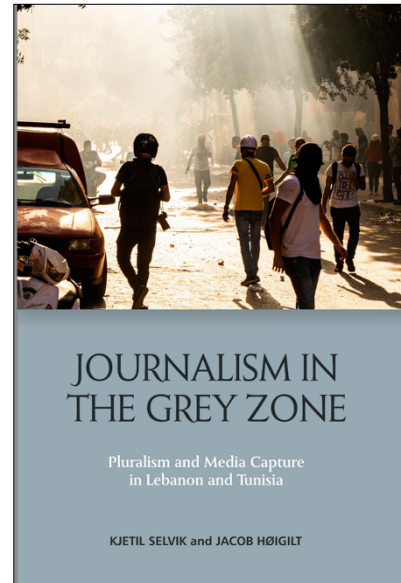


Kjetil Selvik and Jacob Høigilt, **Journalism in the Gray Zone: Pluralism and Media Capture in Lebanon and Tunisia**, Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 228 pp., \$110.00 (hardback).

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There is extensive research on the role of new media in non-Western contexts and its impact during democratic transitions, but the specific challenges and opportunities faced by journalists in hybrid regimes have received comparatively less attention in the literature. The hybrid regimes, which offer multiple areas of contestation while systematically violating democratic norms and values, create complex media landscapes that are filled with ambiguities and uncertainties affecting journalistic practice. Selvik and Høigilt's book, **Journalism in the Grey Zone: Pluralism and Media Capture in Lebanon and Tunisia**, focuses on these ambiguities and uncertainties, offering a nuanced understanding of journalists' experiences, challenges, and strategies for navigating this difficult terrain.



The literature on hybrid regimes identifies the media as one of four arenas where contestation can occur in competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2002), highlighting the critical role of political communication and the need for these regimes to maintain a semblance of democracy. Journalists within these systems, relied upon by both incumbents and the opposition to spread their narratives, have a diverse set of strategies for acting as watchdogs and fostering new forms of civic engagement. However, these opportunities come with substantial risks, as "legal repression" and the systematic restrictions of press freedoms pose serious threats to journalists who challenge incumbents or demand accountability. In their book, Selvik and Høigilt explore how journalists respond to these pressures, particularly "when key democratic assets are at stake" (p. 18). Exploring the role of media in maintaining or challenging political power, they ask, "Where does the mix of pluralism and manipulation leave Arab journalism as a political force?" (p. 4).

To address this question, the authors explore the power struggles between political elites, media moguls, and journalists in Lebanon and Tunisia, situating their analysis within the broader literature on Arab media and media instrumentalization, as well as political science analyses of hybrid regimes. In Lebanon, the media landscape exhibits considerable pluralism; however, journalists and media moguls are deeply intertwined with political elites, reflecting the country's consociational system and the politicized ownership of key resources. Despite the Lebanese state's limited capacity to impose strict press restrictions or establish a hegemonic narrative, the close ties between media and political elites significantly shape media content and perspectives. In Tunisia, on the other hand, media sector struggles with entrenched patronage networks and the legacy of Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, despite the country's strides toward democracy following the 2011 Arab uprisings. Tunisian politicians manipulate media narratives through both direct and indirect connections with business elites, while media moguls use their platforms to amplify the voices of aligned

parties and politicians, effectively “restricting the journalistic agency that flourished after the revolution, without abolishing it” (El Issawi, 2021, p. 870). Both countries, in this sense, exemplify “grey zones”—albeit for different reasons.

In chapter 2, Selvik and Høigilt investigate the underlying mechanisms shaping the media landscapes in Lebanon and Tunisia, examining factors that contribute to a complex mix of media instrumentalization and pluralism: weak institutions and struggling economies at the macro level, clientelism and other informal exercises of power at the meso level, and social cleavages and polarization at the micro level. In chapter 3, the authors shift their focus to the journalists, examining how they navigate their working conditions and the political opportunity structures available to them. This analysis sets the stage for a deeper analysis of how journalists respond to the challenges they face. Chapters 4 and 5 then explore the potential responses of journalists to their circumstances, outlining three primary strategies: (1) aligning with a party or politician, (2) maintaining distance from politics to preserve journalistic integrity while avoiding direct confrontations, or (3) actively defying media institutionalization to become agents of change or voices for the people. The authors complement this discussion with direct quotes from interviews and numerous examples from both Lebanon and Tunisia, illustrating how journalists’ choices are shaped by the specific political and media landscapes they navigate.

Chapter 6 further examines how these responses might evolve when key democratic institutions are under threat, focusing specifically on how Tunisian journalists positioned themselves during the collision of democratic norms and national security concerns following the terrorist attacks in 2015. In subsequent chapters, Solvik and Høigilt highlight the vulnerabilities of these systems and the internal conflicts that arise, especially during tumultuous periods like elections (chapter 7) and widespread protests (chapter 8), demonstrating that the media serves as more than just “authoritarian window dressing” in hybrid contexts (p. 2). Journalists, whether acting as “trumpets” for a party or politician, “advocates” for ordinary people, or “change agents” who openly challenge the powers that be, exert substantial influence over public opinion (p. 185). This influence is especially potent during critical junctures when the resentment sparked by media capture can catalyze grassroots movements against the elite, as seen in the YouStink protests in Lebanon and most recent presidential elections in Tunisia.

The extensive fieldwork conducted by Selvik and Høigilt in Lebanon and Tunisia from 2016 to 2019 constitutes one of their most important contributions to the literature. Their original data comprise 80 face-to-face semistructured interviews with journalists, alongside an analysis of journalists’ political positions through op-eds, TV debates, and social media posts. This thorough and systematic approach captures a broad spectrum of viewpoints and traces the evolution of the media landscape during the tumultuous years from 2015 to 2020. The interviews, in turn, illustrate how journalists cope with the tensions between maintaining professional ethics and operating in environments where media freedom is consistently under threat. For instance, they reveal the role of regulatory bodies like the Tunisian High Independent Authority of Audiovisual Communication in mitigating economic and political pressures exerted by elites. They also demonstrate the degree of professional solidarity among journalists who, despite struggling financially and sometimes engaging in unethical practices to survive, continue to support each other in these challenging conditions.

The authors do not study the journalists' backgrounds or motivations, but they explore the various career trajectories available to those who successfully navigate the challenging media landscape of hybrid regimes. In Lebanon, journalists who act as change agents run in parliamentary elections as independent candidates or on civil society lists, voicing the concerns of those disillusioned with the status quo or critical of Lebanese political parties. In Tunisia, charismatic and well-connected journalists often rise to become *chroniqueurs*—commentators on politically charged talk shows. While *chroniqueurs* engage in heated debates to entertain and inform the public, they also leverage political rivalries to negotiate better compensation for their services or secure greater independence in their journalistic endeavors.

But do *chroniqueurs* use their platforms to become "change agents," or do professional norms compel "trumpets" to change their perspectives? In Türkiye's similarly instrumentalized media landscape, journalists often leave mainstream platforms for roles offering more freedom of expression—whether by moving abroad, turning to social media, or joining international media outlets. Generally, these journalists' career paths align with their previous public and professional stances, but their responses to their environments vary depending on their circumstances. That is why a longitudinal analysis of their career paths and ideological shifts would provide greater insights into the dynamic interplay between journalists' individual trajectories and the broader political and media systems in which they operate, enhancing our understanding of their professional adaptations within hybrid regimes.

The authors demonstrate that "media instrumentalization provokes resistance" (p. 188) and may even "backfire on political elites" (p. 18), yet the integration of digital media, AI-driven software, and electronic surveillance complicates this landscape further. As authorities utilize increasingly advanced forms of political control, harness new media to harass opponents, manipulate public opinion, and deploy bots and trolls to achieve their objectives (Byman, 2021), several critical questions emerge: In this environment, do journalists still have access to the same opportunities and range of responses that were once available? Are political elites gaining the upper hand in the battle to control information? Can the media continue to act as a catalyst for genuine political change and open discourse, or is the "grey zone" of ambiguous political control and limited freedom expanding, posing new challenges to journalists, including those in Western countries?

*Journalism in the Grey Zone* is an important resource for scholars of comparative politics and for anyone interested in media and politics in the Middle East and North Africa. It offers valuable insights into the consequences of media instrumentalization and raises crucial questions for media studies and journalism scholars—particularly concerning the moral dilemmas and the personal and professional struggles of journalists, aspects that are often overlooked in broader political analyses.

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