

Critical thinking
meets selective
exposure.

An examination
of the media
literacy of Iraqi
media users

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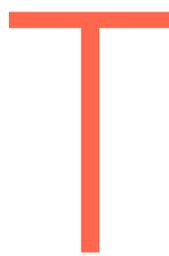
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The fall of the Baath regime in Iraq in 2003 was immediately followed by the suspension of all previously applicable restrictions in the media sector. The new media freedom was used by a variety of Iraqi players to establish a large number of new broadcasters and newspapers, which reflected the cultural and political diversity of Iraqi society. Today, 13 years after regime change, the Iraqi media pluralism is viewed as politicized and partisan. Local media organizations are accused of participating in the escalation of conflicts through polarized reporting. This criticism is based on the assumption that not only media production, but also media use follows ethno-sectarian patterns, and that media users, isolated from one another, exclusively follow the media offerings of their own “community.”

Because there has been little research on the relationship between media reporting and conflict development in Iraq to date, so that we can only speculate about the effects of the media, this study addresses patterns of media use in Iraq, as well as media literacy and use of content by media users.¹ An Iraqi team of interviewers, which had been prepared for its task by MiCT in training courses, interviewed 2,982 people in southern and northern Iraq, as well as in Baghdad, Kirkuk and Kurdistan-Iraq.

The interview locations were divided into regions with majority Shiite, majority Kurdish and majority Sunni populations. The interviews of media users show that the majority of Arab-speaking Iraqi TV stations reach both Shiite and Sunni target groups. There are only minor differences in the penetrations of most stations with highly variable proportions of Sunni and Shiite residents. This outcome supports either the nonpartisan nature of these stations or an increased interest on the part of ethno-sectarian communities in news from the respective other community. In any case, the results of the study demonstrate that the theory of ethno-sectarian patterns of media usage is not sustainable to the exclusive extent applied to date. It appears more realistic to assume that there are ethno-sectarian tendencies in media use, which are, however, counteracted by a clearly recognizable interest among most media users in the opinions and information offered

¹ The study was conducted within the framework of a longterm media assistance program of MiCT in Iraq (mict-international.org) with the financial support of the German Foreign Office.

by broadcasters that do not represent their own political constituency.

The results on media literacy also reinforce this impression. 75% of respondents indicate that they regularly use two, three or more sources to obtain information about Iraqi domestic politics, while almost 60% say they regularly compare news from stations representing different political constituencies. 87% of respondents are of the opinion that, for political reasons, Iraqi broadcasters do not report on certain incidents. Here it becomes clear that media users not only recognize the differences in reporting, but that they even offset to some degree the deficits of a polarized-pluralistic media structure through adjustment of their user behavior, by combining and comparing. In this sense, the respondents also designate conversations with friends and relatives as their most important source of information. The tendency to compare different media offerings even correlates with the propensity to discuss media content with friends and relatives.

Contrary to the usual charge of warmongering, the majority of users see "their" media as proponents of unity and peace. The respondents also emphasize the potential for reconciliation of the Iraqi media, which raises the question of how this potential can be exploited in a more targeted and efficient manner.

Critical thinking meets selective exposure. An examination of the media literacy of Iraqi media users

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fter the fall of the Baath regime in April 2003, a large number of new newspapers, radio and TV stations were established, within the context of an extensive liberalization of the media sector. By March 2006, the number of media organizations had already grown to 114 radio stations, 54 TV stations and 268 newspapers and magazines (Brookings Institution 2008: 47).

The pluralistic development of the media landscape is considered one of the few success stories in the Iraqi transformation process. The consonance among all existing media, which had prevailed until then, was replaced by a broad spectrum of widely divergent voices, which represented a large number of political camps, minorities and interest groups in the public.

However, the opening of the media sector was also accompanied by its infiltration by political interest groups, especially as communication tools were needed for the simultaneously emerging campaigns of newly established political parties (Deane 2013: 19). Politicization continues to characterize the Iraqi media system to this day. Parties operate and fund media channels and media channels are generally perceived as a voice or at least communication partner of (ethno-sectarian) interest groups (al-Marashi 2007; al-Rawi 2012; Price 2010; Isakhan 2009).

The partisanship of the media is the subject of criticism by Iraqi media producers and observers. The media are accused of deepening the existing divides in society and thus obstructing the democratic process. In times of political tension, the Iraqi media are supposedly exacerbating conflicts, due to their partisanship, and generally promoting the destabilization of society (Awad & Eaton 2013; al-Marashi 2007; Cochrane 2006; Price 2010).

This accusation is based on the assumption that the use of media offerings also adheres to ethno-sectarian patterns, so that Shiites exclusively use media backed by Shiite interest groups, Sunnis exclusively use media backed by Sunni interest groups, and only Kurdish media are received in Kurdistan-Iraq. In the discourse on the relationship between media and conflict development, it is assumed that such usage patterns tend to promote conflict (Deane 2013: 19; Price 2010).

This view essentially corresponds to the *Selective Exposure Theory*, which holds that people tend to choose media offerings and favor information that is in line with their own opinions and views (Festinger 1957). In contrast, challenging information that contradicts existing convictions is avoided and, in the context of systematized

avoidance strategies, is eventually hardly perceived at all anymore. This media usage behavior facilitates the ability to act at the individual level, because the actor does not have to grapple with contradictory information, but instead sees his or her views confirmed and reinforced. This type of behavior becomes more likely in the context of political turmoil and armed conflicts, because this is when people feel growing uncertainty and tend to reduce information in order to counteract this sense of insecurity. The growing number of media offerings and a polarized structure within the media sector are also factors that promote *selective exposure* (Fischer & Greitemeyer 2010). This is natural and understandable, but in the fragmented societies it can lead to the fragmentation of media user groups along political dividing lines and to the growing isolation of predominantly political or ethno-sectarian camps (Sunstein 2002: 4; Garrett 2006: 1; Deane 2013).

However, the penetration research available for Iraq raises doubts over whether people actually choose their media offerings according to ethno-sectarian characteristics. For instance, a study by IREX (2012) showed that *Al-Sharqiya*, perceived as representing predominantly Sunni positions, achieves penetrations of 90% in the southern part of the country. In that same vein, *Al-Iraqiya*, a public broadcaster controlled by the Shiite governing party, is also viewed by large numbers of people in the predominantly Sunni north (ibid.: 27). The credibility values measured in the same study also reinforce the impression that people tend to be critical toward the media. High penetrations of 50 to 70% for the most popular broadcasters, *Al-Sharqiya*, *Al-Iraqiya* and *Al-Sumeria*, stand in contrast to their low credibility values of only 20 to 30% (ibid.: 24).²

Against the background of these observations, the initiative for this study emerged in 2016. One of the questions it addresses is whether media use in Iraq does not in fact follow completely different patterns than those shaped by ethno-sectarian factors. An Iraqi team interviewed 2,982 people in southern and northern Iraq, as well as in Baghdad, Kirkuk and the Iraqi Kurdistan region, asking questions about their media use, media literacy and evaluation of media contents. MiCT prepared the 30 interviewers for their task in multi-day training courses.

² Respondents were asked about (1) use of the TV station "on the previous day" and "in the last few days," as well as (2) the credibility of TV stations in terms of news.

The questionnaire was based on the concept of media literacy (Potter 2004). Media literacy is concerned with the ability of media users to reflect critically on media content and competently select media offerings. From a normative standpoint, media literacy targets a 'literate' media user who recognizes partisanship and knows how to differentiate propaganda from news. The research interest in this study was especially focused on the question of whether the residents of Sunni-dominated regions in northern central Iraq also watch predominantly Shiite broadcasters, and whether media users in the predominantly Shiite south also use predominantly Sunni broadcasters. Another central question was how people evaluate the partisanship and quality of information of Iraqi media offerings. Because of the high penetration values of TV offerings, compared to radio and newspapers, the primary emphasis was on the use of television.

The questions of media literacy and patterns of media use are of great importance to the relationship between media communication and conflict development, as well as for the (democratic) viability of the public in Iraq. In the sense of *selective exposure*, there is an important difference, both for the democratic process and for conflict development, as to whether people compare media offerings and therefore positions of conflicting parties, or only expose themselves to the views of one – of their own, that is – conflicting party. A critical distance between the media user and his or her "own" media also calls their effectiveness into question. This study is intended to highlight credibility problems and give Iraqi media producers the opportunity to examine their editorial guidelines in that regard. It is also intended to further encourage the existing discourse on quality in Iraqi reporting and provide useful information on public interest and media usage patterns.

MiCT has been involved with activities in the area of media development cooperation in Iraq since 2004. Two of MiCT's most important projects are the Media Academy Iraq in Erbil and the website niqash.org, where Iraqi authors report in three languages, from all parts of the country, on politics and local conflict development. Other important cornerstones of MiCT's work in Iraq in the past 13 years include hosting workshops and discussion events on issues of media ethics with key players in the Iraqi media sector.

The quantitative interview with a standardized questionnaire was conducted in 11 Iraqi cities, from October to November 2016. Originally, the goal was to interview 2,200 individuals. Thanks to the commitment of our Iraqi partner, 3,195 individuals were ultimately contacted for this study, of which 2,982 agreed to participate (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1:
Distribution of respondents by region

Region	Number of interviews	Cities
Kurdish regions	436 (14.6%)	Sulaymaniyah: 202 (6.8%) Erbil: 234 (7.8%)
North (majority Sunni)	434 (14.6%)	Salah al-Din: 229 (7.7%) Diyala: 205 (6.9%)
South (majority Shiite)	1,198 (40.2%)	Basra: 308 (10.3%) Al-Diwaniyah: 207 (6.9%) Kerbela: 217 (7.3%) Amara: 249 (8.4%) Al-Kut: 217 (7.3%)
Baghdad	701 (23.5%)	Baghdad Rusafa: 396 (13.3%) Baghdad Karkh: 305 (10.2%)
Kirkuk	213 (7.1%)	
Total	2,982 (100%)	

The current political and security situation in Iraq entails that a methodically watertight strategy to form the random sample is difficult to implement. Because of the conflicts, many Iraqis were driven from their home cities, were forced to flee or became victims of military operations. This makes a quota method difficult, because there are hardly any reliable statistical data and figures on the residents of Iraqi cities. Taking an unrestricted random sample based on a concrete sampling plan (such as every sixth household with subsequent random selection of the individual to be interviewed) is also hardly possible under the circumstances, because not all city neighborhoods and districts are safe. This approach could put interviewers and respondents at risk, and would create distrust within the population and among local authorities.

For this reason, at the beginning of the study a rough distribution key was established for some variables, which was intended to guarantee at least a certain balance in the recruitment of respondents (for example, a uniform distribution of men and women in the random sample or a greater emphasis on Shiite versus Sunni neighborhoods and regions). After that, interviews were conducted by random sample in all cities, with the exception of Baghdad, where stratified random selection was used. Different interview entry points and the use of different interview groups were intended to prevent distortion of the random sample to (not) favor certain neighborhoods (and thus certain social milieus). The interviews took place in public squares, commercial centers, residential areas and government and/or official districts. This also applies to the capital Baghdad, which was divided into clusters in advance, with more interviews being conducted in the clusters with a higher population density than in those with a lower population density.

According to UN statistics and other sources, an estimated 75% of the Iraqi population are Arabs, while 15 to 20% are Kurds. The rest of the population consists of ethnic minorities (Turkmen, Assyrians, Persians, etc.). About 20% of the Iraqi population are between 15 and 24, about 34% are between 25 and 54, and about 8% are 55 and older. 99% of Iraqis are members of the Islamic faith (Shiites 60 to 65%; Sunnis: 30 to 35%). For this study, however, a specific distinction was not drawn between the Sunni and Shiite denominations, but only between "Muslim" and "other religions," so as not to create problems for the respondents or the interviewers. Therefore, only the regions can provide information on the religious orientation of the study participants (see [Table 1](#)), as is explained later in the report.

While a relatively good distribution was achieved for the independent variables age, religion, income and education, which corresponds to our knowledge about demographic structures in Iraq, the goal of a 50:50 proportion in the distribution of male and female respondents was far from achieved, as can be seen in [Table 2](#).

The reason for this is not only that interviewing women in a public space is subject to certain social conventions (such as that a woman is less likely than men to give an interviewer information about herself in public), but also that it was generally more difficult to convince women to participate in the study [despite the use of 10 female interviewers in Baghdad and the other regions]. Many

women found it difficult to agree to an interview, be it because of increased mistrust of the interviewers and their assurances that they would abide by the principles of anonymity and voluntariness, presumed or actual social norms or the lack of availability due to household, child-rearing and professional responsibilities.

If it had been disregarded, the discrepancy between the sexes would have consequences for the results of this study. Men still have better access to education in Iraq. As in most other countries in the world, they dominate political events, control financial expenditures, as the heads of their families, and pursue different interests (preferably politics and sports) in media use than women (preferably entertainment). To keep the risk of distortion as low as possible, weighting was performed in some cases to achieve a 50:50 proportion. All responses with the corresponding variable characteristics that could be assigned to female study participants were multiplied by a factor of 2.49, and all responses with the corresponding variable characteristics that could be assigned to male study participants were multiplied by a factor of 0.63. However, in the data analysis it became clear that the discrepancy between the sexes in data collection had only a minor effect on the results.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face with specially programmed smartphones and tablets, which not only made data collection faster and more efficient, but also eliminated potential errors in the collection and transmission of data. The questionnaire was divided into 18 questions with 124 variables. In addition to demographic data (gender, age, income, education, etc.), questions were asked about (i) media use (with a special focus on television as the most important traditional medium in Iraq), (ii) the respondent's assessment of his or her own media literacy and the media literacy of others, and (iii) the assessment of media in terms of their credibility and their potential to promote peace and/or conflict. All respondents were assured anonymity.

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Table 2:
 Distribution of respondents
 by gender, age, education,
 income, religion and size
 of household

Variable	Characteristic
Gender	male: 2383 (79.9%) female: 599 (20.1%)
Age	18-30 years: 955 (32%) 31-40 years: 929 (31.2%) 41-50 years: 736 (24.7%) Older than 50 years: 362 (12.1%)
Level of education	no school completed / elementary school not completed: 99 (3.3%) completed at least elementary school: 328 (11%) completed at least middle school: 752 (25.2%) completed at least high school / professional diploma: 899 (30.1%) completed at least bachelor's degree: 773 (25.9%) completed advanced degree (M.A., Dr., etc.): 131 (4.4%)
Monthly household income	0 – 60,000 IQD: 210 (7%) > 60,000 – 200,000 IQD: 364 (12.2%) > 200,000 – 600,000 IQD: 747 (25.1%) > 600,000 – 1,500,000 IQD: 1260 (42.3%) > 1,500,000 IQD: 401 (13.4%)
Religion	Muslim (Sunni/Shiite): 2946 (98.8%) Christian: 22 (0.7%) Yezidi: 2 (0.1%) Mandaeen: 12 (0.4%)
Household size	Single-person household: 63 (2.1%) Two to four people: 1123 (37.7%) Four to 10 people: 287 (9.6%) > 10 people: 1509 (50.6%)

To allow for conclusions on the media literacy and assessment of Iraqi media users, it must first be determined which offerings the respondents refer to when “the media” is mentioned. Which content is especially popular? Which media are central to everyday use? These questions are answered in the first part of this chapter. Then we address the media literacy of the respondents. How often do they compare sources during media use? How critical are they of media content? At the same time, the study participants were asked to assess the media literacy of their fellow Iraqis. In the last section, all results on the topic „media assessment“ are presented. How credible do the study participants believe the information from the media is? And based on the respondents’ perception, do the media tend to use rhetoric that inflames conflict or is peaceful?

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3.1

Media use

This section offers an overview of the respondents’ preferences in media use, as well as the most important information channels. **Table 3** shows that Iraqi male media users prefer domestic politics, sports and entertainment, while women prefer entertainment over domestic politics and religion.

In accordance with **Table 1**, the Iraqi cities were clustered by regions with majority Sunni residents (Salah al-Din, Diyala und Baghdad Karkh), predominantly Shiite regions (Basra, Al-Diwaniya, Kerbala, Al-Kut, Amara and Baghdad Rusafa), Kurdish regions (Erbil and Sulaymaniyah) and Kirkuk (as a mixed region dominated by neither the Sunni minority nor the Shiite majority). **Table 3** shows that domestic political news play an important role in the Shiite and especially in the predominantly Sunni regions, followed by entertainment. In the Kurdish regions, both were used comparatively less. Instead, the respondents in Kurdistan attach significantly greater importance to foreign policy and economic issues and, in particular, the upcoming elections, than the study participant in the other regions. A regression on the relationship between age and media content also illustrates that the older respondents tend to be interested

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Table 3:
Use of specific media contents by gender and region
(mean values)

	Male	Female	Predominantly Sunni regions	Predominantly Shiite regions	Kurdish regions	Kirkuk	Total
Domestic political news	1.98	1.82 **	2.14	1.98	1.63	1.75 **	1.95
Foreign political news (Middle East)	1.35	1.26 *	1.38	1.33	1.30	1.23	1.33
Foreign political news (international)	1.33	1.20 **	1.34	1.25	1.54	1.06 **	1.30
Elections	0.88	0.77 **	0.67	0.77	1.38	1.09 *	
Business	1.18	0.93 **	0.92	1.16	1.48	0.86 **	1.13
Sports	1.74	1.08 **	1.37	1.82	1.30	1.46 **	1.61
Religion	1.32	1.45 **	0.92	1.57	1.14	1.50 **	1.34
Entertainment	1.66	2.11 **	1.89	1.82	1.26	1.75 **	1.75

0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = often, 3 = all the time

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

in political and economic topics, while the younger generation is more interested in sports and entertainment.

As media literacy is the focus of this study, questions were asked very specifically about the use of different types of media to search for information about Iraqi politics (see Table 4/Figure 2). This resulted in the following picture: Social media are used most frequently to search for information, closely followed by personal conversations with friends and relatives. Although television is only in third place here, it can be treated as an equal source of information, given the fact that there was only a difference of 1 to 2%. There are no significant differences between men and women, with the exception of the use of international TV stations, blogs and personal contacts, which male study participants mentioned as sources significantly more frequently.

The least amount of interest in politics on almost all channels is found in the Kurdish regions (which further differentiates the results of Table 3). In the Sunni regions, people get their information about domestic political topics primarily through Iraqi TV stations, whereas there is a greater tendency to switch to international TV stations in the predominantly Shiite regions (in comparison to the other regions), where a greater emphasis is also assigned to news websites and personal contacts.

The results of a regression on the relationship between age and the use of specific sources on domestic political issues are not particularly surprising: Younger respondents turn to news websites, social networks and blogs significantly more frequently than the older generations. In return, younger people use significantly fewer traditional media (the radio, in particular, is com-

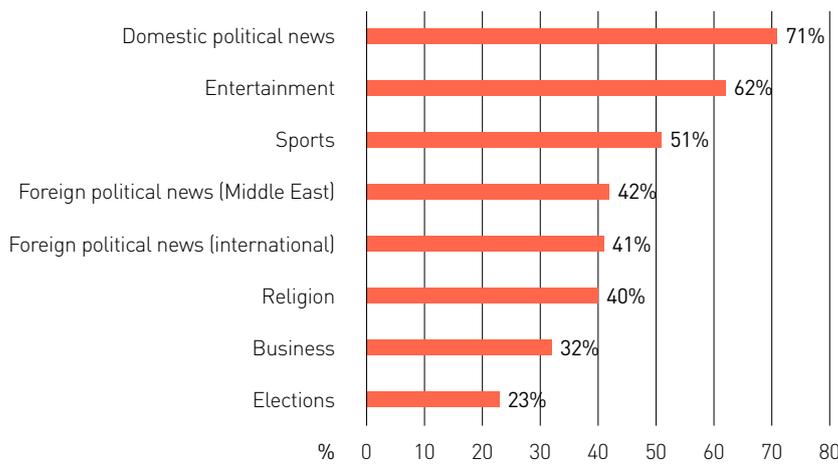


Figure 1:
Use of specific media content (frequently/constantly), N = 2982

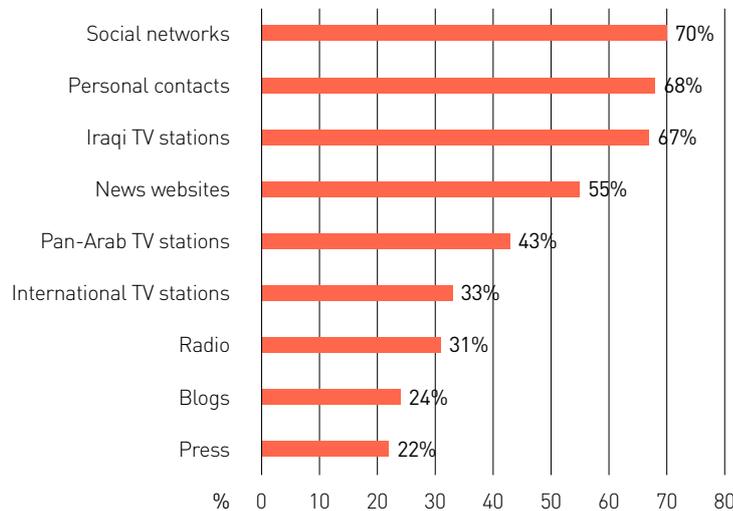


Figure 2:
Choice of medium for targeted searches for information about domestic political issues (frequently/constantly), N = 2982

pletely “out” for them), and they also mention personal contacts less frequently.

The prominent role played by personal contacts in the respondents’ search for information, especially in the majority Shiite regions, must be emphasized in the interpretation of the data. It can be assumed that friends and relatives (in contrast to television and social media) enjoy trust benefits, which are especially important in the search for information in an environment with polarized and partisan media offerings, as well as in the context of armed conflicts. At the same time, it is to be assumed that the various information sources perform

different functions for users. It is possible that personal contacts serve the purpose of verifying information circulating in social media and/or in TV programming. The issue of different functions of different information sources could be addressed in further, more qualitatively designed research projects.

Because television still plays the most important role among the traditional media both in terms of reach and agenda setting special attention was paid to the selection of TV stations in this study (see Table 5). The results reveal that government-run station *Al-Iraqiya* is used most frequently, albeit with regional differences.

Table 4:
Choice of medium for targeted searches for information
about domestic political issues, by gender and region
(mean values)

	Male	Female	Predominantly Sunni regions	Predominantly Shiite regions	Kurdish regions	Kirkuk	Total
Iraqi TV stations	1.89	1.85	2.13	1.94	1.26	1.82 **	1.88
Pan-Arab TV stations	1.31	1.35	1.33	1.39	0.93	1.55 **	1.32
International TV stations	1.15	1.05 *	1.08	1.23	0.89	1.05 **	1.13
Radio	1.10	1.11	1.15	1.11	0.97	1.19 *	1.10
Press	0.87	0.86	0.67	0.94	0.80	1.15 *	0.87
News websites	1.62	1.57	1.48	1.72	1.57	1.38 *	1.61
Social networks	1.94	2.01	2.11	1.95	1.74	1.88 **	1.95
Blogs	0.82	0.99 **	0.63	0.95	0.95	0.78 **	0.86
Personal contacts	1.93	1.69 **	1.64	2.06	1.76	1.62 **	1.88

0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = often, 3 = all the time

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

While it is frequently or always switched on in the Sunni and Shiite regions, as well as in the Kirkuk region, the Kurdish stations clearly predominate in the Kurdish regions (primarily *Rudaw TV*, *NRT TV*, *KNN TV*, *Kurdistan TV*).

At this point, it should be noted that many Shiites also live in predominantly Sunni regions, so that the conclusion cannot be necessarily drawn from [Table 5](#) that Sunnis watch *Al-Iraqiya* more frequently (which is also close to the pro-Shiite government) than Shiites. Nevertheless, the mean value at least suggests such a tendency.

It is worth noting, in any case, that *Al-Sharqiya* achieves very high penetrations in predominantly Shiite regions, while *Al-Iraqiya* receives more attention in predominantly Sunni regions than in predominantly Shiite regions. These results contradict the common assumption of the predominance of ethno-sectarian media usage patterns. The *Al-Sumeria*, *Al-Hurra*, *Dijlah* and *Al-Rasheed* TV stations also attain almost equally high penetrations in predominantly Shiite and predominantly Sunni regions.

On the whole, the group of stations with similarly high penetrations in Sunni and Shiite regions is larger than the group of stations that apparently appeal to one ethno-sectarian target group only. This either speaks for the nonpartisan nature of these broadcasters or an increased interest on the part of one ethno-sectarian community in news from the respective other community. At the same time, a closer look at clearly party affiliated media offerings like *Al-Afaq*, *Al-Furat* and *Al-Ahd* shows that ethno-sectarian identity aspects influence media usage in these cases. However, this influence never leads to the absolute exclusion of predominantly Sunni stations in predominantly Shiite regions, and vice-versa. Instead, the limits of use are more likely a sign of priorities than the dogmatic exclusion of certain media offerings, with the mixing of ethno-sectarian groups in residential areas certainly playing a role, as well. After all, Shiites live in majority Sunni areas, and vice-versa.

[Table 6](#) shows what percentage of the respondents at least occasionally turn on the top four TV stations,

Table 5:
Use of specific TV stations, by gender and region
(mean values)

	Male	Female	Predominantly Sunni regions	Predominantly Shiite regions	Kurdish regions	Kirkuk	Total
Al-Iraqiya	1.81	1.79	2.28	1.87	0.73	1.85 **	1.81
Al-Sharqiya	1.63	1.76 **	2.07	1.73	0.50	2.08 **	1.66
Al-Sumaria	1.66	1.66	1.82	1.93	0.36	1.71 **	1.66
Al-Hurra	1.38	1.11 **	1.41	1.58	0.36	1.15 **	1.33
Al-Arabiya	1.19	1.18	1.55	1.08	0.70	1.71 **	1.19
NRT Arabic	1.05	1.03	1.00	1.11	0.59	1.64 **	1.04
Al-Rasheed	1.01	1.07	1.29	1.11	0.13	1.28 **	1.03
Al-Jazeera	0.99	0.90 *	1.49	0.81	0.47	1.39 **	0.97
Dijlah	0.98	0.89 *	1.03	1.15	0.17	0.93 **	0.96
Al-Ahd	0.91	0.77 **	0.60	1.18	0.11	1.18 **	0.88
Russia Today	0.92	0.72 **	0.77	1.06	0.45	0.81 **	0.88
BBC Arabic	0.87	0.75 **	0.89	0.88	0.56	1.05 **	0.85
Al-Furat	0.86	0.78	0.43	1.18	0.22	1.05 **	0.84
Al-Afaq	0.82	0.70 **	0.52	1.05	0.12	1.19 **	0.79
Al-Mada	0.75	0.77	1.02	0.78	0.10	1.04 **	0.76
Sky News	0.79	0.61 **	0.85	0.70	0.66	1.02 **	0.75
NRT TV	0.54	0.65 *	0.15	0.32	1.78	1.31 **	0.56
France 24	0.54	0.47	0.50	0.55	0.40	0.71 **	0.52
Rudaw TV	0.48	0.66 **	0.19	0.21	2.05	0.78 **	0.52
Al-Fallujah	0.48	0.54	0.80	0.41	0.08	0.97 **	0.50
KNN TV	0.42	0.59 **	0.15	0.19	1.69	0.99 **	0.46
Kurdistan TV	0.40	0.62 **	0.15	0.18	1.60	1.06 **	0.44

0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = often, 3 = all the time

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

Table 6:
Use of specific TV stations versus mention as community TV stations (projection question), broken down by regions

	Al-Iraqiya		Al-Sharqiya		Al-Sumaria		Al-Hurra	
	Use	Community	Use	Community	Use	Community	Use	Community
Predominantly Sunni regions	97.3%	53.5%	95.8%	41.7%	94.5%	24.3%	87.6%	4.1%
Predominantly Shiite regions	87.6%	38.2%	80.7%	29.0%	87.9%	21.0%	77.0%	14.5%
Kurdish regions	55.3%	2.5%	35.1%	2.3%	27.1%	0.7%	24.3%	0.2%
Kirkuk	90.1%	28.2%	93.4%	44.1%	85%	19.2%	71.4%	1.4%

Al-Iraqiya: Use $\chi^2 = 782.184$, *** $p < 0.001$; Community $\chi^2 = 319.191$, *** $p < 0.001$
 Al-Sharqiya: Use $\chi^2 = 842.831$, *** $p < 0.001$; Community $\chi^2 = 231.112$, *** $p < 0.001$
 Al-Sumaria: Use $\chi^2 = 1088.445$, *** $p < 0.001$; Community $\chi^2 = 113.493$, *** $p < 0.001$
 Al-Hurra: Use $\chi^2 = 815.651$, *** $p < 0.001$; Community $\chi^2 = 137.874$, *** $p < 0.001$

Al-Iraqiya, *Al-Sharqiya*, *Al-Sumaria* and *Al-Hurra*. In the predominantly Sunni regions, for example, 97.3% of the respondents stated that they watched these stations “rarely,” “often” or “all the time,” compared to “only” 87.6% in the Shiite regions. To minimize the effect of social desirability, a projective question was included, in which the respondents were asked which two TV stations they believed were most frequently watched in their respective community. This question was openly worded, so that it was left up to the participants to decide which TV station to mention. The results of the projective question indicate that apparently *Al-Iraqiya* does indeed play a significantly greater role in the predominantly Sunni regions than in the other parts of the country. While 53.5% of the respondents from the predominantly Sunni regions named the public broadcaster as the community’s reference station, it was only 38.2% in the predominantly Shiite regions.

In the age groups, the calculation of regressions shows that *Al-Iraqiya*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Al-Arabiya*, *Al-Hurra* and *BBC Arabic* are more likely to appeal to the older respondents. In contrast, *Al-Sumaria*, *Al-Fallujah*, *Al-Mada*

and *Dijlah* appeal significantly more often to young people. In addition, well-educated Iraqis are more likely to watch foreign broadcasters, such as *Al-Hurra*, *Russia Today* and *BBC Arabic*, while Iraqis from relatively uneducated classes prefer, for example, *Al-Ahd*, *Al-Afaq* and *Al-Furat*. Income also plays a significant role. Wealthy Iraqis are more likely to watch the Kurdish stations *Rudaw TV*, *KNN TV* or *Kurdistan TV* (which is probably related to the better living conditions in Kurdistan), whereas poorer Iraqis are more likely to watch *Al-Ahd* or *Al-Afaq*.

3.2 Media literacy

Media literacy, in the sense of behavior critical of the media, was operationalized in two directions in the questionnaire. First, the goal was to draw conclusions

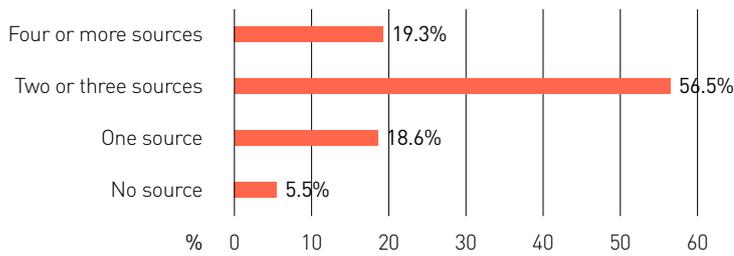


Figure 3:
Number of sources used
to find information about
domestic political issues,
N = 2982

regarding reflective use of media content based on the nature of media use. For instance, are certain news sources assigned to different political camps and compared with one another? Is media content discussed with family members or friends? Second, respondents were asked how critical they are of media content. What is their assessment of the performance of the media?

Figure 3 and Figure 4 combine all statements in which the study participants were asked to assess their own media literacy. On a 4-point Likert scale, the respondents were asked to indicate how many sources they use and whether they do not agree at all, do not agree, agree or completely agree with the statements made in the questionnaire (see Figure 4). It is apparent that most respondents use two or more sources and the majority of the study participants compare sources, discuss differences with friends and would like more information about the status of ownership of Iraqi media.

Specifically, 75% of respondents say they regularly use two, three or more sources to inform themselves about Iraqi domestic politics, and almost 60% say they regularly compare news from broadcasters in different political camps. Judging by the generally prevailing view that Iraqi citizens would only use media offerings from their "own" camps, this result is rather surprising. It becomes clear that the media users not only recognize differences in reporting, but that they even partially offset the weaknesses of a polarized-pluralistic media structure through a modified usage behavior: combine and compare. Instead of believing the representations of only one side, the representations of different sources are compared and evaluated by the majority of viewers. The interview results also suggest that the impressions gained in comparison and evaluation are discussed with friends and relatives.

Both the media content and the partisanship of the media are the subject of these discussions. The tendency toward discursive reflection is more pronounced among respondents in predominantly Shiite regions than among respondents in predominantly Sunni regions (mean value 1.41 vs. 1.84) (see Table 8 in the appendix).

Discussion and competency of comparison³ are positively correlated ($r = 0.238$; $p < 0.01$), i.e., the respondents who exchange views with friends or family members to obtain information about Iraqi politics display more competency in comparing media content than the participants who obtain information about domestic political issues from international ($r = 0.155$; $p < 0.01$), pan-Arab ($r = 0.111$; $p < 0.01$) or Iraqi TV stations ($r = 0.110$; $p < 0.01$).

Men ($M = 1.776$, $SD = 0.505$) exhibit a minimal but nevertheless significantly higher competency of comparison than women ($M = 1.726$, $SD = 0.572$), or they consider themselves to be more competent in this respect than the female respondents (< 0.01). There is only a weak positive correlation between income ($r = 0.125$; $p < 0.01$) and education ($r = 0.123$; $p < 0.01$) and competency of comparison, i.e., those with higher incomes or with better education possess a higher competency of comparison.

3 Competency of comparison is defined by the following variables : (1) It is important for me to compare different news sources regarding Iraqi politics; (2) I usually compare news sources from different political camps regarding Iraqi politics; (3) The political news coverage differs between the different Iraqi news sources; (4) I usually discuss news content with friends and/or family; (5) I usually discuss the differences between the news sources with friends and/or family; (6) I wish I had more information on ownership and funding of the Iraqi media to know who is behind a specific news source; (7) I prefer the media to be open to all opinions, even if they disagree with my own; (8) It is interesting to learn more about the views and opinions of all political camps; (9) One should not trust any particular media channel and therefore rather compare; (10) News sources differ in whom they invite and quote, e.g. interview partners or guests in talk shows; (11) News sources differ in the selection of events they cover; (12) Different news sources give different meanings to same events (0 = don't agree at all, 1 = somewhat disagree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = fully agree).

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Figure 4:
Respondents' assessment
of their own media
competency, N = 2982

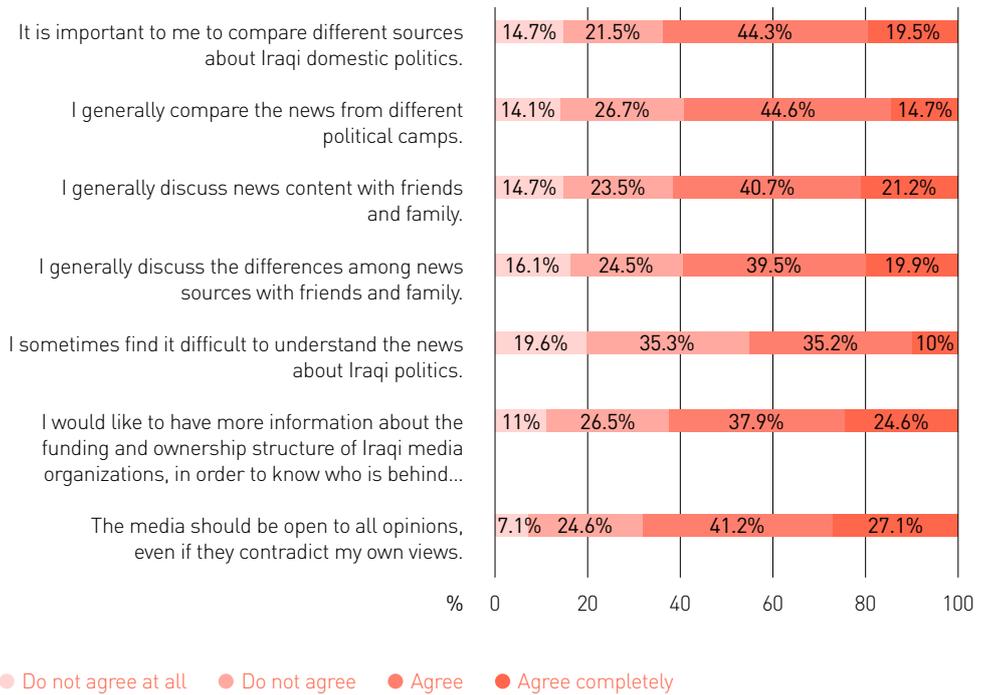
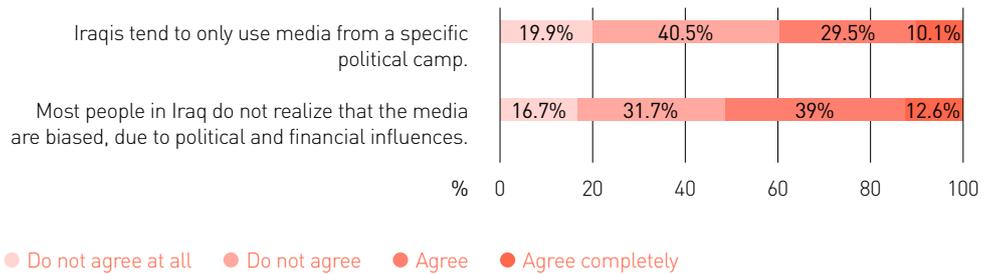


Figure 5:
Respondents' assessment
of the media competency
of other Iraqi media users,
N = 2982



With the statements from **Figure 5**, as well as from **Figure 9** and **Figure 10** (see appendix), the goal was to determine how the respondents rate their fellow Iraqis when it comes to media literacy, and for what reasons they believe some Iraqis are more or less competent to critically question media content. It is interesting to note that a majority of the respondents (more than 60%) did not agree with the statement that Iraqis only use media from a specific political camp. In addition, a slight majority of the study participants consider their fellow Iraqis sufficiently competent to recognize political and financial influences on the Iraqi media.

A correlation between media evaluation and assessment of media literacy shows that respondents who perceive the media as polarizing deny other media users the “competency” to critically question media content ($r = 0.201$; $p < 0.01$). In addition, those who view themselves as literate media users, and compare sources with a critical eye, are more likely to rate other users as being not media literate, that is, deny their competency.

A look at **Figure 6**, on the critical assessment of media content, shows that the study participants form two opinion groups. About half of the respondents rate the Iraqi media as politically biased, partisan and non-objective. The other half of the respondents rate the

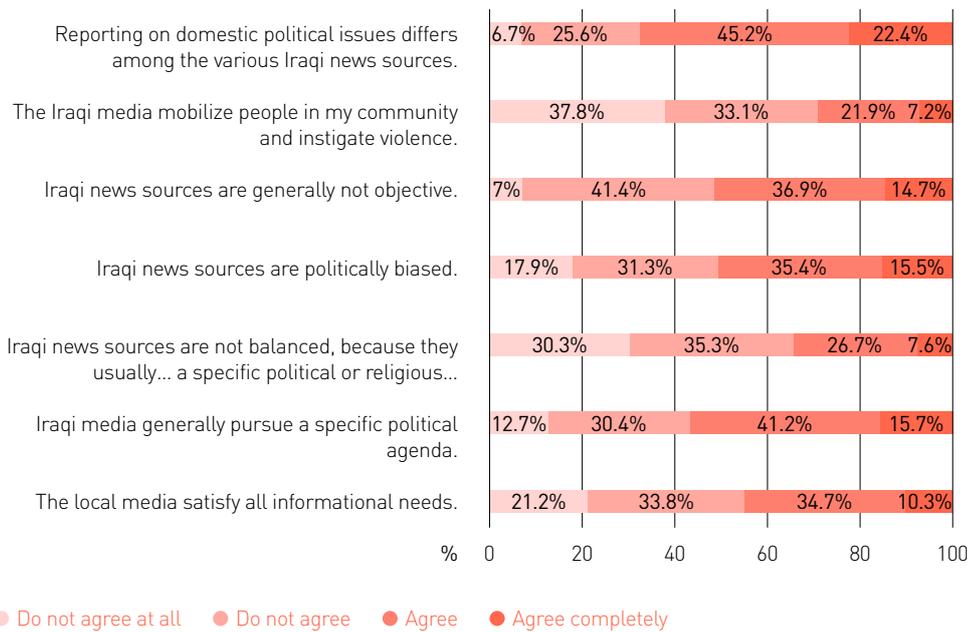


Figure 6:
Critical assessment of Iraqi
media content, N = 2982

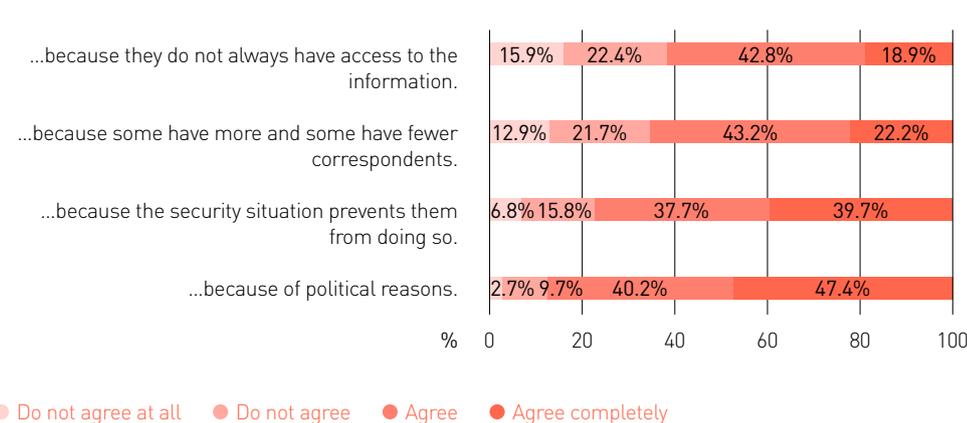


Figure 7:
Some news media
do not report on certain
incidents, ...
N = 2982

performance of the media positively with regard to the same criteria. In other words, opinions on the quality of information, in terms of balance, impartiality and objectivity, are sharply divided into two camps. Figure 7 also shows that more than 87% of the respondents partly attribute the omission of certain events in the reporting of individual broadcasters to political motives.

With a view to the debate on the involvement of the Iraqi media in the development of conflict, it should be emphasized that 70% of the respondents feel that the

content of the media they use *most often* has no mobilizing character and does not incite violence.

This tendency among the respondents to perceive the Iraqi media as agents of reconciliation rather than as warmongers (Table 7/Figure 8) is confirmed in the broader question of the potential for conflict and peace of the most widely used broadcasters. These results give rise to a reflection on whether and how the apparently extensive potential for reconciliation by the Iraqi media could be exhausted more effectively and efficiently by media providers.

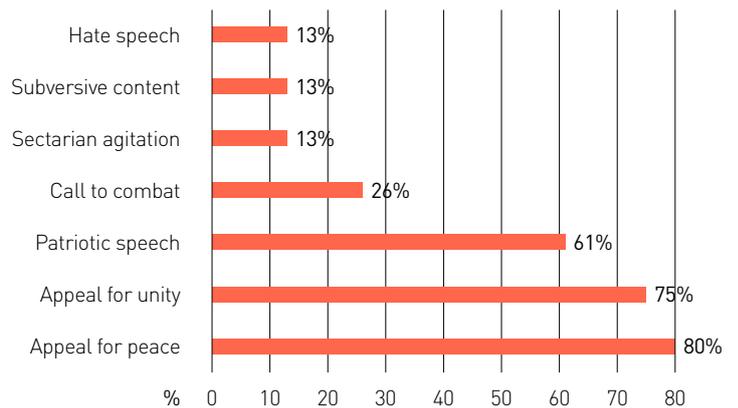
Table 7:
Assessment of the potential of the media used most often to promote conflict and peace (mean values)

	Predominantly Sunni regions	Predominantly Shiite regions	Kurdish regions	Kirkuk	Total
Sectarian agitation	0.36	0.67	0.26	1.07 **	0.56
Subversive content	0.38	0.68	0.35	0.97 **	0.58
Hate speech	0.37	0.65	0.27	0.95 **	0.55
Patriotic speech	1.89	1.78	1.18	1.31 **	1.68
Call to combat	0.57	1.09	0.22	1.11 **	0.83
Appeal for unity	2.30	1.99	1.81	1.40 **	2.00
Appeal for peace	2.34	2.06	2.09	1.74 **	2.11

0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = often, 3 = all the time

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

Figure 8:
Assessment of the potential for conflict and peace of the media used most often (frequent/constant), N = 2982



In the last part of the interview, the study participants were asked how frequently the media they use *most often* contain elements such as “sectarian agitation” and “subversive content” and, in contrast, how often there are calls for peace, patriotism and unity (see **Figure 8** and **Table 7**).

Overall, it can be said that in the perception of respondents the media “frequently” call for unity and peace and (very) rarely for violence and hatred. Again, there are regional differences in this respect: In the Kirkuk

region, the inhabitants seem to ascribe the greatest potential for conflict and the least potential for peace to the media. The figures are the opposite in Kurdistan, where the respondents see the greatest potential for peace and the least potential for conflict in the media they use most often.

This study shows that the use of media in Iraq is only partly based on ethno-sectarian patterns, and that the majority of media users are not naively susceptible to the views of individual media offerings. There are broadcasters that explicitly appeal to ethno-denominational target groups, and there are user groups that follow only one broadcaster in a monothematic fashion. However, the majority of the public seems to be interested in the interpretations of reality by different camps and therefore receives and compares different media offerings. As a result, it is possible that biased reporting achieves the opposite of its intended effect. Instead of gaining more support in the public for certain positions, the partisan channel loses its credibility and thus its effectiveness, as well.

From this standpoint, a departure from partisan and biased reporting would be in the interest of both media users, a majority of whom are critical of biased reporting, and media producers, who would also strengthen their position in the public by attaining greater credibility.

One could object here that the results of the study are based on the self-assessments and self-perception of the respondents, and therefore do not reflect real behavior but social expectations. Conversely, however, this would mean that the majority of the respondents perceive anti-sectarian use of the media as a social expectation they would like to fulfill. This too would only reinforce the conclusions stated here.

The study also casts a new light on the relationship between media reporting and conflict development. It is to be assumed that the supposedly inciting effects of one-sided reporting on the conflict development is cushioned by media-competent patterns of use, especially the discussion of media content with friends and relatives, and is therefore weaker than previously assumed. Manipulative reporting must be viewed in the context of various influencing factors, which shape the recipients' attitudes and views of the conflict. This perspective undermines the arguments of those who refer to the polarization of the media to argue for stricter regulation and restriction of press freedom in favor of national security interests.

On the whole, the results of the study should encourage a review of the prevailing views of the public in editorial offices and media organizations. The quality of public discourse in Iraq would probably benefit if the image of a naive and uncritical media user were

22 corrected and replaced by the more realistic image of a media user who has learned, over the past 13 years, to form a very personal opinion in the context of polarized media offerings.

The question of the motives underlying the various usage patterns should be pursued in further qualitative research projects. Moreover, the actual practice of a comparative approach to media offerings and their influence on the attitudes of the recipients would certainly be a productive continuation of the present research. Third, an examination of the prevailing views of the audience in Iraqi newsrooms would be a useful addition to the current state of knowledge.

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Figure 9:
Some people in Iraq
compare news, ...
N = 2982

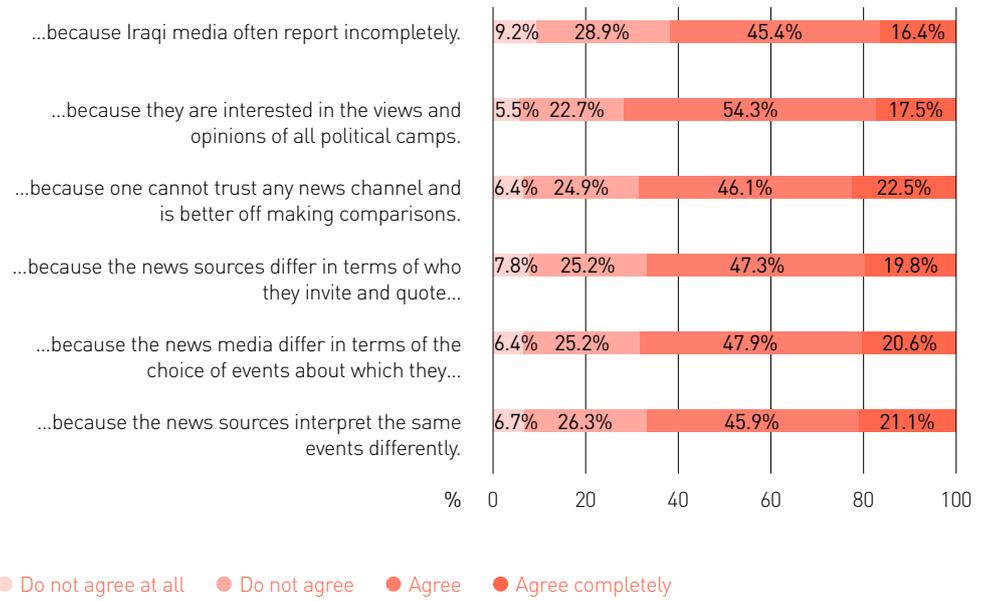


Figure 10:
Some people in Iraq
do not compare news, ...
N = 2982

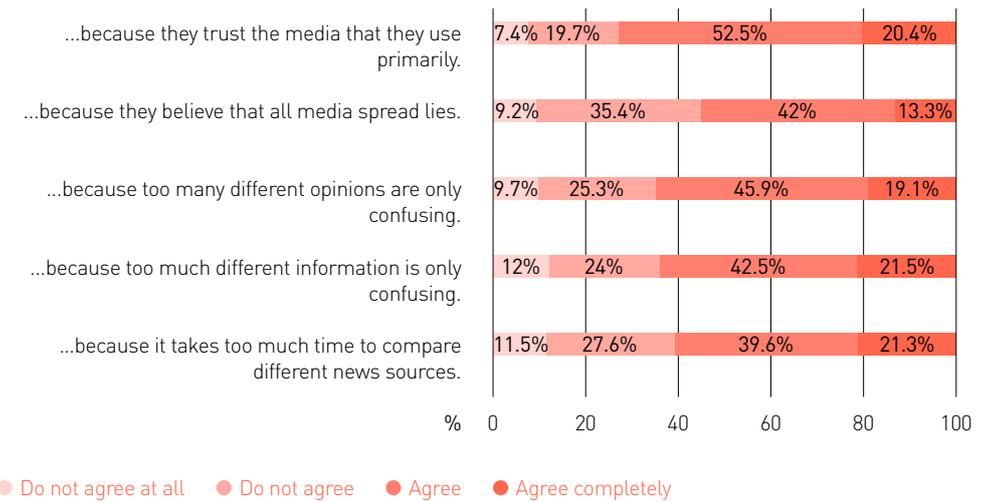


Table 8:
Respondents' assessment of their own media competency
(mean values)

	Predominantly Sunni regions	Predominantly Shiite regions	Kurdish regions	Kirkuk	Total
Number of sources used to find information about domestic political issues	1.75	1.94	2.11	1.68 **	1.90
It is important to me to compared different sources about Iraqi domestic politics.	1.94	1.53	1.94	1.48 **	1.69
I generally compare the news from different political camps.	1.63	1.56	1.78	1.41 **	1.60
I generally discuss news content with friends and family.	1.41	1.84	1.69	1.46 **	1.68
I generally discuss the differences between news sources with friends and family.	1.35	1.75	1.77	1.45 **	1.63
I sometimes find it difficult to understand the news about Iraqi politics.	1.21	1.45	1.35	1.18 **	1.36
I would like to have more information about the funding and ownership structure of Iraqi media, in order to know who is behind a news source.	1.69	1.83	1.83	1.31 **	1.76
The media should be open to all opinions, even if they contradict my own views.	1.87	1.96	1.82	1.46 **	1.88

Number of sources used: 0 = none, 1 = one source, 2 = two to three sources, 3 = four or more sources

Other variables: 0 = do not agree at all, 1 = do not agree, 2 = agree, 3 = agree completely

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

