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Conceptualizing *Transnational Hybrid Media Systems*: A Case Study on Diasporic Pan-Arab Media in the UK

Abstract

Using qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews, this study examines the hybrid media culture within which the pan-Arab diasporic media in the UK function as they exist physically in a liberal media system while operating virtually in a more restrictive one. The paper further investigates the hybrid patterns of interactions, spaces and politics/media logic to specify new connections between social actors within such a transnational system. It employs two conceptual frameworks: comparing media systems and the hybrid media system as starting points for developing a novel definition of the ‘Transnational Hybrid Media System’ and advancing a comprehensive discussion of its characteristics.

Introduction

For decades, Pan-Arab media outlets, either broadcasting from inside or outside their home countries, have served as transnational media systems transcending national boundaries by creating new hybrid spaces where national and transnational journalists have mutual relationships aiming to connect audiences across the Arab world and beyond (Kraidy, 2012; Valeriani, 2010). Within these transnational media landscapes, journalists serve as transnational political actors or “stakeholders” by politicizing issues and mobilizing audiences and leadership (Kamboh & Yousaf, 2019; Wade, 2011). The term “Arab media” refers broadly to “mass media in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—a region that comprises more than 300 million people in over 20 states stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the borders of Iran” (Richter & Kozman, 2021, p. xii.). Pan-Arab media comes in different forms and types, however, this study focuses entirely on diasporic Pan-Arab media based in the West, taking the UK as a case study. Studying the Gulf-based Pan-Arab media such as *AlJazeera*, *MBC*, and *AlArabiya* is beyond the scope of this research.

London was crucial to the emergence of the diasporic Pan-Arab daily press and the development of transnational Arabic publications from the late 1970s to the 1990s where technology, expertise, and political conditions made the British city a global hub for Arab media (Jarrah, 2008). Unlike regional Pan-Arab media outlets that operate from another Arab country such as Al-Arabiya which is Saudi funded, but is based in the UAE, Arab media outlets in the UK

work within a unique hybrid media culture, as they exist physically in a liberal media system while operating virtually in a more restrictive one targeting audiences from all over the Arab region and diaspora. However, little scholarly attention was paid to examining what hybridity means in this unique context.

To bridge this gap, the study employs content analysis and in-depth interviews aiming to advance the *Transnational Hybrid Media Systems* concept by examining the significant decline of state-funded Gulf media outlets operating inside the UK (Jarrah, 2008), whose long history dates back to the 1970s oil boom that increased Gulf states' wealth and ambition in media investment abroad. Since the factors that made London a significant hub for Arab media have now lessened in importance or reversed in effect due to many political, financial, and audience preferences changes (Jarrah, 2008), this study investigates the hybrid spaces, interactions, patterns of politics/media relationships, and old/ new media logics adopted by these media outlets aiming to specify how the new connections and changing power dynamics between social actors within such a transnational system have led to their gradual decline in relevance and impact. Since journalists are the key news actors, the study further explores how Arab journalists working for UK-based Pan-Arab media build their agenda towards the regional Arab politics and how their agenda is highly influenced by the various social, political, and economic contexts of both their host and home countries including the state intervention, ownership, funding schemes, as well as the development of their media markets. To achieve this, the paper employs two conceptual frameworks: comparing media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) as a starting point, connects them together, and re-conceptualize them in the diasporic context aiming to develop a new understanding for the novel concept of *Transnational Hybrid Media System*.

Conceptualizing Hybridity in Media Systems

Hybridity is a broad concept that was conceptualized by several scholars to refer to “an association of ideas, concepts, and themes that at once reinforce and contradict each other” (Kraidy, 2005, p. iv). When connected to international media, Kraidy (2005) proposes hybridity as the cultural logic that emerges from the intermingling of people and media across different cultural boundaries, shaped by communication dynamics, uneven power relations, and the broader political economy. To reframe hybridity within a media system, Chadwick (2013) defined the *hybrid media system* as

a holistic approach that “is built upon interactions among older and newer media logics—where logics are defined as bundles of technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms—in the reflexively connected social fields of media and politics” (p. 4). In so doing, media logics point to “how the discrete interactions between media elites, political elites, and publics create shared understandings and expectations about what constitutes publicly valued information and communication” (Chadwick, 2013, p.20).

In such a hybrid media system, communication flows have become multidirectional allowing new political discussion models to emerge (Marchetti & Ceccobelli, 2016). The political information cycles involve power relations among various actors that shape the news meaning making and witness intervention by non-elite citizen activists whose information is integrated by mainstream newspapers and broadcasters (Chadwick et al., 2016). However, this former understanding of hybridity in terms of power relations among political actors, media actors, and publics associated with older and newer media (Chadwick, 2013) is only limited to understanding media operating in one media system, and thus was challenged by other scholars when applied to transnational media contexts. In the diasporic interactive space, hybridity does not only involve online and offline interactions between political and non-political, diasporic and non-diasporic actors (Arafat, 2022; Laguerre, 2005). The mutual transnational collaborations and interactions between the different actors propose conjoining professional roles, hybrid institutional logics, as well as interchanging diasporic journalism/activism strategies and practices that offer a hybrid conceptualization of journalism (Porlezza & Arafat, 2021, p. 1885).

Drawing on Chadwick's (2013) work, Pyrhönen and Bauvois (2019) mentioned the *Transnational Hybrid Media System* with no clear definition in their study that examines the French and American election-related conspiracy stories as transnationally reported and “producer” generated campaigns channeling news-framed content between mainstream and “countermedia” outlets. They examined conspiracy story as “a specific type and format of news-framed narrative subject matter that producers of reinformation rely on in the transnational context of hybridly mediatized presidential elections” (p .6). However, their paper did not offer any new definitions or explanations of the dimensions the transnational hybridity as a framework entails. This requires further investigation of the concept to be usable by future researchers in different contexts. Based on this, our study aims to examine and expand the current understanding of

hybridity within the diasporic state-affiliated Pan-Arab media contexts to identify the hybrid spaces, interactions, actors, political/media logics it involves.

Comparing Arab Media Systems

The paper secondly employs Comparing Media Systems as theoretical framework proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to analyze different media systems in western countries which they grouped into three models: the Mediterranean/Polarized Pluralism model, Liberal or North Atlantic model, and Democratic Corporatist or North/Central European model. To this end, Hallin and Mancini (2004) introduced four dimensions of comparative media system analysis: “the structure of media markets, including, particularly, the degree of development of the mass circulation press; the degree and form of political parallelism; the development of journalistic professionalism; and the degree and form of state intervention in the media system” (p.296). However, the connections between variables in the media system and the political system cannot be viewed as a mechanistic, cause-and-effect relationship (ibid).

The framework received criticism for being inapplicable to non-western countries, addressing relations between elite media and elite politics, and neglecting the roles of information and communication technology in media systems today (Curran, 2011; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018; Nielsen & Levy, 2010). Mattoni and Ceccobell (2018) revised and expanded the framework suggesting some digital media-related indicators through which each dimension can be measured, as well as adding a fifth dimension Grassroots participation that results from the “combination of media and the bottom-up participation of citizens” in the media systems (p. 9).

Therefore, in their latest book “Arab Media Systems”, Richter and Kozman (2021) revisited Hallin and Mancini’s framework and suggested seven dimensions for comparing and contrasting media systems in 18 Arab countries including the state’s approach to media, media ownership, fragmentation and polarization, technological advancement and innovation, and transnational mobility and connection (p. 323). Following these dimensions, they explained how the performance of Arab media workers is influenced by various unwritten regulations and self-censorship induced by the state’s approach to media, how media privatization does not necessarily result in media pluralism, how conflict and wars led to the fragmentation of audiences, journalists, and content, how media systems differently adopt technological advancement and innovation, and finally how trans-Arab connectedness and outreach of media outside their national borders reflect

interchanging relations between the countries and their media systems. Eventhough some of these dimensions apply to Pan Arab media in the UK, mainly in relation to fragmentation of audiences, journalists and content, others need to be re-examined, refined, and expanded to study and conceptualize the transnational hybrid media system within which Pan Arab diasporic media work. A system that relates to media that exist physically in a liberal media system and operate virtually in a restrictive and polarised media system.

The pan-Arab diasporic context imposes new forms of hybridity, new interactions between local, transnational, and international actors, as well as different relations between politics and media. In light of that, this study draws upon the four dimensions of media systems proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as well as Chadwick (2013) and Arafat's (2021) to understand hybridity. It aims to conceptualize the transnational hybrid media system by answering the main following research questions.

***RQ1:** What are the characteristics of the transnational hybrid media system within which Arab diasporic media in the UK operate?*

***RQ2:** What does hybridity mean in this context in terms of interactions, spaces, actors, and media/politics logics?*

***RQ3:** How does the news content of state-affiliated Arab media in the UK represent a position towards regional politics? And how does this coverage reflect the impact of political parallelism and interstate relations on power dynamics within the hybrid media system?*

Mapping Pan-Arab Media in the UK

Due to the common language, the MENA region has always been a shared hub of mobility for media producers and journalists with a transnational pan-Arab orientation that shapes both national and pan-Arab politics (Kraidy, 2012; Richter & Kozman, 2021). The history of Pan-Arab media dates back to the 19th century. Following the Egyptian revolution in 1952, Egypt launched its *the Voice of the Arabs* to be one of the first Pan-Arab radio services to be transmitted across many Arab countries creating imagined communities and a sense of brotherhood (Yushi, 2012). Since that time, Pan-Arab media were by large subject to forms of control by Arab governments and ruling regimes to promote certain political interests. With the aim of encouraging a sectarian agenda to

counter the Iranian impact in some parts of the Arabic world for example, the Saudi royal family expanded its power to the Pan-Arab media using various mechanism of control including “ownership, sponsorship, cooptation and coercion to keep Pan-Arab media in line with its policies” (Yaghi, 2017, p. 39). As Rugh (2007) argued, Arab diaspora media targeting audiences in the Arab world follow the basic rules of media systems in the Arab countries, although they might not be subject to the same constraints.

London was crucial to the emergence of the Pan-Arab daily press and the development of transnational Arabic publications from the late 1970s to the 1990s where technology, expertise, and political conditions made the British city a global hub for Arab media (Jarrah, 2008). Two of those pan Arab publications were *Asharq al-Awsat* (1978) and *Al-Hayat* (1988). The earlier is Saudi owned and the latter was Lebanese owned and was later bought by Saudi businessmen close to the Saudi royal family. The early success of the London Pan Arab press led to the city being selected as “a launch-pad for the first serious Arab forays into satellite news broadcasting” including the pioneering Saudi-sponsored MBC channel that first established its initial office in the British capital in 1991 and then moved its headquarters to Dubai in 2001 (Jarrah, 2008).

In particular, the UK-based Pan-Arab media come in different forms and types due to their diverse political ideologies, advocacy agendas, business models, home and host state-relationships, as well as target markets which can be mapped out as following: a) state-funded and/or state-affiliated pan-Arab media outlets such as Saudi Arabia’s *Elaph*, Emirati-affiliated *Alghad*, the pro-Libyan *Al-Arab*, as well as *Al Arabi Al Jadeed* and *Al-Quds al-Arabi* affiliated with Qatar; b) Pan-Arab media affiliated with political parties and/or Islamist groups (groups claiming Islam as their political ideology) such as the *Al-Hiwar* TV channel (Muslim Brotherhood), c) small-sized opposition Arab diasporic media outlets established by exiled political activists to advocate for democratic reforms in their homelands such as anti-Bahraini regime *Voice of Bahrain/Sawt al-Bahrain* created by political exiles, and d) community-focused diasporic media outlets targeting mainly Arab migrants and expatriates in the host country. While previous studies focused on small-sized opposition advocacy-oriented diasporic media (See Arafat, 2023; Arafat, 2021), this study investigates Pan-Arab UK-based Gulf-affiliated media outlets.

It should be noted that the importance of Arab diasporic media in the UK in the past years has been in decline. The closure or movement of some of these media outlets back to their homelands gives this study a special significance to understand the changing power relations in the current Pan-Arab media scene. For example, the Saudi privately owned Al Hayat newspaper ceased publications in 2020 due to economic difficulties and lack of funding. The business model based on readership was not sufficient for the paper to survive. The privately owned pan Arab newspapers struggled financially with the advancement of digital spaces. The state of Qatar acquired Al Quds Al Arabi newspaper in 2013 (Galal, 2021). This has made the newspaper survive its economic hardship, but resulted in its very famous and controversial editor in chief and publisher Abd Al Bari Atwan leaving the paper.

Research Methods

The study employs two qualitative research methods. First, 12 in-depth interviews with editors and journalists (8 males and 4 females) working for UK-based Pan-Arab media outlets are conducted. In-depth interviewing was employed as a method to offer first-hand accounts of diaspora journalists' perceptions of the different sources of influence, actors, funding business models, and professional logics that shape their news coverage of Arab politics and provide a historical perspective on change that Pan-Arab media witnessed over time which is underresearched in literature. Hence, diaspora journalists' inside perspective is crucial for understanding the transnational media system.

Participants ranged in age between 30 and 60 years old and had at least 10 years of experience in journalism. Many of the participants served as co-founders, head of editorial departments, or managing editors of leading state-owned Pan-Arab newspapers and TV stations including Al Hayat, Al Arabi Al Jadeed Al Ra'y Al Youm, Al Shareq Awsat, and Al Quds Al Arabi newspapers as well as Al Arabi and Al Ghad diasporic TV stations and their sister websites. The sampling followed a purposive snowball technique where only journalists currently working for Pan-Arab media in London were interviewed and asked to recommend other potential participants relevant to the study. Participants were asked four main sets of questions about: a) their journalistic background and professional experience of working for pan-Arab media outlets, b) their perceptions of the changing role of pan-Arab media in the UK over time and the various local and transnational political, economic, and organizational actors and sources of influence that

shape the hybrid media system they work within including the influence of state intervention, target markets, audience preferences, and hybrid politics/media logics they follow, c) their perceptions of how their pan-Arab newsroom builds its editorial agenda towards the regional Arab politics and how this agenda is shaped by the news outlet's ownership and state-funder's political leanings, and d) the constraints of their daily news reporting routine on Arab politics from diaspora.

A thematic analysis was used. Drawing upon Webb's thematic analysis guidelines (2017), we first employed open coding to identify the recurring ideas and themes that emerge from the interview data with regard to the participants' insights on their news outlets' hybrid media/politics and online/offline logics, structure of media market, political parallelism, and influence of state intervention as guided by both Chadwick and Hallin and Mancini's frameworks. To achieve theoretical saturation, we then followed a "constant comparison process" that involves re-reading the transcripts data again until no new themes were found (Webb, 2017, p. 1344). Subsequently, we grouped codes into categories derived from both data and theoretical frameworks and developed new connections among categories using axial coding to advance theoretical extensions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and build connections in Figure 1.

In a second step, the study adopts qualitative content analysis to compare diaspora journalists' perceptions and claims (reported in interviews) to their actual news reporting practices aiming to answer the third research question. All of the editorials, economic analysis, and opinion pieces published by the UK-based Saudi-affiliated *Asharq Al-Awsat*, Emirati-affiliated *Alghad*, and Qatari-affiliated *Al Arabi Al Jadeed* websites between the 15th of September 2021 and the 31st of October 2021 on the following topic were chosen for analysis: the Tunisian president Kais Saied's actions against the Islamist Ennahda movement including the suspension of parliament, the dismissal of the prime minister, appointment of a new government, and introduction of transitional governing rules which his opponents described as "a coup". This resulted in a total data set of 50 editorials and opinion pieces collected from the news outlets' digital archives which were all analyzed. In particular, the selection of editorials, opinion articles, and analysis pieces for our content analysis was crucial because the interviewed journalists and editors working for Pan-Arab media claimed the diversity of opinions in their produced news content and we wanted to examine whether their perceptions of content diversity match their actual practice.

We have chosen these three news outlets as they remain the three most prominent Pan Arab news outlets still operating from London despite the decline of other pan Arab media in the UK. Their political affiliation reflect the geopolitical regional divide between Saudi Arabia (*Asharq Al-Awsat*), United Arab Emirates (*Alghad*), and Qatar (*Al Arabi Al Jadeed*). Additionally, by not restricting the interviews to journalists who work in these three outlets only, we wanted to capture the wider picture. While we interviewed participants from diverse Pan-Arab media outlets to collect diverse insights, only three news outlets were chosen for content analysis because it would have been difficult to analyse news coverage from all the media organizations we interviewed participants from. Besides, these editorial, opinion pieces and analysis articles are produced by journalists and editors that do mostly influence and mirror the editorial agenda within their own newsrooms.

Tunisian president Kais Saied's anti-Ennahda Islamist party decisions was carefully selected as a topic for analysis based on various criteria. Firstly, it is timely and have news salience and significant impact on the Arab politics and regional relations. Secondly, it allows to examine the differences between the political ideologies, editorial policies, and news agenda of the three selected diasporic news outlets to understand how they position themselves regarding regional politics and power relations (the Qatari Turkish side supporting Muslim Brotherhood or the contradicting Saudi, Emirati, Egyptian, and Bharani Coalition against them) and whether they promote the same political agenda of their home countries and its Arab allies. The qualitative content analysis aimed at collecting data around: a) Who wrote the news items in the research sample and where?, b) Who are the main actors in the coverage? And how are they presented?, c) What are the prominent issues tackled in the coverage of the selected topic?, and d) Which objectives are used to describe the following: President Qaes Al Saed's actions, the current democracy status in Tunisia, and Arab intervention in the Tunisian politics?

The qualitative content analysis was conducted using Nvivo 12 Pro Software. We first created an initial open-ended coding sheet following Mayring's inductive category development approach (2000). In this early step of analysis, "pre-established codes, built from engagement with past literature, are guiding lights at earlier coding phases of a study and are adjusted as the researcher engages in with the texts being studied" (Smith, 2017, pp.1859-1860). In so doing, we first followed a deductive approach where adjectives, advocate frames, presentation of actors, and angles of coverage were analyzed in each article searching for pre-established initial themes related

to journalistic professionalism logics including diversity of opinions and degree of autonomy or political parallelism, as guided by Hallin and Mancini's theoretical framework (2004). Next, a close reading of the text was employed leading to inductively identifying new patterns and grouping them into more abstract categories resulting in four news content-related characteristics (e.g., Mirroring the political stand of state funders, Demonizing and delegitimizing the state "opponent, Pseudo Pan-Arab diversity, and Promoting conspiracy theories ...etc). Relevant categories were then clustered into two bigger groups that best describe them (e.g., Transnational political parallelism, and weak journalistic values). We conducted an inter-coder reliability check to highlight any possible deficiencies in the initial coding scheme or category definitions. While coding was created by first author, 20% of the selected news sample (10 articles) were coded by the second author who also speaks Arabic.

Research Findings

First: Understanding Changes in Pan-Arab media in a Transnational Hybrid System

To answer *RQ1* and *RQ2* and examine the different characteristics of the transnational hybrid media system and the diverse forms of hybridity it entails, this section first discusses the political, economic, and technological factors that contributed to shaping the role of Pan-Arab media in the UK offering some historical and current perspectives. It further explains how diaspora journalists build their news agenda towards regional Arab politics and how the different political and organizational sources of influence (e.g., state intervention, interstate relations, digital technologies ...etc) impact their agenda building process in the transnational hybrid context.

Participants explained that the main purpose of establishing Pan-Arab media in London was political aiming to serve regional political agendas. They reported the late 1970s as the practical start of Arab journalism in London and the 80s and 90s as its golden time. Some of diasporic Pan-Arab media outlets were created to escape from governments and limitations on freedom of expression in the Arab region while others were directly funded by the Arab countries that did not expect a commercial profitable outcome. *Journalist 1* argued how choosing London for establishing Pan-Arab media was a strategic decision because of its political hegemony in the Middle East and the significance of London as a European media hub that offered many facilities to host foreign media outlets. As *Journalist 8* explained how Arab regimes were interested in investing in Pan-Arab media in the UK:

Historically, the earliest Arab media in London was *Al-Arab* newspaper that was anti-Al Qazzafi's regime [in Libya] at the beginning, then it harmonized with the regime because of its need for financial support. Then, Saudi Arabia found it important to have a newspaper in London. This act has both a political and intellectual payload so *Al Sharq Al Awsat* and *Al Majala* magazine were founded.

Additionally, participants reported different sources of influence shaping the transnational hybrid media system. They can be grouped into four categories as follows:

a) Influence of Hybrid media/politics logics: Operating in a changing transnational hybrid media system, participants reported significant influence of hybrid media/politics logics (Chadwick, 2013) on UK-based Pan-Arab media. The evolving connections between media and political systems in the Arab region have impacted and reshaped the role of Pan-Arab media in the UK over the past decades. They elaborated on the importance of digital transformation, interstate politics, and new business models that had been driving many Pan-Arab organizations to move back from diaspora to the Arab region. For example, *Journalist 1* explained that many of these organizations going back to home countries are state-owned or state-affiliated media. They are going back to countries that would support their political and editorial agenda. Either to countries of sponsor or countries that ally with the sponsor state. For instance, Qatari-affiliated Al Arabi TV (sister media outlet of Al Arabi Al Jadeed) transferred their headquarters back to Qatar in August 2022 after operating in London for almost a decade. A possible reason for this, according to *Journalist 1*, is the changing hegemony, power structure, and political coalitions in the Arab world:

Pan-Arab media came to London because there was a hidden conflict between some Arab regimes and they wanted to address their audiences with media published abroad because the formal mainstream Arab media were subject to significant restrictions. They wanted to create media outlets that have an influence on the Arab public opinion and they succeeded in that. *Al Sharq Al Awsat* and *Al Hayat* had considerable readership in the Arab world.

Many participants further reported how Pan-Arab newspapers, in their golden era, were able to exercise a degree of editorial freedom and offered specialized, in-depth coverage and analysis using a language distinct from that used by local newspapers which contributed to their prominence and appeal among the elite in the Arab world. To this end, *Journalist 5* explained that

the physical distance of migrant Pan-Arab media is no longer meaningful, so Gulf countries that hold a dominant position in Arab media now decided to “bring back those tools into the national interest”:

Since 2015 and onward, the physical presence abroad, which allowed diasporic Pan-Arab media to be a breath of fresh air, has unfortunately gone. The political scene has changed and the localized agendas and divides within the political Arabic sphere has narrowed down to two main contradicting blocks.

b) Influence of technological advancements: Moreover, many participants reported that digital transformation and the development of media technologies as other factors contributing to the decline of the UK-based Pan-Arab media that used to depend mainly on their distant geographical location as well as the circulation revenues of its print copies in the Arab region as a business model. *Journalist 1* further argued that the Pan-Arab media lost the necessity that justifies its existence beyond geographical borders as online media can be created and accessed anywhere now. To this end, “journalists no longer need to relocate to the diaspora for the purpose of printing and distributing their newspapers to the target markets”. Instead, they can establish a social media page or a news website, reach the entire Arab world online, and bypass the printing and production limitations that were once enforced by their home countries. Unless pan-Arab media now are state-funded or dependent on private funding they would find it hard to sustain their operation since they can no longer rely on traditional revenue streams including hard copy sales. *Journalist 1* also noted that the dominance of new media logics over older ones (Chadwick, 2013) as many Pan-Arab newspapers discontinue their print editions:

The Arab migrant press is on its last legs. The print Pan-Arab newspapers in London do not sell 10 copies now. The era of print migrant Pan-Arab media is over in my assessment since the beginning of 2000s. Social media abolished the “migratory” feature of diasporic media. If newspapers will put their content online, what’s the difference if it is issued in London or inside the Arab world? No difference.

Nonetheless, the difference is surely pressing when it comes to non-state funded media outlets in the diaspora. *Journalist 7* explained that some Arab opposition groups founded digital websites and online TV channels, but they are “still weak because they offer one color and line of

oppositional news that challenge media in their homelands”. Although they operate in London, they are not Pan-Arab in the sense of the word (targeting Arab audiences across Arab states, with pan Arab editorial agenda), but rather arms for national oppositional movements within border states, with limited transnational reach.

c) Influence of State Intervention and inter-state relations: In the hybrid diasporic space where influence from different countries on Pan-Arab media co-exist, participants detailed how political parallelism and state intervention (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) as well as geopolitics and interstate conflicts between the host and home states and their neighbouring countries serve as key influencing factors in shaping the transnational hybrid system within which they operate. On one level, *Journalist 1* reported that there is limited diversity of opinions in some diasporic state-funded Pan-Arab media outlets: “The problem is when you are funded by a certain country, you are not only following this country’s agenda but also the agenda of its friends and allies. You might also be required to attack the enemies of this country which might lead to losing your independence and impartiality”.

On a second level, many participants described how news reporting in the transnational media system entails an influence not only from the funding state, but also from its Arab neighbours whose political disputes and geopolitical conditions with the media’s funding country shape news production in two ways: First, *Journalist 8* explained how self-censorship has always been a common practice among many Pan-Arab journalists even in the old days. Their editorial caution stemmed from the desire to avoid critiquing the policies of specific Arab states to prevent potential censorship of their print copies in those regions because Pan-Arab newspapers were printed not only in London, but in publishing houses in Arab capitals. Second, inter-state relations with neighbour states can also hinder or facilitate access to information and news sources where countries tend to ban the correspondents and offices of Pan-Arab media funded by certain regimes. *Journalist 7* highlighted banning the Qatari-funded Al Arabi TV offices in Egypt as a demonstrative example of how interstate relations can exert additional pressure on the daily news production processes of Pan-Arab journalists who depend mainly on their correspondents inside and outside the Arab countries to gather information and visual footage.

On a third level, political interests and interstate relations between both the host and funding countries also impose additional restrictions on the Arab journalists operating in diaspora

(Chaudhary & Moss, 2019). However, all of the participants reported neither experiencing any kind of political pressure or interference in their journalistic work or news agenda by the UK authorities, nor encountering any limitations related to getting licenses to establish Arab media outlets or hire Arab journalists to work in London. To this end, *Journalist 3* explained that “the UK’s communications regulator Ofcom only interferes with our work if there is a complaint. We never heard of its pressure on any media or journalist for the sake of a certain country”. In so doing, participants reported being obliged to follow some legal regulations related to defamation laws, reporting sensitive/violent content, especially graphic images of human casualties, or topics that might violate human rights, which meant abiding by host country’s regulations and legal jurisdiction. While the United Kingdom does not seem to impose its political agenda on Pan-Arab media outlets, the influence of host state’s intervention cannot be ignored in other political and geographic contexts. For example, Syrian diaspora journalists in Turkey have been encountering censorship imposed by Turkey as an active player in the Syrian conflict restricting them from publishing stories about the Turkish interference in Northern Syria (Arafat, 2021).

d) Influence of Hybrid Actors and Interactions: Furthermore, when it comes to building news agenda around regional Arab politics and transnational conflicts, participants used different legitimizing narratives to rationalize the influence of various local and diasporic, state and non-state actors whose interactions in the transnational hybrid media system shape news coverage to a great extent. Hence, many participants reported operating in hybrid spaces between two countries where hybrid interactions and collaborations among various local and transnational actors for news gathering and production purposes are necessary. According to *Journalist 7*, diaspora journalists interact with diverse actors including local citizen journalists, fixers, civil society workers, politicians, and whistleblowers in Arab countries, mainly through social media, to report on ongoing events from a distance. They also depend on many diaspora activists and experts for further analysis and investigation. However, many informants argued that currently there is no major difference between state-funded journalism published in diaspora and in their local counterparts published within their respective regions in terms of political autonomy and margins of editorial freedom. *Journalist 5* explained how the state-affiliated Pan Arab media’s presence in the west “did not present a new agenda as they brought along their agendas, conclusions, and opinions about issues and they worked in this politicized context aligning themselves with either

left or right, embracing or opposing political Islam movements, or advocating for nationalism or anti-nationalism”.

On the contrary, many journalists justified political parallelism with funding states arguing that every media organization represents the viewpoint of its funders and achieving full editorial autonomy is impossible even in Western media. For example, *Journalist 2* reported:

I do not see a contradiction between relying on state funds and producing professional media. Whether you work in an Arab or foreign country, each news organization has a clear political editorial agenda and the journalist chooses whether to work there or not. I do not see any restrictions/pressures on journalists.

Similarly, *Journalist 3* believes it's important to differentiate between the news organization and individual journalists. Individuals try to stay professional, but the news organization is not a charity, it is a business that tries to sell a product. He concluded: “You cannot be free if you receive funding from a certain state, party, or opposition group”.

Second: The News Content of UK-based Pan-Arab Media

To answer RQ3, the paper investigates the Pan-Arab media's news coverage of a relevant political topic to examine the professional logics these news organizations follow in their reporting pertaining to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) third dimension of media systems about journalistic professional values and its coverage-related representational practices. Thus, news coverage of the Tunisian president's decisions to freeze the parliament's work, suspend the immunity of all parliamentarians, and dismiss the prime minister is selected as a case study. Qualitative content analysis of editorials, opinion articles, and economic analysis pieces in the three news outlets (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Alghad* and *Al Arabi Al Jadeed*) identified four content-related characteristics that reflect how Pan-Arab media set their news agenda and how they position themselves towards regional Arab politics and power relations (Harb, 2019). The characteristics include: 1) political parallelism (a- mirroring the politics of state funders, and b- demonizing/deligitimizing the state opponent), and 2) weak performed journalistic values (a- pseudo Pan-Arab diversity, and b- promoting conspiracy theories). Such characteristics are translated into a series of editorial

selections of adjectives, advocate frames, presentation of actors, and angles of coverage in the news articles as follows:

1. Transnational political parallelism:

a. Mirroring the political stand of state funders:

The qualitative content analysis showed how the three news outlets under study promote the same political ideology of their state-funders providing contradicting understanding of the concepts of democracy, revolution, and Arab-state intervention. Adjectives are used to “colour” the way the topic is presented impacting with whom the audience would sympathize (Boudana, 2016; Fisher, 2016). For example, what is described as “robbery of power”, “military coup”, “counter-revolution”, “a leap into the void”, and “conspiracy against democracy” by opinion writers in the Qatari-backed *Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, is described as a “fight against corruption”, “rescue before collapse”, and a “new Tunisian dawn” by their counterparts in the Saudi-affiliated *Asharq Al-Awsat* and Emirati-affiliated *Al Ghad* outlets. Consistently, the Tunisian President Kais Saied was repetitively associated with contradicting adjectives describing him as a “savior” in the Saudi and Emirati outlets or as a “dictator” in the Qatari newspaper. The following translated excerpts are demonstrative examples of how the president was either heroized or demonized for his anti-Ennahda policies in the different outlets:

The man [president Saied] does not have a political project, no vision, nor a program. He is a populist politician par excellence, no less bad than former US President Donald Trump (...) A president haunted by narcissism that has no foundations, who took Tunisia as a hostage, [and] disrupted its progress (*Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, 30 July, *Opinions*, By Osama Abul Arshed)

They wanted the nominal president, but he [president Saied] became the voice of the Tunisian citizen. Today he is the real president, and he has an opportunity to reform what the government and parliament have failed in. In fact, what he is doing is saving the Tunisian regime, and Tunisia, the country, from the chaos that it witnessed. (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 27 July, *Opinion*, By Abdel Rahman Rashed)

In particular, resonant headlines used by opinion writers served an important role in showing clear stand on the president’s policies:

Tunisia returns to the bosom of Arab tyranny (*Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, 1 August 2021, Headline, By Ghazi Dahman)

The fall of the last "Brotherhood" fortress (*Asharq Al Awsat*, 27 July, Opinion, By Abdel Rahman Rashed)

These different opinion pieces clearly speaks to the political divide in the region.

b. *Demonizing and delegitimizing the state "opponent"*:

The Tunisian president, the prime minister Gannoushi and his government, the Arab intervention, as well as the Tunisian people are the most recurrent actors identified in the opinion articles. Depiction of regional political conflicts in terms of 'us' vs 'them', and 'good' vs 'evil' and siding with one party is a main characteristic of the opinion content in the three news outlets. While opinion writers and economic analysts in *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al Ghad* celebrated the Tunisian president giving constitutional legitimacy to his actions as a step towards defeating Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists' rule in the region, most of *Al Arabi Al Jadeed's* opinion content was dedicated to defending Islamists as democratic actors delegitimizing the president's policies and accusing the Tunisian people of having a "shallow understanding" of the situation for celebrating the Islamists' defeat:

It is not surprising that the "Brotherhood" has fallen in Tunisia now, but rather years later than its expected date. Their downfall was due to their being partners in government, and they were associated with chaos, assassinations, and deliberate obstruction operations to thwart government work after it became outside their control (*Asharq Al Awsat*, 27 July, Opinion, By Abdel Rahman Rashed).

President Kais Saied's coup against the constitution and his monopoly of power represent a major relapse for all movements in the Arab world (*Arabi Al Jadeed*, 1 August, opinions, By Lamis Andony)

In the era of the Ennahda Party, Tunisia did not witness the opening of any projects or development, but rather setbacks at all economic levels, including agriculture, industry and tourism. The Brotherhood rule is usually suitable for demolition and not for

construction, and there are many examples in which it failed to provide developmental achievements (*Al Ghad*, 28 July, By Hafez Al Barghothy)

In particular, fighting Islamists was portrayed by *Asharq Al-Awsat*'s opinion writers as a mutual goal for all of the Arab countries against corruption, comparing the fall of Islamist rule in Tunisia to what happened in Egypt and Libya:

Until this moment, Ghannouchi is not aware that the reason for which the Egyptian masses came out on June 30, 2013, is the same that drove the Tunisian masses last week, and if Egypt has been patient with them for a year in power, the Tunisians have been patient with them for ten years. (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 1 August, Opinion, By Sawсан AlShaer)

2. Weak journalistic values:

a. (*Pseudo*) Pan-Arab diversity: Qualitative content analysis further demonstrated how the diversity of the nationalities of reporters and opinion writers in the three news outlets does not necessarily reflect a diversity in content, opinions, or political stands in the published articles. While *Al Arabi Al Jadeed* published opinion pieces by Palestinian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Lebanese, Tunisian, Jordanian, and Syrian writers, almost all of the opinion articles showed the same support for Ennahda (Islamist) movement and the same attack against the Tunisian president and his policies, going in line with the newspaper's editorial policy. Similarly, the space given by *Asharq Al Awsat* for their Saudi, Lebanese, and Egyptian opinion writers did not translate into producing diverse content that criticizes or contradicts any of the Saudi politics.

The content analysis also revealed that the lack of diversity in opinions and political views reflected on limited diversity in the angles of coverages used by opinion writers to analyze the political situation in Tunisia. The prioritization of the 'responsibility' angle was identified in the opinion articles by the news outlets. All of the opinion articles in *Asharq Al-Awsat* supported the Tunisian president's decisions blaming the responsibility of destroying the Tunisian economy on the Islamists and their policies celebrating the president's claim of power and leadership offering no space for diverse or contradicting opinions. While the majority of the opinion pieces in *Al Arabi Al Jadeed* criticized the motives and consequences of the Tunisian president's decisions defending

the Islamist rule and giving justifications for why it was not successful, only a couple of opinion articles gave less sided analysis of the problem blaming part of the responsibility on the failing policies of the (Islamist) Ennahda movement while condemning the president's actions to overthrow it:

It has become clear that the goals of Kais Saied and the Ennahda movement on the one hand contradict the goals of the street, and the Tunisian revolution in general on the other hand.....These are the goals of the Tunisian revolution, and the goals of all the revolutions and protest movements in the region, and they are the goals from which all forces and all political actors on the Tunisian and regional arenas, including Kais Saied and the Ennahda movement, have escaped. (*Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, 27 July, 2021, *opinions*, Hayan).

As these quotes demonstrate, the one sided argument has become the dominante feature in these opinion pieces. Journalistic values of balance and fairness have escaped the piece included in the analysis.

b. *Supporting conspiracy theories (not backed by evidence in most cases)*: Many opinion articles, mainly in *Al Arabi Al Jadeed* newspaper, portrayed Arab intervention in the Tunisian politics as a part of a conspiracy against democracy in the country led by the United Arab Emirates that was described by one of the opinion writers as “the first supporter of coups in the region” (27 July, *Opinions*, Mostafa Abdel Salam). This editorial agenda goes in line with Qatar's position in regional politics due to its troubled relations with Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt who announced the severance of their diplomatic relations with Qatar in 2017 because of its support for Islamist groups and extremist organizations. Accusing the alliance of thwarting the democratic experiment in Tunisia and raising concerns about the Gulf money injection in Tunisian politics was a recurrent theme in *Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed's* opinion pieces without presenting fact-based evidence, reports, or statistics in most of the cases. In so doing, opinion writers employed various advocate frames using persuasive explanations that involved particular ways of interpreting topics and conflicts and promoting certain viewpoints rather than straightforward information formats (Tewksbury et al., 2000). The following excerpt is an illustrative example:

It is not possible to skip over the role of the regional powers, which are concerned with drying up the sources of the Arab Spring, in the maturation of the Tunisian

event, as the UAE-Saudi-Egyptian alliance has spared no effort, over the course of the year to abort the Tunisian democratic experiment, as it is the source of the “democracy contagion” that afflicted the region and pushed its people to take to the streets and demand freedom, democracy, dignity and social justice (*Al Arabi Al Jadeed*, 29 July, 2021, *Zawaya*, By Mohammed Ahmed Banes).

As indicated in the quote above, the 2011 Arab revolts and their aftermath have been used as a tool in the political rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Discussion: Conceptualizing *Transnational Hybrid Media Systems: Insights from State-Affiliated Pan-Arab Media in the UK*

The study revisits and expands hybridity and comparing media system concepts by re-examining them in diasporic media contexts. Its main contribution lies in advancing our understanding of diasporic Pan-Arab media on several connected levels. Our findings propose three main characteristics of the *Transnational Hybrid Media System* within which state-affiliated pan-Arab media in the UK function. First, findings from content analysis and interviews with journalists and editors demonstrated how the transnational hybrid media system is not linear as it involves an interplay of various local and transnational actors and sources of influence whose different political and media logics complement and influence each other’s paths. Five main sources of influence were detected in the case of Gulf-affiliated Pan Arab media in the UK: state intervention/influence, interstate relations, technological advancements, changing target markets and audience preferences, as well as news organizations’ own professional logics.

As our findings demonstrated, building editorial news agenda and practicing forms of self-censorship in these media outlets is not only influenced by the political agendas of the funding countries, but also their diplomatic relations with their allies and enemies resulting in political parallelism in most of the cases. Journalists working for a Saudi Pan-Arab media might find it hard to criticize Egyptian or Emirati politics because of the current political alliance among these countries but might find it easier to criticize the Qatari politics on which these countries used to impose a three-year diplomatic, trade and travel boycott (Wintour, 2021). Also, diaspora journalists find it hard to send correspondents, build editorial headquarters, and access resources in countries with a contradicting political agenda to their funding state. This explains how interstate

conflicts led to the fragmentation of audiences, journalists, and content in the pan-Arab media scene (Richter & Kozman, 2021). The digital infrastructure and licenses provided by the host country might present another source of state intervention on diasporic media (Chaudhary & Moss, 2019).

Therefore, it could be argued that the transnational hybrid media system where state-affiliated Arab based in the UK operate fits closely with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) polarised pluralist media system. However, that is to be contested. Firstly, hybridity and transnationalism manifest itself in political parallelism being extended beyond media organisations affiliating with the politics of the country of operation (host country) or party to assuming the politics of the country or parties on the receiving end of the message (home country). Secondly, the hybrid transnational model identifies with two different states' intervention at one time. The host state jurisdiction and the home state sponsorship. Hence, to fully understand the transnational hybrid media system, a proper understanding of the local media system within the home country is first required. This expands Hallin and Mancini's (2004) understanding of state intervention in relation only to the public money put into public broadcasting, regulations of media concentration, investments in digital infrastructures, and policies on digital media actors operating inside one country.

While digital technological advancements and social media platforms empowered and accelerated the transnational diffusion of journalism beyond borders, they also led diasporic media to lose their unique feature and purpose connected to their geographical distance leading to a huge decline in their print copy sales. This, along with the changing geopolitics and interstate relations/conflicts between dominant countries in the Arab region, have resulted in a decline in the importance of the diasporic pan-Arab media roles. Also, news organizations' professional logics come as another actor in shaping news in the transnational hybrid context. Although Pan-Arab news organizations might claim independence and diversity of opinions on their news websites, the content analysis of opinion articles showed how their claims do not match their actual performance to some extent, as they give extensive space to voices that clearly reflect the publications' political leanings and funding states' ideologies, presenting forms of political parallelism and weak journalistic values in many of their analysed content. Also, diasporic Pan Arab media outlets have transnational media markets located in various geographical locations: audiences from the home country and across the Arab region, diaspora audience groups whether

migrants or refugees in exile, and international audiences whom they target with their websites' English mirrors. As these markets can be reached by newer media formats (e.g., news websites and social media pages), Pan-Arab media are abandoning their older to newer media logics giving up on their print versions, that constituted their main profit source for decades.

Second, the state-affiliated Pan-Arab media in the UK is one type of many diasporic media that operate within the transnational hybrid media system. The latter is not homogenous as it involves different media organizations with various political ideologies, advocacy agendas, business models, and home/ host state relationships. Other Arab media types operating in the West involve: Arab media affiliated with national political parties, small-sized opposition diasporic media established by exiled political activists/journalists, as well as community-focused diasporic media outlets targeting migrants and expatriates. Their different ideologies, advocacy agendas, and business models are significantly shaped by the components of the transnational hybrid media system they operate within which require further scholarly investigation.

Within each group, diasporic news organizations tend to build their editorial news agendas towards Arab regional politics differently. Thus, the different funding and ownership models of diasporic Arab media by opposition groups yield different outcomes than those of state-affiliated Pan Arab media studied here. For example, literature reported how Syrian opposition diaspora media, funded mainly by international donor money used their news websites to engage in transnational advocacy practices covering oppression and violations in their homelands empowering underrepresented voices of activists, social movements, and human rights defenders (Arafat, 2021). Similar results were reported in studies on Ethiopian, Iranian, Sri Lankan, and Burmese opposition exiled journalists (Balasundaram, 2019; Skjerdal, 2011; Wojcieszak et al., 2013).

The third characteristic of transnational hybrid media systems is incorporating different forms of hybridity including hybrid spaces, hybrid interactions among diverse actors, hybrid political/media logics. While diaspora journalists depend on new media logics, they also integrate some old logics and some still keep publishing print versions of their newspapers despite their current low circulation rates (e.g., Asharq al-Awsat and Al-Quds Al-Arabi). Also, diasporic news production involves interactions between various political and non-political actors such as journalists, politicians, activists, local citizen journalists and fixers, amateur writers, civil society

actors, whistleblowers, and the public in both the homeland and the host country (Balasundaram, 2019). This facilitates multidirectional communication flows (Chadwick, 2013) rejecting simple dichotomies between politicians and journalists, professional writers and amateur bloggers, voluntary sites and corporate big businesses (Chadwick et al., 2016; Schillemans, 2013, p. 1110).

Drawing on the previously discussed three components of transnational hybrid media systems, we propose *Figure 1* that maps out how the interplay of hybrid actors, hybrid logics, and hybrid political loyalties shapes the transnational hybrid media system expanding the hybridity concept as described by Chadwick et al. (2016) to new hybrid spaces including the space where elite and new media logics co-exist outside the liberal democratic media system sphere. Also, hybrid political loyalties is an additional component to the features of hybridity Chadwick (2013) argues. While the intersection of different actors and sources of influence in Pan-Arab media matches some of Halin and Mancini's (2004) four dimensions of media systems, mainly political parallelism, it offers different understanding related to all these dimensions including the structure of media markets (where audiences spread beyond national borders) and the role of the state (one that is located outside the borders of the hosting state) and its impact on professionalisation (ibid: 21-45) in the transnational diasporic context.

*** Insert Figure 1***

Based on the case study of the UK-based Gulf-affiliated Pan-Arab media our paper presents, we propose the following definition of *transnational hybrid media system*. This definition needs to be adapted and revisited in other diasporic media contexts to examine how their unique ideologies and logics might involve a different set of transnational actors and interactions:

A heterogeneous complex of media institutions, with different political ideologies, advocacy agendas, and business models, that exist physically in a liberal media system while operating virtually in either polarised or authoritarian one, proposing forms of hybrid spaces, interactions, and political/media logics. It involves non-linear interactions between local and transnational actors where various sources of influence including state intervention, interstate relations, change in digital technology, professional logics, and target audience preferences shape the diasporic news industry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that the restrictions and political constraints state-affiliated diaspora Pan-Arab media outlets work within do not differ much from the restrictions and constraints Pan-Arab media based in Arab countries operate within (See Harb, 2019). Journalists writing for these Pan Arab media have become instrumentalized, as argued by Hallin and Mancini (2004) while assessing professionalism in the polarized pluralist system. Political loyalties is a common feature in Pan Arab media outlets, being based in an Arab country or in the diaspora (Harb, 2019). However, elements of professionalism in the practices of UK-based Pan-Arab journalists are maintained within the context of the UK media jurisdiction and rules. These characteristics of transnational hybrid media system can also apply to non-Arab diaspora media operating in liberal democracies media systems while addressing audiences in more restrictive media environment. The uniqueness of the Pan Arab diaspora media studied here, is that they are not fully independent from their home governments' control. The need to claim an independent role while reaching out to pan Arab audiences and readers, is no longer needed in the current virtual and digital flow of information.

The the research comes with some limitations. We are aware that the sample analysed in this paper does not include dissent and advocacy media. A further investigation into how advocacy journalism fits within the framework of the Transnational Hybrid Media System might produce significant findings. Arab dissent media organisations might become the only Arab media ventures existing in the diaspora.

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