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## **News ‘Media Capture’, Relations of Patronage and Clientelist Practices in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Interpretive Qualitative Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

This essay is an interpretive qualitative analysis of secondary data that explores and/or highlights the intricacies of ‘media capture’, relations of patronage and clientelist media practices in sub-Saharan Africa. It adopts an exploratory approach that delineates the contours and patterns of debates around these intricately connected phenomena by identifying salient examples in the region, and their implications to the role of the media in struggles for democratisation. Our analysis points to a typology of interconnected driving forces of media capture which coalesce around *legal and administrative regulation; financial and economic enticements*, and lastly, the *dynamics of media ownership*. These driving forces collectively broaden our understanding of the social practice as well as the role of the media in processes of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa. The study further establishes that while there are marked differences and nuances which have significant implications on the operations of the news media in the region, there are several shared professional practices, values, and attitudes, that are qualitatively generalisable across sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Keywords:**

Corruption, clientelism, media capture, patrimonialism, political economy, sub-Saharan Africa

### **Introduction**

The concept of ‘media capture’ and its closely associated notions of ‘patrimonialism’ and ‘clientelism’<sup>1</sup> collectively illuminate some of the contemporary challenges and threats faced by the news media in sub-Saharan Africa. Although the manifestations of these intricately connected forms of social relations cannot be summed-up in universal explanations they, however, articulate broader complexities rooted in the pervasive conditions of material deprivation, weak regulatory institutions, corruption, and wanton perversion of democratic norms, which collectively subject the news media to corrupt political and economic pressures (Waisbord 2013; Powell 2017). In particular, the patron–client relationships resulting from these social relations lead to the undercutting of professionalism through corrupt practices such as “the discretionary use of public resources by political officials to strengthen personal and/or partisan power” as well as “favor allied news organisations” (Waisbord 2013, 154).

Similarly, patrimonial relations between officials and journalists “as well as tight-knit linkages between political patrons and business owners” (Waisbord 2013, 159) filter into the news media’s agenda consequently redefining and shaping ‘news judgement’ and ‘news values’ (Mabweazara 2018). The media thus lose their autonomy and are beholden to the vested interests of the political elite and the private sector, and the collusion between these forces. Efforts to understand these intricate social connections and the challenges they pose for the news media across sub-Saharan Africa are, however, thin and disparate or too narrowly focused on individual African countries to offer overarching qualitatively generalizable findings (see Powell 2011; Sampaio-Dias 2019; Tutwane 2018).

This article is thus an attempt to plug this gap by presenting an exploratory snapshot of diverse forms of media capture and the related notions of patronage and clientelism as they manifest across sub-Saharan Africa. The study uses a qualitative analytical strategy that draws its data from a combination of peer-reviewed studies and publicly accessible sources. It is, however, quite distinct from a conventional literature review (see next section). It adopts an interpretive exploratory approach that delineates the contours of the debates and salient examples from a cross-section of sub-Saharan African countries. To our

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<sup>1</sup> *Patrimonialism* points to structural relations in which the political elite pervert and twist formal channels for the benefit of their allies and *clientelism* is a form of patronage which depends on a reciprocal exchange of favours between individuals with unequal economic and social status.

knowledge, the study is one of the first efforts to systematically untangle and generate consensus views on the fairly disparate but intricately connected concepts of ‘media capture’, patrimonialism, clientelist media practices, and the closely associated concepts of ‘brown envelope journalism’ and ‘press freedom’, among others. The analysis consolidates and maps out a direction for more empirically driven studies that reflect on how these issues shape and constrain the social practice of journalism in Africa, including how they weaken the ability of the media to play a meaningful role in the struggle for democratisation. As an initial attempt to plug the research gap in this area, the comprehensive review offers some important perspectives and insights that can serve as a springboard for ‘theory building’ through more empirically grounded research.

Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly pertinent in this study because conversations about Africa invariably consider this region, which stretches from the margins of the Sahara Desert through the rain forests of Central Africa to the Southern edge of the Kalahari Desert as the main focal point. North Africa is not of interest in the study primarily because it is widely considered part of The Arab League<sup>2</sup> and “engages less in scholarship terms with the rest of the continent” (Obonyo 2011, 4). We, however, do not attempt the impossible task of painting all sub-Saharan African countries with one socio-cultural brush. Rather, we acknowledge that the region is a “complex mosaic of cultures with equally varied socio-political, economic and historical experiences” (Mabweazara 2018, 3). Similarly, there are “shared [media] practices, values, attitudes and beliefs” which are “qualitatively generalisable across a range of countries, despite the obvious differences” (ibid.).

It is also worth noting that although the 1990s saw most sub-Saharan African countries adopting multiparty politics, leading to the liberalisation of the media landscape in countries such as Zambia, South Africa, Kenya and Ghana, among others, most of these governments have since rescinded on this liberal agenda (Voltmer 2006; Obonyo 2011). The region has over the years seen an untamed ascendancy into political power by ‘strongmen’ as heads of states, with Mugabe, the late former president of Zimbabwe being forced to leave office at the age of 93 in November 2017. There remain many other strongmen across sub-Saharan Africa from Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni, Paul Kagame in Rwanda, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo in Equatorial Guinea and many others, at least at the time of

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<sup>2</sup> This is a regional organisation of Arab states in and around North Africa, the Horn of Africa and Arabia.

writing this paper. These life-long political leaders have partly sustained their grip on power through well-oiled structural systems of political patronage in which the strongmen and their allies are deemed inviolable. A heavy stranglehold on the media is a key element of this structural system of political patronage. As this study shows, state-affiliated media institutions in particular, bear the brunt of the patrimonial state power and are widely appropriated for the material benefits of politicians and their constituents. Equally, as noted above, state resources are used to induce loyalty and conformity. In this study, we explore how these complex structural relations impact on the news media and the implications for democratic processes in the region.

### **Data Collection and Analytical Strategy**

As intimated above, this qualitative analysis uses data drawn from published peer-reviewed studies as well as additional unpublished but publicly available sources as discussed in detail below. The analysis is therefore different from conventional literature reviews and secondary analyses (Payne and Payne 2004). Its agenda is distinctly interpretive with the aim to generate overarching claims based on rigorous analysis of extant qualitative knowledge (Zimmer 2006). It is important to note that there are substantial variations in the ways in which qualitative reviews might be conducted. However, researchers tend to adopt and adapt approaches developed for empirical research. As Campbell et al. (2014, 1) contend, “some of the concepts and techniques that have been developed for qualitative evidence synthesis can be usefully translated to theoretical reviews”. Thus, for this study, we adopted an interpretive analytical approach carried out in two closely connected phases as shown in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***Phase 1 of the study***

The *first phase* focused on peer-reviewed literature comprising of “studies selected on the basis of their relevance to [the] research question” (Zimmer 2004, 312). To that end, we independently identified studies (journal articles, book chapters, research documents, academic theses and policy documents), which we evaluated as making important advances

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<sup>3</sup> In terms of timeframe, the study takes a broad overview that stretches from the mid-1990s (a period during which most sub-Saharan African countries committed to multiparty democracy and media liberalisation) to early 2019.

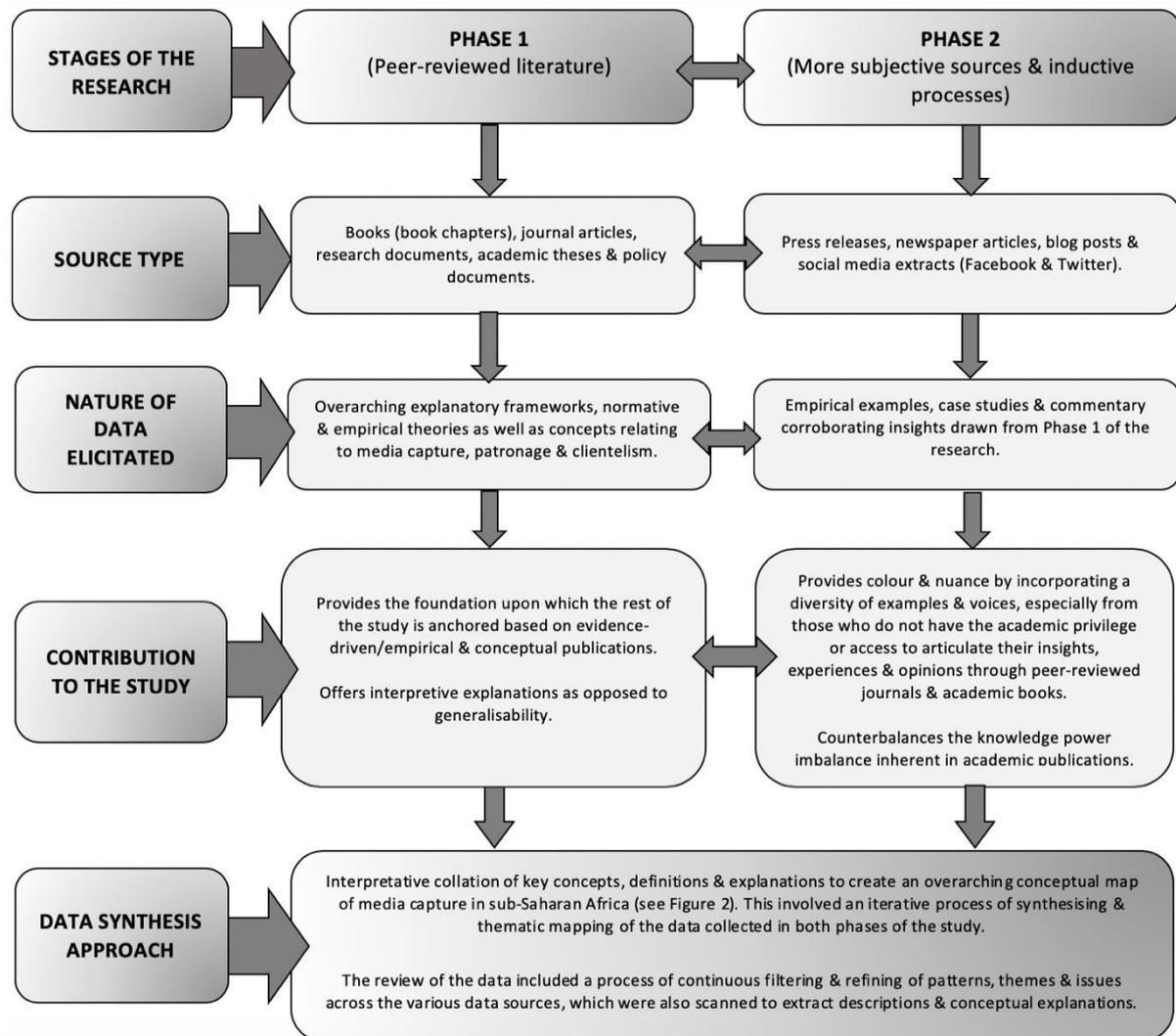
to the understanding of the notion of 'media capture' and the associated practices of media patronage and clientelism.

We used different approaches to search for material, including electronic and manual searches to follow the development of concepts, explanations and empirical cases. The bulk of the papers were, however, retrieved using the 'pearl-growing' or 'citation mining' technique of identifying additional relevant references using the bibliographies, titles and abstracts of relevant papers (Zimmer 2004) as well as manually trawling through papers to check where the included studies themselves were cited. We included theoretical and empirical studies that focused more broadly on the subject of media capture, including literature from disciplines with theories that focused on the political economy of media, press freedom, ethics and general explorations of the intricate connections between media, politics and democracy in Africa.

Our pursuit for interpretive explanations as opposed to generalisability rendered purposive sampling far more appropriate. We were thus not interested in locating every available study. In our view, the results of a theoretical synthesis would not necessarily change if less or more studies contained the same concept, explanation or examples. In the words of Thomas and Harden (2008, 3), our approach very much depended "on the range of concepts found in the studies, their context, and whether they [were] in agreement or not". Thus, aiming for 'conceptual saturation' and 'maximum variability' (ibid.) to capture the heterogeneity of experiences in sub-Saharan Africa as a region was more appropriate in shaping our search strategy. As we noted earlier, there are substantial variations in approaches that can be used in studies of this nature. What is clear, nonetheless, as Nguyen and Tran note in their own study of the 'Global South', is that "it is simply impossible for a single paper to capture the numerous issues across such vast lands, regions, nations and cultures" (2019, 3). To decide on the specific articles to include in the study, we manually searched articles for the most relevant key terms such as 'media capture', 'media patronage', 'media clientelism' as well as cognate terms like 'press freedom' and 'media censorship'. After a process of refining and exclusion, a total sample of 41 peer-reviewed articles (19 book chapters, 16 journal articles, 1 thesis and 5 research reports) published between 1996 and 2019 were selected.

To analyse and synthesise the data, we worked independently to search for patterns and group together emerging and recurring themes which we then compared to develop a

common consistent approach before further grouping the results into themes and categories of the manifestations of media capture in sub-Saharan Africa. Through an iterative synthesising and thematic mapping process, our analysis in this phase of the study pointed to a typology of the pillars and driving forces of media capture as shown in Figure 2, which we then used to structure a follow-up exploratory analysis of non-peer-reviewed sources of data in the *second phase* of the research.



**Figure 1:** Overview of the two-tier data collection and analytical strategy

### *Phase 2 of the study*

While it is commonly argued that scoping reviews are more likely to require a standardised approach to searching, inclusion and exclusion, our study also benefited from the more subjective approaches and inductive sources we deployed in this second phase. As Campbell et al. (2014, 5) argue, “overly rigid *a priori* inclusion criteria may be less useful for [secondary data] reviews, whilst more subjective methods of selecting relevant studies may be more useful; what may be required is a careful balance between these approaches”. For our purpose, we sought wide-ranging sources from newspaper articles, blogs posts, social media data and press releases from organisations such as the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and Reporters Without Borders, among others. Albeit largely subjective, these sources provided ‘detail’ and ‘colour’ to compliment and embellish conceptions of media capture generated in the first phase by providing topical examples and cases. The data captured nuances and explanations that otherwise would be difficult to elicit or grasp through more conventional methods such as face-to-face interviews, especially given the sensitivity of the subject.<sup>4</sup>

Newspaper articles and blog posts were located through Google searches using the search terms deployed in the first phase as well as following hyperlinks embedded within the identified online articles. Press releases were mainly drawn from a combination of email alerts circulated by organisations such as the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and Reporters Without Borders between 2014 and 2018<sup>5</sup> as well as searching the organisations websites. After screening and exclusion of all invalid and duplicated results, we obtained a total of 32 items (12 news articles & 2 blog posts all published between 1999 and 2018, and 18 press releases circulated or published between 2014 and 2019).

For social media, we primarily explored Facebook and Twitter, the most commonly used platforms in the region, especially by journalists and policy makers (Mabweazara 2015). We entered key search terms on both platforms’ search tools and this yielded a substantial volume of data, which required further screening for relevance. Consequently, relevant posts were purposively selected by restricting our sample to posts circulated

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<sup>4</sup> Another key reason for this phase of the research was to include key voices that ordinarily may not have the privilege of theorising through academic platforms. Many of these voices do not publish in peer-reviewed journals, which are often difficult to access.

<sup>5</sup> During this period one of the co-authors signed up for email alerts from several media-focused non-governmental organizations and civil society organisations such as MISA and Reporters Without Borders.

between 2014 and 2019 and strictly targeting ‘leading players’ and ‘influencers’ such as civil society organisations, media advocacy organisations, senior journalists, politicians and media activists whose social positions gave them access to specialist or insider knowledge “that is more extensive, detailed or privileged than ordinary people and [...] therefore particularly valuable” (Payne and Payne 2004, 134). In advocating for this methodological approach, McKenna et al. (2017, 87) submit that social media,

provides qualitative researchers with a new window into people’s outer and inner worlds, their experiences and their interpretation of these. There is literally a flood of qualitative data [...] on Twitter, Facebook [...], all of which can be downloaded, interpreted, and analysed [...].

Following this advice, we carefully selected screenshots as well as textual data from publicly available Twitter and Facebook posts which we saw as enhancing contextual understanding as well as providing “empirical evidence to support a theoretical point” (McKenna et al. 2017, 92).

It must be stressed, however, that since the data sources used in this segment of the research ordinarily tend to be less objective, we were from the outset, very much mindful that we needed to use it with caution. Therefore, to minimise potential bias and subjectivity, we strictly used this data to corroborate and add nuance to insights drawn from the peer-reviewed sources in the first phase of the study. For this reason, data extracted from this phase was organised using thematic codes identified in the first phase and extracted texts were weaved into the thematic sections.

### **Patrimonialism, Clientelism and the Political Economy of News Media Practices**

Although ‘patrimonialism’ is widely deployed as a catch-all concept for the political ills that engulf the African continent<sup>6</sup>, it offers useful insights into the structural relations in which the political elite pervert formal channels for the benefit of close allies (Medard 1996). Key findings of this study pointed to the complex connections between patrimonial and clientelist relations, and the political economy of news media practices. Pitcher, et al. (2009)

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<sup>6</sup> It is seen by critics as reinforcing African exceptionalism which frames the continent as the ‘normative other’ relative to the economically developed regions of the North.

contend that in a patrimonial society, individuals tend to wield more power than institutions. As we have seen in the introduction, political “authority and the social linkages through which [power] is exercised [by political ‘strongmen’] are vested almost as personal property in an individual, rather than in impersonal institutions or in a mandate conferred and withdrawn by citizens” (Pitcher et al. 2009, 130). The media in their various forms across sub-Saharan Africa, are part of these structural institutions and have not escaped the clutches of patrimonialism both for their own economic survival (Kelsall 2011) and also because the economic model prevailing in the region hinges upon embracing patrimonial tendencies in order to survive.

There is a price to pay for the media as they are critical institutions in democratic processes. This is mainly because “one of the central components of a functioning democracy is the reporting of politics and institutions by the news media” (Orebro 2002, 21). However, in a patrimonial society, the media become subordinate to individuals who wield political power. Patrimonial media systems are mainly entrenched through state-controlled media, especially broadcasting, as evident in most sub-Saharan African countries such as Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa and Namibia (Tutwane 2018). As we discuss later, this is mainly achieved through corrupt and opaque licensing systems that make it possible for broadcasting licences, in the case of radio in Zimbabwe for example, to be awarded to known ruling Zanu-PF party officials. There are many examples in South Africa where the influence of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and expectations that the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) should be supportive of the ANC government. This is aptly captured by Kopecky (2011, 723) in his view that “in South Africa, there are three policy sectors that appear highly politicised: the military and police, the media and, to a lesser extent, foreign affairs”.

The privately-owned media are also implicated in patrimonial relationships. Beyond the ANC and its control of SABC through the board of directors and other senior appointments within the public broadcaster, the relationships that emanated from private broadcasters such as the now defunct Africa News Network (ANN7), owned by the Gupta family which was supportive of former South African president, Jacob Zuma also raised eyebrows. Describing the relationship at the time, Duncan observed:

There's a non-transparent channelling of government advertising to prop up a media outlet that is now very clearly acting as a propaganda arm for the Guptas and the support for the Presidency and in return, the Presidency's support for the Guptas. (cited in Qukula 2016)

This points to the ANN7's clientelist relationship with the former South African president, a system of political patronage that engenders a society where the media deliberately turn a blind eye to the corrupt activities of political leaders (Mabweazara 2018).

In a patrimonial society as Medard (1996) highlights "authority cannot be exercised directly and must be mediated by administrative officers, personal retainers, like servants, relatives, slaves or clients" (79). This is evident in the institutional arrangements one finds in most sub-Saharan African countries as the operations of public institutions, including the media, are beholden to political leaders. These relationships further the interests of those that have established the clientelist networks. As Roudakova puts it, citing Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, "one of the most important ways in which clientelism affects the media, [...] is through *instrumentalization* of media outlets – the process whereby outlets' owners and sponsors use the media under their control to advance their particularistic interests" (2008, 43).

These corrupt tendencies are largely an outcome of the failure by most African governments who took over at independence to create forward looking economic policies that could, in the long term, allow most Africans to be active economic participants (Kelsall 2011). Given this historical connection to the colonial structural relationships inherited at independence, the most plausible explanation for patrimonial relationships and their influence on media can be found in the political economy approach to the study of media. At the very core of this approach is "how different ways of financing and organizing cultural production have traceable consequences for the range of discourses and representations in the public domain and for audiences' access to them" (Golding and Murdock 1996, 11). A clientelist economy characterized by crude accumulation is likely to foster or engender the same in how the media operate and perform their duties. In most sub-Saharan African countries, economic influence flows from political power. Consequently, media institutions tend to be concerned more with safeguarding their economic interests by ensuring that

they do not publish anything that negatively impacts on relationships that grant them various economic favours (Atal 2017; Powell 2017).

Media organisations' reportorial routines whether it is in Zambia, Botswana or Malawi are largely underlined by clientelist relationships alluded to above, which in turn compromise and weaken democratic processes as the media are unable to provide the checks and balances needed in democratic societies. The relationships cascade down to everyday operations of journalists in terms of how they source their news stories and who occupies key editorial positions, especially in state-controlled media institutions. For the latter, in countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe, for example, patrimonial relations have seen the continued imposition of senior editors in state-controlled media institutions. Writing about the Zambian context, Chirambo (2011), observes that the relationship between former President Kenneth Kaunda and the controversial British businessman, Tiny Rowland, catalysed a number of developments that ultimately influenced editorial transactions at one of Zambia's leading daily newspaper, the *Times of Zambia*. In Zimbabwe, senior editorial appointments at the state-controlled Zimbabwe Newspapers Group (Zimpapers) have often been associated with 'political correctness' or an individual's alignment with the ruling party's (Zanu-PF) political patronage networks thus "placing journalists under the manipulative control of government officials" (Mabweazara 2018, 12).

Most sub-Saharan African countries whose social, economic and political relationships are characterized by patrimonialism tend to be economically poor (Kelsall 2011). This means that those that work in the media, including journalists are poorly remunerated and thus confronted with survival challenges that make them susceptible to "pecuniary gestures" (Frère 2007, 244) such as "the dominant clientelistic practice of 'brown envelope journalism'"<sup>7</sup> (Mabweazara 2018, 15, see also Skjerdal 2010). This has led to the sacrifice of "investigative reporting" (Skjerdal 2010, 388) as journalists and sources respectively pursue mutual interests in *financial gains* and *status* (Yusha'u 2018; Sampaio-Dias 2019).

### **The Intersecting Forms of Media Capture and their Implications**

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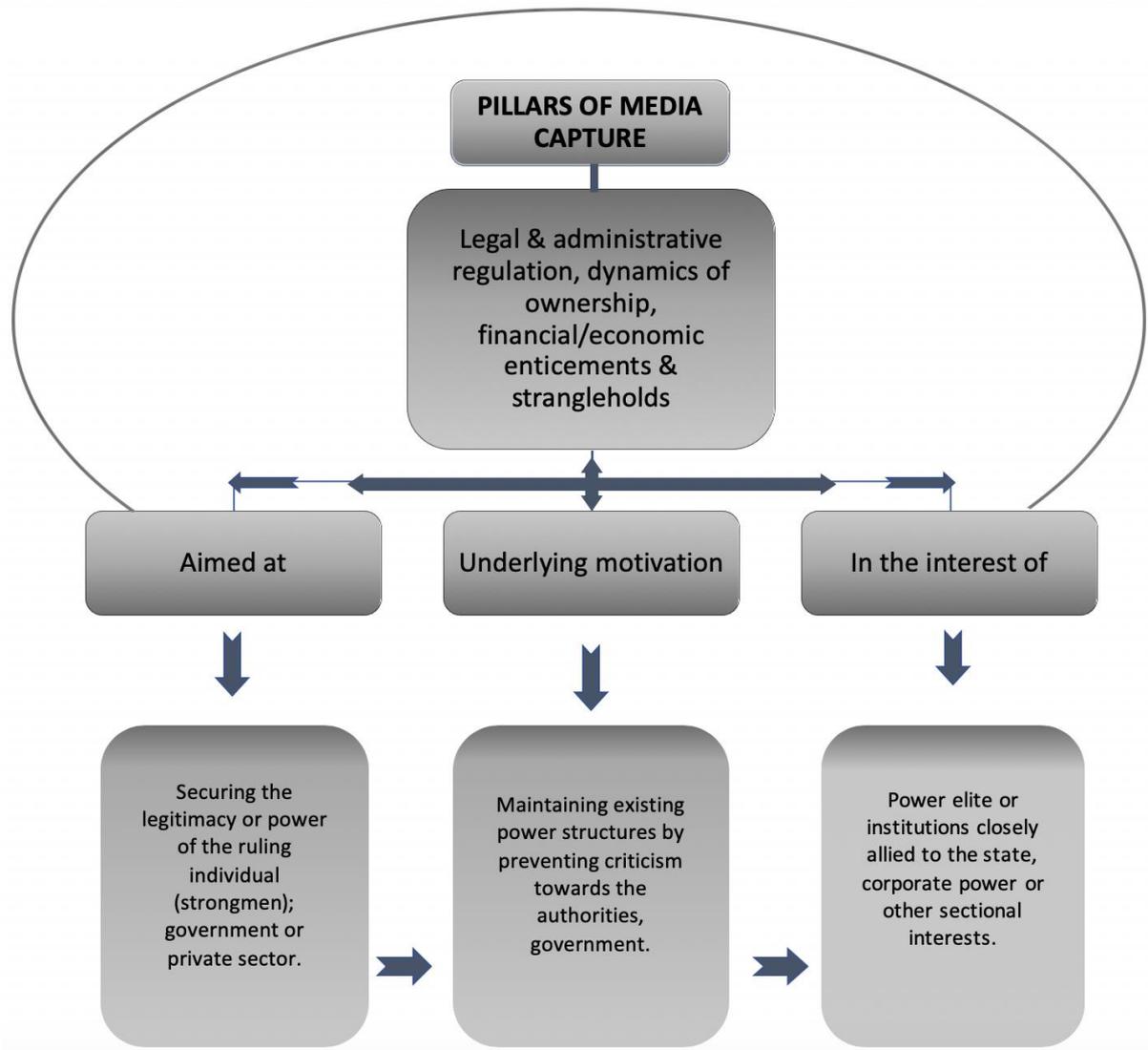
<sup>7</sup> The widespread acceptance of cash, freebees and other forms of payments from sources in return for positive coverage.

As noted earlier, the concept of 'media capture' provides a broad analytical framework for understanding contemporary challenges and threats faced by the press in sub-Saharan Africa. However, like most concepts, as our analysis finds, it is quite often broadly defined and applied in various socio-political and economic contexts. Mungui-Pippidi (2013, 41) defines media capture as

... a situation in which the media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous in manifesting a will of their own, nor able to exercise their main function, notably of informing people. Instead, they have persisted in an intermediate state, with vested interests, and not just the government, using them for other purposes.

Schiffrin makes the crucial point that "[t]he rich diversity of forms that media capture takes, and [the] contexts it is situated within" render it necessary to examine it contextually by digging into the particularities and distinctions of its forms in various countries and regions "at a particular moment" (2018, 1039).

While there is more than enough evidence of state-media control across sub-Saharan Africa, our study shows that the thinking around media capture, is much broader. It extends beyond political pressure to include pressure exerted on journalistic independence by the private sector as well as collusion between the two (Schiffrin 2017). Schiffrin further submits that the "involvement of the private sector is what primarily distinguishes media capture from traditional forms of government control" (2017, 3). It is thus a type of self-serving systemic socio-political and economic corruption in which private interests significantly influence editorial decision-making processes in intricate, "often very subtle, but [...] tenacious [and], widespread" ways (Schiffrin 2018, 1039).



**Figure 2:** Typology of media capture and its driving forces in sub-Saharan Africa

As a mechanism of media control, media capture manifests in varying forms across different social contexts. Our collected material indicated that several sub-Saharan African countries embody multiple and sometimes overlapping forms of media capture as Figure 2 shows. Some of the pillars of capture, albeit with varying underlying driving forces, include, *regulation, ownership and funding or economic enticements*. These collectively compromise the independence of the press and its core principle of speaking truth to power as we discuss below:

#### ***Legal and Administrative Capture***

Evidence from our study shows that regulatory (and legislative) frameworks are the main cog for the curtailment of journalistic autonomy by controlling the administrative elements around licensing, funding and other aspects of media development and management in sub-Saharan Africa. These measures, as seen earlier, are largely put in place to protect entrenched personalistic and neo-patrimonial governance structures that strengthen the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the ruling elite. In Zimbabwe, the government has since independence, systematically used legislation as a “tool to manage news output and information access for citizens” (Maqeda and Makombe 2013, 194). A good example of this is the strategic legal control of regulatory bodies that control the media such as the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), which is responsible for licensing the broadcasting sector. Equally, the appointment of board members for state-controlled media entities such as the Zimpapers Group, which publishes some of the leading newspapers in the country and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), a public/state broadcaster. The control of key regulatory bodies is reflected in the partisan editorial leanings of public/state-controlled media, especially when it comes to the coverage of key national events such as general elections (Maqeda and Makombe 2013). For example, in the coverage of the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe, the media watchdog, Media Monitors, observed that while state-controlled media is constitutionally obliged to be fair and impartial in the coverage of contesting political parties, the major opposition party predominantly received negative reportage in contrast to the ruling party which enjoyed extensive positive coverage (Media Monitors 2018).

Our material also indicated that legal and regulatory capture is also administrative in character. As Chalaby (2000, 22) observes, this includes “measures such as the obligation to register, to obtain authorisation for publication (licensing) and to deposit financial guarantees”, all enacted to frustrate the privately-owned press which is generally perceived to be more aligned to the opposition in ways that are “indirect and less conspicuous” (ibid). Under these administrative hurdles, the private press may encounter difficulties in registering or be subjected to systematically biased judicial decisions, a practice which is commonplace in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, in February 1996, the Zambian government ordered *The Post*, a privately-owned newspaper deemed critical of government “to remove a banned edition from its website under the Preservation of Public Security Act and threatened to sue its Web host” (Parks and Mukherjee 2017, 223). Slightly

over a decade later, the newspaper was shut down by the government because of disputed tax arrears amounting to K68 million (US\$6.1 million) (see Figure 3). The newspaper, however, argued that the authorities were trying to silence it because there was evidence to suggest that, at the time, *The Post* was not the only media house that had tax problems in Zambia, thus reinforcing the fact that the newspaper's closure was a political move used to 'whip the press into line' (ibid.).



**Figure 3:** Journalist circulating information on the closure of *The Post* by the Zambian government on Twitter.

In analysing a cocktail of concerns around the Tanzanian media legislative and regulatory environment, especially the Media Services Act (2016) and the Cyber Crimes Act (2015)<sup>8</sup>, Powell (2017) avers that “self-censorship and state control of narratives co-exist as forms of state capture”. A similar picture also obtains in Cameroon where anti-terror laws are reportedly invoked to silence and tame journalists. As one senior journalist put it on Twitter (see Figure 4), echoing related sentiments by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).



<sup>8</sup> While the former facilitates the ban of newspapers and the prohibition of non-accredited journalists from publishing the later enables the policing of speech and prosecution of citizens for information deemed to be false, among other issues.

**Figure 4:** Anti-terror law reportedly used by authorities to arrest and threaten journalists in Cameroon

In some cases, regulatory structures provide for the government to prosecute journalists on political grounds and even deny them the sacrosanct right to protect their sources of information (Chalaby 2000). In January 1999, two Zimbabwean journalists from the privately-owned *Sunday Standard*, were detained and tortured for publishing an article about a foiled military coup to overthrow President Robert Mugabe's government. The authorities claimed the story was "false information" and could lead to "fear and despondency" hence charged the two under the Law and Order Maintenance Act. The journalists laid criminal charges for assault and torture and launched a civil suit against the police and the military to no avail (BBC 1999). In a similar move to exert political pressure and control on the news media, in 2018 Rwanda adopted a penal code that imposes heavy penalties for offences such as "humiliating" state officials or legislators "in either spoken word, writing or cartoons" (Reporters Without Borders 2018).

### ***Dynamics of Ownership***

In our search for patterns and recurring themes, 'ownership' emerged as a key element of media capture in sub-Saharan Africa. It is pervasive and closely tied to the legal and administrative control of media. Stiglitz (2017) observes that in most developing countries, "[p]rint and broadcast media are often captured *through the ownership of powerful plutocrats* affiliated with political elites who limit the scope of political debate" (emphasis added). South Africa offers several examples of this form of media capture. In December 2010, the *New Age*, a daily newspaper owned by the controversial Gupta family, which, as noted earlier, had strong ties to the ruling party, the ANC and the then South African President, Jacob Zuma, was launched amid strong scepticism that it was no more than a propaganda mouthpiece, which in the words of one commentator, was bound to "kowtow, beg, and basically be the ANC's propaganda arm" (News24 2010). Some commentators branded the *New Age*, the "*New Agent* for the government", funded almost entirely by advertising from state-owned enterprises such as Telkom and Eskom (Maqeda

and Makombe 2013, 192). After an effort to rebrand itself as the *AfroVoice*, under ‘new ownership’, the paper collapsed, following hard on the heels of President Jacob Zuma’s political demise and the clandestine escape from the country by the Gupta family (Daniel 2017).

Similarly, the reluctance to liberalise the broadcasting sector, especially the registering of private radio stations, by several governments in sub-Saharan Africa “is also part of a coercive pool of patronage strategies that linger in the African media scene” (Mabweazara 2018, 13). Some stations are registered but not allowed to broadcast news, as seen in the Zambian context, where radio broadcasting licenses are mainly granted to religious and community stations on the grounds that they would not meddle in politics or air political broadcasts (Chirambo 2011). A similar scenario has obtained in relation to humanitarian or donor-owned media in the region. Writing about a radio station owned by the U.N. Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), Clarke and Sieh (2016) highlight that while the Radio generally projected itself as setting the standard for good journalism by covering issues “in an unsensational and objective manner”, in practice, this meant avoiding asking “tough questions of a government that is plagued by incompetence and graft” and barely mentioning “allegations of corruption even when they dominate the headlines” of other independent media. Clarke and Sieh (2016) further observe that part of UNMIL Radio’s caution was hinged on the U.N. Mission’s “*need for the Liberian government’s consent to remain in the country*; individual employees [also feared] expulsion from Liberia if they dig too deeply into issues the government would prefer not to address” (emphasis added). This example highlights how donor-owned media can undercut the development of critical independent journalism in deeply insidious ways. Thus, while aid money can be used to develop journalism in post-conflict countries such as Liberia, as Langan advises, we must not overlook the fact that donors are not always behaving altruistically but have an “interest [...] in maintaining [...] systems of influence within Africa” (2018, 64).

In Zimbabwe, ‘ownership capture’ is also evident through the continued expansion of the state’s footprint on the media landscape either through ongoing licensing of state-controlled media with outlets spanning across print, television, radio and most recently satellite broadcasting; or the licensing of those with close links to the state. Commenting on the state’s control of media ownership, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA, Zimbabwe) (2015), argues: “The concentration of ownership of broadcast services by the

state and those linked to the ruling party betrays authorities' drive to dominate and monopolise the broadcast media space under the guise of private ownership". This observation came after the licensing of eight local commercial radio stations demonstrated that those licensed were either state-controlled media intending to expand their services or those with ties to the ruling elite. Writing about the implications of this type of media capture on his blog, one commentator posited:

It is those with resources that are not only spreading their wings across differing media platforms [...] but are also beginning to have uniform editorial policies that disable media diversity and in the final analysis determine what is 'news' in favour of their own political or economic interests. (Zhangazha 2017)

As noted earlier, direct government control or capture of public media is pervasive in sub-Saharan Africa. In Zimbabwe, government interference with the operations of public media has filtered through to ministers and officials affiliated with the ruling party, Zanu-PF (Maqeda and Makombe 2013), who generally view the public press as a mouthpiece of the party and incumbent president. In one instance of barefaced editorial interference, a Zanu-PF member of parliament publicly warned editors of Zimpapers' flagship daily paper, *The Herald*, for not giving the president's return from Eurasia front-page coverage. The editor had, for very valid editorial reasons, decided to place the story on page 2 and this did not go down well with the legislator who immediately posted the following threat on Twitter:



HON. J M W, M P  
@JusticeMayorW

Following

His Excellency, President @edmnangagwa's return only makes Page 2? Something cooking over at @HeraldZimbabwe. It'll all end with a lot of egg on some faces! What's going on Cdes @nickmangwana @energymutodi and where are you Editor at Large @caesarzvayi?



10:14 AM - 22 Jan 2019

Figure 5: Zimbabwe's Zanu-PF legislator publicly warns editors of Zimpapers' flagship daily, The Herald, for not giving the president front-page coverage.

Following this public threat, the editor of The Herald was suspended and subsequently fired, barely a month after his appointment to the position. Writing on his Facebook page after this incident, the Chairperson of the Zimbabwe National Editors Forum also the Editor-in-Chief of a leading privately-owned business weekly at the time, remonstrated thus:

How does a government suspend, with the obvious intention to fire, a state newspaper editor for merely not putting a president's picture on the front page (not deliberately, but as an editorial judgement guided by news values and professionalism)? [...] This only happens in failed Banana Republics or fascist states. I'm talking about the Zimbabwe government suspending state-controlled daily Herald editor [...] for not putting President Emmerson Mnangagwa's photo on the front page. Zimbabwe has gone to the dogs and is now a laughingstock. *This is a grave injustice and a serious assault on press freedom, editorial independence and democratic and civilised norms of society.* (emphasis added)

In Botswana, similar concerns have also been raised about the involvement of the Office of the President in the affairs of public media. Tutwane observes (2018, 276) that direct control of state-run media outlets, especially broadcast media by the Office of the President "means that this office oversees all production processes and that *these media routinely fail to conduct one of their sacred duties, holding power to account* (emphasis added).

The collusion of political influence, vested interests and ownership is also evident in Mozambique. Despite embracing democratic ideals, at least in principle, Ronning (2012, 77) notes that, "both print and broadcast media are influenced by the state through ownership patterns, political pressure and shared interests". He further observes that although both government owned and independent media co-exist, "the state, which controls Radio Mozambique and TV Mozambique, is considered to be the dominant media actor in the country" (Ronning 2012, 81). Ownership of media is also a key pillar in the ecosystem of media capture in Tanzania. Politicians and business entrepreneurs are identified as the major owners within the media industry while the editorial policies of some privately-owned news media such as Star TV's signify capture by state politicians as evident in the coverage of the 2015 election campaign (Powell 2017). The ultimate goal of this collusion between government control and business interests is to bolster the retention of political power, which results in "a form of media capture dominated by a centralised state, marked by rent-seeking and corruption, in a wider context of inequality and exclusion" (Powell 2017, 93).

Our analysis further shows that the stifling of press freedom and editorial autonomy resulting from the ownership patterns above, weakens the ability of news media to play a meaningful role in processes of democratisation. This is complicated by the short history of democratic practices, political systems and institutions in Africa resulting in most citizens and voters having no traditions to depend on (Voltmer 2006; Powell 2017). This scenario renders the media even more central in providing citizens with the information they need to make informed decisions. As Voltmer (2006, 4) argues, in contexts where “traditional agencies of socialization—such as political parties and trade unions—have lost their credibility [...] the media are left as the main source where citizens can obtain the information they need to take part in public life”. However, the media cannot fulfil this role if they are economically fragile and entangled in corrupt networks only responsive to the needs of advertisers and the political elite as opposed to the information needs of citizens.

### ***Financial/Economic Enticements and Strangleholds***

Alongside the dynamics of ownership, our review also shows that financial and economic incentives play a role in aiding media capture in sub-Saharan Africa. According to Coyne and Leeson (2009), government advertising erodes “the independence of media and allows government officials to capture the media to serve their own private interests. This has the effect of diminishing the credibility and effectiveness of the media”. Chalaby similarly observes that “[a] favourite technique is to take advantage of the economic fragility of [...] media outlets” and “[m]edia organisations in desperate need for funds are less likely to reject financial backing that comes with strings attached” (2000, 23). This form of economic capture is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa. In most countries, the private media, which is constantly under pressure to cater to the financial interests of proprietors and shareholders, is also on the receiving end of advertisers who have become a ‘de facto licensing authority’ that constitutes part of a coalition of the financially powerful who hold the news media captive. This scenario remains starkly evident in post-apartheid South Africa where white monopoly capital-owned and controlled mainstream media reinforce each other’s narratives and jealously guard its hegemony. As Wasserman explains,

The commercial media remain dominated by outlets that cater to an elite who can afford to pay for access or who are attractive to advertisers. Control over the means

of production of social reality by the media [is largely] in the hands of white capital [...]. (2018, 4-5)

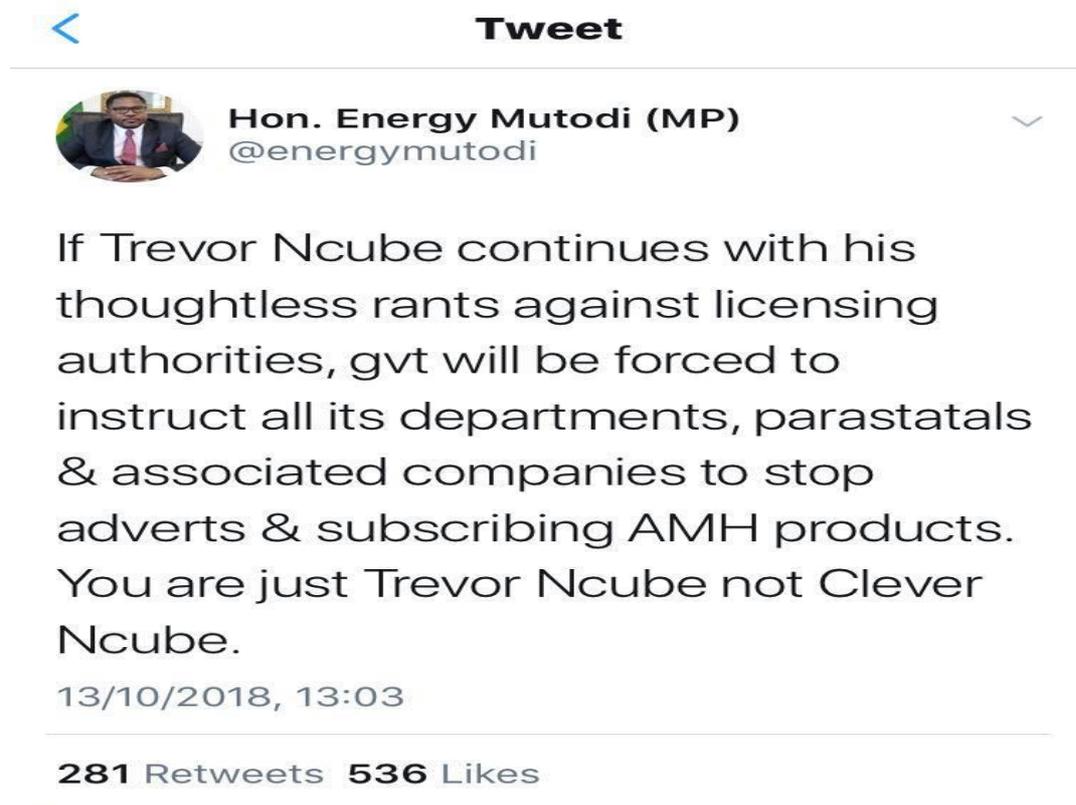
In a study focusing on the ethical challenges imposed by big advertisers on business journalists in Kenya, Mare notes that “[t]hreats to withhold or even cut advertising budgets” were constantly “deployed by powerful corporates as strategies to ring-fence themselves against negative media coverage” (2018, 217). He highlights that in most cases, senior editors at newspapers such as the *Business Daily* bow down to this pressure in a bid to “safe-guard [their] advertising revenue stream” (ibid.)

Stories of governments’ attempts to control the private media by refusing to place lucrative state advertising with news organisations seen as ‘disloyal’ are also commonplace in sub-Saharan Africa. In Uganda, the *Daily Monitor*, a privately-owned newspaper, was denied advertising from the government and state-run companies for much of the 1990s (Balikowa cited in Mabweazara 2018). This approach has persisted to date, with some companies in the private sector avoiding any association with the critical private press, preferring only to advertise with the government-controlled daily, the *New Vision* (Mabweazara 2018). This is also the case in Burundi and Rwanda where privately-owned newspapers are intentionally denied advertising by government-affiliated institutions (ibid.).

This ‘back-door’ control of press operations by governments is not unique to East and Central Africa. In Southern Africa, advertisements are sometimes used by politicians to discourage critical coverage. In 2011, a South African government spokesperson announced that the government had approved a communications plan to reward media “which put a positive spin on what government was doing”. He qualified his statement thus: “Clearly the media I am going to focus on is *where I have a base to reinforce my message. How can I advertise in a media that doesn’t carry my message?*” (de Waal in Mabweazara 2018, 13, emphases added). These sentiments were also echoed by South Africa’s Arts and Culture Minister, who equated advertising in newspapers critical of government and the ruling party, ANC, to “feeding a crocodile and stand[ing] next to it hoping that it won’t attack you” (Hans cited in Mabweazara 2018, 13).

In Zimbabwe, the government through the Ministry of Information, Media and Broadcasting Services has on many occasions threatened withdrawal of advertising from media houses deemed critical of government policy. In October 2018, the Deputy Minister

of the same ministry, in the newly elected post-Mugabe government, publicly threatened Trevor Ncube, the proprietor of Zimbabwe's leading private media organisation, Alpha Media Holdings (AMH) on Twitter, as shown in Figure 6



**Figure 6:** Zimbabwe's Deputy Minister of Information threatening the proprietor of a leading private media organisation with commercial and financial penalties.

Emphasizing the pervasive collusion between political and business interests as well as the manipulation of media through financial incentives, media watchdog, Freedom House (2015) similarly notes that in Mozambique,

The largest source of advertising revenue for local media comes from government ministries and businesses under state control and some journalists have accused the

government and ruling party of allocating advertising according to political concerns and favouring friendly outlets.

For Powell, this kind of collusive relationship has the corrosive impact of undermining media freedom and editorial autonomy “in ways that do not require a direct form of repression and control typically associated with authoritarian regimes” (2017, 85).

As seen earlier, an exploration of the financial or economic capture of the media in sub-Saharan Africa cannot be complete without pointing to the growing involvement of philanthropic organisations in funding the operations or taking complete ownership of media institutions in the region. The challenging economic environment in which most sub-Saharan African news organisations operate has, in the words of Schiffrin, encouraged Western donors “to step into the breach, bringing with them the possibility of another form of media capture” (2018, 1034). In many sub-Saharan African countries, media outlets “are willing to accept funding from philanthropists” and even change their “coverage in response to donor demands” (Schiffrin 2018, 1037). News organisations are thus held hostage to the agendas of donors and even forced to turn a blind eye to endemic cases of corruption by the same philanthropic organisations. A good example of the latter is seen in the underreporting of widespread cases of sexual exploitation and abuse of girls by UN and aid agency staff in West Africa, a scandal that according to Csáky (2008) resulted in far-reaching consequences such as abortions, teenage motherhood and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and social exclusion for the girls.

It is this disruption of the editorial independence of media institutions by donors that has forced newspapers like *Punch* in Nigeria to stand “aloof from outside funding” in an effort “to preserve [their] reputation” (Myers 2018, 34) while other leading newspapers like the *Daily Trust* and the *Premium Times* partly fund their newspapers from funds donated by “various funders such as the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA)” (Myers 2018, 34). Elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, Zambia offers a good example of how non-profit corporations such as churches and other religious charities “both donate to and advertise in media in target areas” thus amassing “leverage to shape media content” (Atal, 2017, 25). We should, however, acknowledge here that the question of donor-funded journalism is far more sophisticated than we discuss above (see Wright et al. 2019). Be that as it may, it is clear from our analysis that donor dependence in African news media

undermines editorial independence thus adding an important nuance to our understanding of 'media capture' in Africa.

Another dimension of how financial and economic incentives promote media capture is seen in pervasive culture of 'brown envelope' journalism alluded to earlier. Writing about the challenges faced by journalists in the war-torn region of Central Africa, Frère observes that "because of the disruption of the economic structures that sustain media institutions (particularly because of economic embargoes), journalists in both the private and public media sectors are lucky to receive any salary at all" (cited in Mabweazara 2018, 15). This "has left many journalists in the region susceptible to the dominant clientelistic practice of 'brown envelope journalism'" (ibid.). Skjerdal (2010) observes that in Tanzania "it is customary for reporters to [...] queue up and sign a form to receive a 'sitting fee' from the event organizer" (2010, 370). In Guinea-Bissau, Sampaio-Dias (2019) also notes that the related "habit of politicians paying journalists *per diem* rates in exchange for media coverage" is "chronically damaging [...] freedom of expression and professional integrity". It is important, however, to highlight that while the problem of brown envelope journalism is widely seen as encapsulating the age-old ethical problem of bribery in journalism, our findings also highlight that this is a deeply insidious form of 'media capture' that results in journalists sacrificing their editorial autonomy and "main function" of speaking truth to power (Mungui-Pippidi 2013, 41).

## **Conclusion**

This interpretive qualitative analysis has pointed to a range of intersecting forms of media capture, relations of patronage and clientelist practices in sub-Saharan Africa. It highlights how political and economic imperatives have broader implications on the social practice, normative orientations and the type of media that are found in most of sub-Saharan Africa. While the performance of media is broadly tied to the overall economic environment, the widespread conditions of material deprivation in most sub-Saharan African countries have made the media more susceptible to political and economic pressures associated with patronage and clientelism. Similarly, the prevailing weak institutional frameworks create conditions that allow powerful political leaders, wealthy individuals and institutions to abuse their power by not following the law. Even within ruling political parties, power is concentrated in a 'strongmen' whose authority is not subject to debate or questioning. In

addition to the problem of concentration of power, patrimonial relationships are perpetuated through the appointment of politically-aligned individuals to most regulatory institutions responsible for issuing media licences. For this reason, licences are also caught up in the patronage networks that are all aimed at maintaining political power. These relations of patronage equally have negative implications for media professionalism, they particularly weaken journalists ability to effectively perform their roles by interfering with their professional autonomy.

The fragile economic environments and the poor remuneration that characterise the working conditions for most journalists in sub-Saharan Africa are also linked to these challenges. As our study shows, poorly remunerated journalists are prone to financial bribes and corruption thus rendering it difficult for them to champion democratic struggles. In this respect, media are captured both at an institutional level through ownership arrangements that favour those connected to ruling political parties and other centres of power, but more significantly, at the operational level where the ability of journalists to investigate and perform their watchdog role is compromised. Consequently, understanding the role of the news media in democratic processes within sub-Saharan Africa cannot be separated from the economic and political environment in which the media operate.

In conclusion, as noted at the outset, this study has its limitations, especially in relation to illuminating the nuances of key differences within and between individual sub-Saharan African countries in the limited space available. For this reason, there is an inherent risk of overgeneralisation. However, the study's qualitative orientation and pursuit for interpretive explanations as opposed to generalisability renders it possible to capture key patterns and debates around the phenomena of media capture, patrimonialism and clientelist practices, including identifying salient examples that are qualitatively generalisable across the region. We hope this analysis will serve as a springboard for further empirically grounded research that examines notions of media capture and their implications for democratic processes across a range of African countries with a view to highlighting similarities and differences between them. Equally, the impact of digital technologies, particularly how the collapse of the traditional news media's business model has made media capture more likely, remains open for scholarly investigation.

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