

Media Systems and Violent Conflicts: A Theoretical Framework and Patterns of Transformation

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Abstract

This study provides a theoretical framework for the dynamic interactions between media systems and violent conflict. Taking the media system framework developed by Hallin and Mancini in *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* as a point of departure, the study highlights the role of violent conflict in transforming media systems beyond the Western world. To achieve this goal, the study first refines the media system framework to make it applicable to non-Western countries affected by violent conflict. It conceptualizes violent conflict as a social transformative force that alters political and media systems. Building on these steps, we present a theoretical framework for the mechanism by which violent conflicts transform political and media systems. The theoretical framework is then utilized to study these transformation processes in four purposefully sampled countries: Afghanistan, Lebanon, Israel, and Turkey. Finally, the four countries are used as case studies to discern three patterns of interaction between violent conflict and political and media systems. The results show three patterns: victorious autocrat, stalemate, and instrumental escalation. This study contributes to the literature on media systems and the relationship between the media and violent conflict.

Keywords

media system, violent conflict, political mechanisms, conflict communication, hybrid media system

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Introduction

In 2004, Hallin and Mancini published a seminal study that compared media systems in eighteen Western countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The book motivated scholars, including Hallin and Mancini themselves (2012), to extend the analytical framework and apply it at different times and to other countries (see Jakubowicz and Sükösd 2008; Richter and Kozman 2021a; Voltmer 2008). This process faced a crucial epistemic challenge relevant to communication science in general. This challenge pertains to the pitfalls and inadequacies of treating theories or interpretative frameworks generated by empirically studying specific countries in Europe and North America at a certain moment, with all their intrinsic presumptions and specialties as global ones, and applying them to other countries with totally different social and political structures (Park and Curran 2000; Waisbord and Mellado 2014).

Another challenge scholars faced in studying the media systems in non-Western countries is the optimistic notion of a new wave of peaceful democratization led by digital media, especially in the literature written amidst the Arab Spring and other protest movements against autocratic regimes (Howard and Hussain 2013). After the initial euphoria of hoping, predicting, and theorizing about the democratic transition of political and media systems during the Arab Spring (Badr 2015), a new variable, violent conflict, began to reveal its darker side. Many countries that experienced protest movements and where the media were (supposed to be) used to liberalize or democratize their public spheres fell into the trap of violent intrastate conflict, sometimes reaching the level of either civil war (Libya, Sudan, Yemen, and Syria) or interstate conflict (Ukraine and Russia). Also, the Western countries studied by Hallin and Mancini now suffer from much higher levels of transformative conflict, predominantly non-violent, resulting in the erosion of democracy and, also in Eastern Europe, democratic backsliding (Gora and Wilde 2022) with rising levels of illiberalism (Laruelle 2022) and polarization (Brüggemann and Meyer 2023). Although Hallin and Mancini occasionally refer to the role of political conflict, particularly non-violent conflict, it is not at the forefront of their analysis (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 150–60). Against this background, there is a need for a theoretical framework that delineates the dynamic interaction between media systems and transformative violent conflict.

This study examines media system transformation in four countries in Western and Southern Asia that are affected by violent conflict to (1) refine Hallin and Mancini's framework to make it more dynamic and able to incorporate the different social transformations resulting from violent conflicts, and (2) provide a theoretical framework for violent conflict as a mechanism that changes the media system. First, we review Hallin and Mancini's media system framework, its limitations and pitfalls, and challenges in applying the framework to non-Western countries affected by violent conflict. Second, we conceptualize violent conflict and elaborate on its political and social repercussions. Third, we present our refined framework for analyzing the mechanism whereby violent conflict alters the power constellations in the political system and accordingly transforms the media system. Last, utilizing this framework, we review the media transformation process in four countries that suffered from violent conflict.

These four countries are then utilized to highlight three patterns of media system transformation. It is worth noting that we do not claim to present an exhaustive typology, but see the three patterns as a beginning to identify different constellations and mechanisms.

Transformation of Political and Media Systems

The main rationale of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) study was to track how the development of different political systems affected and produced the media systems of the examined countries at a certain moment in time and to categorize them into different models. The central notion is that historical developments in the political system of every country led to the production of different media systems. The challenge was how to analyze the process of transformation of such media systems. Hallin and Mancini noted in a follow-up study that "[m]edia systems are also not static (...). A system is not an entity with a fixed set of characteristics, but a pattern of variation" (Hallin and Mancini 2017: 167). One of the helpful examples in their study was gauging commercialization trends in press and broadcasting media systems from the democratic corporatist and the polarized pluralist models, which manifested a convergence toward the liberal model (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 251–82).

Another prevalent argument within the literature on media in non-Western countries was a fourth wave of democratization for the media systems (Howard and Hussain 2013). The notion was that digital media, along with other factors, can significantly help the democratic opposition to topple autocratic regimes, as seen in the Arab Spring. However, recent case studies and comparative analyses show that in many countries, political and media systems are not moving in a linear path from an authoritarian to a liberal democratic structure (Gora and Wilde 2022; Štětka and Mihelj 2024; Voltmer 2008).

Thus, there is a need for a robust analysis of the dynamics and patterns of political and media system transformation. The present study addresses this research gap by highlighting different possibilities of transformation, such as the autocratization of media systems. Illustrating such processes adds to the literature on media system transformation by shedding light on transformation patterns beyond democratization.

First, we need to clarify what is meant by a "system transformation." By "system transformation," we mean the long-term alteration of a system's structures. We look at conflict as a mode of interaction between actors in a power constellation. Media and political systems are the structural contexts of action. Action and structure mutually influence each other (Giddens 1984; Schimank 2016). We limit our focus to "transformative conflict" that changes the structure of political and media systems. Not all conflict has this transformative effect.

Nonviolent conflict as public discourse can also be a characteristic of a stable democracy by supporting social integration (Deitelhoff and Schmelzle 2023). The transformation of systems can be intended by actors or a non-intentional effect. Power constellations can change during a conflict. Thus, transformation in a political system can manifest as an alteration of institutional norms and roles, such as the

monopolization of political power within institutions and the arbitrary usage of this power against oppositional citizens instead of protecting their rights in political participation (Cassani and Tomini 2020: 277). Another possible manifestation of political system transformation is an actor gaining political power and accordingly altering the nature and limits of this power. For instance, an autocratization of the political system entails a monopolization of unlimited political power in the hands of unelected people without democratic institutions to hold them accountable and enabling these actors to use illegal forms of violence as a manifestation of this new power (Cassani and Tomini 2020; Dresden and Howard 2016). In the next section, we review debates on the media system framework and the different possible ways to refine it.

Refining the Media System Framework

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) categorization process depended on four dimensions: (1) the development of the media market, (2) journalists' professionalism, (3) political parallelism, and (4) the role of the state. In addition to Hallin and Mancini's (2012) edited book *Comparing media systems beyond the Western world*, there have been relevant attempts to apply their analytical framework to other regions, such as Central and Eastern Europe (Herrero et al. 2017), the Arab region (Richter and Kozman 2021a), Francophone sub-Saharan Africa (Frère 2015), and Latin America (Guerrero and Márquez Ramírez 2014). These studies aimed to address a theoretical challenge that pertained to the notion that Hallin and Mancini's four dimensions are insufficient and should be extended or edited, since the *scope* and the *kind* of the four dimensions vary significantly in non-Western countries. The original framework classified the dimension of state intervention into "high" and "low" within the boundaries of a democratic system, limiting the study of state intervention that would be far above these boundaries (Voltmer 2012: 227), as in the case of authoritarian regimes (Badran 2021; Zhao 2012). Also, the political parallelism dimension is bound to media affiliation with political parties but fails to include different forms of ethnic, religious, or identity group parallelism (El-Richani 2016; Richter and Wollenberg 2020; Voltmer 2012). One suggestion to solve this problem was to add more themes beyond the four dimensions mentioned, such as the themes added by Richter and Kozman's (2021b). However, this rationale created a never-ending process of adding new variables or themes with every new studied country, which ultimately puts the validity of the whole framework into question.

Another suggestion comes from Voltmer (2013), which is to take a step back and treat the four dimensions as broad arenas of interactions between the media and different actors and subsystems in society. Building on that idea, the first dimension of state intervention entails all the interactions between any state institution or government—whether democratic, autocratic, or hybrid—and the media. Such interactions can range from total censorship and state or army capture of the media to a complete laissez-faire approach of weak, non-interfering states (Richter and Kozman 2021b: 326; Wollenberg and Richter 2020). The second dimension of political parallelism expands beyond parallelism with political parties to parallelism or even instrumentalization (Mancini

2012) by any civil society group or non-state actor, including ethnic, sectarian, religious, warlords, and armed groups. The third dimension pertains to the relationship between the media and the market, incorporating all advertisers and profit-driven corporations in online and offline media. This dimension also entails a relationship between the media and the economic system. The last dimension relates to the interaction between the media and professional journalists working there. This last dimension also encompasses perceived journalistic roles in the country (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018) and the degree of independence and autonomy journalists have over the media and its discourse.

Building on the previous approaches to refine the media system framework, we take, as Voltmer (2013), a step back and deal with the media system as a dynamic constellation of relationships between media and the four arenas of actors. Within this constellation, each actor interacts with the media to achieve particular goals and gain more power. Thus, the media system's constellation is shaped by the political power of each actor, which is reflected in its interaction with the media. According to this approach, the process of transformation in the media system reflects a corresponding transformation in the political system, where a shift in the constellation of power relations occurs. Such an alteration can—not exclusively—manifest as one actor gaining more or less power or dominance over another, which in turn leads to a transformation in the constellation of relationships with the media. For example, in Hungary, since Viktor Orbán took power in 2010, he initiated a campaign to colonize the media system and concentrate power in a loyalist network, thereby transforming the power constellation within the media system in his favor (Bajomi-Lázár 2013). Orbán's party weaponized mainstream media to spread his populist discourse and disinformation (Štětka and Mihelj 2024).

Against this background, we scrutinize the transformation process of political and media systems. Instead of covering all the different drivers for such a transformation process, we focus only on violent conflict as a possible impetus. However, before we elaborate more on this process, there is a need to conceptualize violent conflict as a force for societal transformation.

Conflict as a Transformative Force

Hallin and Mancini's model does not foreground *conflict as a transformative force* or a relevant factor in the transformation of the political and media system. Following Simmel, this study views conflict as a "social form" just like competition (Simmel 2008: 227–305). Conflicts are characterized by antagonistic, direct, interactive, and ongoing (sequential) communication between at least two counterparts (Neuberger 2022).

It is also relevant to distinguish between conflict as a broader category and violent conflict per se. According to Demmers (2017: 7), violence does not represent an escalated quantitative scale of conflict but a specific qualitative shift; thus, it is a specific form of conflict, not a higher degree (Demmers 2017: 7). This violent form of conflict can occur interpersonally between individuals or collectively between organized

groups. Non-violent conflict can also transform society (Maerz et al. 2024; Štětka and Mihelj 2024) and cause significant political repercussions.

System transformation is increasingly taking place without open (violent) conflict, but rather through the restructuring of institutions (democratic erosion, democratic backsliding, and media capture) and the use of soft power that maintains the appearance of “democracy” (competitive authoritarianism; Levitsky and Way 2010). Nonetheless, it is out of the scope of this study—conceptually and empirically—to include non-violent conflict,¹ as it concentrates only on political conflict that entails an organized collective usage of violence by political actors, thereby positioning violence at the center of the political conflict.

Hence, we focus on the societal and political repercussions of violent conflict as a triadic mode of interaction that incorporates two conflicting actors and an audience (Beck 2011). This triad model of conflict is significant, since it elaborates many dimensions of conflict and the relationship between conflict and different aspects of society (Holzinger 2014; McSorley 2014), including the media (Gilboa 2009; Schoemaker and Stremlau 2014). The central notion of this triadic model of violent conflict is that violence as an adopted agency also carries a communicative message—usually transmitted through the media to a third observing party, the audience (Beck 2011; Demmers 2017). In this model, actors perform different roles according to their positions. The two conflicting actors attempt to send certain messages to their audience. The media filter and frame these messages for the intended audience, who respond and may support one conflicting actor. For instance, a warlord who escalates violence against another ethnic group may also direct a message through the media to his own constituents that he is the only one who has enough power to defend them.

Accordingly, the literature on violent conflict tends to move beyond the simplistic, obsolete views of conflict as a binary interaction between a good and bad actor over power or the moral good of the people (as examples of the new trends in conflict studies see Cederman and Vogt 2017; Kaldor 2013). One of the main contributions of this stratum of literature is elaborating how violent conflict can be a “mutual enterprise” in which both sides need each other and benefit from the continuation of the conflict to consolidate their political power and dominance over their own constituents (Kaldor 2013: 13). Within such contexts, violent conflict leads to social transformation whereby economic and political systems reproduce a conflict trap (Collier et al. 2003) in which actors benefiting from the conflict try to perpetuate it as their best rational choice to consolidate their power.

Hence, it is relevant to examine how conflict transforms society by producing new economic and political systems and altering the power constellations therein (Eibl et al. 2021; Sorensen 2003; Wood 2008). Consequently, the produced political system with its power constellations shapes the media system. In the next section, we elaborate more on this process of (political and media) system transformation as a result of violent conflict.

System Transformation as a Result of Violent Conflict

System transformations are usually conflictual. The literature on media systems within countries affected by high levels of violent conflict, especially intrastate conflict, highlights the—mostly negative—effects of conflict on the media system (Badran 2021; Peri 2012; Stremlau 2013). These case studies shed light on the need to examine media systems as dynamic and transforming in tandem with changes in the socio-political structure wherein they operate (Roudakova 2012).

We follow the “politics-media-politics” (PMP) approach of Wolfsfeld et al. (2022), which conceptualizes the relationship between political and media systems and the use of political power to gain media power and vice versa. Power in the media system can manifest itself as actors’ resources and ability to enforce their will over others in communicative spheres and control their competitors’ options (Jungherr et al. 2019; Neuberger 2025). For instance, an authoritarian regime that imprisons oppositional journalists attempts to enforce its discourse and decrease the options of oppositional movements to spread their criticism of the regime. Regarding the power of each actor, it is relevant to highlight that there are system-related types of power—political, economic, and media (attention, approval/reputation)—that can reinforce each other, such as buying media (economic power) to get power over the media, which can be used to gain political power (Wolfsfeld 1997).

The PMP approach makes two basic assumptions. The “politics first” proposition asserts a dominant influence of politics on the media. The “media selection and transformation” proposition posits that the media can, in turn, exert independent influence by selecting and transforming events into stories.² The PMP model consists of two main processes. The “politics first” (PM) reflects the first proposition, that is, the mechanism whereby political changes alter and shape the media system. This process is the main focus of our study, as we highlight changes in the first (P) produced by the conflict. As a result of this produced (P), a process of media system transformation takes place (PM).

Applying this approach, we first assess the structural effects of the conflict (as a “mechanism”) on the political (first P) and economic systems. For example, one of the repeated possible effects due to conflict is the weakening of the state, the creation of a parallel economy, and powerful loyalist networks controlled by warlords (Duffield 1998; Sorensen 2003). That is a conflict-driven alteration of the power constellations in the political system (first P). Accordingly, we analyze how this produced political system transforms the media system (PM). The framework wherein we track this (PM) process is dependent on our abstract approach to the media system, which was explained previously. Hence, we track how the new political constellations resulting from violent conflict affect the four dimensions of the media system. Building on the previous example, powerful private warlords or armed ethnic groups enjoy highly relevant non-institutionalized power in the media system and may be able to dominate it through media instrumentalization, such as media ownership and censorship (Fiedler and Wollenberg 2023; Stremlau 2013). This is a (PM) effect process, as a change in the political system leads to a change in the media system.

The second process in the PMP model is the “media-politics” (MP) process and is based on the “media selection and transformation” proposition. This process elucidates how the produced media system and available technologies lead to a change in the political system. Thus, the media is a powerful resource in conflict and is instrumentalized by conflicting political actors.

Building on this theoretical framework, this article delineates how conflict as a mode of interaction and mechanism of social transformation changes social (sub)systems—here, the political and media ones—by altering power constellations. An epitome of this process is an actor winning a civil war and then using victory to control all political and media institutions in the conquered territory. In retrospect, actors’ agency within the political and media systems affects the conflict mechanisms. For example, when a terrorist group utilizes social media to disseminate fear and destroy their enemy’s morale, their chances of winning the conflict increase. A successful example was the Taliban’s communication during the weeks before the fall of Kabul. The Taliban spread propaganda messages that they had already taken cities before entering or starting the battles. Consequently, governmental forces and citizens lost their morale, believing the city or region had already fallen (Farag et al. 2025). This is an example of the (MP) process.

Despite the relevance of the (MP) process and how media alter the results of the violent conflict, it is not within the purview of this study. This study only focuses on how the political system (first P) transforms the media system (PM).

Case Studies and Patterns of Transformation

Building on this theoretical base, we take a bottom-up, exploratory approach whereby we review media system transformation in four countries and, accordingly, illustrate the patterns of the mechanisms by which violent conflict transformed the political and (consequently) media systems. The four purposefully chosen countries are Afghanistan, Lebanon, Israel, and Turkey. Our selection criteria were (1) countries undergoing long-term intra- or interstate violent conflict over many years that consequently led to a structural transformation in the political (and therefore media) system; (2) countries with diversified political and economic systems. The four countries differ in their political systems, ranging from total or hybrid democracy to total authoritarianism. Although Turkey and Israel have different population sizes, geographical spaces, majority religions, and languages (Akkoyunlu and Sarfati 2024: 7). Both countries have an anti-democratic populist leader leading a campaign to capture the media (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020). Finally, (3) we aimed to diversify the type of violent conflict that took place in the four countries. For instance, Afghanistan suffered from an intrastate conflict in the last decade, while Turkey engaged in conflicts outside its borders (such as in Syria). In sum, the four chosen countries differ in terms of their political system, economies, geography, demographic components, and the nature of violent conflict taking place. Thus, we chose an approach of selecting the most dissimilar countries that have one characteristic in common: undergoing long-term violent conflict. We used a convenience sample as a starting point to provide sufficient

heterogeneity to illustrate different ways of transformation of the media system through violent conflicts. However, we are aware that further research will require a broader and more systematic selection.

In each case study, we focus on the studies about the violent conflict and its social repercussions to gauge its effect on political and media systems. Then we also reviewed relevant research about the political and media systems produced by this conflict. By synthesizing the research, we analytically reconstructed and summarized the process of political and media system transformation in the four case studies. It is worth noting that, because of the study's exploratory nature, it is beyond its scope to empirically scrutinize the pre-conflict political and media systems in detail. We reflected theoretically on each country's transformation process to develop a pattern of transformation. After examining the cases of Turkey and Israel, we decided to categorize them under one pattern. The pattern of violent conflict transformation of the political system and then the media system was very similar in both countries, despite their special characteristics. Other studies have also highlighted similarities between Turkey and Israel (Akkoyunlu and Sarfati 2024: 6–7; Rogenhofer and Panievisky 2020). Despite each country's particularities, the three patterns can be helpful as a starting point for repeated scenarios and templates for political–media system transformations.

Afghanistan: The Victorious Autocrat

Since 2001, Afghanistan has suffered from intrastate conflict between the Republican government supported by the United States of America (USA), different ethnic groups led by warlords, and the Taliban. During this period, the media system was fragmented between these groups (Hamidi 2015; Page and Siddiqi 2012). This pre-2021 media system was characterized by the weak role of the state, a boost in commercialized media instrumentalized by conflicting non-state actors, and low professionalism (Deane 2013; Hamidi 2015; Relly and Zanger 2017).

After years of intrastate conflict, the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021 and controlled most Afghan lands after defeating the government (Sakhi 2022). This intrastate conflict altered power constellations within the political system. The Taliban captured the weak state institutions and started a campaign to weaponize them to consolidate their theocratic regime (Farag et al. 2025). The Taliban also attempts to monopolize power by repressing all forms of civil life and civil society organizations, with an exceptional attack on women's rights (Farag et al. 2025; Karimi 2023). Thus, in this post-2021 political system (first P), the state institutions (controlled by the Taliban, which is now attempting to transform from a non-state actor into a group that captures the state itself) seek to control the social and political lives of citizens.

The political system produces a new media system (PM). After their takeover, the Taliban started a brutal campaign to capture the media (Karimi 2023; Moradi 2022). They tailored strategies to intimidate journalists, especially women. Moreover, the Taliban took over the state institutions to weaponize them in their media capture campaign (Moradi 2022). As a result of these authoritarian media policies, the media market shrank significantly. Within the first six months following the Taliban's takeover,

more than three hundred media outlets—approximately half of the country's media landscape—closed (Moradi 2022: 9). Media freedom and the journalistic profession declined. The Taliban announced eleven rules for journalists to which they must adhere, and they systematically arrest and punish any journalist who criticizes the regime, even on social media (Karimi 2023: 15–22). The media system has become an authoritarian one par excellence, controlled by the Taliban that strives to capture state institutions for its theocratic project. The resulting media system is characterized by significant state intervention, low professionalism, and a shrinking media market (Farag et al. 2025). The Afghan scenario exemplifies a pattern whereby a victorious armed group shapes the new political system after achieving significant military victories in intrastate conflict and transforms the media system accordingly.

In this pattern, one particular actor achieves a huge armed victory in an intrastate conflict and rises from the battlefield, controlling a country's capital and major territories. This actor can be an already ruling leader or party or an oppositional non-state group that achieves hegemony over significant territories and accordingly starts to dominate the media and instrumentalize it for its governance project, like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS; El Damanhoury et al. 2018). Within this pattern, intrastate conflict produces a new power constellation characterized by a high accumulation of power in the hands of the victorious armed actor and limited power in the hands of civil society and journalists. The resulting political system is often characterized by a rebel non-state group striving to centralize all powers, capture the state, and weaponize its institutions against the remnants of the previous regime or other non-state groups.

Consequently, the victorious actor attempts to transform this monopolized political power into control over the media via strategies like media capture, turning any supporting or neutral media into a mouthpiece for their narratives, and censoring opposition media (Badr 2020; El Damanhoury et al. 2018). The produced media system is characterized by the domination of one actor over the state and the other groups, including the journalists. As a result, the media system suffers from a shrinking media market, low professionalism, and ubiquitous state intervention (after the victorious actor starts its campaign to capture the state itself).

Lebanon: The Stalemate

Before the civil war, Lebanon's media system was fragmented between a huge number of small newspapers that had partial freedom but suffered economically as each had a relatively low number of readers (Dajani 1971). As a result of the Lebanese civil war that ended with the Ta'if accord in 1989, a new political system (first P) arose that is characterized by the accumulation of political power in the hands of the warlords and sectarian groups that fought the war (Hirst 2010; Young 2010). The warlords and leading rich families from each sect, which formed the ruling elite during the war, monopolized economic and political power in the postwar regime (Ille and Mansour-Ille 2021; Majed 2022). Operating within the postwar quota-based system, they employed clientelist practices such as allocating state positions, public resources, and services to

reward loyal supporters, thereby consolidating their political authority and economic power (Ille and Mansour-Ille 2021: 30–1). They also developed political tactics and hegemonic narratives to scare their own constituents and anybody who questions this sectarian power-sharing as a threat to peaceful coexistence (Geha 2019). This weakened the Lebanese state and its official institutions relative to the sectarian groups and leaders with their economic elite networks (El-Richani 2016; Hirst 2010; Young 2010). While the social conflict and tension between these groups give the impression they are in opposition, they use the conflict as a smokescreen to cover their mutual interest in perpetuating the system and impede the formation of a strong democratic secular state founded on the rule of law, rather than sectarian ties.

These postwar political constellations produced a media system (El-Richani 2016; Harb 2024) in which sectarian groups own and instrumentalize media outlets for their own interests (Dajani 2019; Nötzold 2009). The high degree of political parallelism manifested a pattern where most media outlets are financially and politically tied to the sectarian groups and reflect more or less the views of these groups (El-Richani 2016: 91–111). For example, the al-Hariri family, a leading Sunni family to which two former Lebanese Prime Ministers belonged, owns Future TV and other media outlets (for a detailed map of the big families' ownership of the main TV stations in Lebanon in the last decade, see El-Richani 2016: 73). In addition, advertising and media markets shrank significantly due to the suffering economy (El-Richani 2016). While journalists continue to strive to escape the influence of sectarian groups and political leaders (Voltmer et al. 2021), the structure of the political and media system hinders their mission. Furthermore, the weak state and mutual interests of the sectarian groups and the economic elite to perpetuate it as weak and to capitalize on the fear of the other made the society, and, in turn, the media system, prone to crisis after another and to continued social polarization (El-Richani 2016). Hence, the Lebanese media system is shaped by high political parallelism with sectarian groups trying to instrumentalize the media, professional journalists struggling for independence, a weak state, and a constrained media market (Dajani 2019; El-Richani 2016; Voltmer et al. 2021).

Reflecting on the case of Lebanon, this second pattern is a particularly distinct one, where no single group or actor is able to achieve a significant armed or political victory in the intrastate conflict. The (post-conflict) power constellations are characterized by being divided between different ethnic, sectarian, religious, tribal, or ideological groups without a strong Leviathan state that monopolizes violence and institutionalizes the military power of society (Hobbes 2009). What differentiates pattern one from pattern two is the violent conflict scenario of one actor defeating the other actors on the battleground. It is also typical in such enduring intrastate conflicts that the fighting social segments rally behind an ethnic or religious identity (Kaldor 2013). Another relevant repeated scenario herein is the rise of the parallel economy and loyalist networks revolving around fighting groups or warlords (Iazzolino and Stremlau 2017; Sorensen 2003).

The political system resulting from such conflict situations is a power-sharing one. The challenge is that after an enduring intrastate conflict, society usually enters into a long structural transformation of militarization (Wood 2008) that accumulates

economic, social, and political power in the hands of those carrying guns. Hence, it becomes in the interest of these armed groups that are fighting the intrastate conflict to perpetuate the conflict, as it is a mutual enterprise for them all (Kaldor 2013). The resulting paradox is that these groups are fighting each other because it is in their interest to destroy the other and dominate the state totally; yet, it is also in their interest that the conflict continues so that they consolidate their power over their constituents, who need their protection against the other. In this stalemate, no actor can completely destroy the other (Pruitt and Rubin 1985).

This resulting political system shapes a media system that is characterized by a weak state, limited media freedom and journalistic professionalism, and very high political parallelism between the media and fighting political groups. The main challenge is that the armed groups attempt to transform their political and economic power into control over the media. In other words, the political parallelism between the media and ethnic or religious groups (Richter and Kozman 2021b) turns into media instrumentalization (Mancini 2012). With the limited post-conflict advertising market and suffering economy, journalists are left vulnerable and in need of funding and political patronage from the ethnic or religious groups fighting the intrastate conflict. This mechanism manifested in Lebanon as low salaries; moreover, the lack of job security has affected journalists' autonomy by pressuring them to accept bribes or serve as a mouthpiece for their subsidizers from the ruling political class (El-Richani 2016: 116–20).

Israel and Turkey: The Instrumental Escalation

In Israel, to support his populist anti-democratic project, Netanyahu has been attempting since the start of his second term in 2009³ to maximize the cleavages between the Jews and the Arab Palestinian minority in Israel through his zero-sum, confrontational rhetoric and perpetual reciprocal escalations with Hamas. The second step in Netanyahu's discursive toolkit is to compartmentalize Israeli Arabs and leftists as sympathizers with the "foreign elements in society" and claim to be protecting the "Jewish people" from a collective threat (Akkoyunlu and Sarfati 2024: 12). Accordingly, repressive measures were justified.

Netanyahu's playbook to capture the media includes the continuous intimidation of journalists by accusing them of siding with Israeli enemies (Panievsky 2022: 814). Furthermore, Netanyahu's government altered the legislative framework governing the media to enhance government control (Schejter 2024). Netanyahu's supporters founded new newspapers and digital media outlets to disseminate his government's narrative and ethno-nationalist discourse that excludes the Arab minority (Panievsky 2022; Schejter 2024).

This media capture campaign influenced the media system. Due to ongoing attempts to own the media through loyalist networks, the current Israeli media system suffers from a high level of ownership concentration, which gives owners the power to influence and censor the media. Two prominent examples of this trend are the establishment of the newspaper *Israel Hayom* by a billionaire who supports Netanyahu, and allegations that Netanyahu sought to limit *Israel Hayom's* circulation in exchange for

favorable coverage from *Yediot Aharonot* (Markowitz-Elfassi et al. 2018). While Israeli journalists still enjoy a degree of autonomy and freedom of speech, Netanyahu's government is attempting to limit this, which is damaging the country's journalistic professionalism (Markowitz-Elfassi et al. 2018; Panievsky 2022). As Peri (2012) illustrates, ongoing conflict hindered the process of liberalizing the Israeli media, paving the way for various actors to instrumentalize it and limit its autonomy. This conflict constantly creates a "rally-around-the-flag" sentiment that enables the government to accuse oppositional voices of being a threat to national security (Panievsky 2022; Peri 2012).

In Turkey, Erdogan has a similar populist playbook to control the media. After the failure of the peace process with the Kurds in 2015, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) escalated the conflict with the Kurdish fighting groups in Syria and intensified hate speech against some Kurdish groups (Akkoyunlu and Sarfati 2024; Yilmaz et al. 2023; Yuksel-Pecen 2018). In addition to the failed coup in 2016, Erdogan used the two issues as the pillars of his securitization discourse and policy, which were a façade of his broader autocratization strategy. This securitization process was the basis for a series of political changes and repressive measures, including those against the media (Coşkun 2020; Yilmaz et al. 2023).

As a result, Erdogan led an authoritarian media capture campaign (Coşkun 2020), arresting journalists and suppressing opposition media, especially Kurdish outlets (Çelik 2020; Yesil 2016). The AKP weaponized the neo-liberal media ownership structure, building a loyalist network of media ownership by controlling funding and ownership (Çelik 2020; Yesil 2016). This strategy of repressive state control and intimidation led the AKP campaign against media independence (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020: 1404).

The resulting media system is one in which Erdogan's populist government and ruling party control most of the media outlets through loyalist networks that utilize neo-liberal privatization strategies to buy media organizations (Doğan 2024). In this media system, the government's role is significant, as it censors dissenting voices through financial sanctions and intimidating journalists (Coşkun 2020). Consequently, professional journalism is declining as political parallelism between the media and populist ideological movements—mainly Erdogan's party—limits the media's autonomy. Still, there are some remaining oppositional digital media outlets striving to keep their autonomy (Doğan 2024).

Building on the two cases of Israel and Turkey, this third pattern entails an autocratization of the political system by escalating and exploiting a violent conflict by an anti-democratic leader or ruling party. Within this political transformation (first P), the anti-democratic incumbents expand the executive branch's power vis-à-vis civil society, judicial powers, and oppositional political parties. Due to the weaponization of the instigated conflict, power constellations within the political system become monopolized in the executive state institutions. Therefore, this political system shapes the media one (PM) as the anti-democratic ruling leader or group starts a media capture campaign that aims at the autocratization of the media system. The produced media system is one where state intervention is very high, and journalistic professionalization is under attack. This media system is often characterized by a monopolizing

neo-liberal structure as the ruling incumbents attempt to control media ownership via their loyalist networks.

Within this pattern, a leader or a party—mostly populist ones—strategically resurrects, exploits, or escalates a conflict to dominate the political and media system. This instigated conflict is utilized as an impetus for spreading polarization and hate speech against a particular enemy and then as a justification for autocratic measures. From a wider perspective, the gambit of instigating conflict is an integral part of a broader autocratization strategy to monopolize power and undermine democratic constraints against populist incumbents (Akkoyunlu and Sarfati 2024). The strategic goal behind this conflict-instigating tactic is to ignite a rally-around-the-flag process and exclude the opposition as a “threat” to the people (Akkoyunlu and Sarfati 2024).

The idea that political leaders foment and exploit interstate conflict and start diversionary wars to achieve a local political goal is not new (see Mitchell and Prins 2004; Ostrom and Job 1986; Tir 2010). Another rising strata of literature examines the mechanism whereby populist leaders undermine the pillars of the democratic system to create an autocratic system (Cassani and Tomini 2020; Jee et al. 2022; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Populist leaders can also weaponize nonviolent conflict and hate against certain groups (like immigrants) to create an enemy as a ruse for the autocratization of the media system. Violent conflict is one way in this playbook, but not the only one. One defining feature of populism is the search for internal and external enemies to escalate conflict and foster polarization (Müller 2016). Our pattern focuses only on the cases where leaders or their parties attempt such an autocratization process via violent conflict.⁴

The autocratization of the political system (first P) transforms the media system (PM). A pattern of autocratization of the media system starts. The central pillar of this process is the rapid rise in state intervention vis-à-vis the independence and professionalism of journalists. The operationalization of this pattern includes repressive laws limiting media freedom with national security as an excuse and the direct or indirect (via loyalist businessmen) ownership of the media by the ruling party.

This phenomenon of populist leaders attempting to autocratize the media system is not deterministically tied to violent conflict, as some countries have experienced it without suffering from such conflicts (see, e.g., Eastern European cases in Štětka and Mihelj 2024). However, what differentiates the cases of Israel and Turkey is the pivotal instrumentalization of violent conflict to justify the autocratization process. In both countries, the autocratization measures are tied to episodes of violent escalation. In addition, the main attack on the media was accusing them of being a danger to national security and siding with the enemy. While non-violent forms of conflict and measures of media capture influenced this autocratization process, violent conflict played a vital role in the two countries, particularly Israel.

Still, it is worth noting that the autocratization processes in Israel and Turkey were not identical. In the current global wave of democratic backsliding, autocratization models and their linkages to violent conflict vary across countries (Boese and Hellmeier 2022; Croissant and Tomini 2025). Although the four countries were purposefully selected to capture heterogeneous cases, the exploratory analysis reveals that Israel and Turkey nevertheless display a similar pattern—albeit in different conflict

contexts. In Israel, the recent escalation was triggered by a specific event within an already enduring and predominantly intrastate conflict setting. In contrast, Turkey's autocratization is linked to its involvement in the Syrian war, which originated as an intrastate conflict but evolved into a complex war with interference from external actors, such as Russia. Israel and Turkey are not the only two countries experiencing such an autocratization trend (for a map of this trend, see Fernandes et al. 2025). For instance, the Trump administration has also been striving to autocratize the political and media systems in the USA (Bennett and Livingston 2025). What is common in Israel and Turkey is the mechanism whereby populists instrumentalize the escalation of conflict to justify the autocratization of political and media systems.

Conclusion

By reviewing the cases of Afghanistan, Lebanon, Israel, and Turkey, this article discerns three patterns of interaction between violent conflict and political and media systems. The first pattern pertains to the triumph of one autocratic actor in a conflict, resulting in an autocratization of the political and, in turn, media system. The second pattern is a stalemate in which a single group cannot achieve total dominance in intrastate conflict, so political and media systems are shaped by a formula of power-sharing and polarization. The third pattern describes a particular situation in which one populist group or actor ignites a conflict as a pretext to exploit cleavages and justify an autocratization campaign. In spite of the dissimilarities between Turkey and Israel, we categorized them under one pattern due to the shared phenomenon of exploiting violent conflict for autocratization.⁵

These three patterns highlight how the media system transformation process can move toward autocracy and how this process of autocratization of the media system is entangled with current anti-democratic trends. They also show how violent conflicts alter power relations in society. The cases of Afghanistan and Lebanon show that sometimes, in violent intrastate conflict, the power inside political and media systems moves from official state institutions into the hands of armed non-state actors. These patterns also illustrate the current challenges facing professional journalism, as anti-democratic leaders and groups attempt to capture the (digital) media, and violent conflicts exacerbate shrinking advertising economies, leaving the media in need of economic and political patronage and prone to instrumentalization.

While the three patterns represent more or less negative scenarios, they are not exhaustive, as other case studies may result in patterns in which conflict has a positive effect on the political and media systems (see Table 1). For instance, the three patterns do not include cases where violent conflict caused a backlash against the ruling class, leading to calls for independent, objective media,⁶ or helped to topple an autocratic regime.⁷ Thus, autocratization strategies can fail.

From a theoretical perspective, this article contributes to the literature on media systems by refining Hallin and Mancini's analytical framework to integrate the transformation process resulting from violent conflict. Building on the PMP approach (Wolfsfeld et al. 2022), we understand the process of media system transformation as a reconfiguration of the constellation between the media and various societal actors

Table 1. Three Patterns of Political and Media Systems Transformation by Violent Conflict.

Pattern	Country	Violent conflict	Resulting political system (first P)	Resulting media system (PM)
Victorious autocrat	Afghanistan	Intrastate with one victor	One autocratic group monopolizes all power	Autocratic state intervention, low professionalism, shrinking market
Stalemate	Lebanon	Intrastate with a stalemate situation	A weak state with powerful non-state groups sharing power	Low state intervention, high political parallelism, media instrumentalization
Instrumental escalation	Israel and Turkey	Instigated conflict as part of a broader autocratization campaign	One actor attempting to monopolize all political power and autocratize the political system	High governmental intervention, media capture campaign, attacking journalistic professionalism, and monopolizing the media ownership

resulting from a transformation in the political system. Our approach shifts the focus to studying the specific mechanism whereby violent conflict transforms the political and media systems. The central argument is that violent conflict transforms power relations in society and, as a result, forges a new political structure. These new power relations and political structure, in turn, alter the media constellations with different social actors and give rise to a new media system (PM).

Further research can examine the second step in the PMP model (MP). It can also investigate new patterns of change by expanding the horizon into new case studies. From our side, we tried to diversify the examined case studies, especially beyond conflicts typically studied in Western countries, to reach a theoretical framework. Nonetheless, we were confined by the available academic literature on the media system transformation in non-Western countries affected by violent conflict. Expanding the scope of scholarship on media systems in conflict-affected countries can help to identify new transformation patterns and incorporate more diverse case studies.

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This article does not involve human participants, human data, or animal subjects. Therefore, no ethical approval was required.

Consent to Participate

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Data Availability Statement

Not applicable, as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the preparation of this manuscript.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive conceptualization of forms of political conflict and their reciprocal relationship with transformations of political conflict (see Maerz et al. 2024).
2. It is worth mentioning that the PMP model and literature on political and media systems include and scrutinize the role of digital media and to what extent it alters interactions between the two systems (see Chadwick 2017). This aspect is not explored in depth here; however, we do take it into account in our analyses. Social media plays a particularly important role in the case of Afghanistan (Bahar 2020).
3. While Netanyahu’s plan to exploit the conflict started moderately in his second term, it escalated and became more obvious in his latest term, which started in 2022.
4. It is worth noting that we do not claim that the conflict is “manufactured” by the populist incumbents out of “thin air.” The argument here is that populist incumbents strategically capitalize on the already existing cleavages.
5. Thus, we do not argue that Israel and Turkey have the same media system, but that the interaction between violent conflicts and the media systems in both countries shares some commonalities that can be categorized under one pattern.
6. One of the pivotal examples of this debate is the transformation of the USA media during the Vietnam War into being more objective and critical of the government at the end of the war. For a detailed analysis of this case and the debate about the effect of the Vietnam War on the USA media, see Hallin (1984, 1989).
7. An example of this scenario is Argentina’s defeat in the Malvinas/Falkland Islands conflict against Britain, which contributed to the end of the autocratic regime (Mainwaring and Viola 1985). This case illustrates that the gambit of escalating a conflict as a diversionary strategy to consolidate power is not a safe one. Simply, it can always backfire due to a military defeat.

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