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The Political and Economic Dependence of the Press in Macao under Portuguese and Chinese Rule: Continuity and Change

Abstract

The article analyses the media system in Macao, a special administrative region of China that transitioned from Portuguese to Chinese sovereignty in 1999, becoming one of cities in the world with the largest number of published newspapers per capita. Combining historical research with the analysis of contemporary empirical data collected through interviews with journalists working on the ground, the research demonstrates how there is a long tradition of state control that goes back to the colonial era and that has assumed different forms, ranging from outright censorship to physical intimidation of journalists and economic dependence on the government. Limitations and control strategies imposed on news reporting during the Portuguese administration continue to be practiced today by the Chinese authorities. Even so, journalists operating on the Macao media market tend to overstate the level of freedom they are given, which can be attributed to media outlets being economically dependent on the state. Nevertheless, the level of freedom attributed to the press is today higher than it had been during the colonial period with some critical voices being allowed to reach the media. This needs to be understood in the context of what has been defined as the Chinese safety valve strategy.

Keywords

Censorship, Journalism Practice, Media Systems, Press Freedom, Press Subsidies.

1. Introduction

Two years following the handover of Hong Kong to China, on 20 December 1999 Macao was also returned to Chinese administration after several centuries of Portuguese rule. In both cases concerns about the loss of freedom and civil rights emerged and many doubts arose on the relationship between civil society, local authorities and the Chinese central government in Beijing. The preservation of western values, namely the ideal of a free press, became a preoccupation for the communities living in these territories after the British and Portuguese administrations came to an end.

This concern has not been dissipated more than twenty years after the handover of Hong Kong and Macao, then becoming two special administrative regions of China. Even though the media are mostly private in both territories, and there is an established tradition of an

ideologically stratified press (Chan & Lee, 1988), the possibility of producing news reports that take a critical stance towards China remains a sensitive topic. Concerns about political interference on reporting actually increased in 2016 after the Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba bought *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong's English language leading newspaper.

However, while a lot of media and academic attention has been devoted over the last decades to the restrictions imposed on press freedom in Hong Kong, with street protests making international headlines on several occasions¹, the same cannot be said about Macao which has been mostly neglected with very few pieces of research dealing with the media in the territory. This can be explained by a couple of reasons. First, Macao has always been outside the English-speaking geography. Second, it is a small territory both in terms of land and population. Located on the western side of the Pearl River Delta, 40 miles on the West of Hong Kong, it occupies 11.8 sq. miles, and even though it is considered the most densely populated region in the world, its population totalled 650 thousand people in 2016 (DSEC, 2017).

Departing from this context, the aim of this article is to discuss how the media system in Macao has been reconfigured since the handover and how this might affect press freedom. An overview of the media landscape in the territory before and after 1999 will be presented, which will allow for comprehensive understanding of which changes did take place after the departure of the Portuguese colonial authorities and which characteristics of today's media system were already in place during Portuguese rule.

Contrary to Mainland China that transitioned from a commanded economy to a capitalist model, Macao transitioned from a small economy controlled by a young democratic state to a larger economy controlled by a semi-autocratic regime. Furthermore, and despite its integration in China, Macao mostly remains a small market. This also has to be taken into account since, as Manuel Puppis (2009) has demonstrated, state size matters when it comes to media policy and regulation. In countries with small markets, a high level of dependency on the political sphere tends to be the norm. Josef Trappel (2010) not only supports this idea but has demonstrated how in smaller European countries this has been the only option left to governments to defend their domestic media markets from being totally crushed by neighbouring countries with larger production and distribution capacities. Even mid-sized countries resort to subsidies to foster cultural pluralism and counter market failures. Finnish support for publications in national minority languages and Italian subsidies for local broadcasters are two examples of this (Nielsen & Linnebank, 2011). Moreover, despite claims to the contrary, even in the USA and in Northern Europe the media, particularly the press, are given different types of public support and thus have never "been fully free and independent from government or other major institutions in any democratic society" (Picard, 2013, p. 50). While public broadcasting is the most obvious case, the press is also given direct and indirect support, including tax exemptions and postal subsidies, just to mention a few examples.

2. Objectives and Methodology

By studying the case of Macao, we aim to add complexity to our understanding of the evolution of the media system in a territory under Chinese administration, with a long tradition of multiculturalism and which is presently the city in the world with the largest number of published newspapers per capita (Simões, 2017). Even though it has mostly been ignored by scholarship, the case of Macao has unique features that distinguish it from the reality of Hong

¹ One of most important protest to first reach international media attention took place from September to December 2014, during which a series of sit-in street protests, led by students, occurred in Hong Kong. Known as the "umbrella movement," the protests started after the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress decided on reforms to the electoral system which were perceived as giving the Chinese Communist Party the power to pre-screen the candidates that would be allowed to run for the Hong Kong Chief Executive election in 2017.

Kong, and this can broaden our knowledge on how the Chinese government is dealing with media and press freedom in the administrative special regions.

The research combines an historical approach with the analysis of contemporary empirical data collected through qualitative methods, enabling an in-depth understanding of the historical evolution of the relationship between the media, the market and the political sphere in Macao. The analysis presented is grounded on the theoretical perspective of the political economy of communication, which aims to understand the power relations that come into play during the production, distribution and consumption of communication resources (Mosco, 2009). It is based on documental research conducted at the Historical Archive of Macao, legislation analysis and interviews with some of the most renowned journalists who have been working in the territory for a period of at least ten years.

In Macao, as in many states in Asia, freedom of the press is a sensitive topic, making it more difficult for journalists to speak openly about their daily routines and their editorial decisions. However, for the purpose of this article, seven journalists working in newsrooms in the territory were interviewed and asked questions about the constraints imposed on their daily work. Two criteria were applied for the selection of the interviewees: a) level of knowledge of the news production routines in place in the territory – thus only journalists working in Macao for more than ten years were selected; b) representation of different newsrooms – the interviewees work in six different media organisations: public television broadcaster TDM, Radio Macau, newspapers *Ponto Final* (daily), *Journal Tribuna de Macau* (daily) and *O Clarim* (weekly), and magazine *Revista Macau*. The data collected through the interviews was subject to a thematic content analysis which allowed the main patterns in the journalist's discourses about press freedom in Macanese newsrooms to be identified.

An overview of the media system in Macao before and after the handover will be presented, focusing on the degree of freedom given to journalists when reporting events taking place in the territory. This will allow us to answer the following research questions: how did the media system develop in Macao throughout the 20th century? What was the level of independence given to journalists? What were the main changes in the media landscape after the transition from Portuguese to Chinese administration?

Answering these questions will enable us to fully understand which characteristics of the media market are new, and eventually a consequence of the policies implemented by the Chinese authorities, and which remain from the media system that existed before the handover.

3. Origins and Development of the Press under Portuguese Rule

Macao was ruled by Portugal between the 1550s and 1999. The first Portuguese settled in the territory in the mid-16th century and in 1557 Macao was rented to Portugal as a trading port administrated under Chinese authority. More than three centuries later, in 1887, China recognised Portuguese sovereignty over the territory and it thus became a colony of the Portuguese Empire (Aresta & Oliveira, 2009).

Since its emergence in the territory, journalism was far from being considered an autonomous profession since it was mostly perceived as an extension of political activity. During most of the 19th and 20th centuries journalists had to deal with censorship which depended directly on the governors. The periods during which the press enjoyed total freedom were indeed very scarce (Braga, 1965) and control was severely tightened up following the establishment of the military dictatorship in Portugal in 1926 that opened the way for Oliveira Salazar to found a nationalistic and authoritarian regime known as the *Estado Novo* (New State). Officially created in 1933, with the approval of a new constitution that functioned as the regime's legal framework, the dictatorship led by Salazar adopted censorship as one of its main pillars.

On the same day the constitution came into force – 11 April 1933 – the government issued a decree determining that all periodical publications of a social or political nature, ranging from leaflets to newspapers, had to be checked by committees appointed by the government before they were approved for publication (Ribeiro, 2015). In January 1937, a new piece of legislation was published regulating censorship in the colonies. Its main aim was to homogenize censors' actions in the entire Portuguese Empire. The new bill stated that citizens had the right to “openly express their thoughts through the press” (Decree-Law 22.469, Article 1). However, it also mentioned that censorship applied to all publications with the aim of “preventing the subversion of public opinion” (Decree-Law 22.469, Article 3).

Newspapers had to be checked before publication, which meant that censors had the power to decide what would reach public opinion through the press. Even though this was also the situation in Macao, the control over publications in the Chinese language became less strict after several incidents that took place in 1966 following the launch of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese community of Macao then demanded more autonomy from the colonial rule, which was ultimately conceded in January 1967, putting an end to several months of disturbances that endangered the Portuguese rule (Patrão, 2004) at a time when ideologies that ruled China and Portugal could not be at more opposite ends of the spectrum. From the Cultural Revolution and until the handover, it was clear for all those working in the press in Macao that censorship did not reach the media in Chinese.

Besides the press, the action of the censors also extended to radio. The first major station to be established in the territory was Rádio Clube de Macau (Radio Club of Macao) which arose in 1941 following the closure of two amateur stations. In 1952, a second professional broadcaster emerged, Radio Vila Verde. Both stations aired programmes in Portuguese and Chinese (Museu das Comunicações, 2016). Similar to what happened with most stations that were set up in the territories controlled by Portugal in Africa and in the Indian subcontinent, these two broadcasters were established by private entrepreneurs who were members of the colonial elite and thus kept good relations with the Portuguese authorities (Ribeiro, 2014). Furthermore, in the case of Rádio Clube de Macau, the names of those who composed the different management teams throughout the years were sent to the Governor for approval, which guaranteed the political alignment with the colonial power of those who ruled the station².

During the entire period of the Portuguese dictatorship that lasted until 1974 the media landscape in Macao remained tightly controlled by the colonial government that ensured that both the press and broadcasting would promote Portuguese interests at a time during which decolonization had risen to the centre of the international agenda. In 1962, when Salazar's government decided to exercise greater control over the media in the Empire, the privately-owned Rádio Clube de Macau was transformed into a public station – Emissora de Radiodifusão de Macau (Macao Broadcasting Station) – that thus came under the direct control of the colonial authorities. By then it was already clear that the Portuguese and the Chinese press operated following different rules. Despite it being impossible to trace political and economic relations between the owners of the newspapers published in Chinese and the Communist Party, all evidence indicates that these relations existed.

The *coup d'état* that overthrew the Portuguese dictatorship in April 1974 did not bring immediate freedom for the media. In August 1974, an *ad-hoc* commission to control the press, radio, theatre and cinema was established in Macao (Gomes, 2001) and even though it did not act as a censorship body, it had the ability to apply fines, which posed a serious threat to all newspapers that were experiencing precarious financial situations.

² Several documents available at the Arquivo Histórico de Macau (Historical Archive of Macau), folders MO/AH/AC/SA/01/19162, MO/AH/AC/SA/01/19436 e MO/AH/AC/SA/01/19705, confirm this situation.

On the transition to democracy in Portugal, political parties were once more called to play a central role in the political process. In Macao two main political groups were established: Centro Democrático de Macao (Democratic Centre of Macao - CDM) and Associação para a Defesa dos Interesses de Macao (Association for Defence of the Interests of Macao - ADIM). While the former was close to the Portuguese Socialist Party the latter had connections with the Portuguese Christian Democratic Party. Both established weekly magazines to spread their political ideals: CDM founded *Democracia em Marcha* (Democracy in Motion) in 1974 while ADIM established *Confluência* (Confluence) in 1975. Furthermore, both parties founded newspapers in 1982: CDM published the weekly *Tribuna de Macau* (Tribune of Macao), and ADIM printed the daily *Jornal de Macau* (Newspaper of Macao).

The establishment of these two newspapers introduced significant changes in the journalistic work produced in Macao that was then still limited to the publication of news from international agencies along with local stories on social events taking place in the territory. With the launch of *Tribuna de Macau* and *Jornal de Macau*, a larger number of journalists were recruited from outside the territory, mostly from Portugal. Both newspapers functioned, however, as the voice of the parties that financed them and the number of journalists employed by each newsroom was very small, ranging from two to five depending on the year (Patrão, 2004).

Although censorship came to an end after democracy was installed in Portugal, in Macao the law that regulated the press was only revoked in 1990. In actual fact, even though the press broke free from the shackles that had tied it down during the dictatorship, most evidence supports the conclusion that up to the end of Portuguese rule in Macao the content distributed by the media was either under the direct or indirect control of local government. In 1983, five journalists of TDM were expelled from Macao allegedly for political reasons and there were also cases of journalists recruited in Lisbon by members of the Macao government to work for the local press (Patrão, 2004).

The 1980s was also marked by an increase in the interest by both the Portuguese and Chinese governments to have a more active role in news production. The Portuguese State-owned news agency –Lusa– opened a delegation in Macao, with the support of the local government, while the New China News Agency (Xinhua) established its own office in the territory. Moreover, *TDM – Companhia de Televisão e Radiodifusão de Macau* (Radio and Television Company of Macao) was established as a public service company replacing its predecessor, ERM. Besides being given the responsibility of radio broadcasting it was also expected to broadcast television, which eventually occurred in 1984, with the broadcaster offering bilingual programming in Portuguese and Chinese. Three years later, when China and Portugal signed a Joint Declaration agreeing on the handover to take place in December 1999, TDM was already operating two different television channels, one in Portuguese and another in Chinese.

4. The Media Landscape during the Transition Period

The transition period that started in 1987 with the signing of the Joint Agreement, was marked by several changes in the media, mostly those operating in Portuguese. Where broadcasting is concerned, in 1998 the public service company –TDM– was opened to private investment with the State retaining a stake of 50.5%. It was then renamed *Teledifusão de Macau* (Telediffusion of Macao), maintaining the acronym TDM (RAEM, 2015). It continued to air two different channels in Portuguese and Chinese, which remained under close scrutiny from the local government.

A major shift also took place in the newspaper sector in the year prior to the handover, with the merger of the two major Portuguese dailies, *Tribuna de Macau* and *Jornal de Macau*. Despite having different political alignments, the owners decided to join forces in order to face the changes that were expected to take place in the media system after the transition

(Dinis, 2011). The newspaper that arose from the merger was named *Jornal Tribuna de Macau* and first reached the stands in June 1998. Two other dailies were then published in Portuguese: *Macao Hoje* (Macao Today) and *Futuro de Macau* (Future of Macao), both founded in the early 1990s. These three newspapers divided the market with two weeklies also published in Portuguese: *Clarim* and *Ponto Final*. While the latter was a recent project, launched in 1991, the former had a long history –it was founded in 1948 by a group of Catholics and later became the official newspaper of the Diocese of Macao (Clarim, 2016). All these titles had very small print-runs not exceeding 2000 copies each.

Before the handover there was also an expansion of the Chinese language newspapers in the territory with a total of seven dailies and nine weeklies being published in 1999. This took place at a time when two English papers printed in Hong Kong also reached Macao –*South China Morning Post* and *Hong Kong Standard*. The population of the territory was then estimated to be 450,000 people making it one of the territories in the world with the largest number of newspapers per capita. Moreover, the number of titles in Portuguese was even more astonishing as, according to the general census of 1996, only 1.9% of the population aged over three spoke Portuguese on a regular basis (Matias, 2016), with 95% of the residents identifying themselves as Chinese (Clayton, 2009).

While radio and television were mostly paid for by the local government, the explosion in the number of newspapers was sponsored by local businessmen, politicians and lawyers for whom the press was an investment, not because of the revenues they could gain from the publications but because these allowed their owners to increase their influence in Macao. As the business was not profitable, the proprietors themselves covered the expenses not paid by advertising, which “came mostly from government departments and judicial announcements” (Gomes, 2001, p. 26). The newspapers had an additional and important source of income also originating from the government. From 1987 onwards, a monthly subsidy of 12,000 patacas (USD 1500) was granted to all newspapers in publication in Chinese and Portuguese, the two official languages, which was intended to cover production costs (Dispatch 111/GM/87). Therefore, what at a glance may have seemed to be a flourishing media market –comprising over a dozen dailies and a dozen weeklies, two radio programmes and two television channels– was in fact a very small market controlled by a restricted political and economic elite.

In 1991 a slight change was made to the legislation regulating press subsidies. Newspapers had to be in publication for at least three years before they could apply for public financing (Dispatch 122/GM/91). In practical terms, owners had to prove they had the capacity to support the titles for a few years without government money. Moreover, as pointed out by Gomes (2001), not all newspapers were granted the subsidy after three years in publication. Those that tended to be more critical of the government –which were the cases of *Ponto Final* and *Futuro de Macau*– had to enter a legal battle in order to see their rights recognized.

During the transition period, a press ordinance was published inspired on the Portuguese legislation. Besides assuring the freedom of the press and journalists’ access to sources of information (Law no. 7/90/M, Articles 5 and 6, August 6, 1990), the legislation passed in 1990 also ensured the creation of a Press Council that would be responsible for guaranteeing independence from both political and economic powers. It was also expected to ensure pluralism and to act as a mediator in disputes between the press and citizens (Law no. 7/90/M, Articles 25 and 26, August 6, 1990). However, a battle over who should propose the members of this body went on for a few years leading to it never being established, as Macao’s Legislative Assembly never managed to approve its members.

The final years of Portuguese rule were also marked by several cases that ended with journalists losing their jobs as a consequence of editorial decisions. Two of the interviewees who worked in Macao prior to the handover confirm that “the Portuguese authorities exercised strong pressure over the media” (J. Lopes, interview, 13 June 2016) and that those

pressures were “the result of the political battles taking place in Portugal that affected the local governor, whose continuation in office depended on the Lisbon authorities” (L. Ortet, interview, 28 June 2016). All that was written about the Macao local government ended up being read in Portugal which caused the governor to keep the press on a short leash.

The bad relations between the newspapers and the governor himself, mostly those published in Portuguese, marked the everyday life of reporting (Patrão, 2004). Judicial lawsuits against journalists became regular along with physical intimidation, the most evident example being the attempted murder of the editor of *Macao Hoje*, which led the newspaper to publish an article in which it commented on the pressures regularly exercised over those who wrote in the press: “In Macao, when a journalist writes about [...] powerful lawyers, or about mafia activists, drug dealers, those who trade weapons, governors or corrupt businessmen or political mercenaries, there is a high probability of his life being put in danger” (*Macao Hoje*, 1999). Even though this was an extreme case, the odds of the press being free from political and economic pressures remained very low until the handover, more so because all newspapers were dependent on official subsidies and institutional advertising or were paid for by the few major companies that operated in the territory and which also had close links to the colonial government.

5. Characteristics of the Media System under Portuguese Rule

Even though the media landscape in Macao in the 1990s was substantially different from that which had existed during the dictatorship years in Portugal, when analysing the territory’s media system through the lens of the four dimensions proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) –state role, professionalism, political parallelism and media markets– we can conclude that there are a few characteristics that did not undergo significant alteration after the establishment of democracy. The State continued to play a central role in the media companies it financed either directly or indirectly. The press published in Portuguese transitioned from political alignment with the colonial regime to political parallelism with the two main parties that emerged in the territory in the late 1970s.

As the handover approached the different political voices became less audible and the media adopted political alignment with the local government. In an analysis of the press during the last month of the transition period Matias (2016) has demonstrated that even though a few newspapers were somehow critical of how Portugal and the local government were managing the transition, political disputes were no longer present on the news but instead there was a clear focus on the Portuguese legacy and on official events. On the other hand, while the level of professionalism increased slightly in the 1980s, it remained mostly low with journalists having low independence to make editorial decisions. The market continued to be a residual player in defining the media system that was mostly dependent on the revenues originating from subsidies, institutional advertising and donations from its owners. Thus, despite all the changes operated in Macao’s media market throughout the final one hundred years of Portuguese sovereignty, its main characteristics remained mostly unchanged and can be illustrated as follows:

Table 1: Dimensions of the Macao Media System in the 20th century (under Portuguese administration).

State Role HIGH	Political parallelism HIGH
Professionalism LOW	Media Market LOW

Source: Own elaboration.

During the period of colonial rule, the press served as a vehicle for the promotion of businesses operated by the different communities that lived and traded in Macao. It also played a political role by functioning as a tool used by the local government to disseminate its policies and political decisions. Until 1974, press freedom was limited and the colonial authorities ensured that all publications that saw the light of day agreed with the ideology of the Lisbon regime. After a democratic regime was set up in Portugal, and despite censorship coming to an end, the government of Macao continued to have a say in both the press, which it controlled indirectly, and broadcasting that it directly owned. It is therefore possible to conclude that there was a high degree of involvement of the State in the media system throughout the entire 20th century under the colonial regime.

6. The Media System after the Handover: Change and Continuity

Sovereignty over Macao was transferred from Portugal to China on 20 December 1999. The agreement between the two countries stipulated that the territory would be given a high degree of autonomy for fifty years in order to ensure a smooth transition. Macao will maintain its own legal system, monetary system and immigration policy at least until 2049 while military defence and foreign affairs are a competence of Beijing (Joint Declaration of the Portuguese and Chinese Governments, 1999).

The law that established the Macao Special Administrative Region clearly states that all those residing in the territory are entitled to freedom of expression. The freedom of the press is also recognized as a foundational value of the special region (Basic Law of the Special Administrative Region of Macao, articles 27 and 32, December 20, 1999). Furthermore, the press ordinance approved in 1990 under Portuguese rule continues to be the legal framework in which journalists operate today, meaning that after the handover no significant alteration was introduced in the legislation that regulates journalists' activity in Macao.

After the handover, coinciding with the liberalization of the gambling industry that became the territory's major economic sector, subsidies granted to the press substantially increased. New publications in Chinese emerged along with bilingual newspapers in Chinese/English and Chinese/Portuguese. All are entitled to official subsidies after an initial period of five years in circulation as long as they offer content in one of Macao's two official languages (Dispatch 145/GM/2002 from the Head of Macao Government, June 24, 2002).

Subsidies, inherited from the Portuguese colonial period, remain the most important source of income for the press in Macao. Newspapers, besides printing only a few thousand copies per edition or solely one thousand copies in the case of the Portuguese press, do not yet have a real digital business model which makes them very dependent on government subsidies and advertising (M. Carvalho, interview, May 14, 2016). The case of the Portuguese language press is particularly paradigmatic of this. While estimates indicate that only 20,000 residents in the territory speak the language (Lusa, 2016), there are three dailies and two weeklies, one radio station and one television channel entirely in Portuguese.

Following the handover, the media system clearly expanded, in particular the press, but its main characteristics have remained untouched, namely the level of professionalism. "While newsrooms recruited journalists from Portugal, China, Malaysia, Philippines and Australia, the number of professionals per newsroom remains low and these have little say in the editorial line defined by the owners and the editors" (J. F. Pinto, interview, May 20, 2016). This same idea is conveyed by Sérgio Terra who underscores the fact that "the newspapers are produced by a small number of journalists, which significantly limits the possibility of covering a large number of events" (interview, 16 August 2016). Furthermore, with just a few journalists per newsroom specialization becomes inexistent (M. Carvalho, interview, 14 May 2016), raising concerns about the quality of the journalistic content being produced.

Most media tend to present a pro-Beijing editorial line despite the fact that some do publish critical pieces on the actions of the Macao government, especially the dailies *Ponto*

**The Political and Economic Dependence of the Press in Macao under Portuguese and Chinese Rule:
Continuity and Change**

Final and *Hoje Macau* –published in Portuguese– the monthly *Lun Chon Mui Tai* (All About Macao) and the digital newspaper *Oi Mun Iat Pou* (Macao Concealers) –published in Chinese. Even though the names of those who own newspapers is not made public, creating ownership opacity, in some cases this information has been disclosed. Based on this incomplete information concerning press ownership, it is possible to conclude that, at least to some extent, media plurality can be mentioned since both pro-Beijing and pro-democratic groups own publications in the territory.

While the government owns TDM, which operates two radio and two television channels in Portuguese and Chinese, the largest newspaper in circulation –*Mun Iat Pou* (Macao Daily News) – is directly sponsored by the Chinese Communist Party (IBP, 2016: 53). On the opposite side, the digital newspaper *Macau Concealers*, which also offers a seasonal print edition, has a direct connection with the New Macao Association, a pro-democracy political party founded in 1992, which since its inception has managed to elect a small number of MP's of the Macao Legislative Assembly (ranging from 1 to 3). The president of the party is Jason Chao who is the editor-in-chief of *Macau Concealers*. The table below shows the main characteristics of the Macao media system after the handover to China:

Table 2: Dimensions of the Macao Media System in the 21th century (under Chinese administration).

State Role HIGH	Political parallelism HIGH
Professionalism LOW	Media Market LOW

Source: Own elaboration.

The existence of publications that are critical of the lack of democracy in the territory demonstrates that political alignment with the government is enforced less than during Portuguese political rule when there were cases of journalists arrested and harassed. In fact, even in Mainland China where party structures control the media landscape “by banning wayward publications, jailing dissident journalists, and attempting to consolidate control under huge government-run conglomerates” (Hassid, 2016, p. 3), there is some tolerance to “press openness on the type of problems that, if left unreported and unsolved, might stir popular dissatisfaction” (Shirk, 2011, p. 20). Therefore, the fact that journalists in Macao are able to take critical stances should not be perceived as unique within the Chinese context (Weller, 2012). It shall best be understood in the wider context of China’s policy towards the media, marked by what scholars have defined the safety valve strategy that allows for the relief of public discontent through temporary measures that allow for critical voices to be heard on the media and through activist movements. This strategy does not change the authoritarian nature of the state, but it instead functions as a powerful tool for it to better control discontent and maintain its power (Chen, 2016).

The possibility of reporting facts and occasionally taking critical stances has led to the “growing sense of the liberal watchdog model” among some Chinese journalists (Zhao, 2008, p. 253) and according to Hassid (2016, p. 51) there are reporters that do look up to an “idealized American model of the press”. In the case of Macao, the fact that the media system is very much dependent on the revenue originating directly or indirectly from the government is perceived by those who operate in the sector as the only option to sustain the multi-linguistic media landscape: “The public support given by the Macao government to all the Chinese and Portuguese press published in the territory is important in order to allow pluralism and diversity of editorial options” (L. Ortet, interview, 28 June 2016). Journalists who defend this system tend to describe it as a way of liberating the media from economic suffocation, thus

increasing its independence and diversity: “The government supports diversity, as newspapers follow different editorial lines and to this date the government has never favoured this or that newspaper neither has it discriminated any of the publications” (J. M. Encarnação, interview, 18 August 2016). A similar opinion is expressed by other interviewees who consider that “there is no direct relationship between the subsidies of the government of the Macao Special Administrative Region and the pluralism of Portuguese-language newspapers” (S. Terra, interview, 16 August 2016).

The unanimous view of the interviewees on how there is no or few political interferences on newspapers published in Portuguese and Chinese languages is contradicted by international reports, namely those produced by the International Federation of Journalists to the Special Administrative Regions of China and by the European Union. The later, in a report made public in 2015, considered that restrictions and self-censorship are mostly visible in “the media in Chinese language and in the news on issues related to China” (European Commission, 2015, p. 4). Journalists in the territory tend, however, to express a more positive view on press freedom in Macao, mostly that concerning news in English and Portuguese: “The Chinese media reality is different. News values are different and there is much more pressure. When I worked at the television the Chinese channel *TDM* was under pressure, most surreptitious” (M. Carvalho, interview, May 14, 2016).

Even though the discourse of the journalists interviewed can be fuelled by economic dependence from the government, it is a fact that since 1999 the government has not suppressed subsidies attributed to the publications (J. F. Pinto, interview, May 20, 2016). This demonstrates that, contrary to what happened during the transition period, the post-1999 Macao authorities have been cautious when dealing with the private media in the territory, not resorting to public intimidation or the financial strangulation of the newspapers that have adopted a critical or less flattering tone towards the government. Broadcasting, on the other hand, remains entirely under the control of the government.

7. Conclusions

Macao has been, for a few decades, one of the cities in the world with the largest number of published newspapers per capita. Far from being driven by a competitive media market, this is rather the result of political sponsorship combined with the need to serve different cultural communities that speak different languages. Despite the fact that the number of media expanded immensely after the handover to China, the size of the market presents all the contingencies of a territory with a small population. In fact, even though Macao is not a sovereign nation, some of the characteristics of its media market are similar to those that Manuel Puppis (2009) identified in small states, namely small audience, shortage of resources and capacity for media production, and small advertising market. While these combined characteristics lead to a strong dependence on public policies, that are supposedly designed to overcome the fragility of the media market, this raises justified concerns over the asphyxiation of critical voices and the real possibilities of a free press.

By using the four dimensions proposed by Hallin and Mancini to analyse the media system we have concluded that the main characteristics of the press and broadcasting in Macao after the handover do not differ much from the ones that were in existence during most of the 20th century under Portuguese rule. Even after the end of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, the media remained very much under the control of the State until Portuguese rule came to an end, thus demonstrating that the democratic authorities were unable to generate a free press. This seems to suggest that, contrary to the literature (e.g. Keane, 1991), democratic states do not necessarily produce liberal media systems.

The scenario of State dependency has not been significantly altered since subsidies and official advertising remain the main source of revenues for the privately-owned newspapers. For journalists working for a long time in Macao newsrooms who were interviewed for this

article, public subsidies are the only option left for the survival of the newspapers. They also do not perceive that this affects their freedom to report the news. Even though this should not be understood as an absence of pressures, the publication of some critical pieces about the government's actions seems to indicate that the Macao authorities are embracing the Chinese strategy of safety value which can ultimately be used to reduce the public frustration by creating a sense of openness to criticism on non-crucial themes.

Even though China and Portugal are two countries with very different political and economic systems, their political history helps to explain why the media system in Macao did not undergo radical change after the handover. While China is ruled by a semi-autocratic government and has transitioned from a communist to a capitalist economy, Portugal inaugurated the third wave of democratization and thus was still a young democracy during its final decades of sovereignty over Macao.

Throughout the entire 20th century, like today, the political sphere always exercised its control over the media in the territory of Macao and so it cannot be said that there has been transition from a system marked by freedom to one marked by control. In practical terms this means that when advocating for more press freedom in Macao it has to be noted that this does not represent going back to a reality that existed in the past and which was disrupted after the handover, but it demands, instead, the construction of a new relationship between the media and the State which requires breaking away from the long tradition of governmental dependence.

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