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Filling the Void: Information Seeking and Processing in the Context of Violent Conflicts

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Abstract: This article explores the ways in which violent intergroup conflict affects how people acquire, use, and perceive information. Based on previous studies and empirical findings from field research in four fragile countries (Libya, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Iraq), including qualitative focus group discussions and standardized quantitative surveys, we show that the polarization and instrumentalization of media in these countries produce media skepticism, leading to increased fact-checking and cross-media use among the general public. Uncertainty leads to discussions in the community about what the media presents, indicating that media users try to establish agency through advanced information processing and validation strategies. We posit that this type of media environment facilitates critical media literacy among media-savvy individuals. Moreover, the present study develops a research agenda for analyzing communication and information processing in conflict contexts.

Keywords: fragile statehood, violent conflict, media use, public sphere, fragmentation

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Introduction

We start from the assumption that violent intergroup conflict shapes media structures and communication processes that influence how people acquire, use, and perceive information. Information acquisition and processing behavior therefore differ during times of violent conflict in comparison to contexts of peace and stability. This article sheds light on these specific practices and behaviors by looking at the interplay between violent conflict, the media ecosystems of fragile countries (Libya, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Iraq), and how audiences assess media performance in these countries.

Conflict research was previously rooted in the study of journalistic practices that promoted either conflict or peace (Bratić, 2006; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). In this strand of research, audiences are implicitly conceptualized as passive and trusting consumers of the media—a deterministic and media-centered approach that is now considered to be outdated (e.g., Bräuchler & Budka, 2020; Schoemaker & Stremlau, 2014; Edgerly, 2015). From the same angle, our study starts from the argument that media effects emerge from conflict-sensitive modes of information-seeking and processing that can only be understood in the context of individual and collective sense-making processes. More precisely, with Schwarzenegger (2020), we believe that personal epistemologies or “individual’s beliefs about media” (p. 366) shape media channels and how media content is both discussed and decoded. Analyzing how people use media and why information acquisition and processing behaviors change must be approached in the context of people’s general beliefs and attitudes toward the media itself. It follows that “it is vital not only to examine the specific practices of news navigation but also the underlying beliefs and personal epistemologies of the media” (Schwarzenegger, 2020, p. 365).

We define conflict as a violent confrontation between two or more groups within a territory in which the state has lost its monopoly over the use of force, i.e., the state can no longer guarantee external and internal security, essential public services, and the rule of law. In such an environment, public sphere structures evolve dynamically among conflict stakeholders who use traditional and digital media for political ends. As a consequence, the public sphere becomes highly fragmented and politicized (Deane, 2013; Voltmer, 2013; Mancini, 2012).

This article first reviews media use concepts within the framework of public sphere theory and explores how these concepts connect with political environments plagued by violent conflict and fragile statehood. This approach is embedded in a literature review of the current state of research on media use and reception in violent conflicts. We then set our analysis and research agenda based on collected empirical material. Our research focuses on Libya, Iraq, Sudan, and the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, all of which have been subject to intra-state group conflict and a highly fragmented, politically instrumentalized, and polarized public sphere.

Communication Amidst Violent Conflict: The Informational and Communicative Frenzy in a Fragmented Public Sphere

This article is rooted in the thesis that media perception and information processing modes are shaped by conflict contexts and the communication structures embedded within them, hence producing context-specific modes of media use. What does fragile statehood—defined here as a loss of the monopoly over the use of force, military sovereignty, and authoritative decision-making—imply for public communication? How does violent conflict shape the structures of media and public discourse? It is necessary to answer these questions first and analyze the structural specifics of public mass media communication in a state of violent conflict before discussing media perception and information processing.

In functioning democracies, public communication is considered the "central controlling and regulating mechanism of modern society" (Eisenegger & Udris, 2019, p. 5). The public sphere forms the institutional core of political decision-making, which involves citizens openly articulating their interests and opinions (*transparency function*), evaluating the opinions and arguments of others (*validation function*), and allowing them to form opinions based on what they see (*orientation function*) (Neidhardt, 1994). In this idealistic view, the public sphere is a separate sphere that mediates with state institutions about the needs of society through an orientation to the common good and the exchange of critical dialogue.

According to its *transparency function*, the public sphere should be open to all social groups, topics, and opinions of political and collective relevance (Jünger & Donges, 2013; Neidhardt, 1994). This openness ideally results in a broad representation of societal diversity and fosters both cohesion and a sense of belonging between members of society. Depending on the regulatory regime, representation in the public sphere therefore also mirrors power relations in society, i.e., the accumulation or deprivation of power. (Ferree et al., 2002; Jünger & Donges, 2013).

In the conflict countries in focus here, state regulations are weak, combined with pronounced political competition and polarization due to violent conflict. Together these factors produce a mushrooming of media outlets across regions and communities (cf. Frère, 2015). In Libya (with a population of less than 7 million people), a recent media mapping found 217 media outlets (Richter & Wollenberg, 2020). In DR Congo (with a population of around 108 million people), 341 radio stations and 167 TV stations are available (Kanteg, 2021); In Iraq, an estimated 40 TV stations broadcast for a domestic audience of less than 30 million people. Weak regulation combined with solid political competition allows these media landscapes to evolve as highly inclusive and pluralistic arenas where, theoretically, every political movement, strand of society, and minority group has a voice in the public sphere. No media monopolies, far-reaching state control, or multinational corporates dominate these media markets. From the perspective of public sphere theory, this means that unimpaired access for all communities to the public sphere and, thus, a broad

representation of cultural, societal, and political diversity is almost or fully fledged. But what about validation and orientation? Is such an abundance and diversity of sources useful for people in conflict environments to understand the course of conflict at the political level and to prepare for a subsequent takeover or regime change?

Public sphere theory suggests that *orientation* is provided through *validation*: Agents of the public sphere engage in the discursive scrutiny of issues and opinions with others, thus validating the plethora of publicly available arguments and positions. Transparency and validation together facilitate the emergence of "public opinions" that "can be perceived as convincing and accepted by the public" (*orientation function*) (Neidhardt, 1994, pp. 8–9). From this view, public opinion is different from individual or commonplace opinion in that it is validated and, as such, helps audiences and citizens to make sense of the world around them.

According to Habermas, the primary function of the public sphere is to rationalize governance through deliberative elements (Habermas, 1989). The unconditional constraint of the better argument is supposed to guarantee the rationality of the discourse.

In the four countries concerned here, media structures and the common practice of political media capture stand in stark contrast to the deliberative concept of 'discursive scrutiny.' Most media outlets have tight connections with political parties that instrumentalize these media in pursuing their goals, most of which are related to the increase of or total takeover of power. In Iraq, there are Shia-backed parties with constituencies in the South alongside Sunni-backed parties from the North and Center with tribal foundations and military arms that own, operate, and finance media outlets. In Libya, two unofficial governments in the East and the West, with their militias and political allies (Arab Emirates, Turkey, Russia, and Qatar) own, operate, and finance TV stations. In DR Congo, many media outlets have been facing economic and financial hardships, challenging the emergence of an independent and viable media sector. Bribery, paid-by-the-source journalism, and political sponsorship are integral to the local media's business models (Frère & Fiedler, 2019; Fiedler & Frère, 2018). In Sudan, the ousting of former president Omar al Bashir in April 2019 was followed by the liberation of the media system and newly formed political parties started to compete over media control and prevalence in public communication. Partisanship, bias, and the one-sided promotion of party-relevant narratives are dominant modes of public communication. Mass media practice is undermined by "groups with different agendas and single political/business figures [who] use the media to intervene in the decision-making process, to reach specific goals at specific moments, or to support personal candidacies and alliances" (Mancini, 2012, p. 271). It is evident that under such structural conditions, validation as discursive practice plays a neglectable role in the local media at best.

To conclude, it is safe to say that transparency and openness are pronounced in these conflict environments, as are representation and cohesion in society. At the same time, validation and orientation are undermined as critical functions of the public sphere by polarization and instrumentalization of media by conflict parties. The remainder of this article demonstrates how this lack of orientation is met with counter-strategies by active media users that collectively and individually organize sense-making to cope with armed conflict's challenges. In addition, we review selected academic concepts of media use that help to illustrate how people adapt their selection of media sources to cope with high levels of uncertainty and contingency.

Media Use in Conflicts in a Globalized World

In previous scholarly debates on the role of the media in violent conflicts, the focus was predominantly on journalistic production and its impact on the course of the conflict, without considering the citizen as an active user of the media. This is particularly true for the peace journalism strand of scholarship (Bratić, 2006; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2004; Youngblood 2016). Another strand of debate is concerned with media structures, i.e., the fragmentation of media landscapes in fragile states that are "often fragmenting along the same fault lines that divide society" (Deane, 2013, p. 3), noting that this tendency exacerbates existing conflicts and polarities in society. In the same spirit, Voltmer (2013) highlights the ambivalent nature of partisan media in emerging democracies: "Partisanship and parallelism are a vital part of democratic life," she writes, but they also have the "potential to deepen intolerance towards those who do not share the beliefs of the in-group" (p. 184). Finally, a great number of country studies analyze the conflict-exacerbating effects of conflict media coverage (Hussain & Lynch, 2019; Jok, 2015; Isakhan, 2009; Adeyanju, 2018). However, questions on media use, social interaction among media users, and modes of media perceptions—in other words, questions pertaining to *audience behavior*—are rarely raised in such debates.

This article is not the place to reproduce the various theoretical approaches that the discipline has generated to describe and analyze media use and effects (see e.g., Potter, 2019). Mass media research has, however, moved beyond such media-centric approaches. Assumptions about linear media effect and passive audiences have been addressed and reviewed in the face of increasingly empowered media users across the globe (Schoemaker & Stremlau, 2014; Hanitzsch, 2004; Scott & Dietz, 2016). Due to globalization and digitalization, everyday structures in which media use is embedded are increasingly characterized by the diversification of media offerings (traditional and online) and a fragmented public sphere, leading to the emergence of sophisticated media repertoires (e.g., Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017; Taneja et al., 2012; Edgerly, 2015). The media user is increasingly seen as someone actively and collectively constructing meaning in the context of societal and social practices (Dahlgren, 2005; Smith, 2017). Schwarzenegger (2020) examines how users interact with media in the face of fake news and post-truth era narratives, elaborating on

the notion of "personal epistemologies of media" (p. 362), i.e., people's understanding of how media functions, how they are influenced, or what they have to offer. As such, epistemologies are personal theories about media and media-related practices that shape media diets as well as individual and collective processes of sense-making. For example, increased knowledge about mechanisms and routines of state control in authoritarian and repressive environments will influence the way that media users select, combine, and trust available sources. Schwarzenegger (2020) found that, among other dimensions, "competence confidence" (p. 371)—that is, "how fit individuals believe they must be to identify false information, confirm trustworthiness, and filter the truth" (p. 371)—played a role in how people interact with the news, apply fact-checking strategies, and navigate media repertoires. In the results section, we will show how personal epistemologies of media are shaped by critical assumptions and knowledge about party media capture in the countries at stake; and how these epistemologies again foster the emergence of specific navigation skills.

Kohring and Matthes (2007) see *trust* as a critical strategy to cope with increased levels of uncertainty and risk: "Trust is perhaps the most important mechanism in helping people deal with the risk of an open future" (p. 239). If reliable knowledge about any future development is lacking, if the future is difficult to predict due to the complex enmeshment of different pathways, "trust replaces knowledge" (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 239). In other words, a lack of certainty and knowledge about future developments increases the relevance of trust and distrust as a guideline for action. Tsfati and Cohen (2013) link the concept of trust to a person's interest in reaching their goals in uncertain environments: "The trustor and the trustee interact in an uncertain situation in which the trustor stands to gain or lose. Trust is a voluntary expectation on the side of the trustor that the interaction with the trustee will lead to gains rather than to losses" (p. 2). From this angle, risk is not only what produces trust but is implied in the transaction of trust itself. Trust is risk mitigation. Moreover, trust is a tool applied by rationally acting individuals to cope with uncertainty.

Selective exposure is another way to reduce the uncertainty stemming from high-choice and fragmented media environments. According to selective exposure theory, "individuals prefer exposure to arguments supporting their position over those supporting other positions. As a consequence, individuals are more likely to read, listen to, or view a piece of information the more it supports their opinion, and less likely to attend to it the more it challenges their position" (Garrett, 2009, p. 678). Media users assemble channels and sources of information to reinforce their existing opinions and beliefs whilst avoiding contradicting information.

Garrett (2009) also introduces the idea that avoidance of challenging information is mitigated if this information (i) is considered to be "useful" by the recipient and (ii) if avoidance is pervasive and more time-consuming than devaluating the information after the encounter (p. 680). From this view, the 'usefulness' of information

compensates for negative feelings from exposure to contradicting and confusing information. Put simply, if the desire for useful information is strong enough, it might overrule the tendency to avoid challenging information. This raises the question, how useful is challenging information—that is, information contradicting one's existing beliefs and positions—for people in volatile and violent environments? How useful is information deriving from sources that belong to antagonistic camps in the context of armed conflict?

The following research questions emerge from the previous literature review: how do audiences in countries plagued by armed conflict and high uncertainty cope with and adapt to modes of information retrieval? Moreover, what are the particular specifics of media use in conflict contexts with fragile statehood?

Methodological Approach

As a starting point, we summarize findings from qualitative audience research in our four case countries, Iraq, DR Congo, Sudan, and Libya. These states share a highly politicized and fragmented media landscape in which parties engaged in conflict hijack the media for their political goals. We argue that these structures produce specific media use, perception, and evaluation patterns. In this review, we identify common patterns through cross-national analyses that allow for initial hypotheses about the characteristics of media use and perception in fragile contexts. This overview should pave the way for a future research agenda.

Three of the case studies presented here—DR Congo, Iraq, and Sudan—are secondary analyses of qualitative field research conducted as part of other projects. The raw data as well as the respective research reports were rescreened for the present analysis and evaluated in light of our research question and theoretical framework. In these three studies, the authors of this article played a leading role in their design and implementation while local researchers collected the data. In the case of Sudan and Iraq, the data were synthesized into research reports provided by an associated researcher (Al-Kaisy, 2020; Al-Kaisy 2021), which form the basis for the analysis in this article. Because of the contextual similarity and pronounced features in focus, such as instrumentalization, polarization, and media capture, we included Libya as a fourth case study although we were not directly involved in conducting the research. In what follows, we present the methodological approach of each case study in detail.

The study in DRC was conducted as part of the EU-funded INFOCORE project, an international research collaboration that investigated the role of media in violent conflict in Africa, Europe, and the Arab world. Eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized with more than 50 individuals in Goma (capital of North Kivu province in Eastern DR Congo) between July and October 2015 to discuss their media use and trust in conflict-related news for approximately 120 minutes. The selection

of interviewees was based on purposive snowball sampling and followed the principle of theoretical saturation. The independent variables of focus group participants were varied as often as possible and at multiple levels (gender, age, ethnic belonging, educational and professional background) until the discussions did not yield any additional information. Most FGDs were conducted by a local researcher who facilitated the discussions in the local language (Swahili). All discussions were transcribed and translated into French.

In Iraq, eight FGDs with a total of 30 participants (citizens of Nineveh living in Mosul) were conducted by the media development organization MiCT in the years 2020 and 2021 (Al-Kaisy, 2021). Mosul province was one of the prominent strongholds of the Islamic State (ISIS) when they established the so-called "Caliphate" in Iraq and Syria between 2014–2017. The focus group participants discussed (i) audience expectations regarding media coverage of issues related to social cohesion in Nineveh and (ii) perceived bias and the journalism quality of local media in general. The groups were split according to gender and socioeconomic background. The first wave of the pandemic challenged data gathering, and FGDs had to be conducted online via Zoom. A local researcher organized and facilitated the FGDs, and recordings were subsequently analyzed by an Iraqi expert in media and journalism before the findings were discussed in a research report (Al-Kaisy, 2021).

Furthermore, MiCT conducted a qualitative study on the use and assessment of local media in the city center of Khartoum, its suburbs, and Nyala (Darfur). Six FGDs with 41 participants were conducted, two in each city split by gender at the end of 2020. Nyala is in South Darfur and is considered to be one of Sudan's marginalized areas. Khartoum was included as an urban center and the suburbs of Khartoum as an area characterized by precarious conditions. FGDs were conducted by two local researchers (one male, one female), and recordings were later analyzed by an associated expert in international media and journalism, who again produced a research report on the findings (Al-Kaisy, 2020).

Participants in all studies were assured confidentiality, i.e., the non-disclosure of identifiable information, to create an open atmosphere and build trust with the research team.

Finally, the present paper includes research on audience perception in Libya, conducted by BBC Media Action two years after the fall of the Qaddafi regime (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2015). The methodology comprised a national survey focusing on media consumption patterns and audience attitudes toward different media and information sources in the spring of 2013, and six FGDs conducted in urban centers in Libya in March 2014. The FGDs focused on assessing media performance concerning domestic politics and eliciting participants' expectations of local media. Held in the direct aftermath of the Arab Spring, the political context of the research was shaped by turmoil and uncertainty. Media structures presented high similarities to those found in this study's three other countries of focus.

The studies used for this article were conducted at different points in time. However, all countries except for Sudan were in a persistent state of fragile statehood, allowing certain media use patterns to emerge in a solidified conflict context. The study in Sudan, by contrast, was conducted shortly after the fall of President Omar al Bashir, so the country was in a transitional phase at the time of data collection, and structures of fragile statehood were only just beginning to emerge.

The statements of the study participants were reorganized according to the research categories, mainly the functions of the public sphere (transparency, validation, orientation) and media use theory, and condensed into two theses presented in the following section.

Evidence from the Middle East and North and Central Africa

Thesis 1: *Audiences are aware of party media affiliations, and they perceive media pluralism as party media capture serving political elites, not the people. This negative assessment fuels the loss of trust in local media.*

The audiences overwhelmingly perceive the pluralism found in the countries' media systems in focus as party pluralism serving party interests rather than society. Awareness of media-party affiliations was high across countries. Participants in the FGDs in Goma knew the political and institutional affiliations of media outlets, media financing, and restrictions on press freedom and information. "Policy makers prevent the population from being well informed. They want the media to report in favor of their political line," said a 38-year-old petrol vendor from Goma. "The media give the floor to politicians. The latter drag the journalists into their political visions," said a 39-year-old peasant from Mugunga. These data show that research participants are not only aware of who owns which stations but are also very critical of party-media affiliations.

Similarly, one of the critical findings of the research conducted in Iraq was a high level of awareness around political parties' instrumentalization of the media. "There was an overwhelming recognition that the media environment in Iraq is highly politicized and that most channels are strongly aligned to their funders and related political parties" (Al-Kaisy, 2021, p. 7). Focus group participants noted that political affiliations were evident in the content of almost all channels in Iraq. "Today, there is no way that a media outlet would open if it were not tied to a specific group or side. Everyone in the institution works according to that person's agenda," said one female focus group participant from Mosul (Al-Kaisy, 2021, p. 10). Competence–confidence was high among Iraqi participants "who demonstrated a good understanding of media principles such as sourcing and impartiality as well as high levels of knowledge of media ownership in Iraq" (Al-Kaisy, 2021, p. 7). Due to such enhanced knowledge and understanding, "trust in media has been lost across all of the Iraqi population," said one male participant from Mosul (Al-Kaisy, 2021, p. 9).

Comparable observations were made in Libya, where the analysis of interviews and FGDs showed that, just like their Iraqi fellows, “Libyans are wary of agendas behind almost all channels, and there appears to be minimal trust in the credibility of television channels as a result” (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2015, p. 20). Libyan focus group participants and interviewees were aware of political parties’ control over media, particularly television, and they expressed the view that party control of media undermines professional values: “The idea that each broadcaster has an agenda that is at odds with truthful reporting was the overwhelming view” (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2015, p. 21). Interviewees saw a direct connection between the source of funding (i.e., political affiliations) and the views promoted by a particular channel. Incapacity or a lack of inclination among local media to provide accurate and complete news mitigated trust among the general public, driving a trend to resort to international channels such as the BBC, Al Jazeera, al Arabiya, and France 24 (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2015, p. 10). Given the robust engagement of third countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Qatar, and Russia in Libyan media, the data from Libya also indicated a perceived chasm between the people and Libyan media.

The evidence outlined above demonstrates that the personal epistemologies of media, i.e., the individuals’ understanding of media and media-related practices, are shaped by the notion of party media capture. The ‘sense-making of media’ is driven by the critical framing of media coverage as party propaganda. The strong statements on (dis)trust reveal disappointment at how little the media care about the interests and needs of their audiences. The statements, however, also reveal a sense of empowerment among media users who deliberately refuse media dependence and replace it with flexible media diets and social strategies of information retrieval (see thesis 2).

Likewise, the study in Sudan found that mainstream media was seen to be “agenda-driven and plagued by a lack of credibility and a lack of representation and diversity” (Al-Kaisy, 2020, p. 9). Mirroring the very early stages of the transition, Sudanese audiences expressed respect and regard for the new political elites in their country. They also had high hopes and expectations for the ongoing political change. News fatigue, however, was already blatant in the face of party capture and the incapacity of the media to provide accurate and helpful information (Al-Kaisy, 2020, p. 16).

Thesis 2: *Perceived instrumentalization of media encourages people to include various channels in their media diets and to further resort to personal networks for orientation and validation.*

Our data indicate that in the countries in focus, distrust in local media has accelerated the emergence of individual and collective validation strategies among audiences. Chief among these is the tendency to combine and cross-check an extensive array of sources. Comparing different sources and checking “news and reported events across a number of trusted sources and platforms” (Al-Kaisy, 2021, p. 18) is a standard routine among Iraqi media users.

Iraqi focus group participants say that they resort to personal networks, namely WhatsApp groups, as the most trusted sources of information and sense-making. These groups are often made up of peers and sometimes experts. This strategy centers on personal networks as verification sources. In the same spirit, Iraqis evaluate media content when they meet friends in private contexts, where peers collaboratively produce the orientation that local media fails to provide. “We discuss programming among our friends. When the subject is topical and relevant to our community, then we discuss it. Everyone has different views, and sometimes I change my opinion as a result,” said a female student from Mosul (Al-Kaisy, 2021, p. 26).

These findings suggest a countertrend toward selective exposure: media users do not assemble their information channels and sources to reinforce existing opinions and beliefs, but to validate them. Instead of avoiding conflicting information, they actively seek it out to gain a more complete picture. Following Garrett (2009), one might suggest that in volatile and high-risk environments, the usefulness of contradictory or challenging information outweighs the convenience that comes with having one’s beliefs reinforced.

We found similar trends in DRC, where interviewees faced with contradictory information and imminent danger continued to tune in to various radio stations, even those they perceived as spreading falsehoods. For instance, a 53-year-old housewife from Goma said that she listened to the UN-sponsored Radio Okapi, Digital Congo (said to be close to former president Kabila’s family), the international broadcaster TV5 Monde, and the government-run TV station RTNC. Aware of media weaknesses and plagued by uncertainty deriving from conflict, participants in Goma also rely on interpersonal communication to verify specific news. Mobile phones are essential in this type of “early-warning system” (Frère & Fiedler, 2019, p. 279).

For the same reasons, interviewees in Libya explained that they checked different sources for news and verification, noting that the sources they trusted most were people they knew personally (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2015, p. 26). In search of a genuine and complete understanding of an event, Libyans “shopped around” and consulted multiple sources. Focus group participants also said that they resort to their lived contexts as a source of validation, where talking to real people is central: “[We get information] from the people, from the street, you go down to the street, and you see the reality” (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2015, p. 19).

Similarly, focus group participants in Sudan applied advanced practices of verification and corroboration, mainly when using social media: “When I read any news on social media, I usually assume that 50% of what I read is true. I look for more sources like official and newspaper accounts before I consider a news item credible,” said one male participant from Nyala (Al-Kaisy, 2020, p. 13). Researchers found a generally high level of discernment among media users in Sudan regarding the truthfulness of coverage (Al-Kaisy, 2020, p. 12). Most participants said they carefully double-check information and news on social media either with other social media

accounts or with televised reports (Al-Kaisy, 2020, p. 12). While social media was recognized as a platform that provides news quickly, people often waited for the news on television for confirmation. Exchange with peers about politics and media content was ubiquitous in public spaces, where street peddlers, also known as “tea ladies”, offered ample opportunity for exchange on the sidewalks and streets of Khartoum. However, Sudanese focus group participants saw social gatherings of this kind as instigating the spread of false news and rumors (Al-Kaisy, 2021, p. 12).

Kohring and Matthes (2007) suggest that in times of uncertainty and unpredictable future, trust becomes more important as a guiding principle for action (p. 239). In our sample, trust is withdrawn from local media and redirected to peers and personal networks. This trend may be due to critical judgments of bias and a perceived lack of journalistic quality in local media. However, participants and interviewees in our sample emphasize how much they not only value the proximity and opinions of real people, but also the controversial discussions that occur among them. Trust and the process of validation is therefore withdrawn from individual sources and shifted towards processes of social exchange and deliberation.

Limitations

This study compared patterns of media use by people living in conflict contexts on the premise that media use and structures of the public sphere in fragile statehood are closely linked. We identified various media use patterns that are similar in all four study countries, suggesting that the basic assumption of the dependence of media use in public communication structures within fragile statehood is valid.

Still, media use cannot be discussed in isolation from the recipients, their psychological makeup, and their sociocultural environment (e.g., Ruggiero, 2000). For instance, the societies of the countries studied here may traditionally exhibit a more pronounced culture of orality than in Western contexts, and this in turn influences manifestations of media use. Personal discussions about media content, framed here as a ‘verification measure’ in a conflict context, could thus equally be an expression of cultural conditioning. Future research should differentiate more strongly in this regard.

In addition, the use of specific media and formats in conflict contexts needs to be studied in more detail. In the case studies presented here, respondents were asked about media use thematically and in general, rather than specifically about media programs, channels, or outlets. Thus, it could be that the issue of trust varies depending on the particular media outlet. Similarly, distinctions pertaining to age, gender, education (literacy), and media access are missing. Future refinement of methodology would require consideration of these aspects.

Moreover, further research in this area would need to have a genuinely comparative

methodological design with equivalent survey instruments. Therefore, the present study should be understood as an approach to further research that substantiates the empirical findings outlined here.

Conclusion

Preliminary evidence from the countries in focus suggests that party media capture produces a highly critical and media-savvy audience skeptical of the truthfulness of what is presented to them by local media on a structural level. Media distrust deriving from perceived partisanship and negative assessment of instrumentalization is accelerating the emergence of verification strategies and facilitating a retreat to personal networks as sites of orientation.

In the cases outlined here, knowledge about media ownership and assessment produces not only skeptical routines of media use, but also high levels of 'competence-confidence,' i.e., a high level of perceived "ability to proficiently navigate the news and govern which information they receive" (Schwarzenegger 2020, p. 371). If we look at this observation from the angle of public sphere theory, it is the perceived lack of validation offered by local media and their incapacity to provide orientation that prompts media users to do so themselves. They do so through critical reading, comparing sources, and exchanging with peers. The latter is where most of the orientation in sense-making seems to take shape. This strategy works well insofar as we did not encounter media users in the FGDs across countries that "feel out of control and reliant on the information they encounter" (Schwarzenegger, 2020, p. 372)—experiences related to a low level of competence-confidence.

Our findings contradict and challenge common assumptions about audience attitudes implied in the academic (Western) discourse on the role of media in conflict environments, namely assumptions that conceive media users as mostly trusting entities that can be easily manipulated and mobilized by parties within a conflict. We conclude that the media skepticism and orientation strategies we find in fragile contexts mitigate the impact that parties within conflicts have in their attempts to instrumentalize mass media. According to our data, party media are less potent than conflict parties may think. From a policy perspective, this insight could be turned into a powerful tool for media development by conveying this finding to conflicting parties and party media. A deeper understanding of the conflicting parties' media-critical audiences could lead to reexamining the parties' media strategies. Ideally, some parties would discover factual and balanced reporting as a means to restore the trust of their constituencies and influence their competitors.

Surprisingly, the media users that participated as interviewees in the studies did not recognize any merits coming from the openness of the media system, namely the high level of 'transparency' deriving from it. The latter is highlighted in public sphere theory as the foundation for media pluralism and all subsequent media

performances, including validation and orientation. Apparently, transparency is assessed from the perspective of internal rather than external pluralism. The overall negative assessment of media systems' performance among media users in fragile countries did not allow for a nuanced recognition of achievements concurrent with regime change. Sudan is an exception in this regard. Mirroring the very early stage of the transition and the narrow scope of armed conflict at the time of data gathering, Sudanese media users had more confidence in media than other countries in focus. Sudanese audiences still partly demonstrated trust in state TV and were skeptical about social networks as sites of validation and orientation. In other words, the fact that media capture is only about to grow in Sudan leaves room for confidence in media performance.

In this article, we have outlined preliminary vantage points for a theoretical framework. Moving forward, we suggest a theory-based research agenda that transcends country borders. Public sphere theories should be highlighted because they connect the political system, society, and the media environment (including its structures, practices, usages, and perceptions) as interlaced layers of analysis. Ultimately, media literacy programs would benefit from greater insight into context-specific modes of media use, namely into the social nature of media use in conflict contexts. Conflict-specific 'media epistemologies' could be refined and introduced as a component of a media literacy curriculum in respective regions. Knowledge pertaining to ownership and political media affiliations, the perceived instrumentalization of media, as well as priority to social validation, are context-specific perspectives that feed into the media literacy of people living in conflict societies. Further research into these issues could help de-Westernize and contextualize programs of media literacy.

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