"Independent" Kurdish Media in Syria: conflicting identities in the transition[1]

Yazan Badran, CEMESO, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium), yazan.badran@gmail.com

Enrico De Angelis, American University in Cairo, edeangelis@gmail.com

Abstract. The Syrian uprising in 2011 was accompanied by the birth of a new generation of media outlets seeking to offer different narratives to those of the regime. Having gained a certain level of autonomy from both Syrian regime and opposition forces, areas historically inhabited by Kurds (Rojava) have also seen the emergence of local media: for example. television station *Ronahi*, magazines and newspapers such as *Welat*, *Buyer* and *Shar* magazines and newspapers, *Arta FM* and *Welat* radio stations and *ARA News agency*. Indeed, Syrian Kurds have for the first time in their history the opportunity to have an independent voice in the media landscape. This paper aims to map the field of emerging Kurdish media in Syria and analyse some of the main features of these outlets while situating them in the larger context of emerging Syrian media. Moreover, the paper explores their relationship within the current political context of the Syrian uprising and, especially, of Rojava. In doing so, it analyses the political identity that these media tend to project and addresses how they position themselves towards the issue of the Kurdish identity in general and in Syria in particular.

Introduction

The Syrian uprising that erupted in the beginning of 2011 has profoundly changed the media scene in Syria. Media activists started to produce news and content on a large scale and distribute it through social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook in order to counter the narratives of the Syrian regime and mobilize other Syrians (Ahmad & Hamasaeed 2015; De Angelis 2011). From 2012 onward, the same media activists and journalists began to establish new media institutions: radios, magazines, newspapers and local news agencies, completely reshaping the media field of the country and how local events were covered (De Angelis, Della Ratta & Badran 2014).

In a similar way, new media outlets emerged in Rojava as the northern regions of Syria inhabited mainly by Kurds are now known. The emergence of "Kurdish" media has to be considered in

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the context of the renovation of Syrian journalism as a whole and, at the same time, as a phenomenon having its own history and particular conditions. If Syrian journalism in general was always subject to the repression and control of the Syrian regime for almost 50 years under Baath and Assad rule, repression of Kurdish identity went farther than repression of Kurdish media to include all cultural expressions. The gain by Rojava of a de-facto autonomy that had kept it in a sort of neutral position in the struggle between the Syrian regime and opposition forces enabled for the first time the establishment of local media using Kurdish language and attempting to represent the region's diverse communities. In this paper we analyse the emerging media field in Rojava after 2011, focusing in particular on "independent" media, that is to say those outlets not belonging to political parties but mainly surviving thanks to the support of international organizations and governments, or of local businessmen and communities. The exploratory study will be based on available literature on Kurdish media in Syria, as well as 8 in-depth interviews conducted with Kurdish journalists and media professionals active in Syria. The interviews were conducted in November-December 2015.

The main argument of this paper is that as a result of a complex set of factors independent Kurdish media developed a flexible journalistic identity enabling them to adapt to a particularly complex and uncertain context. In other words, their journalistic identity and especially how they position themselves towards the Kurdish issue, the Syrian conflict, and the future of Rojava, is a response to the necessity of dealing with different regional and local actors and their agendas. Ultimately, this strategy is designed with the aim of giving space to the expression of a Kurdish national identity and to ensure the survival of these media institutions in a future that is difficult to predict. In particular, we maintain that the professional identity of independent media in Rojava is based on three main elements: the decision to distinguish themselves in opposition to party media, the use of multiple languages instead of privileging the Kurdish language, and the promotion of a multi-sectarian view of society.

The repression of the Kurdish identity and the absence of Kurdish journalism
Before the uprising of 2011, Kurdish journalism, in the sense of a cultural production aimed at Kurds and centred on "Kurdish" issues, was practically non-existent in Syria (Hassanpour 1996). The only publications that originated from Kurds were limited to political leaflets and newspapers. These publications were produced by specific political currents and parties, and distributed illegally in Rojava

and important urban centres like Aleppo and Damascus (Badini 2015; Darwish 2015). When, in the middle of 2000s, the use of the Internet in Syria became more common, news websites specifically identifying themselves as Kurdish websites began to appear.[2] However, according to Serdar Malla Darwish (2015), a Syrian-Kurdish free-lance journalist, these websites were often just platforms recycling news from other sources rather than the expressions of professional media organizations.[3]

In general, the history of Kurdish journalism had to contend with several obstacles and needs to be put in the context of the history of Syrian Kurds. First, journalism produced by Kurds, as all forms of journalism in Syria, was subject to censorship and repressive measures by the regime in power. In this sense, a "Kurdish journalism" in Syria could not emerge simply because a "Syrian journalism" did not exist either. Second, the repression of the Kurdish identity by the Syrian regime made the emergence of journalism based on Kurdish issues even more difficult. Moreover, the repression of Kurds in Syria by the authorities has to be contextualized in a wider distrust between Arabs and Kurds that can be traced, as Rubin (2003) describes, at least to the French Mandate and it was later exacerbated by the emergence of Pan-Arabism. The French authorities often used Kurds, in a similar way to the Druze, to crush Arab revolts against colonial rule, contributing to creating an antagonism between the Arab majority and the Kurdish minority in Syria[4]. After independence, the relationship deteriorated further, with Arab nationalists suspected of setting fire to a cinema in 1960, killing 250 Kurdish children. In 1958, the Syrian government banned all kinds of publications in Kurdish, and the teaching of the language was forbidden even in private schools (Rubin 2003). After the Ba'ath party seized power in 1963, the position of Kurds became even more fragile. As Rubin says: "The Ba'ath in Syria promoted an ethnic chauvinist platform that in effect relegated the Kurds and any other non-Arab to second-class status", with the result that "for four decades the now-stateless Kurds and all their children have been prohibited from owning land, legally marrying, and receiving education. Syrian Kurds cannot even enter a public hospital (and instead must rely on unsubsidized private care), yet the government continues to forcibly conscript its non-citizens Kurds into the military" (2003: p.322).

The repression of the Kurdish identity made even more difficult for Kurds to establish media organizations. As Hozan Badini (2015), editor-in-chief of the *al-Wahda* newspaper (of the Kurdish

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[2] For an analysis on Syrian news websites before 2011, see De Angelis (2011).
[3] For example: the news website *GemyaKurdan*: http://www.gemyakurdan.net/
[4] On the shaping of minorities in Syria, see White (2011).

Democratic Unity Party in Syria - Yekiti), says, before 2011 "it was even difficult to find young Kurds who wanted to study journalism, for example in Damascus University".

Kurdish "Independent" Media: the political and media context

When the Syrian uprising in 2011 erupted, it paved the way for Kurds to finally establish media institutions without all the constraints they suffered from during the last 60 years. Kurdish political parties quickly seized the opportunity and began opening their own media outlets or tried to develop their old platforms. At the same time, a number of independent media, working separately from political parties and their specific agendas, also began to mushroom. The emergence of independent media, and their relationship with the Kurdish political scene, needs to be placed in the political context of Rojava in the aftermath of the uprising, when a significant part of the Kurdish youth mobilized to support the uprising against the regime. Local committees in Qamishli, created by young activists already in 2010, started organizing regular protests, and other committees were created soon in Amouda and other urban centres in Rojava. On the other hand, the traditional political parties, and especially the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), maintained a more ambiguous position towards the revolt (Tejel Gorgas 2015). The parties managed their contrasts with youth movements in different ways, from adaptation, in the case of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), to co-optation (both PYD and KNC), to repression.[5]

It is within this context and the opposition between the parties and some sectors of the civil society in Rojava that the birth of independent media has to be interpreted. Whereas party media are direct expressions of political parties and are financed by them, independent media in Rojava have more in common with a radical redefinition of the journalistic field all over Syria as a product of the media activism linked to the 2011 uprising. Indeed, during the five years of the uprising, Syria witnessed the emergence of dozens of new media organizations. Media activists who started to produce and exchange information on the uprising, as well as journalists with experiences in the media before 2011, soon decided to establish media outlets capable of conveying content in a more professional and institutionalized way. Most of these institutions tend to share an anti-regime stance, or at least the

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[5] For a more detailed description of the relationship between political parties and civil society after 2011, see Gorgas, 2015.

belief that a new media system has to be created in Syria (Badran and De Angelis 2015; De Angelis 2014).

Emerging media in Syria's Kurdish regions initially followed similar patterns to the emergence of media in other parts in Syria. As the uprising spread into Kurdish regions, active mediation of the events became a significant part of the work of local activists. Facebook groups, and dedicated blogs were the basic platforms for sharing news, pictures, footage and announcements (Ebdi 2015). Similarly to what happened in Syria's other regions, in Rojava these media activities went through a process of gradual institutionalization and professionalization. Since 2011 several media institutions began to emerge: radios such as *Arta FM* and *Welat*; newspapers such as *Buyer, Welat* and *Shar*; news agencies such as *ARA News*. As with the majority of the other Syrian media which emerged in the same period, all these outlets are supported by international organizations and governments or they rely on investments by local businessmen and communities. *ARA News*, for example, is supported by Free Press Unlimited and Sida. *Arta* is supported by Creative, an American private association funded by the US Congress. *Welat* is supported by several organisations including Basma, Adopt a Revolution, and MICT. *Shar* is supported by the US government funding through Chemonics.

In this sense, the role and the journalistic practices that characterize the new generation of Kurdish media have to be considered, on the one hand, in the context of the Syrian information environment after 2011, and, on the other hand, in the context of Rojava and its specific status during the Syrian uprising.

The structure of independent media and their nature

The "Independent" media in Syria born after 2011, including those established in Rojava, are young outlets, mainly led by young journalists or activists. None of them is economically sustainable, since the conflict does not enable them to sell copies or advertising. Instead, they rely entirely on funding by international NGOs and governments, which is renewed year by year. As a consequence, they are small media organizations, and they can rarely can plan long-term strategies. The only organization which appears large in relative size is *Arta FM*, which as a community radio uses its spaces as a place providing services for their community in Amouda, like education and trainings (Berko 2015). Additionally, independent Syrian media are going through the difficult processes of institutionalization and professionalization in a context of great instability and high rates of staff turnover. Thus, even

when the quality of the content is rapidly developing, they still have to struggle with skills shortages both at the administrative level and the journalistic level.

Producing Journalism in Rojava

The other factor that has to be considered when it comes to analysing Kurdish media in Syria is the recent history of Rojava in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising and the shaping of the Kurdish autonomous administration. In 2012, the Syrian regime retired its security forces from the majority of Kurdish areas in order to redeploy them in other regions. The PYD, and its armed militias, People Protection Units (YPG and YPJ), rapidly filled this vacuum and occupied the abandoned administrative buildings. The process of taking power resulted sometimes in violent clashes with other Kurdish opposition forces, and some political leaders were expelled (Desoli 2015).

There is no doubt that the PYD, thanks to its superior power in terms of organization and military resources, acquired a hegemonic position in Rojava during the last few years. Its victories against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and their ability to keep Rojava out of the conflict provided them with a level of legitimacy in the eyes of a large part of the population. Even if less relevant, other political organizations also operate with a certain margin of freedom. The most prominent of these parties is the modern Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS), which traces its roots to the 1957 party with the same name, is the "sister party" of Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq (Hevian 2013). In October 2011, the party, along with 15 other smaller parties, formed the KNC, which, in contrast to the PYD, decided to adopt an anti-Syrian regime stance and to develop closer ties with the Syrian opposition (Hevian 2013).

The fact that Rojava was kept neutral during the clashes between the Syrian regime and the rebels created an environment in which media outlets could develop and operate without the restrictions typical of other regions in Syria, both in and out of the control of the regime. As Badini (2015) suggests, "the only place [in Syria] where you have politics and media is the Kurdish region". For the same reasons, local civil society organizations, independent from political parties, and often critical towards them, thrived in the last few years, and found in the emerging Kurdish media a privileged channel for getting visibility.

Generally, the journalists from Kurdish media tend to acknowledge that they enjoy a level of freedom of expression and of movement that their colleagues in other parts of Syria do not

have. However, the hegemony of the PYD tends to have a strong impact on the political life, civil

society, and journalistic freedom. Many journalists have denounced pressures put by the party and its

security services on the media. On 15 August 2014, the Kurdish Supreme Committee founded the

Union of Free Media, entrusted to regulate the media field in Rojava. The Union of Free Media

provides legal permits necessary to the media outlets to operate in the area. Officially, the institution

was born as an independent body to regulate the media field, protecting journalists, and enhance

freedom of expression. However, many local journalists consider it as a tool in the hands of the PYD

and the autonomous administration to control and supervise independent media outlets.[6]

The ambiguous identity of Kurdish media in Rojava

As earlier studies of minority ethnic media indicate (cf. Husband 2005; Matsaganis 2014; Smets 2016),

we find that the professional identity of Kurdish independent media and the type of journalism they

produce are the result of the intersection of several factors. As explained above, the political economy

of these outlets is very similar to those of Syrian emerging media and they are strictly dependent on the

aid of international organizations and governments. With Syrian media they also share a common

history: the absence of a professional journalism under the Baathist rule and the sudden emergence of a

new generation of journalists and media institutions. At the same time, the development of Kurdish

independent media is also deeply influenced by the specific history of the Kurdish people in Syria and

the repression of their identity at least since the post-colonial period. Moreover, the status of Rojava

after 2011, and the geopolitical role of the Kurds in relation to the other actors involved in the Syrian

conflict (especially ISIS, the Syrian regime and opposition, and Turkey) contributed to shaping the

professional identity of these outlets and how they perceive their role towards society and the

international community.

In this context, we can identify three main elements that shape the strategy of Kurdish media

in Syria:

First, they define themselves primarily in opposition to party media, and in particular to those

of the PYD, and they rather present themselves as the tools of expression of civil society movements in

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[6] For more information on the Union of Free Media and the PYD violations against journalists see
"How Kurdistan's PYD Keeps The Media And News Providers In Line", *Reporters without Borders*, 1
May 2014: http://en.rsf.org/syria-how-kurdistan-s-pyd-keeps-the-01-05-2014,46221.html

Rojava. In particular, they see the process of democratization as one of their main aims and as the main condition enabling Kurds to freely express their cultural identity.

Second, they tend to use multiple languages, and especially Arabic, rather than giving prominence to the Kurdish language. In this sense, they give priority to reinforcing the Kurdish and local points of view available in multiple publics, and especially the Syrian one, rather than strengthening the Kurdish identity in itself.

Third, they clearly promote a multi-sectarian view of the society in Rojava and they tend to dismiss any reference to ambitions of a Kurdish state or even of a Kurdish exceptionalism. In this sense, to paraphrase Tejel Gorgas (2006), they tend to privilege a Syrian approach to a pan-Kurdish one.

These points will be explored in greater detail in the following sections.

Independent media against the PYD's hegemony?

In order to understand how Kurdish independent media in Rojava construct and define their identity, we need to distinguish them first of all from the party-linked media outlets, and especially those that belong to the PYD and promote its political discourse. In fact, all the journalists from independent media tend to frame their role as different, or even in opposition, to party media. They claim they do not identify themselves with a specific party, and, if they have any preferences in that sense, they always refuse to reveal for which party they support (Ebdi 2015; Serwan 2015; Darwish 2015b).

This opposition is even more important if we consider that party media in Rojava have more resources than independent media and probably have more impact in terms of audience. For example, local parties like the PYD and the KDPS, thanks to their links with their equivalents in Turkey and Iraq, are the only ones having at their disposition, directly or indirectly, television stations. The PYD opened *Ronahi* in late 2012, while *Zagros TV,* the television channel of the KDPS, broadcasts to Syria from Iraq. In addition, parties produce newspapers, like the PYD's *Ronahi*, with more printed copies than those that independent media can afford.[7] The media arena of Rojava is thus crowded with party media based locally or in Kurdish communities in Iraq and Turkey. Whereas some of the local parties have outlets using Arabic as the main language, others use Kurdish, and especially those from Turkey and Iraq.

[7] Ronahi distributes around 10,000 copies in Rojava.

To acknowledge the superior power of party media in Rojava does not mean that independent media do not have an impact. There is evidence, for example, that independent radios such as Radio *Arta* and, to a lesser extent, radio *Hêvî* and Radio *Welat*, can compete and even reach more audience than radios such as *Orkêş* and *Judy FM*, both belonging to the PYD, or *Rudaw*, of the KDP.[8] However, all the journalists interviewed tend to stress that party media can currently count on larger audiences overall.

The relevance of party media in comparison to independent media derives of course first of all from the disparity in terms of resources. The funding provided by NGOs and western governments to independent media in Syria is quite limited, and certainly not enough, for example, to establish a television channel. Moreover, the international donors appear quite reluctant to fund Kurdish media and, until now, they preferred to direct most of the resources to Syrian media in exile or based in opposition-controlled areas. This has to do first of all with the decision to give priority to the Syrian conflict instead of investing on Rojava, given its status as a relatively unaffected region. According to Kurdish journalists, NGOs' members rarely visit the region and their media, and the only way to meet them is to travel to Gaziantep or Istanbul in Turkey. Moreover, from informal conversations with members of NGOs it appears that another reason lies in the fear that investing on Kurdish media could be viewed as encouraging a future division of Syria.

The prominence of party media needs to be also related to the politicization of the Kurdish public sphere since the first half of the 2000s. It is not by coincidence that, as we mentioned above, the only media outlets circulating before 2011 were political pamphlets strictly related to political organizations and parties. Indeed, as Kurds were by default excluded from the nationalist Arab polity sanctioned by Baathist Syria, the de-politicization of this space was felt less in Kurdish regions. Moreover, as Tejel Gorgas (2006) says, the relationship of Kurdish political movements with the Syrian regime passed recently from a strategy of "dissimulation" to a strategy of "visibility". After many years during which the Kurdish identity was practiced and preserved only out of the public spaces, after the death of Hafez al-Assad we can start observing different signs of an "extreme politicization*"* and the reactivation of elements of the Kurdish identity as the main base for social and political actions.

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[8] Also, in a study produced by the American organization Navanti on the radios' audience and circulating informally among Syrian journalists, radio *Arta* was named as the first radio in terms of audience in the Rojava region.

The tendency towards the politicization of the Kurdish identity continued after the uprising, when the war against ISIS and the relevant role that YPG, YPJ and Peshmerga forces played in it put the Kurdish people at the centre of the international community's attention and opened to new hopes in obtaining significant political gains. In this context, it is normal that political discourses based on the victories of the Kurdish forces and their resilience against multiple enemies easily gained the hearts and minds of Kurds in Rojava. Moreover, the nationalist project of the PYD is strictly linked to a specific, leftist social and political project, in a similar way to the PKK (Savelsberg 2014).

But the major point of distinction relies on the fact that the PYD de facto controls the territory of Rojava both at the administrative and the military level. As mentioned above, the party in several occasion exerted pressures on independent media or media outlets belonging to rival parties. In other words, even if the PYD's political discourse insists on democracy, gender equality, and individual and collective freedoms, many Kurds, both in other political parties and civil society, fear PYD's hegemonic aspirations. Moreover, as Savelsberg argues, Kurdish political parties have "marginalised" the majority of civil society groups, and "have been acting as obstacles, not as driving forces for democratization" (2014: p.101-102). In this context, independent media tend to perceive their role also as watchdogs against the hegemony of political parties and especially of PYD. This is in opposition to party-linked media which, according to Mustafa Ebdi (2015), "follow an old approach, without any effort of exploring and investigating: the important thing is political loyalties. Reporting what the public say is less relevant, and they are tools imitating the parties' ideas but with a colourless language".

Thus, independent media stress that they want to represent the "people" of Rojava, in all their different constituents and sects, and support civil society organizations. As Sirwan Berko (2015), director of radio *Arta*, puts it: "We have no specific political position. But I have a problem with the fact that in the current situation we have a government made of a single colour. Since the population in Rojava is made of different communities and ethnic groups, they need a government that can represent all of them". In other words, they stress their role as impartial, democratic media, in opposition to partisan media producing propaganda on behalf of the political parties. This goes with the consideration that giving expression to the local civil society is the only way to reinforce their voice and, by consequence, that of Kurds. As Abbas Vali says: "autonomist movements which currently dominate the Kurdish political scene [...] thrive on the persistent weakness of civil society" (1998:

p.84) and their parochial and clientelist interests actually exacerbate the fragmentation of the Kurdish identity. In the view of many Kurdish journalists, the establishment of democracy is the more realistic strategy in order to obtain civil rights for the Kurds in the future, in opposition to other political projects that give more prominence to the Kurdish identity.

Finally, presenting themselves as "professional" and "objective" journalists help them to defend their autonomy against political parties. As Sirwan Berko, director of *Arta*, says: "They [the PYD] do not love us. But as long as we produce an objective and transparent journalism, they do not have other choice than tolerate us" (2015). In this sense, professional values are used, as Tuchman (1972) described, as a "strategic ritual" against political forces with different agendas.

Different languages, different audiences

Syrian independent media are Syrian media before being Kurdish media. If the politics of Kurdish identity always spanned, as Tejel Gorgas (2006) points out, between a "Syrianization" and a "pan-Kurdism", these media seem to clearly opt for the former. In fact, none of the independent media outlets examined in this study describe themselves as "Kurdish" media first and foremost. Some, as *Arta FM*, actively dispel that label by identifying themselves as a "Syrian community radio". In general, all the media prefer to be called "independent" or "community" rather than "Kurdish".

The choice of the languages these media tend to use in this sense is particularly revealing. In the last few years, the advent of transnational televisions and the Internet increased the circulation of the Kurdish language in different countries. As Sheyholislami says: "Kurdish language is held as one of the most important and salient manifestations of Kurdish identity. Satellite television and the Internet have magnified the symbolic, instrumental and constructivist roles of the Kurdish language in defining Kurdish identities. In addition, these new media have enabled Kurds from different regions and walks of life to share and discuss cultural, social and political ideas and issues publicly, and to construct and reconstruct their identities discursively with relative freedom and ease" (2010: 290).

However, most of the independent media in Rojava do not use Kurdish as the main language. *Arta* broadcasts in Kurdish, Syriac, Arabic and Armenian. *Shar*, *Welat* and *Buyer* publish in Kurdish and Arabic. *ARA News* publishes only in Arabic and English. This choice can appear at a first look very surprising. After all, Kurdish identity, as any other national identity, has in a shared language one of its most important components (Sheyholislami 2010). In the case of the Kurds, the language acquired even

more symbolic relevance after decades of forced privation when, especially in its written forms and in public spaces, Kurdish was completely prohibited in Syria. A process that Hassanpour (1996) described as "linguicide". Thus, a reaffirmation of a Kurdish identity starts necessarily with re-appropriating the language, and normalizing its use, in key-contexts such as the journalistic field.

We maintain that the choice of independent media in Rojava to avoid giving prominence to the Kurdish language over the other languages can be understood only with the need of keeping their journalistic identity ambiguous and flexible in relation to the Kurdish issue and its future. This choice enables these media not to be labelled as "Kurdish" and in this way to engage more freely with multiple actors on the economic, political, and social level. Ultimately, it is a pragmatic and rational choice in a strategy aimed at reviving the Kurdish identity, including the language, within a multi-sectarian and democratic Syria. This choice is perfectly in line with the decision of shaping a journalistic production that is identified as "multi-sectarian" rather than "Kurdish", and in the context of a "democratic" Syria rather than of a Kurdish autonomy managed according to a specific ideological and local project.

Broadcasting in Arabic, or in multiple languages, enables these media to target a wider public, both locally and regionally. Rojava is a multi-sectarian region, inhabited by Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Armenians, and Assyrians. But using Arabic or English can potentially enable these media to reach for a regional, or even an international, public. As some journalists said, the uprising in 2011 enabled Kurds to make their voice heard both locally and beyond the borders of Syria (Perik 2015). This aim is considered as relevant as reviving the Kurdish language among the Kurds, a choice that will inevitably limit their audience to a much more limited population. This is particularly clear in the case of *ARA News*. Even if the director, Adib Abdulmajid, defines the agency as "a Kurdish news agency", none of their publications is in Kurdish. The staff of the agency is composed in majority by Kurds, but also Arabs work within it (Abdulamjid 2015).

At the same time, without relying only on Kurdish reveals other contradictions. Kurdish journalists often lament the limited pool of writers who can publish in Kurdish. The long years of privation has meant that very few Syrian Kurds have had the chance to be educated in Kurdish. This is compounded by the particular impoverishment of the general field of journalism in Syria under the Baath Party. This state of affairs meant that at the outset of the uprising not only were there only a handful of trained journalists among Syrian Kurds, they were mostly writing in Arabic.

The latter issue has to be understood at several levels. Firstly, a significant portion of the Syrian Kurdish audience only studied in the state-sanctioned educational system, which means that they are only literate in Arabic (it is not by coincidence that one of the first decisions of PYD was to organize schools to teach Kurdish to the general populace). Secondly, there is a general lack of Kurdish-language writers and professional journalists to write in Kurdish. According to Kurdish journalist Farid Edward, in Syria it is difficult to find people with a good level of reading and writing in Kurdish (Darwish 2015).

The choice of avoiding the Kurdish language becomes even more understandable if we consider that it is a language that would not guarantee even to reach a pan-Kurdish audience dispersed in different countries, because of its fragmentation along different dialects and scripts (Hassanpour 2003). In particular, the linguistic division between "Kurmanji" (the main dialect for Syrian Kurds, written in Latin script) and "Sorani" (the main dialect for Iraqi Kurds, written in modified Arabic script) makes it very difficult to create a cultural continuum with Iraqi Kurdistan—the only other Kurdish region with any level of autonomy. While television can overcome this problem of mutual intelligibility across dialects and scripts, literary media tends to lead to greater clustering and fragmentation (Sheyholislami, 2010). According to Perik (2015), the lack of a central linguistic authority for the Kurdish language (to align the different dialects) is a serious hindrance to the accumulation of the various efforts of reviving Kurdish as a literary language in Syria, Iraq and Turkey.

Finally, framing their role as non-Kurdish media can facilitate the approach to NGOs and governments in order to gain support. Kurdish independent media, as we mentioned above, do not have access to the same channels of funding of party media. Rather, they tend to have stronger links with the Syrian opposition media and the organizations supporting them. In this sense, presenting themselves as platforms publishing in different languages, and especially Arabic, is almost a pre-requisite to have access to that arena.

A multi-sectarian identity to guarantee the future of the Kurds in Rojava
The final component on which we want to focus is more related with the choice of giving priority to a multi-sectarian political identity rather than a Kurdish one. And this is despite the fact that the majority of the journalists and the staff working for these media organizations are Kurdish.

Independent media in Rojava clearly reject a journalism based on identity politics and on the prominence of the Kurdish identity. Even if they follow with particular attention and support the war of the Kurdish militias against ISIS and Turkey, they tend also to give salience to the Syrian civil war and, if they are not anti-regime, they sympathize with the first waves of the revolt in Syria. Some of the media, like *ARA News*, began as a network of media activists covering the revolts in Rojava and other Syrian regions, similar to many other Syrian independent media.

Moreover, framing the Kurdish identity within a larger, multi-sectarian and democratic Syrian identity is seen by most of the journalists as a pragmatic and realistic choice. As Piroz Perik (2015) of *Shar* Magazine explains: "Every Kurd holds in him a dream of an independent national state for all Kurds [in Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran]. However, when looking in reality, there are certain political/historical realities that we can't deny, and thus we turn into other ideals like democratic federalism." A similar position is conveyed by Sirwan Berko (2015) of *Arta* who says that he has no illusions about Kurdish independence, and he believes that they should be part of Syria but with more control over local resources, and more decision-making power over local issues. Thus, while nationalistic feelings do exist, independent media opts for more conciliatory approaches to the question of Kurdish nationhood. They advocate instead for a democratic state for all Syrians, where Kurds and Arabs alike can have equal status vis-a-vis their culture and language. Moreover, they advocate a federalist solution that grants different communities and regions significant autonomy over the running of their affairs, albeit within a democratic Syrian state (Darwish 2015; Perik 2015; Berko 2015). Thus, democratic discourses are preferred to nationalist discourses as a way to preserve the newly acquired rights of Kurds without antagonising neighbouring communities of Arabs.

Advocating for a federalist democratic Syria implies a reconstruction of Syrian identity itself to be far more inclusive than its previous incarnation, which privileged Arab nationalism. Indeed, according to Perik (2015), he himself, like many Kurds, are as much involved in Syrian politics as they are in Kurdish politics: "After there is political stability, I want to go back to Damascus. I find Damascus to be the place where I can live…. If we have that [a democratic federalist Syria], why would Syrian Kurds go through a war with Turkey for a dream of Greater Kurdistan? That would be political foolishness!"

Connecting the Kurdish issue with the establishment of a democratic Syria means recognizing a particularly relevant role for independent Kurdish media in this phase. Rather than reinforcing their

particular identity, Kurds need first of all to make their voice heard in Syria. In the eyes of journalists, this can be obtained only through reinforcing independent media outlets. As Hevidar Malla, a Kurdish journalist, writes: "Since Kurdish political parties acted as umbrellas for Kurds since the 1960s, the media profession has been intricately connected to them. The parties have not been able to abandon their out-dated strategies in the media field. Their work is mostly through pamphlets, statements, and some studies. It is mostly aimed at Kurdish regions - and sometimes only at party members - and it functions as no more than party propaganda" (Malla 2012).

Conclusion

Independent media in Rojava established after 2011 developed a specific professional identity that distinguishes them both from party-linked media in the region but also from the other Syrian independent media. As described, the way that Kurdish journalists at the centre of this article perceive their role is part of a strategy enabling them to interact with different actors and to operate in a context characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. Smets (2016), in his study on Kurdish television channels in Turkey and Europe, refers to similar modes of negotiated strategies necessitated by the constraints of conflict and the uncertainties it entails. As such, framing their outlets as not Kurdish enables Kurdish journalists to adapt to difficult economic and political conditions, while at the same time allows them to pursue the objective of obtaining the right for Kurds of freely expressing and practicing their cultural identity.

As we have seen, the construction of their professional identity is based on three main elements that reinforce each other and at the same time shape a coherent journalistic identity in opposition with other journalistic actors in Syria and the region. The decision to distinguish themselves from party-linked media, and especially the PYD, relies on the strong conviction that the creation of a democratic society, in which civil society is stronger, is the only viable way for Kurds to reach their national aspirations. In their view, party-media not only are the expression of hegemonic projects that can endanger the future democracy of Rojava, but are also inadequate when it comes to communicating the Kurds' points of view both in Syria and abroad. Against this background, strengthening the Kurdish identity, albeit considered important, is perceived as less urgent than developing journalistic standards capable of promoting these issues to multiple publics. For the same reason, the majority of the

journalistic production is not in Kurdish, with Arabic being more relevant and with some outlets even making recur to other languages like English, Syriac and Armenian.

The choice of language, as well as the prominence given to pluralism in contrast to any partisan political project, reinforces the multi-sectarian approach of independent media. In fact, independent media in Rojava refuse to be identified as Kurdish media for several reasons. First, they acknowledge the multi-sectarian tissue of society in Rojava and in this way they reinforce their role as pluralistic media. Second, they can promote a strategy for the Kurds, which is in their eyes more realistic or at least less threating for other political actors both in Syria and abroad. Adopting a Syrian approach to the Kurdish issue instead of a pan-Kurdish approach in other words enables them to pursue their political aim, while at the same time preserving their existence as media institutions.

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