

Levels of Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Digital Media in Iraq (A Comparative Critical Analytical Study in Light of the Liberal and Social Responsibility Communication Theories)

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Abstract:

The media in general and digital media in particular offer the widest possible arena to practice freedom of opinion and expression. These media are a strong safeguard to protect freedom from various violations that it may suffer from, in the context of social responsibility.

The research study seeks to clarify the digital media in Iraq's level of practicing freedom of opinion and expression as mentioned by the liberal theory as well as the level of adherence to the theory of social responsibility within social responsibility's social obligations since the political change in Iraq in 2003 until now. The study is contained in five chapters; the first chapter includes the problem of research, its significance, and its aims. The second chapter is the theoretical framework where the researcher explains the concepts and theories used in the study. The third chapter tackles the reality of the Iraqi media in the contemporary era. The fourth chapter is the field study where the researcher presents the study sample's responses to a questionnaire that was conducted on a sample of specialists in the fields of media, law, politics, and civil society organizations. Finally, the fifth chapter is the study of conclusions and recommendations.

The findings of the analysis suggest that the Iraqi media practices freedom of opinion and expression, but within an incomplete liberal framework lacking the professional controls advanced in social responsibility theory. The Iraqi media orientation is, therefore, not in total conformity with either theory but is more transitional. The research recommends forming a committee that formulates an integrative model between the two theories and developing an effective professional framework for media practice that strikes a balance between freedom of opinion and expression and social responsibility, and this is in accordance with the demands of democracy.

Keywords: Digital Media, Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Iraqi Media Landscape, Liberal Theory, Social Responsibility Theory

Introduction

The media in all forms is an important constituent for the strengthening of freedom of opinion and expression as it plays a significant role in all other spheres of democracy. This will be possible by having independent platforms that will provide the information, express different views, and hold authorities accountable. As a watchdog that stands up for the people's rights, the media helps shape public opinion and protect the civic space. It exposes violations and helps information freely flow, thus making it possible to discuss sensitive issues. Laws on freedom of opinion and freedom of expression have, accordingly, received significant attention from countries and human societies. Moreover, countries have enacted laws and regulations to strike a balance between individuals' right to express their opinions freely and their responsibilities towards society. These legal provisions seek to ensure that freedom of expression does not

encroach on other people's rights or cause social harm. Human development and social progress are also signaled by them.

Due to the developments that took place in digital media, these media became amongst the most influential tools in our society that broke the grip of immediate censorship, and geographical and conventional barriers on the transmission of information. As a result, people can share opinions and find information through social media and blogs. Digital media provides a public space for interaction and sharing of content. Notwithstanding, challenges are wide open – misinformation, hate speech, and blackmail are just few of them and have to balance between right to expression and social and legal responsibility.

The United Nations asserts in its relevant documents that “independent media are a cornerstone of democratic societies, and freedom of expression constitutes a guarantee for human rights and sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2023).

According to Article 19 of human rights instruments, “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media.” Thus, in relation to that Irene Khan, a United Nations Special Rapporteur, warned, “If independent media cannot survive and thrive, misinformation will thrive, and journalists will face increasing risk” (UNESCO, 2023). America's President Franklin Roosevelt once said that “our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost” (McQuail, D., 2010). Consequently, the media is the most important element of democracy because it directly concerns human rights on the one hand, and issues of media and communication on the other. It also directly crosses the following trajectories:

- State trajectories refer to the paths and functions of existing political, social, economic and cultural systems, and their degree of development. The developments are based on the laws of the state and the legislation aimed at creating unity and cohesion of the social entity, its vision of the requirements of social cohesion, and the requirements of defending it in a manner that serves its interests.
- The trajectory of society involves the interrelationship of a range of media systems at local, national and international levels. They are the site of popular ideological struggle. Moreover, they reflect the contradictions prevalent in the political, economic, social and cultural sphere.
- The legal human-rights trajectory encompasses the right to communication. This right is regarded as a complex phenomenon that entails the relationships which arise between the

individual and the components of the communication system within which those individual lives and which determines its functions and dynamics.

The alterations that societies are experiencing currently, and the nature of governmental systems, are significant factors regarding the levels of freedom of opinion and expression within the framework of social responsibility in the media. The accuracy of news provided to a person is maximum with reference to the quality and quantity of sound information and factual realities that would enable him to form a correct opinion about an event or issue. An opinion should objectively reflect public opinion, orientation, and tendencies (Suweih, Dunyazad, 2019).

This study aims to determine the significance of the two theories for equity, liberalism, and development. The target group was one of the most liberal sectors of Iraqi society. One of the two key theories is considered a premise of the freedom of opinion and expression, while the second or theory of social responsibility lays emphasis on adherence to ethical values, customs and traditions and the public good. According to this perspective, the significance of this study lies in unveiling the nature of relationship between these two theories, both in intellectual and practical terms, in the context of contemporary media practice in contemporary Iraq.

1.2 Research problems, goals and relevance

The integral role of ICT and the internet have made them a part of everyone's life across the world. They play an important part in creating openness and public debate within society itself. Nonetheless, the right to freedom of expression is not absolute. It is subject to certain restrictions; especially with regard to information published on digital media platforms which are often never short of abuse and/or offence. In light of this, numerous guidelines, agreements, and action plans have been formulated to stem the dissemination of erroneous information, deceptive materials, and false, inflammatory, and alarming content. The entire world suffers problems as a result of abuse of digital media technology and infringement of freedom of expression while many states are trying to adopt laws, legislation and policies to tackle these problems. People communicate and share information on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Messenger, WhatsApp, YouTube, and video and written blogs and websites in what researchers refer to as "citizen journalism" (Sarah Tudor, Russell Taylor, 2022).

Considering these realities, it becomes necessary to analyze the levels of balance in the practices of digital media, and particularly digital journalism, between freedom of opinion and expression and social responsibility. Social media is the foremost forum concerned with and most direct expression of freedom of opinion and expression, which has been problematic. In this context, what happens when they use their powers to influence public opinion? Every concept is related to its own sphere Media freedom is associated with the character and features of the communication and media system, its professional responsibility, and its commitment to provide information and news to the members of society. On the one hand, commitment to the idea of "social responsibility", according to the ruling political, social, economic, and cultural systems (the state often leads the way through locally binding laws, regulations, legislation). Members of society, whose lives naturally connect them to social systems, values, customs and traditions, seek to preserve this connection.

This study targets the Iraqi context in this area, and it has been shown, despite constitutional and legal recognition of the opinion and expression, many studies and research in the Iraqi media reality have largely pointed out the presence of a gap between theory and application. Iraqi media encounter numerous difficulties and multiple variables. The Iraqi society witnessed successive transformations over decades in addition to the intersections between media and journalistic practice on the one hand, and the laws and legislation regulating freedom of opinion and expression, and the ways to implement it on the other. This further influenced by values, customs and traditions through which society is connected to its regional and international environment especially in light of the contemporary changes witnessed by Iraqi society and the growing openness accompanying the consolidation of democracy and freedom of opinion throughout the past two decades.

1.3 The Issue of Research

The following main question encapsulates the research problem.

What is the level of commitment of Iraqi media to the principles of freedom of opinion and expression within the criteria of liberal theory? And to the regulatory standards of social responsibility theory in media practice?

This problem raises other theoretical and practical questions regarding the nature of the current media model in Iraq. Does the model in use gravitate toward the liberal model, or the social responsibility model, or does it represent a balanced hybrid of the two theories?

Study Sub-questions

- Is there a contradiction between liberal media and social responsibility media in Iraq? How to reconcile them?
- What are the most important challenges confronting Iraqi media concerning the freedom and the responsibility?

1.4 Research Structure, Beliefs

To reach scientific results in accordance with the objectives of the study, the association relationships among the variables were specified. The researcher adopted the intellectual and conceptual framework of the media practices literature in the light of liberal theory and social responsibility theory as follows.

- The first independent variable: There is a significant correlation between the Iraqi media practices and liberal theory.
- Statistically significant relationship between Iraqi media practices and social responsibility theory.
- There is a correlation between the media practices in Iraq and the circumstances.

1.5 Study Expectations

- Iraqi media practices freedom of opinion and expression in balanced conditions between openness and restriction.

- A certain group of Iraqi media are liberally orientated at the expense of social responsibility.
- The level of freedom of opinion and expression in the media in Iraq is affected by direct and indirect factors.
- The effectiveness of codified legal rules and laws of freedom of opinion and expression, and professional media practice within the framework of social responsibility.

1.6 Objectives of the Study.

- Establish the empirical bases of liberal and social responsibility theories.
- Assess the condition of the Iraqi media in terms of freedom of opinion, expression and social responsibility.
- Explore the rationale behind the limitations placed on freedom of opinion and expression online.
- Generate recommendations that are scientific and professional on how to improve the performance of Iraqi media
- Prompt those with a stake in the issue, including media practitioners, lawmakers, politicians and opinion leaders, and civil society organizations, to look for and trigger the media legislation that promotes and regulates the journalism and digital media profession in Iraq, if any.

1.7 Importance of the Study

A. Educational relevance.

- This can be used in another study as a theoretical framework.
- The link between media theories and the Iraqi media reality helps to contribute to the foundations of media practices.
- Comparative analytical study in the media-related area enriches Arabic and international literature and libraries.

B. Real-life significance.

- The implementation of codes of conduct facilitates the work of media professionals and decision-makers by emphasizing the importance of developing appropriate methods. Moreover, it helps in developing proper approaches and working regulations for professional media practice.
- Aims to refine professional media ideas about how to reconcile the freedom of opinion and expression in a democratic society with the media's social responsibility.
- Support initiatives that safeguard the right to free expression in Iraq and its accompanying legislation as part of the democratization process.

1.8 Boundaries of the Study

- Iraqi media and freedom of opinion and expression.
- The Republic of Iraq is Geographical scope.
- The temporal range of this study is the last two decades or since 2003.

- The human subject matter (participants) consists of specialists working in the fields of media, law, politics and civil society organizations, as part of the field study.

1.9 Method of Research.

This study uses the descriptive analytical method appropriate to this research, in addition to the field method, to collect and analyze study data. The objective aims to reach scientific findings that are as accurate as possible which explain the reality of the Iraqi media in light of two theories, the liberal theory and the social responsibility theory. Thus, the researcher uses a mixed-method design, both qualitative and quantitative as follows:

- Intriguingly, this article analysis data concerns the study's theoretical framework was collected from relevant studies and research, and also using the theoretical research.
- The study hypotheses were subject of testing through the application of Quantitative research method (observation – questionnaire), do you misinterpretation and field approach that relies on data collection and analysis, to produce scientific results accurate which interprets the reality of the Iraqi media, in the light of the two theories highlighted in the study.

2 The theoretical framework of the study.

2.1 Operational Definitions

2.1.1 The Meaning of Media and Digital Media

Media refers to all such organized communication that sends message from a sender to the receiver through some medium, influencing, persuading, informing or educating through any of the organs – Print, Sound, Films and Electronics. Media is not just an instrument of transmission. Mass media is also defined as an institution through which political, social and cultural affairs of society take place (McQuail, 2010). Media is the key actor in creating public consciousness. Therefore, the issue of media freedom and regulation is a fundamental issue in a democracy.

Digital media basically depend on “digital communication media”, as researcher defines, and as you may know that is “content that is used to be transmitted via the internet or computer networks”. The digital media refers to those which are processed, stored, analyzed and distributed on, electronic devices such as mobile phones, computers, podcasts and applications (Digital Technical Communications Committee, 2022). As such, digital media is that media which makes substantive use of any of these digital channels through article, audio material, video, advertisement, music, podcast, audio book, games and audio-visual story. Most newspapers, magazines, radio, and television have gone digital in a big way. The most prominent digital media companies like Google, Netflix, Facebook, Twitter and Amazon are considered to be among the largest in the world (ibid, p. 112).

2.1.2 The Freedom of Opinion and Expression: its concept

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights believes in the right to freedom of opinion and expression on a huge level. Freedom of opinion and expression is the right of an

individual to have their opinions without interference from others and to hold and communicate opinions and ideas through speech, writing, and other means. However, they must comply with any restrictions provided by law with aims. The idea of freedom of opinion and expression is closely connected to the media, including journalistic work, as it is the main tool for expression. Freedom of opinion and freedom of expression can be identified as the components of freedom.

- One of the fundamental freedoms that must not be violated is the freedom to hold opinions .
- The right to access information from any source freely is a fundamental and inalienable right.
- The right to convey any idea and impart it to others through any medium or communicational channel, in any form.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right to exchange any information, as well as to express ideas and opinions, whether through traditional or electronic media.

2.1.3 Key Features of Digital Media Freedom (Richard Carver, 2018).

- Publication which is not subject to any prior governmental censorship.
- The ability to criticize those in authority and other officials, without punishment, toward the end of disclosing the truth.
- Access to information, defined as the right to seek, transmit and receive information and ideas across borders.
- A professional journalist needs both freedom in their workplace and the absence of coercion.
- The availability of diverse platforms represents various points of view.
- One aspect of being socially responsible means following professional ethics, respecting the values and laws, and respecting the reputation of others.

2.1.4 The duty and challenges of digital media regarding the freedom of opinion and expression.

- Concern about the spread of rumors and fake news (Misinformation, disinformation)
- The emergence of hate speech and harassment are posing serious threats to freedom of expression against woman and activists.
- Situations where the right to freedom of expression may clash with the right to privacy
- We must develop legislation that regulates digital content without unreasonably limiting freedom.

2.1.5 The Roles of Media and Digital Media in Promoting Freedom of Expression.

- The traditional and modern media afford the public an open space to express their opinions and debate issues of relevance.
- Ensuring the right to access information means providing the public with access to information that is true and reliable, especially during conflict and crisis situations.
- Monitoring and Accountability to Shedding Light on Human Rights Violations and Abuses of Power.
- Ensuring varied media players with diverse opinions, we can avoid the formation of monopolies.

- The role of independent journalism in exposing false information and verifying facts to strengthen the safe information environment.
- This situation provides for the protection of journalists and defenders. Independent and free press helps to establish a situation where journalists, as well as human rights defenders, can work freely.
- A report by the Digital Communications and Technology Committee (2022) states that modern technology, including social media and online platforms, provides opportunities for freedom of expression beyond constraints.

2.1.6 Legal Restrictions on the Freedom of Expression.

Freedom of expression is one of the most significant rights guaranteed under international law and a host of national constitutions. The right to freedom of expression is nonetheless important to human development, self-fulfillment, pursuit of truth and information and exchange of ideas and opinions. It is also a basic requirement of democracy. Although freedom of expression is evidently protected under a plethora of treaty-based legal instruments, it can also be conceived as a principle of customary international law because of the repeated affirmation of this right through international treaties along with other related legislation (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). The Study's Theories

2.2 Factors of liberal theory of freedom.

The emergence of liberal theory in the media in Western Europe from the 17th to the 18th centuries represented a qualitative leap and a trajectory that strongly influenced the fight against despotic, monarchic, and ecclesiastical censorship. It was founded on the philosophical ideas of a number of thinkers and philosophers like John Milton, John Locke and John Stuart Mill who each in his own way and by his intellectual contribution defended it and laid claim to it as a necessary condition for finding the truth and improving society (Siebert et al., 1956).

Liberal theory places great importance on many principles:

- The press should enjoy the freedom to operate uninhibited.
- The right of individuals to express their opinions without interference.
- The conviction that different ideas compete with each other in order to ultimately find the truth.
- Separation of media institutions from political control.

Supporters and champions of this theory contend that any interference by the state in media matters is injurious to freedom and democracy.

According to the Swedish media scholar Denis McQuail, the most important aspects of the theory of freedom are as follows (Al-Mashhadani, 2025).

1. Publication should not be subject to any prior censorship.
2. The realm of publication and distribution should be open for everyone and anyone, as well as individuals and associations should have the right to own newspapers and media without prior approval from the authorities.

3. Remarks expressed against any government, political party or public servant should not be punishable after publication.
4. Journalists should not be subject to any form of pressure or constraint.
5. There should not be restrictions on the collection and publication of information lawfully.
6. No restrictions should be placed on the receipt or transmission of information across borders.
7. Journalists must have autonomy in their media institutions.

Thanks to the liberal theory, the press got substantial freedom from the state after the ending of many restrictions imposed by the authorities on the press. Advocates of this theory among media practitioners argue that (Siebert et al., 1956):

- The aims of the media are news, entertainment and promotion under this theory. According to the authorities, they also help to discover the truth and exercise oversight.
- According to liberal theory, the media serves the purpose of watching, assessing and critiquing all activities of the government as well as satisfying demands of society.
- According to the theory of freedom, media activity is based on the principle of a market economy in which capital functions with no legal restrictions and free from government interference.
- We will maintain a diversity of information sources.
- Self-regulation via “truth-testing” in the free marketplace and the judiciary is a form of oversight.

2.2.1 Criticism leveled at Liberal Theory.

Although institutions that have adopted a liberal theory have contributed by embedding freedom of opinion and expression in their professional media practice, the well-known weaknesses which the critics of the twentieth century unconsciously pointed to have been successfully consolidated in Theodore Peterson. The summary of the criticisms could be thus;

- It overlooks the social and ethical aspect of media practice.
- It assumes equal footing among various players in the idea marketplace.
- It allows for the monopolization and manipulation of media, including misinformation.
- Media institutions may misuse their power not only to promote their own interests, but also to impose their own views, especially political and economic ones.
- Real-world global media and journalism increasingly sat unmoored from the credible constructs of liberal theory, dominated by major information conglomerates. The information market is unable to facilitate an equal opportunity for the free expression of opinion and viewpoint (McQuail, 2010).

2.2.2 New Digital Media (Citizen Journalism) a manifestation of liberal theory

Research and studies from a range of “new media” (digital media) indicate that, to the extent it takes the form of “citizen journalism”, it performs three essential functions which influence values, perceptions and orientations extensively.

- Promoting networked thinking: A thinking mode that accepts dialogue, plurality, interconnectedness, and symmetry. Linear thinking has long been the mode of human thinking.
- Facilitating participation and bridging the gap between elites and the general public.
- Through the liberation of minds, the responder in traditional media could receive the message and may approve of it. Since the respondent does not reflect on its shortcomings, he/she does not know of any alternative. The recipient of digital media can very quickly find others through their participation who will correct their shortcomings with regard to understanding and interpreting the message. Such commentary can destabilize its worth or effect on a less informed receiver (Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society, 2022).

Thus, it is arguable that new media embodies liberal theory, especially in their respective core values. These core values embody citizenship, equal legal standing, broad participation, respect for freedom of thought expression and deliberation, openness to others, pluralism, decentralization, accountability, transparency, open market and even open government. Regardless, a continuing debate and empirical experience are at play as to whether the digital information and communication technologies that drive digital media will become instruments of liberation or of social and political control.

From another viewpoint, “digital media,” according to the freedom theory, is an expression of the market’s free hand. It is not just for the goods. Open data can refer to ideas, and can reach the level of “open government” when the government meets its obligation about the public’s right to access decisions, justifications, and plans through information publishing that is not just transparent but complete. Individuals Possess the Right to Have Their Proposals Considered in the Decision-Making Process and the Formulation of Policies. (Jamal Sanad Al-Suwaidi, 2018).

2.2.3 Responsibility Social Theory

People who endorse the theory say that, freedom is a right, duty and responsibility. As such, they must perform their social responsibility. This can be accomplished through the adoption of professional standards including truthfulness, objectivity, balance, transparency, and accuracy.

These standards are not specifically covered by the theory of freedom, it may be noted. Through self regulation under the law and the existing institutions, media institutions should regulate their own affairs within the framework of accepting these obligations. The media should also be pluri-ethical or, to put it differently, pluralists. The media should provide a means for all to publish and a means for all to present. The public is entitled to expect high standards of performance from the media, and intervention in the media may be justified

when in the public interest. In addition to being responsive to the media agency, professionals of media must also be responsible to the society (Talah Lamiya, 2021).

Theoretical literature in media systems indicates that social responsibility theory was ushered in by abuses and excesses committed by media institutions in various countries under the theory of freedom. Some experts believe that press has lost its essential function and has taken a deep interest in side issues, thus losing its position in the minds of the people. It eventually became engaged in tales about sex and crime becoming obsessed with sensationalism. (Al-Tha’r, 2023).

As a result, it became necessary to implement controls to limit the erroneous and excessive use of freedom in the practice of journalism. According to Al-Dahdouh, Fadi Muhammad (2023), the principle of social responsibility has been formulated to protect freedom in performing the media and preventing it from being misused by subjecting it to an appropriate mechanism.

This principle is founded on a number of other principles.

- A promise by media institutions to serve the public interest.
- Honoring social principles, and ethical and professional constants.
- Information that is accurate, balanced and fair.
- Media self-accountability when it fails to fulfil its responsibility.
- The state must interfere to protect the social order. Alternative definitions of a good society can justify this.

Dimensions of the Theory of Social Responsibility (Amr Hamzawy, 2017).

The dimensions of this theory can be summarized as follows.

- The social dimension refers to a set of functions all digital media should perform to society. It encompasses functions that are political, educational, cultural, economic, entertainment, and related.
- The ethical dimension refers to the written and unwritten ethical performance standards that should guide work practices in media institutions.
- The professional dimension refers to the professional values that must be observed in media work practice.

Based on the principles set out by the theory, the mass media is expected to perform the following dimensional roles.

- Building social ties.
- Guaranteeing social peace.
- Respecting cultural and religious diversity.
- Assisting in the promotion of democracy and human rights.

A media institution is one of several institutions working within the social environment. Society itself is specified as systems include the context in which they exist. Thus it must place the interest of the society at large over its own private interest. According to Denis McQuail, the dimensions of social responsibility are reflected in the degree of commitment given to any of the issues, since responsibility can be anything from voluntary to obligatory (Al-Mashhadani, 2025).

An in-depth comparison of the two theories.

Some researchers argued that the concepts of freedom and social responsibility contradict between perspectives, goals, strategies, and ways of working. The discomfort of this tension is found in the following:

- Modern media has developed tremendously, leading to difficulty in drawing a line between freedom of expression and social responsibility.
- There is a difference of opinion on the media practice laws and legislation. Certain people suggest that freedom of press and freedom of expression can be ensured through law and legislation. However, some others argue against it. They think that laws and legislation can be components to neutralize or curtail press and media freedom.
- The advocates of the two ideas agree that an excess in journalism and media expression can be harmful to society.
- In both theories, the definition of media and journalism relationship is in reference to the core pillars of development, political, social, economic, and cultural, and to emphasizing the specification of the role of press and media in professional practice.
- Both theories highlight the need to ensure the integrity of social content and social structure or social fabric. It means the components that make of social picture we need to safeguard or the music which assets of any social setting. The media and the journalism are supposed to get this the set of functions which need to hallmark of professional value.
- The divergence is most strikingly seen in the ethical dimension which directs working methods in media organizations.

In short, the two theories differ on how each understands freedom of the press and media and its limits. Liberal insight affirms absolute freedom and excludes interference of all kinds in media practice. It views the media as an arena for the expression of the free struggle of social forces. Social Responsibility theory visualises both freedom and responsibility. Through an experience-based lens, reality suggests that unrestricted freedom can cause media and social chaos, while too much regulation may impede freedom of opinion and expression. That's why an integrative model that takes into consideration the positive aspects of the two theories while avoiding the negative aspects is important, and this is what the study aims to test for the case of Iraq.

There is a conflict concerning the laws and rules of media practice. Some people claim that freedom of the press and freedom of expression can be ensured with the help of laws and legal

enactments. On the other hand, there are some who claim that laws and legal enactments can be used to render harmless or cripple press and media freedom.

2.3 Earlier Studies.

Many studies have examined how media freedom was the foremost vehicle for stimulating freedom of opinion and expression. According to the studies and literature pertaining to reporting in the media, which might be useful to media persons, most have concentrated on the legal framework. It often stipulates in principle yet weak in practice within the media and journalistic practices. According to several studies, which have been highlighted elsewhere, the absence of those standards in media work distorts the concept of freedom of expression and leads to media disorder. The following are among these studies.

A study conducted by Mohammad Amin Al-Maydani and Hala Mohammad Taqi Mohammad Amin (2021) entitled “The Legal Framework for Protecting Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Iraq as a Model” aimed at identifying the dimensions of freedom of opinion and expression in Iraq from the perspective of international law as a source of national legislation. International instruments specify the restrictions which conduct the freedom of expression in general, the study noted. It reached the conclusion that Iraq imposed laws related to freedom of opinion and expression in a strict manner prior to the year 2003 and Iraqi resumed it on new rules and foundations after that, including those contained in the Iraqi constitution of the year 2005. The study also concluded that, until this very day, there is no specific law in Iraq that protects freedom of opinion and expression.

The lack of a clear legislative route was also noted to convert criminal provisions into civil provisions for application to cases concerning freedom of opinion and expression as guaranteed by the Constitution of 2005. The authors stressed the need to define the scope within which restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression are permissible in a manner that protects the public from serious and imminent danger, and that is consistent with international treaties signed by Iraq.

A study titled “The Limits of Freedom of Opinion and of Expression in Light of Contemporary Technological Development” was conducted by Al-Jadri, Sajad Saeed Habib (2023). The purpose of this study was to identify the limits of freedom of opinion and expression in light of contemporary technological developments and to examine how the state will be able to use its three branches of power to balance freedom of opinion and expression and the constraints related thereto. The study talked about possibility of social media networks being used by a person to exercise freedom of expression. It is especially after there was a noticeable change of behaviour of a person from the physical world in the online world. This report has certain findings of which the misuse of social media is an important finding. It helps in undermining security and stability by fomenting disorder, destabilizing public reassurance, and promoting hatred between different social groups. It recommended the safeguarding of public freedoms and their exercise. This requires, it said, a constitutional provision to the effect that “any restriction of a freedom or other fundamental right by virtue of the public interest must be subjected to judicial oversight.”

According to a study by Mousawi, Abdul Halim (2016), the study of ‘The Legitimacy of Online Journalistic Publishing and its Impact on Freedom of Expression. A Reading in Light

of the Repealed 2007 Media Law and International law' reveals the need to activate the legal supervisory mechanism so that the practice of the media is not deviated away from the noble humanitarian mission. According to the study, a comparison between traditional media and electronic publishing creates confusion sometimes end up creating contradiction as there is no enabling environment to build the freedom of expression online. It called for putting in place legislative provisions which enables electronic journalism to assume its role along with building an effective accountability system that can balance the requirements of this mission and activating the legal scope of responsibility of any harm caused as a result.

A research by Talah Lamiya (2021), opined at 'The importance of freedom of opinion and expression' seeks to analyse concept of freedom of opinion and expression. From the prism of communication and media, freedom is the expression of the natural right to convey one's ideas through speech. The term "communication" includes every act of seeking, receiving and imparting information or ideas – regardless of whether by... Accordingly, the Government's incidental introduction of limitations it is proposed on the right to freedom of expression must be consistent with the principles already laid down by the Courts as elaborated under Part III of the Constitution. The right to the opinion though, usually coupled with other rights and limits such as freedom of worship, freedom of the press, freedom of peaceful demonstrations, etc.

According to Richard Moon (1956) in his social studies on the freedom of expression, it itself depends on social interactions only. When individuals communicate with each other on a freedom of opinion and expression, they can forge relationships and bond together with others, family, friends and others alike, colleagues and such, within the social framework. The socially beneficial dialogue with others helps in the development of knowledge.

2.3.1 Review of Prior Research

The initial aspect focuses on the similarities and differences between the forthcoming study and previous studies.

- Most prior research has focused on the legal and legislative dimensions of freedom of opinion and expression by the media and social responsibility through an examination of laws governing freedom of expression Although there are differences with the aforementioned studies, nevertheless in this respect they are not dissimilar to the present study where the media domain is examined as it relates to freedom of opinion and expression and social responsibility.
- This research is consistent with previous works to diagnose the problem. Nonetheless, it diverges by taking a comparative approach between liberal theory and social responsibility theory in the Iraqi case.
- There are various studies which tried to analyze the relationship media freedom and democracy. They all have concluded that absolute media freedom without any responsibility can mislead the public opinion and threaten social peace.
- Many studies focused on analyzing constitutional texts and imposed legal restrictions and explained that the laws restrains the freedom in order to maintain the stability of the state (Iraqi Academic Scientific Journal, 2022).
- Recent studies (2025) have endorsed media freedom, especially focusing on the relationship between freedom and responsibility. Besides, international instruments affirm duties and rights simultaneously. Further, UNESCO (2023) highlights the

sanctity of private life as a regulatory limit on freedom of expression. It influences the new media and other forms of communication.

The current study stands apart from others that examine media practices. This is due to its specification which examines the issue of balance between the more conservative liberal theory and the more left leaning social responsibility theory .

Level of Benefit from Old Studies

The researcher found earlier studies to be useful in the following ways:

- Creating the study’s theoretical framework.
- Establishing a theoretical background and conceptual framework for the use of social networking sites in exercising freedom of opinion and expression.
- Creating a few of the research hypotheses.
- That study’s conclusions should also be interpreted with reference to earlier studies.

3. Contemporary Iraqi media realities in chapter three

Various key parameters related to the practice of media should be identified to assess “balance” or “imbalance” concerning parameters related to professional media practice in the Iraqi media environment. This is in order to identify the levels of balance between liberal theory and social responsibility theory.

Information and statistics included in this chapter have been derived from official reports and statements of the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission (2025), the Iraqi Ministry of Culture (2025) and relevant UNESCO reports on media in the Arab world.(2025)

Table (1) The State of Iraqi Media According to Official Statistics

Media outlet / indicator	Estimated figures	Notes
Number of active print newspapers	Approximately 21 “active newspapers”, including: - 3 official newspapers - 18 party-affiliated / private newspapers	Daily and weekly newspapers. Only a few are “governmental”, most are party-affiliated. There are also independent and NGO publications. No fully precise statistics are available.
Number of magazines (all types)	35 magazines, including: - 8 official magazines - 27 party-affiliated / private magazines	A large share are specialized magazines, party-affiliated and independent.
Satellite TV channels	57 licensed satellite TV channels, including: - 7 official channels - 50 party-affiliated / private channels	Only a small number are official state channels. The remainder are party-affiliated, independent, individually owned, or run by organizations.
Number of radio stations (“Radio”)	152 licensed radio stations, including: - 18 official stations - 134 party-affiliated / private stations	Only a small number are official radio stations. Most are party-affiliated or privately owned.
Internet use / social	Approximately 34.3 million	Source: Digital Media

networks / users of other social platforms	internet users, representing about 72.3% of the population, as follows: - TikTok: 18 million - Facebook: 19 million - YouTube: 25 million - Instagram: 17.5 million	Monitoring Center (DMC), 2025. The majority of users are men (over 72%). The most represented age group is 18–24 years.
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Source: Reports and official statements of the Communications and Media Commission and the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, 2025.

Data Analysis of Table (English translation, academic phrasing).

The data in the table, when examined, reflect the reality of the classic and digital Iraqi media as follows:

- The structure and functions of media indicate distinct changes across the globe. The reduced number of active print newspapers, which is limited to no more than 21, entails a withdrawal of traditional journalism to enable the emergence of a mass media where journalism, technology and money and audience patterns of information consumption have undergone changes.
- Statistical data show that partisan media and journalism outweigh official state media. This suggests that space freedom of opinion and expression is quite wide with many more visible intersections and contestations around freedom of opinion.
- Throughout the professional media workforce, specialization in media work does not always reflect itself as a requirement.

The chart in the table reflects a contradiction in the realm of freedom of opinion and expression in Iraqi media, as it shows a more quantitative pluralism coupled with a qualitative constraint. We can analyze such implications as the followings:

Firstly, numerical pluralism versus qualitative pluralism.

According to the data, it consists of 21 newspapers, out of which 3 are official and 18 partisan. There are a total of 57 television channels including 7 official channels. The 152 radio stations out there, just 8 of them are official. About 73% of the population take advantage of the internet. This connoted that a multiplicity of media outlets exist which ideally increase the space for freedom of expression. Despite the plurality being reflected in the country's media, a significant chunk of it has been owned/supported by political parties and political actors. This has resulted in a situation where authenticity and qualitative differences do not represent the political viewpoints represented by them. This may lead to:

- Media content directed to reflect a specific political agenda.
- Reducing the available space for aligned and divergent views.
- Under conditions of political competition, inciting or mobilizational rhetoric at times dominates immediately.

Secondly, print journalism suffers economic weakness and limitations on freedom of expression .

The diminishment of print journalism indicates:

- Less significance for long-lasting story investigations.

- Platforms that encourage extensive discussion and critical analysis of ideas.
- The weaknesses of independent press institutions subjected to political and economic pressures.
- As print journalism dies out, critical perspectives become less visible and more susceptible to marginalization in the mainstream media.

Third: Partisan media help shape public opinion but with a bias.

Most news outlets you encounter are partisan or quasi partisan in one way or another.

- Limiting opinion freedom inside media institutions themselves.
- Forcing journalists to comply with editorial lines.
- The emergence of self-censorship out of fear of punishment or targeting, thus transforming freedom of expression from a right of the people into freedom conditioned on political affiliation.
- Media outlets are increasingly relying on political bases than journalism principles.

Fourth: Network denial of freedom of expression in the fourth quarter of 2020.

According to the table, more than 34.3 million Iraqis from a population of around 45 million use social media of different types, that is around 73%. In Iraq, social media has become a highly influential yet problematic space, particularly in terms of misinformation, incitement, and political polarization.

- Vast room for opinion expression.
- A substitute for old media.
- An instrument for challenging the monopoly of official and party-political media.

Fifth: The effect of the legal framework on the statistics.

- These data reflect an actual situation in which freedom of expression intersects with the following:
- Laws that allow individuals, organizations or authorities impose restrictions.
- Inadequate legal protection for journalists.
- Media regulatory authorities are not truly autonomous.
- A large number of media outlets does not mean that conditions are in place for any opinion.

Conclusion

- There is a lot of quantitative media plurality in Iraq.
- Limited qualitative pluralism affects the practical use of freedom of expression.
- Freedom of opinion is somewhat available at the individual level, especially online, but institutionally constrained within traditional media.
- While social networks are great areas of freedom, they are not necessarily safe or stable spaces .
- The observance of professional journalistic and media standards is weak.

- The social responsibility and freedom of expression standoff exist due to no clear vision .

According to the law, opinion and freedom of expression is a right guaranteed by the Iraqi constitution. It is a fundamental right that allows for the flow and expression of all kinds of thoughts, views and perceptions. Nonetheless, one cannot do anything and everything. According to the relevant constitutional provision, it must be exercised within certain reasonable limits including, not infringing Iraq's sovereignty and the state's security, not harming public order and the law, not affecting public morals and ethics and not harming the reputation of any person without justification. These restrictions are applicable to all media, whether electronic or digital.

In this regard, the question remains: to what extent do media institutions in general and digital media used by the public in particular comply with these laws? Furthermore, are there legal binding instruments applicable to this issue?

4. The Field Study

Tools to collect field data first

A. Interviews and meetings:

A team of experts in the field of media, law, politics and civil society organizations were personally interviewed determining these media practices in Iraq under the concept of freedom of opinion and expression. Likewise, the social responsibility of media institutions in Iraq.

B. Questionnaire

1. Study Group: The participants of the study were the experts who had a direct link to the topic of study because of their expertise in scientific, practical and knowledge-based spheres of media, law, politics, and civil society organizations.

2. The table below shows the divisions from which the specialists comprised (80) data collection purposive sample.

Table (2) Categories of the Study Sample

Category	Number	Percent (%)
Media professionals	30	37.5%
Lawyers	20	25.0%
Politicians	15	18.75%
Civil society organizations	15	18.75%
Total	80	100%

3. Nature of Sample: Purposive Sample

The study sample was selected deliberately for these reasons:

- Due to the nature of the research topic, the expert opinion should be used instead of a random sample.
- Members of the sample are connected to media/legal decision making.
- This group can assess Iraqi media based on the two theories.

4. Designing a questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed according to thematic, hypothesis and objective of the study. The sections of this were four:

- The State of Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Iraqi Media
- Liberal theory and the media in Iraq.
- Iraqi journalism in the perspective of social responsibility theory.
- Regulatory controls, Legal, and professional challenges.

5. Testing of the Instrument's Validity and Reliability.

Four referees with the required specialty were asked to examine the items of the questionnaire. The purpose of this examination was to ascertain the appropriateness of the wordings, the section items and the questions' alignment with the study. The instrument, after minor refinements of some formulations, was considered valid based on their opinions and advices. The referees further certified that the questionnaire items are quite clear and relevant to the objectives of the study. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha as shown in the below table.

Table (3) Referees' Assessment of the Questionnaire Items (Cronbach's Alpha)

Axis	Number of items	Reliability coefficient (α)
The reality of freedom of opinion and expression in Iraqi media	5 (1–5)	0.81
Iraqi media in light of liberal theory	5 (6–10)	0.84
Iraqi media in light of social responsibility theory	5 (11–15)	0.86
Professional and legal challenges and regulatory controls	5 (16–20)	0.79
Overall instrument	20	0.825

The statistical degree of agreement among referees in respect of the questionnaire's categories was 0.82. This shows that the analysis instrument has good content validity indicators that are in line with the study variables and objectives which are highly applicable to the field.

The responses obtained were measured using a five-point Likert scale – frequencies to get results.

(1 = Strongly agree 2 = Agree 3 = Neutral 4 = Disagree 5 = Strongly disagree)

6. Statistical functions and analysis of data.

As the type of study was descriptive analytical, the use of descriptive statistics through:

- Frequencies to ascertain the respondent count for each questionnaire item.
- Percentages will identify percentage study of the sample.
- The arithmetic mean is used to find out the level of agreement or disagreement.
- Standard deviation to determine the extent of deviation in responses.
- The results will be interpreted in accordance with the following rule:
“1.00–2.33 = low level, 2.34–3.66 = moderate level, 3.67–5.00 = high level.”

7. List of Questions

The items were prepared based on the four axes of the study hypotheses and variables (which are mentioned below).

- Axis 1: The present and practical availability of freedom of opinion and expression in Iraq.
- Axis 2: Iraqi Media in the Light of Liberal Theory
- Axis 3: Iraqi Media Through the Lens of Social Responsibility Theory
- Axis 4: Professional, legal challenges and regulatory controls.

Responding to the study queries by axis.

Axis 1:

Table (4) Questions and Sample Responses for Axis One: Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Iraqi Media

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)
1	Iraqi media enjoys freedom of opinion and expression without substantial constraints.	28 (35.00%)	30 (37.50%)	12 (15.00%)	6 (7.50%)	4 (5.00%)
2	Current Iraqi laws sufficiently guarantee media work.	8 (10.00%)	14 (17.50%)	32 (40.00%)	17 (21.25%)	9 (11.25%)
3	Media professionals and journalists face pressures that limit freedom of expression.	26 (32.50%)	34 (42.50%)	5 (6.25%)	8 (10.00%)	7 (8.75%)
4	Freedom of opinion and expression in Iraqi media is consistent with international standards.	9 (11.25%)	16 (20.00%)	38 (47.50%)	11 (13.75%)	6 (7.50%)

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)
5	Security conditions affect the level of freedom of opinion and expression.	35 (37.75%)	22 (27.50%)	13 (16.25%)	6 (7.50%)	4 (5.00%)

Analysis: Overall mean = 3.0

The findings indicate that the principles of liberal theory are only partially reflected in the Iraqi media environment because political and security conditions continue to limit full freedom of expression.

Axis 2:

Table 5. Questions and responses of the study sample regarding the second axis: Iraqi Media in Light of Liberal Theory

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)
1	The absence of government intervention enhances media freedom in Iraq.	15 (18.75%)	28 (35.00%)	21 (26.25%)	9 (11.25%)	7 (8.75%)
2	Iraqi media allows pluralism in opinions and intellectual trends.	31 (38.75%)	30 (37.50%)	11 (13.75%)	4 (5.00%)	4 (5.00%)
3	Media outlets practice freedom of publication without prior censorship.	8 (10.00%)	5 (6.25%)	7 (8.75%)	37 (46.25%)	23 (28.75%)
4	Iraqi media outlets enjoy independence from political authority.	10 (12.50%)	26 (32.50%)	9 (11.25%)	22 (27.50%)	19 (23.75%)
5	Iraqi media reflects the principle of the “marketplace of ideas” as proposed by liberal theory.	23 (28.75%)	21 (26.25%)	5 (6.25%)	15 (18.75%)	16 (20.00%)

Analysis: The overall mean score = 3.07

The findings reflect the presence of some principles of liberal theory, such as pluralism and the absence of prior censorship. However, the independence of media outlets remains limited and still appears to be in a transitional phase.

Axis 3 :

Table 6. Questions and responses of the research sample regarding the third axis: Iraqi Media in Light of Social Responsibility Theory

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)
1	Media outlets in Iraq adhere to ethical and professional standards.	19 (23.75%)	23 (28.75%)	6 (7.50%)	17 (21.25%)	15 (18.75%)
2	The media takes the public interest into account when addressing sensitive issues.	33 (41.25%)	26 (32.50%)	8 (10.00%)	6 (7.50%)	7 (8.75%)
3	Iraqi media contributes to promoting social peace.	16 (20.00%)	23 (28.75%)	3 (3.75%)	15 (18.75%)	23 (28.75%)
4	Media outlets maintain a balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility.	10 (12.50%)	9 (11.25%)	11 (13.75%)	38 (47.50%)	22 (27.50%)
5	Weak self-regulation leads to a decline in the social responsibility of the media.	33 (41.25%)	24 (30.00%)	13 (16.25%)	8 (10.00%)	2 (2.50%)

Overall Mean Score: 3.1

This overall mean indicates a moderate level of commitment to social responsibility. At the same time, it reflects weaknesses in self-regulation, which helps explain the gap between freedom of professional practice and responsible media discourse.

Axis 4 :

Table 7. Questions and responses of the research sample regarding the fourth axis: Professional and Legal Challenges and Controls

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)
1	Political pressures affect the content of media discourse.	37 (46.25%)	23 (28.75%)	6 (7.50%)	14 (17.50%)	0 (0.00%)
2	Some laws are used to restrict media freedom indirectly.	23 (28.75%)	21 (26.25%)	8 (10.00%)	19 (23.75%)	9 (11.25%)
3	Iraqi media lacks effective mechanisms for professional accountability.	34 (42.50%)	26 (32.50%)	12 (15.00%)	4 (5.00%)	4 (5.00%)
4	Civil society organizations contribute to protecting freedom of opinion and	21 (26.25%)	24 (30.00%)	3 (3.75%)	18 (22.50%)	14 (17.50%)

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)
	media expression.					
5	Iraqi media needs a model that regulates freedom within the framework of social responsibility.	39 (48.75%)	33 (41.25%)	0 (0.00%)	8 (10.00%)	0 (0.00%)

Overall Mean Score: 4.0

The findings indicate that the respondents generally agree that there are political, legal, and professional challenges that negatively affect freedom of opinion and media expression.

The result analysis and interpretation based on the study hypothesis and statistical analysis.

Based on the study hypotheses, the above tables indicate that there is a gap between theory and practice in Iraqi media regarding freedom of opinion.

The exercise of freedom of opinion and expression oscillates between openness and restriction in an unbalanced manner.

The tables show that the views of the research sample reveal a tendency among some Iraqi media outlets to be subject to liberal orientation at the expense of commitment to social responsibility.

The statistical results also demonstrate that there are both direct and indirect factors affecting the degree of freedom of opinion and expression in the media in Iraq because of political intersections and weak security conditions.

Due to the weak level of professionalism of the media personnel, the non-specialisation of media institutions personnel, and the weakness of the media's own self-regulation, the media has a weak professional commitment to its social responsibility.

The research sample's responses also indicate that the legal frameworks and binding legislation on freedom of opinion and expression as well as professional media practice within the framework of social responsibility have limited effectiveness.

The study's findings indicate that the Iraqi media practise freedom of opinion and expression but through an incomplete liberalism which lacks the professional controls envisaged by Social Responsibility Theory. As such, the media reality in Iraq does not fully fulfil either of the two theories.

Recommendations.

Considering the indicators confirming that the Iraqi media reflect a transitional condition, it becomes necessary to develop an integrative model governing media practice to achieve a balance between the two theories, freedom and responsibility.

In Iraq, previous studies about the laws and legislation regulating the media and the statistics of the questionnaire show that there is no binding media legislation, amid the constitutional texts related to the freedom of opinion and, meaning, freedom of expression in the media. Thus, the study recommends the establishment of a committee comprised of specialists in media, law, politics, and civil society organizations, to study the situation with a view to the development of media legislation which is advanced and scientific and is in line with Iraq's future as a democracy and international standards and laws.

Result

Given the current situation of a country that is currently going through continuous and multiple changes in a transition to democracy, and considering the political pluralism shown in the statistical data of this research and the various practices of professional media, it can be seen as a positive condition, but one that must be rooted in social responsibility to further societal realities.

The media, in all its forms, trajectories and approaches, bears not only the responsibility of ensuring freedom of opinion and expression, but also developmental as well as social awareness responsibilities, to solidly underpin change at its various levels.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for binding media legislation that seeks to balance freedom of opinion and expression and social responsibility. This was what that study aimed at.

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