**Revisiting the hierarchy of influences on journalism: Challenges to journalistic autonomy and behavior in a transitional context**

**Abstract**

In this article, we use Shoemaker and Reese’s (2006, 2014) 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 post-Arab Spring transition. Our findings show that perceptions of limitations to journalism practice can extend to all levels in the hierarchy of influences model, and that journalistic autonomy is particularly impeded due to factors at the social systems 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. These findings are discussed in light of research on journalism in transitional contexts.

**Introduction**

Over ten years on from the 2011 revolution, the Egyptian media system is still unsettled (Allam and Hollifield 2021), with authoritarian trends influencing the work of journalists, hindering the progress of the industry, and restricting journalistic autonomy (El Issawi 2016; El Issawi 2020; Badr 2020a, Badr 2020b). Since the revolution, Egypt witnessed several transitional phases with four different leaders in power (Abdallah 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 try to restrict media autonomy (Abdullah 2014).

The current political state (Zohny 2019; Abdallah 2014; Amin and Allam 2022) – starting with the election of President Abdelfattah El-Sisi as president in 2014 – witnessed a briefly liberal phase with the mainstream media during the first year and half of his official presidential term (Abdullah 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 (El Issawi and Cammaerts 2016, Badr 2020a) such as the 2018 Media Regulation Law giving 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; and the 2021 amendments to the penal code tightening punishments for journalists who cover criminal trial sessions without prior approval. In addition, the state bought a series of privately owned media outlets through a company affiliated with the state’s intelligence service (see: Bahgat 2017) that some have interpreted as an attempt to control and depoliticize the Egyptian public sphere (see: Author 2019; Badr 2020a).

Scholars argue that such restrictions have led to a fragile, instrumentalized media system (Harb 2019), where journalists are struggling for autonomy and recognition amid socio-economic fragility (Badr 2020a; Badr 2020b). This in turn has further led to a decline in professionalism due prevailing practices such as self-censorship (Issawi 2014), propagandistic reporting and influential clientelism networks (Badr 2020a), where media outlets are either “under direct control of the state, of the secret services or of a handful of millionaire businessmen with influence in ruling circles” (RSF 2022), while growing numbers of journalists resorted to producing content in alternative news media outlets (Medeiros and Badr 2022). Due to these circumstances, several scholars therefore classify the current Egyptian media system as transitional (see: Allam 2019; Amin and Allam 2022; Abdulla 2016), with neo-authoritarian trends (Allam and Hollifield 2021).

Considering the challenges journalists face in Egypt, this study utilizes the hierarchy of influences (HOI) model (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 2016) 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 (see Hallin and Mancini 2004; Örnebring 2012; Milojević and Krstić 2018) to discuss the influence of the social system level on the other four levels in the HOI model and the implications for journalists’ autonomy and journalism practice in the current state of transition. In doing so, we contribute to understanding of influences exerted on journalists working in transitional contexts and provide an adaptation to the widely-used HOI model.

**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 pre-requisites for journalism practice, and is usually linked to journalism’s democratic functions (Örnebring and Karlsson, 2019). Yet journalistic autonomy is often considered as “a rhetorical construct as much as a normative ideal” (Örnebring and Karlsson 2019:2), especially with the deterioration of autonomy even in western democracies, where it is often taken for granted (see: Reich and Hanitzsch 2013). Studying factors that influence and limit journalism autonomy is a well-established theme in journalism studies (see: Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011). Earlier research concentrated on three levels of influences: institutional level, followed by individual level, with less emphasis on the organization level (Örnebring and Karlsson 2019). Despite its importance, studies on journalism autonomy have been widely criticized (see Reich and Hanitzsch 2013, Örnebring and Karlsson 2019) 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 (see Reich and Hanitzsch 2013).

In Egypt, the current political phase witnessed unprecedented attacks on journalism autonomy and media freedom. The most controversial was a physical attack on the syndicate of journalists in 2016. For the first time since its establishment in 1941, police raided the headquarters and arrested two journalists. The attack represented a watershed in the state-media relationship (see: 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 (CPJ:2021) describes Egypt as the “world’s third-worst jailer of journalists”, 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”. These reports are consistent with academic studies documenting the challenging journalistic environment in Egypt (see: Allam and Gody 2021; Badr 2020a; Badr 2020b, Issawi 2014; El Issawi 2016; El Issawi 2020), with Badr (2020a: 64) describing the “death of journalism”, where the media industry as a whole is “heading to the unknown”.

**Analytical framework: the hierarchy of influences model**

If journalistic autonomy is understood in relation to the influences on journalists’ work, then

Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996, 2014) hierarchy of influences model has been foundational for understanding this process. They differentiate between five levels of influences exerted on journalism: individual, routine, organizational, extra-media and social system. The model recognizes that “The levels interact with and condition each other, constraining and enabling, but not directly caused by each other” (Shoemaker and Reese 2014:94). The model’s appeal is that it “goes beyond and considers a wide range of factors both at the micro- and macro-level of the social system that shape the journalism practice” (Dessie et al 2022:6). The model considers that all levels work simultaneously and encourage researchers to study the five levels at the same time, but with the flexibility of studying specific levels, while controlling or blocking the other levels (Shoemaker and Reese 2014: 245-246).

This *micro-level* of analysis considers how the individual, personal and professional characteristics influence content. These include journalists’ demographic features, personal traits, professional values and roles (Shoemaker and Reese 1996), working conditions including salaries and contract stability (Hughes et al., 2017), reference groups (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011), job satisfaction, salary and job security (Milojević and Krstić 2018), personal safety and training (Relly et al 2013).

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 and Reese 2016:399). This covers a wide range of practices such as adapting to technology, second-hand reporting, and resorting to pack journalism (Shoemaker and Reese 2016:399). This can also be extended to unethical practices such as accepting bribes (Milojević and Krstić 2018), paying sources to get information (Relly et al., 2015), or participating in a wider culture of corruption (Milojević and Krstić 2018).

The *organizational level* concerns influence journalists face from inside the organization such as those of editors, owners and in the implementation of new digital technologies. Shoemaker and Reese (2016:401) explain that tensions inside this level happen especially “during times of social change” which may lead to other internal practices such as journalists resorting to “self-censorship” (Davis 2020) or owners imposing censorship on journalists (Lee and Chan 2008; Relly and 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 and Krstić 2018).

Previous versions of the HOI model referred to the *social institutions level* as ‘extra-media level’, meaning “everything outside of media organizational boundary” (Reese and Shoemaker, 2006:402), which could include audiences, news sources, governmental authorities, public relations, organized crime or technological forces (Relly et al., 2013). 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 and Shoemaker, 2006:402). The social institutions level can be particularly vulnerable to influence in transitional contexts. Issawi (2021:866) argues that “media instrumentalization by vested interests” has greater impact on emerging democracies as it “threatens to destabilize a fragile process of institutions building”, 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 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”. It is the “most macro level” which is “concerned with traditional theories of society and power as they relate to media” (Reese and Shoemaker, 2006:403). Reese (2001:183) 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” (Reese 2001:183).

***Application of the HOI model in transitional contexts***

Several studies examined influences exerted on journalists using HOI model in transitional and non-democratic countries, with no real consensus emerging on the relative importance of each level of influences across the examined contexts (see Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Shoemaker and 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 between political, business, economic and media elites impacted all levels in the HOI model. In Mexico’s northern states, Relly and 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 to be the strongest influence affecting “every level above and beyond”. 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”. 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 et al (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. Through a secondary data analysis of 52 countries with different political, economic, and media systems – including Egypt – Collins et al (2022:1) conclude that “the social system level is the hegemonic level on which the other levels rest”, “because this is the level at which media operate as agents of social control that allow societal elites to maintain their power” (P:3).

Overall, the lack of consensus of 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 and Reese, 2014: 246). Resultantly, they 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 non-democratic contexts is the concept of political clientelism, usually found at the social systems level. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004:55), 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”. Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002:189) 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” (Milojević and Krstić 2018: 44). Örnebring (2012: 506) 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 into “a state of co-existence where they exchange favours” (Jungblut and Hoxha 2017:14). In Latin America, Waisbord (2012:442) 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”.

**Method**

By recording the experiences of 20 Egyptian journalists through semi-structured, in-depth interviews[[1]](#footnote-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[[2]](#footnote-2) and lasted between an 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. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes were discussed between the authors as ‘critical friends’ providing a point of reflection of interpretations.

While we make no claims to representativeness, the sample aimed to collect experiences of journalists from across the current media landscape in Egypt. Interviewees were chosen via a purposive sampling strategy based on having at least 5 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: (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 the 1950s-60s; (4) new websites that were opened between 2018 and 2021, some of which are banned inside the country, some of which don’t have a license to operate[[3]](#footnote-3), 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 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 5 to 32 years with a mean of 18 years. Accordingly, our sample ranged from those at reporter level to senior editors, with the majority having worked as journalists from 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 (for example, a journalist at 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 outlet. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of (anonymized) university in the UK (Ethics ID 39638). Informed consent was garnered from every participant, and to ensure their safety and anonymity, we present our findings with only general reference to their job titles and place of employment.

**Findings**

Despite interviewing a diverse range of journalists, from state-owned mainstream media journalists all the way through to those at start-up websites, some of which are banned in Egypt, we found that the journalists’ responses regarding the perceived influences exerted upon 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 journalist. 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 and Mellado 2011). As we discuss, this could be explained by Egyptian journalists’ interpretation to common influences erupting from the societal level, which is impacting 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 the two thirds in comparison to 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 beside their journalism such as: “converting their personal cars to Uber” and “opening a grocery shop in their area”. Some editors reported that they are now “working for free”, and some junior journalists reported they “are working for free with a promise to have a contract, to be able to enter the union and get the union allowance[[4]](#footnote-4) for journalists”.

Many journalists described the financial burden as their main challenge, expressing fears that they cannot secure the minimum standards of living. A private outlet assistant editor explained how he is 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 can’t secure a living without this.

Many journalists explained that their job is 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.

***Routine level***

Most journalists had never paid a source or received payment from a source. Most organizations implement strict disciplinary policies to journalists who take bribes, but only if the organization 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 they allow their journalists to take money from their sources to publish their stories. The criterion is that the editor needs to know, and they will let it pass if the amount is less than 3000 Egyptian pounds. If it is bigger amount or the source needs more than one news story published, then the outlet takes a monthly payment or a lumpsum 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 from a start-up outlet is how members of parliament and candidates pay the outlets and the journalists to have positive stories published about them. One editor explains “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”. Starts-ups also gave examples of accepting money from ordinary citizens to cover their private events and weddings. An editor who allows this acknowledges 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 PR or advisors to public figures, while still covering their stories and without notifying their employers. Editors in private outlets explained that there are sectors where journalists get paid without notifying the editor such as heath and real estate. 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 was paid by the manufacturer, but they could not prove it.

Journalists also revealed some practices that were not acceptable in the past but became 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 extended to include other “cash when they attend events to cover it”, “supermarket vouchers” and “food gifts in various occasions”. Some journalists explained other freebies presented to high profile journalists include 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 know what is allowed and what is not allowed inside their organizations. They argue that their editors impose 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 are not published by one editor who thinks it could harm the outlet, yet they are allowed by another editor in another organization without causing any harm. Editors acknowledged these issues, confirming that they do implement internal censorship on their journalists, but admitted that they might be mistaken in the level of censorship they implement, arguing that they don’t know what is and is not allowed. In this climate, journalists resort to what they describe 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 concentrate 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 that “In many times, we take the hard decision not to send a journalist to cover an 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 creates 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 struggle to secure salaries for journalists. National organizations and outlets owned by UMS - the new company owned by the government - have the same problems. Although salaries are paid by the government, they are asked to reduce expenses and find additional sustainable sources of funding. This often leads them to turn to social media as a main source of funding. 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 lack 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 come from the state, society, and social media. Journalists described the *state’s* stance towards them as “hostile”. An editor of private outlet explained how the state believes that “journalists were one of the main causes that led the fall of both Mubarak and Morsi’s regime”. Another journalist working in an outlet owned by UMS told us that the state will not allow the industry “to stand up” again, until “they build a new state first”. Many journalists explained that they experience a set of “hostile measures” such as state purchase of private outlets through an affiliated company, blocking websites, laws affecting their work, the need for pre-approved filming permits, and curtailing 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 “regime attempt to control al-magal al-am” (which translates in English to ‘public sphere’[[5]](#footnote-5)).

In relation to *society*,most journalists explained that there is a “societal hostility” towards them as well. 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 after. Several journalists complained that ordinary citizens can sue journalists for something they wrote with one editor in a private newspaper adding that "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 wrongdoings in society, rather than forcing them to remove stories. Another freelance journalist explained that he can’t criticize “any important person” as he “will not be in confrontation with this person only. But with his family, friends and social connections”.

All journalists interviewed explained how they are influenced and challenged by *social media outlets*. An editor in an outlet owned by UMS explained that social media is “the one and main challenge they face”. Other editors in private outlets explained how both advertisers and audiences resort directly to social media. Here, companies prefer to advertise directly on social media outlets rather than through a news organization, and audiences get their news and media content from social media, and not through news outlets. Some journalists explained how they sometimes change their content to “trivial sensational stories in long videos formats” as social media outlets – mainly Facebook – gives them a percentage of advertising revenue. The editor of a private outlet explained how they “do everything social media wants” whether it is editorially justified or not.

***Social systems level***

Many journalists explained how the regime’s effort to “close al-magal al-am” (translates in English to ‘closure of the public sphere’) is 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 believe that the current regime created an atmosphere that cultivates 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 don’t know the extent they apply to them. A journalist in a private outlet explained that the regime won’t accept “media to be strong as before” arguing that “they will not kill the media, but they will not let it to stand up”. This is mainly due the widespread belief that media “played a role in toppling the previous two regimes”. Journalists also explained how the state intervene 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 closure of the public sphere, restricted freedom, and financial challenges - can 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 have 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 prevent them from being innovative and can 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 terrorists 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 own to protect their business, creating pressure on competitors who don’t 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 know who the actual owners of the outlets are. Journalists explained that there is “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” either provided by the state, opposition forces, businessmen or foreign countries; each of them aiming to protect their interests.

All journalists explained a complicated network of “shelalyia, mahsobia and fasad” – Arabic words which translates into ‘clientelism’ and ‘corruption’. They explained how this network represents itself in media ownership by the state or businessmen with influence in ruling circles as well as in existing relationships between journalists, politicians, and businesses. According to the interviewees, those journalists who were able to prove loyalty or at least 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 described that “trust is more important than competence” in the current transitional phase.

A freelance journalist explained that relationships between powerful journalists and businessmen influence 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.

Alongside government and business, journalists explained that they face another level of influence from *foreign countries*. This is manifest in several ways. First, they explained how their stories and articles are usually translated by embassies, and how they receive “suspicious” phone calls from embassy officials - usually intelligence services claiming to be diplomats - who want to know more about the story they wrote. Some journalists explained how they must think twice before covering specific topics or publishing some details in their articles as they know it will be translated by the intelligence services of other countries. The, journalists further commented on the relationship between embassies and journalists, suggesting an international and regional element that influence the social system level. They noted that many western embassies reduced their public events for journalists, that was prevalent during Mubarak’s era. Yet they explain how some embassies replaced these events with direct relationship with the journalists. Some of the journalists explained how powerful and “untouchable” they could be because of their relationships with the embassies and the incentives they receive from them, and how it impacted their coverage in general. An opposition journalist who won a prestigious western journalism prize 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 still gives him some freedom in comparison to other journalists who fear prison.

Second, journalists gave examples of other perceived influences from some Gulf countries. For instance, one of the examples repeatedly given by some journalists was how Saudi Arabia invites journalists to cover recent developments as part of the Saudi 2020 modernization vision. They explained how these invitations cover full expenses for them and their families, and allows them to do Umrah and Hajj for free. A journalist explained how “between 2014-2017, almost all editors in chief and their wives went to Hajj for free. It was full inclusive including accommodation, full board food and of course free flight tickets and free visas”. Another journalist explained, “after accepting all this, how can I return Egypt and criticize Saudi Arabia policies or investments in Egypt? How can I even comment on the controversies around Tiran and Sanafir[[6]](#footnote-6) islands? I simply can’t”.

Other journalists explained the role of prestigious Arab journalism awards and how it 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 to investigate 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 job or were forced to leave Egypt, the only market that could accommodate them is in the Gulf. In this context, some explained how they don’t want to risk their future, with one journalist commenting “I am always thinking in 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 can’t risk what they described as a plan B or safe exit, therefore they can’t criticize these countries.

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 turns affects these sectors advertisements in media outlets. A 60-year-old columnist working in a private outlet mentioned that whenever he criticizes any of these countries in his articles, the article is returned to him to remove the criticism first, otherwise it won’t be published.

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

**Discussion and conclusion**

This study utilized the hierarchy of influences model (Reese 2001; Shoemaker 1991; 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 and reflect the current state of crisis that the news media sector is experiencing (see Badr 2020a). 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 payment 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 to the critical role journalism may play at this transitional phase. 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 non-political 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 in transitional contexts (i.e., Relly et al 2015; Milojević and Krstić 2018), 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 and Mancini 2004; Örnebring 2012; Milojević and Krstić 2018).

The main characteristics of the social system level identified in this study are (1) the closure of the public sphere (Author 2019) 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 also not limited to local political/ business networks but extends to the international level through relationships between foreign embassies, foreign-owned companies, and local journalists, that reflect the changing geo-politics 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 can still work under the current social system level but explained that they are usually censored by their editors. Journalists described their editors as “more royal than the king”, implementing high levels of censorship upon them out of fear and confusion over existing policies and laws. Other journalists explained that they practice self-censorship themselves 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 (see i.e., Lo et al 2005; Jungblut and Hoxha 2017; Davis 2020; Relly and Bustamante 2014; McIntyre and Cohen 2021).

The second impact has to do with the influence on media outlets amidst 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 are often used to pay for journalists’ salaries. This finding echoes previous research showing that financial arrangements with government and businesses in Mexico led to developing practices and policies “reacting to economic downturn rather than setting visionary goals” (Relly and Bustamante 2014:116).

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 appear in 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, who find that during social transformation, journalistic ethical norms and codes of conduct can be renegotiated and remolded (Lo et al., 2004; McIntyre and 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 related to the stressful media and political environment they work in, in addition to 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 their 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, government and business interests with journalists 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 towards 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 who observed such phenomena in transitional or non-liberal contexts (Relly et al 2015, Milojević and Krstić 2018; Hanitzch and Mellado 2011; Collins et al 2022; Koltsova 2001). Yet such findings are yet to prompt a sustained reflection on the theoretical premises of the HOI model. 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 model placed content (2014:5) “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” (2014:5). In other words, one of the key theoretical premises of the HOI model 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, that influence an outcome or a dependent variable, which has been variously described as professional practice, journalism ethics, journalistic decision-making or media content (Hanitzch and Mellado 2011; Milojević and Krstić 2018; Relly et al 2015; Reese and Shoemaker 2016).

Yet studies such as ours suggest an important difference. They provide an example of how one level of the hierarchy - the social system level - is influencing each of the other levels, which in turn influence 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 and Reese 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 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. Relly et al 2015, Milojević and Krstić 2018; Collins et al 2022), we would have routines, individuals, organizations, and social institutions all mediating the social system’s influence upon journalistic behavior. This is subtly different from the Shoemaker and Reese model.

In advancing such an adaptation to the HOI model, 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 (Hanitzch and Mellado, 2011). Indeed, a question for future research is whether this adapted model of the HOI 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 between journalists across sectors, career stages, positions of seniority, and media organizations, which our limited sample is unable to fully develop.

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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. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Medium selected by participants due to poor video-call quality, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and to protect their security. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. By law, websites operating in Egypt should have a license to operate. Some websites are unable to get this license. Others are operating without having it contribute to alternative journalism (see: Medeiros and Badr, 2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The allowance known as “Badal” is 2500 LE monthly payment, paid by the union to each journalist who is a registered member of it. Journalists in Egypt cannot register in the union until they are employed with a contract in their organization. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This concept is further elaborated and conceptualized in the Egyptian context in Author (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Egypt ceded the two islands to Saudi Arabia in 2016, amid disagreements from Egyptians who believe they belong to Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)