Revisiting the Hierarchy of Influences on Journalism in a Transitional Context: When the Social System Level Prevails

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In this article, we use Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchy of influences (HOI) model as a framework to investigate the ways in which Egyptian journalists perceive the influences exerted on them in the context of the post-Arab Spring transition. Our findings show that perceptions of limitations to journalism practice can extend to all levels in the HOI model and that journalistic autonomy is particularly impeded due to factors at the social system level. This leads to an adaptation of the HOI model as we find that the perceived closure of the public sphere and a complicated network of clientelism at the social system level has impacted journalism practice negatively in Egypt and has a wider influence on the rest of the four levels in the model. In other words, routines, individuals, organizations, and social institutions all seem to mediate the social system's influence on journalistic behavior.

Keywords: hierarchy of influences, Egyptian journalists, journalistic autonomy, role perceptions, Transitional Journalism

More than 10 years on from the 2011 revolution, the Egyptian media system is still unsettled (Allam & Hollifield, 2021), with authoritarian trends influencing the work of journalists, hindering the progress of the industry, and restricting journalistic autonomy (Allam & Hollifield, 2021; Badr, 2020a, 2020b; Elsheikh, Jackson, & Jebril, 2024a). Since the revolution, Egypt witnessed several transitional phases with four different leaders in power (Abdulla, 2014; Badr, 2020a). At the beginning of each phase, there was a brief liberal honeymoon period between the regime and the media, which soon developed into a restrictive phase where those in power tried to restrict media autonomy (Abdulla, 2014).

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The current political state—starting with the election of President Abdelfattah El-Sisi as president in 2014—witnessed a brief liberal phase of the mainstream media during the first year and a half of his official presidential term (Abdulla, 2014), before a series of restrictive measures were implemented leading to a sharp deterioration in the status of journalism. These measures included a legal framework and subsidiary laws that hinder journalistic autonomy and journalists' safety (Badr, 2020a; El Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016) such as the 2018 Media Regulation Law meting out prison sentences for journalists who "incite violence"; the 2018 Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law allowing authorities to block any website considered to be a threat to national security; the 2021 amendments to the penal code tightening punishments for journalists who cover criminal trial sessions without prior approval; and the cancelation of the Ministry of Information and the establishment of the Supreme Council for Media Regulations as a new regulatory body. In addition, the state bought a series of privately owned media outlets through a company affiliated with the state's intelligence service (Bahgat, 2017), which some have interpreted as an attempt to control and depoliticize the Egyptian public sphere (see Elsheikh & Lilleker, 2021).

Scholars argue that such restrictions have led to a fragile, instrumentalized media system, where journalists are struggling for autonomy and recognition amid socioeconomic fragility (Badr, 2020a, 2020b). This, in turn, has further led to a decline in professionalism due to prevailing practices such as self-censorship (Elsheikh et al., 2024a), propagandistic reporting, and influential clientelism networks (Badr, 2020a), where media outlets are either controlled by the state, secret services, or influential businessmen (Reporters Without Borders , 2022) while growing numbers of journalists resort to producing content in alternative news media outlets (Medeiros & Badr, 2022).

Considering the challenges journalists face in Egypt, this study uses the hierarchy of influences (HOI) model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014) as a framework to examine influences on the work of Egyptian political journalists in the context of transition in Egypt. Here, we use the concept of clientelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Milojević & Krstić, 2018; Örnebring, 2012) to discuss the influence of the social system level on the other four levels in the HOI model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014) and the implications for journalists' autonomy and journalism practice in the current state of transition. In doing so, we contribute to the understanding of influences exerted on journalists working in transitional contexts and provide an adaptation to the widely used HOI model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014).

Journalistic Autonomy and Its Limits in Egypt

The concept of journalistic autonomy—to be free and independent from outside influence—is assumed to be one of the fundamental prerequisites for journalism practice and is usually linked to journalism's democratic functions (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2019). Yet journalistic autonomy is often considered "a rhetorical construct as much as a normative ideal" (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2019, p. 2), especially with the deterioration of autonomy even in Western democracies, where it is often taken for granted (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Studying factors that influence and limit journalism autonomy is a well-established theme in journalism studies (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011). Earlier research concentrated on three levels of influence: The institutional level, followed by the individual level, with less emphasis on the organizational level (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2019). Despite its importance, studies on journalism autonomy have been widely criticized (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2019; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013) for their focus on Western

countries, particularly the United States. Thus, we cannot assume that developments in understanding are suited to other non-Western countries (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013).

With a journalistic history spanning more than two centuries, Egypt's media system holds significance in the region as it supplies content to other countries, thereby exerting influence in the Arab world. It boasts the largest audience in the Arab world. Before the 2011 revolution, it featured a diverse range of content and media ownership models although it was not classified as free media. There were expectations that post-revolution, it would transition to a more autonomous environment with increased freedom for journalists. However, the current political phase witnessed unprecedented attacks on journalism autonomy and media freedom (Elsheikh et al., 2024a). The most controversial was a physical attack on a syndicate of journalists in 2016. For the first time since its establishment in 1941, the headquarters was raided by the police, and two journalists were arrested. The attack represented a watershed in the state-media relationship (Adam, 2016; Badr, 2020b), prompting journalists to demand a presidential apology and the resignation of the interior minister, whose name they boycotted publishing (Adam, 2016). More recently, attacks on media freedom included raiding the independent online outlet Mada Masr in 2019 and briefly arresting three of its staff.

Several international reports have documented challenges to journalism autonomy in Egypt. For example, the Committee to Protect Journalists (2021) describes Egypt as the "world's third-worst jailer of journalists" (para. 12), while the RSF (2022) ranked Egypt 168/180 in its 2022 report. Freedom House (2022) has further noted that intelligence apparatuses attempt to "shape citizen attitudes by promoting conspiracy theories, disinformation, and hatred toward opposition and critics through media outlets they own or control" (para. 26). These reports are consistent with academic studies documenting the challenging journalistic environment in Egypt (Badr, 2020a; El Issawi & Cammaerts, 2016; Elsheikh et al., 2024a), with Badr (2020a) describing the "death of journalism," where the media industry as a whole is "heading to the unknown" (p. 64).

Analytical Framework: The HOI Model

If journalistic autonomy is understood in relation to the influences on journalists' work, then Shoemaker and Reese's (1996, 2014) HOI model has been foundational in understanding this process. The model differentiates between five levels of influences exerted on journalism: Individual, routine, organizational, extra-media, and social system. It recognizes that "the levels interact with and condition each other, constraining and enabling, but not directly caused by each other" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 94). The model considers that all levels work simultaneously and encourages researchers to study the five levels simultaneously but with the flexibility of studying specific levels while controlling or blocking the other levels (Shoemaker & Reese 2014, pp. 245–246).

This *micro-level* of analysis considers how individual, personal, and professional characteristics influence content. These include journalists' demographic features, personal traits, professional values, and roles (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), working conditions including salaries and contract stability (Hughes, Garcés, Márquez-Ramírez, & Arroyave, 2017), reference groups (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011),

job satisfaction, salary, and job security (Milojević & Krstić, 2018), and personal safety and training (Relly et al., 2015).

The *routine level* is "concerned with those patterns of behavior that form the immediate structures of mediawork . . . including unstated rules and ritualized enactments that are not always made explicit" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 399). This covers a wide range of practices such as adapting to technology, secondhand reporting, and resorting to pack journalism (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This can also be extended to unethical practices such as accepting bribes (Milojević & Krstić, 2018), paying sources to get information (Relly, Zanger, & Fahmy, 2015), or participating in a wider culture of corruption (Milojević & Krstić, 2018).

The *organizational level* concerns the influences journalists face from inside the organization such as editors, owners, and the implementation of new digital technologies. Shoemaker and Reese (2014) explain that tensions inside this level happen especially "during times of social change" (p. 401), which may lead to other internal practices such as journalists resorting to "self-censorship" (Davis, 2020) or owners imposing censorship on journalists (Lee & Chan, 2009; Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014). Previous studies focusing on the organizational level have examined how the organizational level affects "story selection or issues framing in line with political leanings and affiliations of media owners" (Milojević & Krstić, 2018, p.43).

Previous versions of the HOI model referred to the *social institutions level* as the "extra-media level," meaning "everything outside of media organizational boundary" (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016, p. 402), which could include audiences, news sources, governmental authorities, public relations, organized crime, or technological forces (Relly et al., 2015). The level was redefined as "social institutions" to "go beyond any single organization to the inter-organizational field" to "represent the mesolevel environment for media—the interplay of economic, political, and cultural factors—lying between organization and society as a whole" (Reese & Shoemaker, 2006, p. 402). The social institutions level can be particularly vulnerable to influence in transitional contexts. El Issawi (2021) argues that "media instrumentalization by vested interests" has a greater impact on emerging democracies as it "threatens to destabilize a fragile process of institutions building" (p. 866), while Jungblut and Hoxa (2017) discussed different forms of self-censorship in news production in post-conflict societies, which include professional, organizational, reference group-based, economic, political, and ideological types.

Reese and Shoemaker (2016) describe *the social systems level* as a "key influence" level, "being the largest of all layers" and "the base on which the other levels of analysis rest" (p. 403). It is the "most macro level" that is "concerned with traditional theories of society and power as they relate to media" (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016, p. 403). Reese (2001) further elaborates that the level is concerned with "how media symbolic content is connected with larger social interests, how meaning is constructed in the service of power" and "how each of the previous levels functions in order to add up to a coherent ideological result" (p. 183).

Application of the HOI Model in Transitional Contexts

Several studies examined influences exerted on journalists using the HOI model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014) in transitional and nondemocratic countries, with no real consensus emerging on the relative importance of each level of influence across the examined contexts (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

Milojević and Krstić (2018) argue that the social system level was the most influential during the 12-year democratic transition in Serbia. Their study reveals how corrupting relationships among political, business, economic, and media elites impacted all levels in the HOI model (Milojević & Krstić, 2018). In Mexico's northern states, Relly and González de Bustamante (2014) find that the democratic institution of the press, at all levels of influence, has been greatly disrupted. Yet they argue that influences coming from the extra-media level are the strongest in affecting every level above and below (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014). In Turkey, Davis (2020) argues that "each level of influence reinforces the level of influence above it" and "in return, there is also a top-down system of reinforcement" (p. 14). The main influences as perceived by journalists in Turkey are related to government surveillance of their work or social media presence, thus creating a general atmosphere of "fear of loss," forcing journalists to practice self-censorship. In Iraq, Relly and colleagues (2015) argue that news media routines and ideological levels had the greatest influences and that the individual, organizational, and extra-media levels had weaker influences. Collins, Kinnally, and Sandoval (2023) analyzed data from 52 countries- including Egypt, concluding that the social system is the primary level supporting others, as media act as social control agents for societal elites.

Overall, the lack of consensus on the relative importance of each level of influence may be because there has not been "as much simultaneous testing of the multiple levels as we might expect," thus "leaving open the relative superiority of one over the other until subjected to an investigation and empirical test" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 246). Resultantly, Shoemaker and Reese (2014) use "more subtle terminology to suggest that one level constrains or conditions or is contingent on the influences at another" (p. 243) and argue that "just because one level is higher or more macro than another doesn't mean that it's more determinative or more important theoretically—although it may be judged to be so empirically in certain circumstances" (p. 243).

Central to the discussion of journalistic influences in transitional and nondemocratic contexts is the concept of political clientelism, usually found at the social systems level. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the concept refers to "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 forms of support" (p. 55). Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002, p. 189) argue that:

> "clientelism tends to break down the autonomy of social institutions, and journalism is no exception. It forces the logic of journalism to merge with other social logics—of party politics and family privilege, for instance. And it breaks down the horizontal solidarity of journalists as it does of other social groups"

Several studies have examined the impact of clientelism on media-state relationships and journalism practice in transitional and emerging democracies. Milojević and Krstić (2018) studied "interdependencies between business, politics and media" especially in new democracies, arguing that clientelism is "one of the main determinants of the relationship between the structure and culture of emerging democracies, with a strong impact on the media sector" (p. 44). Örnebring (2012) suggests that clientelism networks exist at the top level of society in Eastern Europe, mainly between politicians and media owners. Other research in post-conflict societies suggests that journalists tend to avoid confrontation with political and economic power, resulting in "a state of co-existence where they exchange favours" (Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017, p. 14). In Latin America, Waisbord (2012) demonstrated the extent to which the "client-patron" practices "allowed government officials to keep the media on a short leash, achieve political and economic benefits and reward cronies" (p. 442).

Method

By recording the experiences of 20 Egyptian journalists through semi-structured, in-depth interviews,[1] this study attempts to answer the following research question:

How do Egyptian journalists perceive influences exerted on them during the current state of transition (2014 onwards)?

Interviews were conducted in October and November 2021 via audio calls and lasted between 1 hour and 90 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured: They allowed for a wide range of topics to be introduced by participants, but our emphasis was on obtaining stories about their lived experiences of the influences on their work, past and present. The interviews were conducted by the lead author in Arabic, transcribed, and translated into English before analysis was conducted in accordance with the HOI theoretical framework (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014). Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study employed two coding cycles, with the first cycle labeling the data as initial phase codes and the second focusing on repetitive topics and applying more detailed codes to identify the key themes. At this point, the themes were classified according to their level of influence within the HOI model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014; e.g., low salaries sit within the individual level and societal hostility toward journalists within the social institutions level) and are presented in line with the HOI in the next section.

While we make no claims to representativeness, the sample aimed to collect the experiences of journalists from across the current media landscape in Egypt. Interviewees were chosen via a purposive sampling strategy based on having at least five years' experience in journalism and were chosen to represent the different ownership models across print, online, and TV. This included journalists who are currently working for the following: (1) Established independent or privately owned media organizations; (2) privately owned organizations that were recently bought by the state through a newly established company called United Media Services (UMS); (3) national media organizations that are funded directly by the state since

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[1] Based on the operationalization of Fusch and Ness (2015), this was the number of interviews by which the authors felt that data saturation had been met.

the 1950s–1960s; (4) new websites that were started between 2018 and 2021, some of which are banned in the country, some of which do not have a license to operate,[2] and others that were able to secure the license (our sample included journalists from all the three); (5) news media outlets belonging to opposition parties; (6) journalists who stopped their daily work and converted to being opinion writers because of what they see as challenges preventing them from carrying on their daily role; and (6) freelancers working for multiple outlets. Journalism experience ranged from five to 32 years, with a mean of 18 years. Accordingly, our sample ranged from those at the reporter level to senior editors, with the majority having worked as journalists before the 2011 revolution, witnessing several regimes. Across the sector in Egypt, it is common for journalists to hold more than one position in various outlets (e.g., as a journalist in a website or newspaper and at the same time an editor or producer in TV or radio news), so most of our sample came from at least two of the above types of news outlets. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Bournemouth University in the United Kingdom (Ethics ID 39638). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure safety and anonymity, findings are presented with general reference to job titles and employment.

Findings

Despite interviewing a diverse range of journalists, from state-owned mainstream media journalists all the way through to those in start-up websites, some of which are banned in Egypt, we found that the journalists' responses regarding the perceived influences exerted on them were remarkably uniform. Here, the self-reported experiences of the unlicensed website journalist were broadly consistent with those of the best-funded, most secure journalists. This uniformity is notable because studies typically find that journalists demonstrate different perspectives of professional values (Relly et al., 2015), and journalists in state media news often experience different influences from their colleagues working in private newsrooms (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011). As we discuss, this could be explained by Egyptian journalists' interpretation of common influences erupting from the societal level, which impacts their working environment in general.

Individual Level

All journalists explained that they work in a stressful working environment, especially when it comes to their salaries, benefits, job recognition, and satisfaction. Some explained how their salaries were reduced by more than two thirds in comparison with salaries in Mubarak's era and the immediate phase after the revolution. Journalists told us how many of their experienced colleagues left the industry or left the country to work as journalists abroad. Many journalists reported that their colleagues were doing extra jobs besides journalism such as "converting their personal cars to Uber" and "opening a grocery shop in their area." Some editors reported that they were now "working for free," and some junior journalists reported they were "working for free with a promise to have a contract, to be able to enter the union and get the union allowance[3] for journalists."

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[2] By law, websites must be licensed. Some cannot get licenses and still operate; these are often classified as alternative journalism (Medeiros & Badr, 2022).

[3] The union pays a monthly "Badal" allowance of LE2,500 to each registered journalist. Journalists can only register after securing employment through a contract.

Many journalists described the financial burden as their main challenge, expressing fears that they could not secure the minimum standards of living. A private outlet's assistant editor explained how he was unable to "secure the money for his children's education and medical treatment." A journalist working in a private newspaper and website said, "I wake up at 5.00 am to go early shift in TV before my job in the newspaper. I need money to be able to live." They understand the conflicts of interest arising from moonlighting but explain that they cannot secure a living without this.

Many journalists explained that their jobs were no longer prestigious. A senior journalist in a national newspaper explained how he "prevented his children from studying journalism or working as journalists," an action that was echoed by several other journalists and editors working in private outlets. Because of this financial burden and the deteriorating working conditions they experienced, some journalists became vulnerable to influence by other levels of the HOI (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014).

Routine Level

Most journalists had never paid a source or received payment from a source. Most organizations implement strict disciplinary policies toward journalists who take bribes but only if the latter are found out. Most established organizations and senior journalists still draw a strict line between news and advertorials. Yet this is not the case with new private start-ups, mainly those hiring junior journalists or fresh graduates without a contract or a fixed salary.

An assistant editor of a new start-up explained how the outlet allows its journalists to take money from their sources to publish their stories. The criterion is that the editor needs to know, and the outlet will let it pass if the amount is less than LE3,000. If the amount is bigger or the source needs more than one news story published, then the outlet takes a monthly payment or a lump sum payment, and the journalist takes a percentage. The assistant editor explained that the outlet "publishes all the paid stories as news without any reference to payment." One typical example that was given by a start-up outlet is how members of parliament and candidates pay the outlets and the journalists publish positive stories about them. One editor explained, "We know it's not correct and it influences the elections, and he will get elected because of this. But what can we do? He will go to another outlet and have his stories published and win with others' help." Start-ups also gave examples of accepting money from ordinary citizens to cover their private events and weddings. An editor who allows this acknowledged its danger: "The coverage presents them as if they are from the elite and powerful people in the society to the extent that the media is covering their events. Although they are paying us to do so. But no one knows."

Another common example that prevailed in most outlets was journalists working as informal public relations (PR) officers or advisors to public figures while still covering their stories without notifying their employers. Editors in private outlets explained that there were sectors, such as health and real estate, where journalists got paid to publish articles about them without notifying the editor. The editor of a health page explained how they used to remove all medicine names from a journalist's stories as they were sure the journalist had been paid by the manufacturer, but they could not prove it.

Journalists also revealed some practices that were not acceptable in the past but have become normalized now such as sources paying for journalists' duty trips and expenses. Journalists also explained how the culture of PR freebies has changed. Previously, it was limited to in-kind gifts such as notebooks and pens, but now it extended to include other "cash when they attend events to cover it," "supermarket vouchers," and "food gifts on various occasions." Some journalists mentioned other freebies presented to high-profile journalists including discounts or promotional prices for expensive products, in addition to visas and paid foreign trips by some embassies.

Organizational Level

Many participants explained that they no longer knew what was allowed and what was not allowed in their organizations. They argued that their editors imposed severe censorship on them. All journalists in non-leadership positions described their editors as "more royal than the king." Some freelance journalists explained how their stories were not published by an editor who thought it could harm the outlet, yet they were allowed by another editor in another organization without causing any harm. Editors acknowledged these issues, confirming that they did implement internal censorship on their journalists but admitted that they might be mistaken about the level of censorship implemented, arguing that they did not know what was and was not allowed. In this climate, journalists resorted to what they described as "safe stories that will easily pass the editorial process without annoying anyone" such as historical, service-oriented, and light stories.

Both journalists and editors outlined the financial circumstances of the outlet as one of the main influences affecting them. Because of financial hardship, most outlets had to close some sections such as the in-depth and investigations sections. They concentrated instead on quick news stories, usually copied from agencies, press releases, or social media accounts. The editor of a private outlet explained that "even the decision of covering a big news story can be decided based on the cost involved." Another echoed this practice, elaborating, "In many times, we take the hard decision not to send a journalist to cover important news because of the budget," forcing the journalist to either "work by phone, depend on social media, or drop the story totally." Editors explained that this created tensions in the newsroom as "journalists might think it is a purely editorial or political decision but it's mainly financial. We calculate the financial cost. This is affecting the content of course."

Editors in the private and opposition sectors explained how they struggled to secure salaries for journalists. National organizations and outlets owned by UMS reportedly faced the same problems. Although salaries were paid by the government, these organizations and outlets have been asked to reduce expenses and find additional sustainable sources of funding. This often led them to turn to social media as a main source of funding (Elsheikh, Jackson, & Jebril, 2024b). Lack of finance also impacted journalists' development. Junior journalists reported an absence of training opportunities, explaining that "they had to learn on their own." Senior journalists reported "a generational gap," where junior journalists lacked understanding of "basic editorial skills, ethics, codes of conduct" due to the absence of training.

Social Institutions Level

Journalists reported a range of influences that came from the state, society, and social media. Journalists described the *state's* stance toward them as "hostile." An editor of a private outlet explained how the state believed that "journalists were one of the main causes that led to the fall of both Mubarak and Morsi's regime." Another journalist working in an outlet owned by UMS told us that the state would not allow the industry "to stand up" again, until "they build a new state first." Many journalists explained that they experienced a set of "hostile measures" such as state purchase of private outlets through an affiliated company, blocked websites, laws affecting their work, mandatory preapproved filming permits, and curtailed access to official sources. This led to what several journalists described as "one voice journalism": The voice of the state. Most journalists explained these practices from the state as a "regime attempt to control al-magal al-am," which translates in English to "public sphere" (see Elsheikh & Lilleker, 2021).

In relation to *society*, most journalists explained about the "societal hostility" as well that they faced. Citizens "refuse to speak with them" due to "lack of trust" and the common belief that journalists were the main cause of the revolution with the associated "instability and unemployment" affecting them afterward. Several journalists complained that ordinary citizens could sue journalists for something they wrote, with one editor of a private newspaper adding, "They will find anything in the law to sue us with." Journalists explained that this was rarely the case in Mubarak's era as ordinary citizens used to approach them to write about the wrongdoings in society rather than forcing them to remove stories. Another freelance journalist explained that he could not criticize "any important person" as he would "not only be in confrontation with this person but also with his family, friends, and social connections."

All journalists interviewed explained how they were influenced and challenged by *social media outlets* (Elsheikh et al., 2024b). An editor in an outlet owned by UMS explained that social media is "the one and main challenge they faced." Other editors in private outlets explained how both advertisers and audiences resorted directly to social media. Here, companies preferred to advertise directly on social media outlets rather than through a news organization, and audiences got their news and media content from social media and not through news outlets. Some journalists explained how they sometimes changed their content to "trivial sensational stories in long video formats" as social media outlets—mainly Facebook gave them a percentage of the advertising revenue. The editor of a private outlet explained how they did "everything social media wants" whether it was editorially justified or not.

Social Systems Level

Many journalists explained how the regime's effort to "close al-magal al-am" was impacting their work. The editor of an opposition outlet described state purchase of media outlets as part of "stages of state multi-control on society." Most journalists believed that the current regime had created an atmosphere that cultivated a single press with a single voice. Journalists also highlighted their fears of martial law, the "fake news law," and anti-terrorism laws, explaining that they did not know the extent to which such laws could apply to them. A journalist in a private outlet explained that the regime would not accept "media to be strong as before" arguing, "They will not kill the media, but they will not let it stand up." This was mainly due to the widespread belief that media "played a role in toppling the previous two regimes." Journalists

also explained how the state intervened in entertainment production through UMS. A female journalist criticized "how journalists are portrayed negatively in drama productions."

An editor of an opposition outlet explained how the current prevailing culture—especially the closure of the public sphere, restricted freedom, and financial challenges —could lead to wider practices of corruption. He explained how he was approached by several businessmen who wanted to finance his outlet and pay the journalists' salaries but in secret without any documents: "They had one condition. To do it in secret. Not to exchange any documents. This is corruption. They wanted to give me an enormous amount of money and they don't need any documents from me." Another editor of a private newspaper explained how the current closure of the public sphere and absence of transparent regulations prevented them from being innovative and could lead to further corruption: "We can't crowdfund our newspaper as they do abroad. The law doesn't allow it. If allowed, it will be a backstage door for all the political money from local businessmen and countries abroad, and even terrorist groups. We can't be innovative without getting stuck in corruption.".

Journalists justified businessmen owning media outlets as a way to protect their organization's financial interests. They described how some media owners mobilized media outlets they owned to protect their businesses, creating pressure on competitors who did not own a media outlet. Yet most journalists working in famous private media outlets, which played a significant role in the immediate years before and after the 2012 revolution, explained that they no longer knew who the actual owners of the outlets were. Journalists explained that there was "a lack of transparency" regarding funding and ownership for some of the outlets still owned by businessmen. Some journalists referred to media funding in Egypt as "political money," provided by the state, opposition forces, businessmen, or foreign countries, each of them aiming to protect their interests.

All journalists talked about a complicated network of "shelalyia, mahsobia and fasad"—Arabic words that translate into "clientelism" and "corruption." They explained how this network represented itself in media ownership by the state or businessmen with influence in ruling circles as well as in existing relationships among journalists, politicians, and businessmen. According to the interviewees, those journalists who were able to prove loyalty or at least show non-opposing positions were able to secure jobs in highly paying media outlets, while other journalists—at various career levels—were forced to take unpaid leave and stay at home. Many journalists agreed that "trust is more important than competence" in the current phase.

A freelance journalist explained that relationships between powerful journalists and businessmen influenced the coverage and type of journalistic work as powerful media figures "cover how the economic crises and current rise in prices will impact business interests and not the ordinary citizen who can't secure their daily needs." The hiring of journalists as media advisors to state institutions or companies with the aim of influencing the tone of the coverage was also highlighted as a problematic practice.

The interviewees added that besides facing pressures from the government and businesses, they faced another level of influence from *foreign countries*, which manifested in several ways. First, they spoke of how their stories and articles were usually translated by embassies and how they also received

"suspicious" phone calls from embassy officials—usually intelligence services claiming to be diplomats—who wanted to know more about the story they wrote. Some journalists spoke about how they had to think twice before covering specific topics or publishing some details in their articles as these would be translated by the intelligence services of other countries. The journalists further commented on the relationship between embassies and journalists, suggesting international and regional elements that influence the social system level. They noted that many Western embassies reduced their public events for journalists, something that was prevalent during Mubarak's era. Yet they explained how some embassies replaced these events with direct relationships with the journalists. Some of the journalists explained how powerful and "untouchable" they could be because of their relationships with the embassies, the incentives they received from them, and how these impacted their coverage in general. An opposition journalist who won a prestigious journalism prize from the West explained that "the authorities would think twice" before arresting him due to his perceived links and how arresting him would be perceived by Western countries as an attack on freedom of the press. He explained that the authorities could potentially participate in an internal campaign to distort his loyalty instead. But this would still give him some freedom in comparison with other journalists who feared being imprisoned.

Second, journalists gave examples of other perceived influences from some Gulf countries. For instance, one of the examples repeatedly given by some journalists was of how Saudi Arabia invited journalists to cover recent developments as part of the Saudi 2020 modernization vision. They explained that these invitations covered full expenses for them and their families and allowed them to do Umrah and Hajj for free. One journalist explained that "between 2014–2017, almost all editors in chief and their wives went to Hajj for free. It was fully inclusive of accommodation, food, and of course free flight tickets and free visas." Another journalist asked, "After accepting all this, how can I return to Egypt and criticize Saudi Arabia's policies or investments in Egypt? How can I even comment on the controversies around Tiran and Sanafir islands?[4] I simply can't."

Other journalists explained the role of prestigious Arab journalism awards and how they might influence their journalism practice. Several journalists referred to the "Arab Journalism Award" by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with prizes reaching $50,000. A journalist explained, "I will never think of investigating UAE crimes in the Yemen war. Investigating it means I will never be shortlisted for this award." Another journalist mentioned how he would be reluctant to criticize Qatar as they own the Katara prize for Arabic novels with a $200,000 award for each winner.

Due to the challenges journalists face in Egypt, most explained that if they lost their jobs or were forced to leave Egypt, the only market to accommodate them would be in the Gulf. In this context, some explained how they did not want to risk their future, with one journalist commenting, "I am always thinking of my plan B and safe exit." A journalist with Islamist affiliation mentioned, "Because of my political position, I know that I can only be accommodated in Qatar or Turkey." Another anti-Islamist journalist mentioned, "Because of my position, I know I can only work in UAE or Saudi." Both explained that they could not risk what they described as a plan B or safe exit, therefore they could not criticize these countries.

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[4] Egypt ceded the two islands to Saudi Arabia in 2016, amid disagreements from Egyptians who believed they belonged to Egypt.

Journalists also spoke about direct Gulf intervention, with some outlets in Egypt being owned or partially funded by Gulf countries, in addition to direct investments in various sectors in Egypt, which in turn affects these sectors' advertisements in media outlets. A 60-year-old columnist working in a private outlet mentioned that whenever he criticized any of these countries in his articles, the article was returned to him and he had to remove the criticism, otherwise it would not be published.

These perceptions of journalists highlight a shift in international influence on Egyptian journalism. Historically, Egyptian journalism was influenced by the British, the French, and the Ottoman empire (Badr, 2020a). In the modern era, Western influence was emphasized by educational curricula (Al Nashmi, Alkazemi, & Wanta, 2018) and training programs provided by the United States and the European Union. But what our data suggest is a new regional influence from some of the Gulf countries. Journalists mentioned that this shift in influence was mainly due to Egypt's economic situation, which was impacting all sectors including journalism, in addition to what they described as a "decline in Egypt's political influence."

Discussion and Conclusion

This study used the HOI model (Reese, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014) as a framework to examine the perceived forces that influence Egyptian journalists working in the current transitional period (post-2014) in Egypt. Our analysis shows that the influences on journalism practice in Egypt extend to all five levels in the HOI model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014) and reflect the current state of crisis experienced by the news media sector. At the individual level, low salaries, difficult working conditions, and low job satisfaction seem to be the main influencing factors. At the routine level, ethical dilemmas in the form of receiving payments from sources and the lack of original content alongside tabloidization are the main issues highlighted by journalists. Influences at the organizational level are manifested through practices with direct impact on the quality of journalism such as self-censorship and lack of investigative journalism and training opportunities. Financial hardships at the outlet level have also led many organizations to adapt their content to the demands of social media with little consideration for the critical role journalism may play in this transitional phase (Elsheikh et al., 2024b). At the social institution level, journalists highlighted a series of measures that have impacted their work including restrictions on freedom of expression and direct pressures from political and nonpolitical entities in relation to journalism content.

At the social system level, journalists highlighted a complicated network of clientelism in the form of media ownerships and financial models as well as problematic relationships between politicians, businessmen, and journalists. Consistent with some previous studies applying the HOI model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014) in transitional contexts (Milojević & Krstić, 2018; Relly et al., 2015), our analysis indicates that influences at the social system level tend to extend to all other levels and are particularly facilitated through the processes of clientelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Milojević & Krstić, 2018; Örnebring, 2012).

The main characteristics of the social system level identified in this study are (1) the closure of the public sphere and the regime's attempts to monopolize media outlets and content as part of controlling the public sphere (2) leading to a corrupted financial behavior, (3) a lack of transparency over media ownership, and (4) a complicated system of clientelism trying to break through the monopolized media system and the closed public sphere. The clientelism network is not limited to local political/ business networks but extends

to the international level through relationships among foreign embassies, foreign-owned companies, and local journalists, which reflect the changing geopolitics of the region.

The characteristics of the social system level also impacted the organizational level in two main aspects. The first has to do with self-censorship. Some journalists—not in leadership positions—explained that they could still work under the current social system level but were usually censored by their editors. Journalists described their editors as "more royal than the king," implementing high levels of censorship on them out of fear and confusion over existing policies and laws. Other journalists explained that they practiced self-censorship as a self-precaution to avoid potential problems. The finding is consistent with previous studies showing that self-censorship is a common practice in countries and media systems experiencing transition (Davis, 2020; Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017; Lo, Chan, & Pan, 2005; McIntyre & Cohen, 2021; Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014).

The second impact has to do with the influence on media outlets amid financial hardships. Outlets had to close investigative sections and concentrate on quick, sensational stories. They also had to abide by social media requirements for the sake of advertising revenues, which were often used to pay for journalists' salaries (Elsheikh et al., 2024b). This finding echoes previous research (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014) showing that financial arrangements between journalists and the government and businesses in Mexico led to developing practices and policies "reacting to economic downturn rather than setting visionary goals" (p. 116).

The influence of clientelism on media outlets is also present through the types of routines adopted especially in new start-ups, where some accept money from sources to publish stories about them. This includes some parliamentary candidates who seek election as well as ordinary citizens who seek to show that they belong to a higher social level. Other journalists explained how they are offered cash, money, and vouchers while covering events for other organizations. This finding aligns with others conducted in transitional contexts, which find that during social transformations, journalistic ethical norms and codes of conduct can be renegotiated and remolded (Lo et al., 2005; McIntyre & Cohen, 2021; Relly et al., 2015). As such studies also show, once these practices take root, they can be painfully difficult to eradicate.

Finally, the spillover of the social system influence can also be observed at the individual level where many journalists related their lack of job satisfaction to factors linked to the stressful media and political environment they work in as well as financial insecurity, absence of work benefits, lack of recognition, and hostile stances from both the state and society. Put together, these findings present a news media sector that is somewhat powerless to prevent attacks on its autonomy and declining work conditions, where even senior editors lack the agency to meaningfully shape their future. Instead, the future of Egypt's media sector looks likely to be shaped by the agendas of politicians, the government, and business interests, with journalists as relative bystanders. Given their prominent role in the 2011 revolution, this is a bitter irony for Egypt's journalists. And given the positive force that news media can be toward democratic transition, it leaves big question marks over whether Egypt will slide further into authoritarianism (Allam, 2019).

In identifying the overwhelming role that the social system level can play in setting the terms under which all the other influences on journalists follow, our research follows other studies that observed such phenomena in transitional or nonliberal contexts (Collins et al., 2022; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Milojević

& Krstić, 2018; Relly et al., 2015). However, such findings are yet to prompt a sustained reflection on the theoretical premises of the HOI model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014). As a model originally developed in response to other theories such as media effects, which regards content as an independent variable influencing audiences, Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) HOI model placed content "within a variable analytic framework: that is, treating content as a dependent variable with which a number of independent variables were related and could be said to shape it" (p. 5). In other words, one of the key theoretical premises of the HOI model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014) is that the five levels of influence (in the "hierarchy"), while conditioning each other, can still act independently in a sort of competition as to which influences exert the greatest influence over journalistic decision makers. In this way, they are analogous to independent variables, which influence an outcome, or a dependent variable, which has been variously described as professional practice, journalism ethics, journalistic decision making, or media content (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Milojević & Krstić, 2018; Reese & Shoemaker, 2014; Relly et al., 2015).

Yet studies such as ours suggest an important difference. They provide an example of how one level of the hierarchy—the social system level—influences each of the other levels, which in turn influences journalistic practice and media content. That is, the "routines," "organizational," "social institutional," and "individual" levels, heretofore considered independent variables, appear to be dependent variables themselves. For example, the individual-level findings are described not as the personal predilections of journalists (our original Shoemaker & Reese (1996, 2014) understanding that may impact professional behavior), but as an occupation consistently stressed by financial and other hardships brought on by social system–level factors. The same goes for routines, organizations, and social institutions—all of which are at the mercy of a set of greater, oppressive economic and governmental forces. In other words, if we were to diagram a new model of influences on journalistic behavior, according to the data collected here and in other similar studies (e.g., Collins et al., 2022; Milojević & Krstić, 2018; Relly et al., 2015), we would have routines, individuals, organizations, and social institutions all mediating the social system's influence on journalistic behavior. This is subtly different from the Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 2014) model.

In advancing such an adaptation to the HOI model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014), we would not argue for its universality across all political, social, and economic contexts, especially in light of the historical lack of consensus on the relative importance of the levels of influence on journalists' work (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011). Indeed, a question for future research is whether this adapted model of the HOI (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2014) sustains across other transitional and authoritarian contexts. Given that authoritarian regimes typically shape journalistic autonomy through setting the regulatory, institutional, financial, and cultural milieu in which journalists operate, we may likely see the social system influence prevail, but only empirical research—paying attention to the adapted HOI—would confirm this. Here, research should build on the limitations of this study by examining the experiences of journalists across a broader sample, including survey designs. Such replicable methodologies would then also help answer the question of how the influences on journalistic work might ebb and flow through the course of a prolonged transitional period. They would also allow for a greater understanding of differences in influences, practices, and occupational cultures among journalists across sectors, career stages, positions of seniority, and media organizations, which our limited sample is unable to fully develop.

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