reasons, the names of the interviewees are not disclosed in this article.

Moreover, there is a small number of media that seems to try to perform objective journalism with regard to political topics, but does so mostly from abroad and with the help of Western donors. They are mainly online and are analyzed in Section 3.³

The Strong Politicization of the TV Sector and Shifting Loyalties

Media Camps Mirror Patterns of Conflict

According to the media mapping, three strong and adversarial camps dominate the Libyan political landscape, each with its own media wing (see Figure 1): (1) One camp, consisting of 19 media outlets, is supported by the LNA or its allies in the east of the country, including the House of Representatives in Tobruk or the remnants of the former Qadhafi regime. All broadcasters in this sector are fully or partly funded by government authorities. (2) An equally strong camp comprising 14 media outlets is supportive of the GNA in the area of Tripolitania. Six broadcasters in this group are directly funded by the GNA. (3) Finally, there is a variety of media outlets operated or supported by different Islamist currents in Libya, namely the rather moderate Muslim Brotherhood, Jihadist groups such as the Islamic Fighting Group, and the Saudi-backed ultraconservative Salafi Madkhali movement (for more information on this movement, see Luck, 2018). Numbering 35 affiliated outlets, Islamist groups control a significant media footprint with diverse political interests and agendas. The Salafi Madkhali movement supports 17 radio stations throughout the country, all of which broadcast Qur'an recitations, sermons, and seminars that are in line with their school of thought.

The Muslim Brotherhood is backing two fairly popular TV channels both with headquarters in Istanbul: Al-Nabaa and Al-Ahrar as well as the Tripoli-based Libya Panorama channel through the Anwar Libya Ltd. company. Although religious media could be part of a move toward sustainable pluralism, the current Islamist-affiliated media in Libya are characterized by a high level of polarization, and many channels appear as sources of incitement and inflammatory speech, thus reflecting the negative aspects of political parallelism. "They have a lot of prerecordings to tell the people what they have to do," said one interviewee about the radio stations that are supportive of the Salafi Madkhali movement.

³ In the following analysis of the media mapping, we focus on TV, radio, and online websites, excluding (1) print media because of their small number and limited reach (only 11 outlets in all of Libya) and (2) news agencies because of their small number (only three). Because of their strong relation to the government(s), these news agencies resemble the political parallelism patterns of the TV sector, and the press generally resembles those of the radio stations.

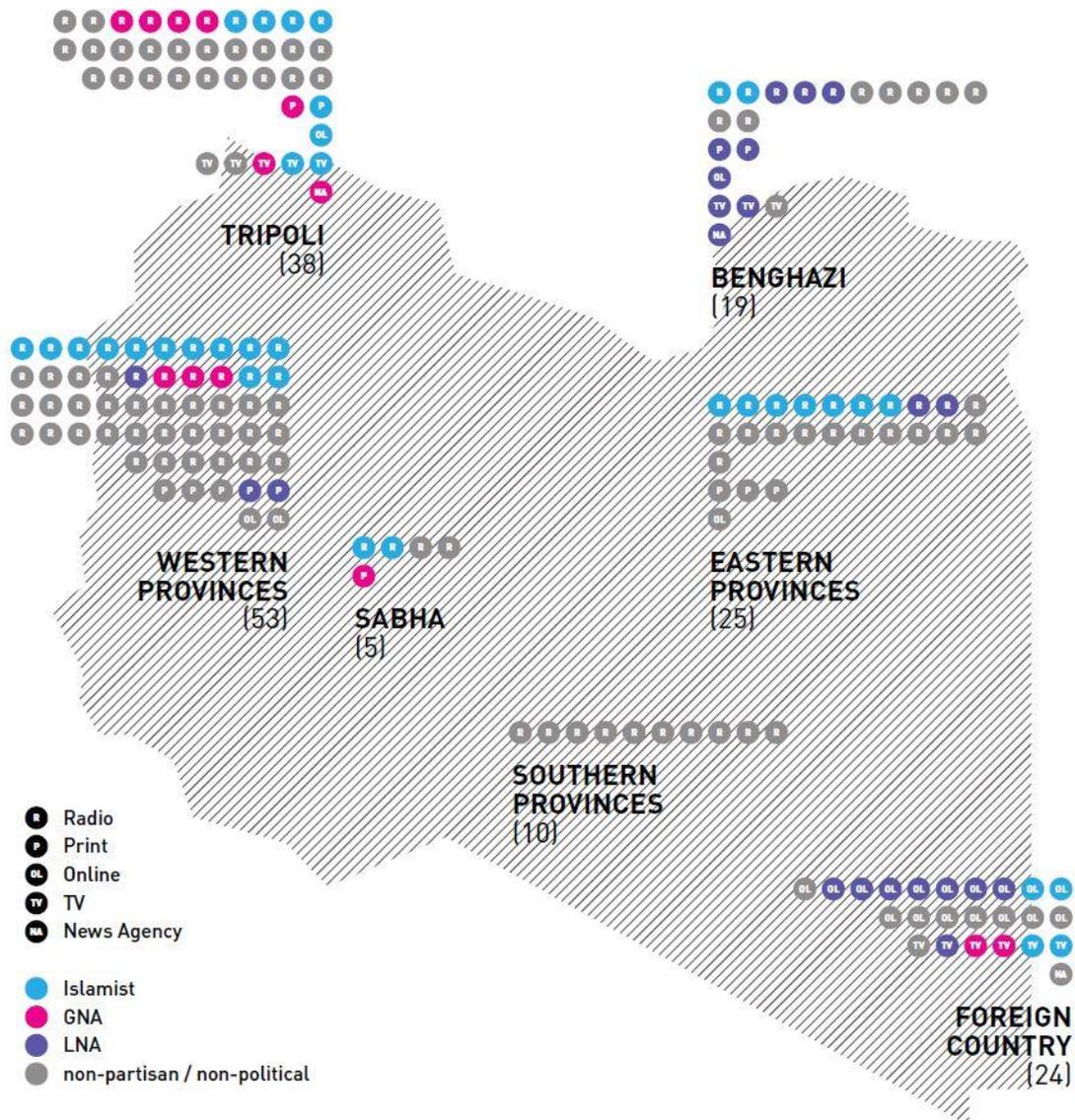


Figure 1. Distribution of partisan media throughout Libya according to media genre. GNA = government of national accord; LNA = Libyan National Army.

The analysis of ownership structures and funding in relation to political affiliations among Libyan TV stations reveals a comprehensive reflection of conflict patterns in the media landscape. All relevant players in the Libyan conflict are represented as owners or funders or executive staff in this segment of the media system. Foreign intervention in Libyan media is also highlighted, evidencing the regional interests in the ongoing conflict.

Table 1. Libyan TV Stations, Their Headquarters, Affiliations, and Funding Sources in 2018.

Channel	Headquarters	Affiliated with	Supposedly funded by
Libya 24	London	LNA, pro-Qadhafi	United Arab Emirates
Al Mustaqbal	Benghazi	HoR (LNA)	HoR
Al Hadath	Benghazi	HoR (LNA)	LNA, Saudi Arabia
Al-Ikhbariyya	Benghazi	HoR (LNA)	HoR
Libya al-Watan	Tunis	GNA	Libyan businessmen abroad
Libya al-Rasmiyya	Tripoli	GNA	GNA
TV 218	Amman	Unclear ^a	United Arab Emirates
Libya's Channel	Amman	Unclear, anti-Islamist	United Arab Emirates
Libya al-Ahrar	Istanbul	Muslim Brotherhood	Qatar
Libya al-Nabaa	Istanbul	Muslim Brotherhood	Qatar
Libya Panorama	Tripoli	Muslim Brotherhood	Unclear
Al Tanashu	Tripoli	Islamist	Qatar
Libya al-Riyadiyya	Tripoli	No political programming, only sport is broadcasted	GNA
Libya al-Ula	Tripoli	No political and news programs broadcasted	Privately owned by Ali Gaddah

Note. LNA = Libyan National Army; HoR = House of Representatives; GNA = government of national accord.

^aAt the time of the mapping in 2018, TV 218 was still considered rather objective, but it turned clearly pro-LNA/Haftar in 2019.

Foreign Country Support Is Ubiquitous

Table 1 shows that a substantial number of TV channels (six of 14) broadcast from abroad and eight are considered by the analysts to receive funding from sources outside Libya: Libya 24 has been operating from London since 2014, allegedly with funding from Libyans in the UAE. Likewise, the channels TV 218 and Libya's Channel, both with headquarters in Amman, are said to receive funding from sources in the UAE. Libyan funders who live abroad are behind the funding of Libya al-Watan, which has operated from Tunisia since 2017. Another example of this external media production and funding is Al-Nabaa, an outlet affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which relocated from Tripoli to Istanbul in 2017 and is known to receive funding from the state of Qatar. Moreover, Libya al-Ahrar, which is as well closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, receives funding from Qatar, although its headquarters are in Istanbul. In fact, Libya al-Ahrar was founded by Mahmud Shammam on March 30, 2011, in Doha, Qatar, to counter Qadhafi's state propaganda during the revolutionary turmoil. It later served as the mouthpiece of the former ruling National Transitional Council. The Qatar-based television channel Al-Rayyan provided an office, studio space, technical equipment, and other support, and Libya al-Ahrar is said to not only be financed but even owned by the state of Qatar.

The media sector with the widest reach among the population thus seems to be a playground for foreign interests, with Qatar supporting mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, the UAE siding with Haftar's LNA, and the Saudis backing Salafist movements. Asked about the intentions of these potent actors from the Gulf region, one of the experts interviewed said, "To get on the ground in Libya! Very obvious, Saudi Arabia, the

Emirates, Egypt, they want a country in the middle of the Mediterranean, loyal to them." Apparently, foreign powers strongly enforce political parallelism.

Political Leanings Might Change Over Time

Interestingly, however, affiliations between political parties and media outlets do not necessarily appear stable over time. For instance, Libya al-Rasmiyya, one of the three former state TV channels that resumed broadcasting in 2012 under this new name, aggressively mobilized in favor of the National Salvation Government from 2014 to 2016. After 2016, with the advent of the GNA, it turned into the mouthpiece of the GNA. Various other channels changed their editorial policies and political orientation as well, depending on the funding opportunities and loyalties of the station managers. This can be seen with the case of Mansur Obaid, who founded Libya al-Watan in 2017 in Tunisia. Obaid was once a supporter of Haftar's LNA and supported him with his channel Al-Karama until he defected and became Haftar's fiercest critic.

Among the experts interviewed in April 2019, the channel TV 218 was discussed as a recent case of sudden change in political orientation. With financial means provided by the UAE, TV 218 had long forged a reputation characterized by professionalism in journalistic coverage. The media mapping in 2018 still emphasized the channel's balanced coverage of domestic conflicts and cultural focus. However, the political attitude of TV 218 drastically changed with the launch of a military campaign by Haftar's LNA against the GNA in early April 2019. In the eyes of the interviewees, TV 218 has ever since openly supported the LNA's campaign and effort to take control of Tripoli: "TV 218 is not neutral anymore. Instead it is taking sides for Haftar, praising the Haftar military successes," said one of the experts about the channel's editorial change. It seems as if the UAE started to instrumentalize the channel once it felt the need to support its ally's campaign more strongly.

Trend and Countertrend: On the (De)politicization of Local Media

Decentralized Spread of Private and Public Local Radio

Whereas the nation-wide TV sector is in the hands of a few and reflects a strong political polarization, the sizable increase in local media in Libya represents a countertrend. Local media make up around three quarters of all media outlets counted. There was a negligible number of print media ($n = 2$), online websites ($n = 1$), and TV ($n = 1$, the aforementioned Libya al-Ula in Tripoli) operating locally, but we found 122 locally broadcasting radio stations in the country. The high number of local radio stations was one of the most unexpected outcomes of the media mapping. Radio is in general considered a weak type of media in the Arab world compared with TV, which is known to be the strongest media genre in terms of popularity and reach in the region. However, a BBC Media Action report of 2014 claimed that 47% of the Libyan male and 25% of the female population listen to the radio every day (Dowson-Zeidan, Eaton, & Wespieser, 2014). Radio is thus about equally important to the Libyans as the Internet, which is used by 32% of the interviewees on a regular basis (weekly or daily), but definitely lagging behind TV, which is used by 76% every day (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2014). Radio is mostly listened to in the car, which might explain

the divide between male and female listeners. Clearly, radio is still way behind the popularity of TV, but its close connection to the people on the ground can be considered a powerful axis of impact.

This prompted us to take a closer look at those local radio stations. Their geographical distribution is slightly uneven, with 75 of these stations in Tripoli and the western provinces, 14 in the sparsely populated southern provinces and the city of Sabha, and only 33 located in Benghazi and the east of Libya. Apparently, many of these local radio stations use infrastructure remaining from the former state-broadcasting network that was built by Qadhafi and had been used by local "popular committees" during the phase of limited liberalization during the 2000s.

After the collapse of the regime in 2011, these local radio stations continued operating, mostly by work of volunteers and activists who could use and maintain the equipment at much lower costs compared with the centralized and much more expensive TV infrastructure. Looking at the ownership and funding of all local radio stations, 71 of 122 are still connected to public bodies, of which 34 are directly related to government institutions such as ministries, and 37 are related to municipalities and publicly funded local organizations such as universities. According to the experts interviewed, editorial autonomy of the local teams is fairly high, with most of these cases exhibiting little control by governmental institutions and a tendency to follow public opinion on the community level, or as one interviewee put it, "There is no control by the government or the army, but one important fact is what the audience wants to hear." The remaining stations are operated by private entrepreneurs (33, particularly in the Tripoli area), and in 18 other cases ownership could not be pinned down exactly (although 17 of which are clearly affiliated with the Madkhali Salafists).

Due to the decentralized spread, the small size and relative autonomy of the individual stations plus a supposedly low level of professionalism, many of these local players were subject to two opposing developments over time: The first development was very much in line with the trend of partisanship and politicization that we observed in the TV sector. Radio stations were being captured by political movements and communication was manipulated for political ends. The second, often subsequent development indicates a turn-away from the omnipresent politicization leading to a growing sector of nonpolitical players offering interactive programs for local audiences that tackle mostly social, cultural, and service-related issues. Both of these trends need further detailing.

Media Capture by Local Armed Groups and Political Movements

Asked about the role of local media in the conflict, the Libyan experts interviewed presented quite a few examples of radio stations that got carried away by conflict escalation. One interviewee gave the example of a radio station in Tarhouna, a city in the western province of Murqub that got heavily involved in the war of militias in 2014. This station belonged to the radio network of the government-owned Center of New Media (Markaz al-'Ilam al-Jadeed) in Tripoli. The government tried to stop the radio station from further fueling the conflict but failed to overrule the local militias that would not allow any change in the program.

Another outstanding example is the case of radio Az-Zawiyya al-Mahaliyya that was heavily engaged in incitement against the neighboring town Wersheffana during the war of militias in 2014. The town of "Zawiyya was part of the war and the local radio supported the war because the people in the city supported the war," explained one expert, emphasizing the role of the community in this instance of taking sides.

The cases of the stations in Zawiyya and Tarhouna demonstrate a delicate vulnerability of the local radio stations to instrumentalization by militias against their enemies. Unlike in the TV sector, partisanship in these cases was driven by dynamics deriving from the local context rather than from top-down party or government control. Asked about the relation of local radio stations to their municipalities, one expert said, "There is a lot of things that affect the independence of the radio station. One of them is the general attitude of the city." Paradoxically, the vulnerability to media capture is linked to the relative autonomy of these stations and their detachment from central institutional control and protection.

Contrasting this trend of bottom-up capture of already existing stations, analysts also identified 17 channels that have been set up by the Madkhali Salafi movement. Although none of these stations revealed their sources of funding, it is very likely that these are to be found inside Saudi Arabia where the movement has its roots. According to one expert, these stations appeal to people "that are lost in all this blood and war and they are trying to find peace in the way to god." In total, about a third of the radio channels mapped in Libya can be considered partisan.

A Tangible Trend to Turn Away From Politics

On the other hand, 82 of 122 radio stations were labeled by the analysts as media that "cover mostly local non-political issues without any particular bias" or as "a culture-oriented station, far from politics" (see Figure 2). Thus, more than two thirds of all local radio stations cover topics of local interest addressing small communities that, for example, actively participate in the many call-in programs. Often the analysts framed content as "local, diversified and service based, employing a neutral political line."

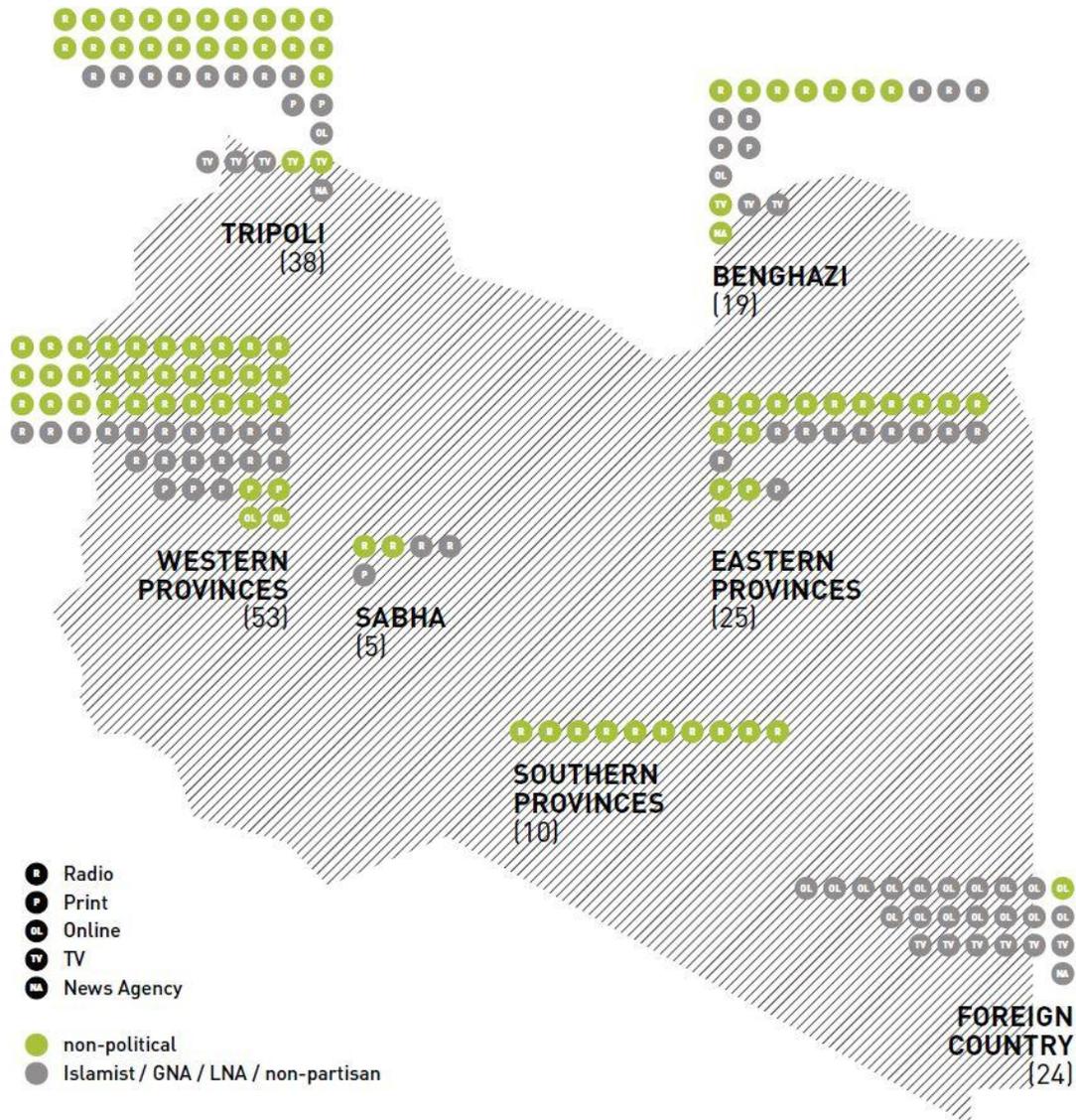


Figure 2. Distribution of explicitly non-political media outlets throughout Libya. GNA = government of national accord; LNA = Libyan National Army.

In several cases, the analysts identified a tendency to support reconciliation at the community level, highlighting a “conciliatory and consensus-based political line.” Community orientation and nonpolitical programming appear as common yet new features within that segment of the media system: “The radio, they feel like they are part of the community and they act as part of the community, not as something separate or something that came from outside,” said one of the experts interviewed.

The majority of local media thus eschew the highly politicized national TV sector model and actively turn away from politics. The data indicate that this development is rather recent. One account features the Wa'ad local radio station in Tripoli. The analyst stated that

The radio station has gone through two different phases. During the first one populist and hateful rhetoric prevailed. Back then, one of the most popular voices was Nazim Al-Tayari, who currently faces a trial for incitement and slander. As a result of adopting such a policy, the station was attacked and forced to shut down. The second phase started after 2016 and the radio avoids now political commentary, and focuses instead on cultural, social, and youth issues. (Analyst's comment in the media mapping file, 2018)

Many of the radio stations, particularly in western Libya, were once strong on populist rhetoric, but recently changed their editorial policy to cover more cultural and social topics. A review of the reasons given by analysts and experts indicates that this change is mostly rooted in pressure enacted by militias and extremist groups. Among the experts interviewed was one editor who reported about raids of their studios in Benghazi that resulted in a decision by the management to refrain from political coverage altogether and focus on entertainment and culture: "They are in the middle of the war and they are not talking about anything related to that war. They try to forget about what is happening and they try to keep calm." These channels are not becoming "neutral" media in the sense that they cover politics objectively, but rather opt for depoliticization under the threat of violence. However, given the large number of radio stations and diversity of circumstances they emerged from, the reasons to refrain from politics are probably more complex and need further investigation.

On the Margin: Balanced Journalism—Only on the Internet

A third development concerns a trend that was mainly observed among online publications. The mapping identified only 22 websites that can be considered original journalistic products.⁴ Again reflecting patterns of political parallelism, 11 of these 22 can be considered partisan as they are owned or financed by supporters of one of the main political camps in Libya. Another four can be considered unpolitical local websites focusing on cultural content. The remaining seven websites operate from outside Libya and, like in the TV sector, are again financed and operated by foreign institutions or individuals; online media, however, is exclusively funded from the West such as the European Union (elbiro.net), the Holland International Channel (hunasotak.com/Libya), or the British journalist Michael Cousins (LibyaHerald.com). These donors seemingly intend to support a balanced style of reporting according to their normative understanding of journalism. These outlets can be considered the few remainders of the many Western-sponsored initiatives that started right after the regime collapse in 2011. What is probably intended to be a breeding ground for professional journalism has, however, only a limited reach in Libya. Their locations outside Libya point to the fact that there is not yet a place for this kind of journalism inside the country.

⁴ Of course, there are many more social media and online outlets, but these are often connected to other media genres such as TV channels.

Discussion: Dialectic Forces Shape the Media Landscape

The media mapping underlying this article has demonstrated that the “savage deregulation” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 124) in Libya has produced a highly politicized media system with political actors systematically co-opting the media. A major portion of new media outlets is owned, operated, or financed either by the many parties that are involved in the various political conflicts, their foreign country allies, or by media personalities that support the cause of a specific party. Referring to Voltmer (2013) and Deane (2013), this type of political parallelism in the context of political fragmentation will most likely deepen existing rifts in society and contribute to the escalation of conflict. In the case of Libya, evidence is strong that the media have fostered the partition during the war of militias in 2014, and continue to do so.⁵ In fact, already a quick glance over content shows that messaging among Libyan TV channels today embodies what Voltmer (2013) calls the “dark side of partisanship,” which refers to practices that “deepen polarization between opposing groups” (p. 184).

It became evident during the media mapping that it is particularly TV stations that qualify under the concept of political parallelism. Only potent donors from the main political camps seem to be able to invest in this genre. At the same time, TV is the media genre that most Libyans use to remain informed (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2014, p. 16). However, audiences are not ignorant of those who control the TV stations. Instead, the pronounced partisanship of the media in Libya seems to nurture a growing distrust among Libyan citizens regarding the truthfulness of coverage: “Libyans are wary of agendas behind almost all channels and there appears to be very little trust in the credibility of television channels as a result” (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2014, p. 20). People are frustrated by the “lack of useful and relevant information on television about issues that matter to them” (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2014, p. 16), and they mostly trust friends and family as sources of information (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2014, p. 36). Given this dissatisfaction of the people with the conflictual situation in the media sector, turning to nonpolitical programming as well as entertainment and sports might also be an audience-related, commercially driven move by operators.

Based on the findings of the study by BBC Media Action, we assume that the impact of bias and partisanship might be effectively mitigated by media users’ cognitive and emotional distance from the media system. The channels known for the dissemination of slander and hate speech do not even classify in the interviewees’ ranking of TV stations conducted in the study by BBC Media Action (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2014, p. 17). This observation in our view reflects a broader trend among educated media users in the Middle East and North Africa region to question and critically discuss the credibility of media channels on- and offline in the face of increased media capture by parties and governments. Further research needs to be dedicated to the question of whether media literacy is possibly nurtured by political parallelism and instrumentalization of mass media in fragile contexts.

One countertrend is implied in the high number of small local radio stations that refrain from political coverage and provide mostly public service content, interactive entertainment programs, and

⁵ This remark is referring to the military offensive that was started by General Khalifa Haftar in early April 2019 with the aim of bringing the capital Tripoli under control of the LNA.

coverage of social and cultural issues. These stations build a media system on their own, a landscape within a landscape that does not follow the pattern of political parallelism. Rather than propagating political messages, communication within this field seems nonpolitical in nature, thus insulating local media against the virus of political instrumentalization. Referring to Voltmer (2013), Deane (2013), and Karpinnen (2013), the question must be raised as to whether this segment in the media landscape can be considered an alternative to the otherwise highly fragmented and politicized media system. Do the many local radio stations bring people together? Do they strengthen shared identities and a sense of unity? Unfortunately, the media mapping did not include a distinct content analysis and thus cannot provide evidence whether media outlets made tangible efforts to foster peace or work toward national unity. Comments of the analysts suggest that in most cases, depoliticization is simply the result of intimidation and is chosen because of a climate of fear caused by political groups, as constantly reported by watchdog institutions (Amnesty International, 2018; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2018). At the same time, this study indicates that the development of content in these local stations, within the framework of enforced depoliticization, is mainly guided by audience preferences (or assumptions about these) as well as by actual interaction with the listeners. We thus look at a segment of the media system that is largely characterized by participatory practices and antielite orientation. If it is true that the people in Libya are tired of conflict and finally wish the civil war to end, then audience orientation of this kind may work in favor of national reconciliation.

Conclusion

The discussion has highlighted a distinction between two types of media prevalent in Libya that might be key to understanding the structure of the newly emerging media system and how political parallelism is shaping it: one layer dominated by TV stations being controlled and used by political elites for political ends and another layer of media dominated by local radio stations that are explicitly nonpolitical, well rooted in the communities and driven by audience preferences.

In our view, it is the coexistence of these two diverging layers that gives shape to the media landscape in Libya. Reading Voltmer (2013) and Deane (2013), it is tempting to see a dialectic struggle between binding and dividing forces at work in this schism. It is evident from the data that political parallelism in Libya has contributed to partition and fragmentation of the country, particularly during escalation of conflict. Yet, we cannot judge from the data if the local radio stations indeed contribute to cohesion in society, in other words, if they function as some kind of forum media or media that contribute to shared identity. To get the full picture, further research on the practices, editorial policies, and ambitions guiding the work of the radio producers in the field is essential, as well as content analysis on the different media outlets' messaging.

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