

Global Communications

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Arab Media Systems





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1. Lebanon: A Faltering Mesh of Political and Commercial Interests

Sarah El-Richani

The Lebanese media, much like Lebanon itself, are boisterous and colorful. The pluralism that characterizes Lebanese society is reflected in its Babelian media. In addition to the gamut of voices represented, freedom of expression is generally respected with the occasional transgressions. This chapter assesses the state of the Lebanese media from its inception to the present day, taking stock of the legal and political framework and the challenges encountered as well as the prospects for media in Lebanon.

Background

Lebanon, which was carved out by colonial powers from its Syrian hinterland in 1943, is among the smallest nations in the Arab world in terms of size and population. The Mediterranean country of approximately five million citizens also comprises a sizeable number of Syrian and Palestinian refugees. According to United Nations (UN) agencies, there are 910,256 registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon and just under 470,000 registered Palestinian refugees who fled to Lebanon after the establishment of Israel in 1948. The government, however, estimates that 1.5 million Syrian refugees are present in the country (UNHCR, 2020), making Lebanon the country with the highest number of refugees in relation to its size: 173 per 1,000 inhabitants (UNHCR, 2017).

Another characteristic of Lebanon is its diversity. While it is the only country in the Arab world that does not have an official religion, religion plays a dominant role in public life. Lebanon has 18 recognized Muslim and Christian religious groups, which have been given the prerogative over family status affairs. This pluralism is also reflected in parliament and political and state offices where positions are divided between the Christian and Muslim sects.

The manner in which this pluralism is organized in Lebanon has been contentious and is regarded as one of several factors that spurred the Lebanese Civil War, which began in 1975 and lasted approximately 15 years. The war claimed nearly 120,000 lives and resulted in the mass emigration of Lebanese citizens. The Ta'if Accord, which eventually brought an end to the war in the early 1990s, rearranged the division of power in a more proportional manner and effectively gave Syria the role of oversight. Syrian armed forces were already on Lebanese soil at the start of the civil war in a failed bid to end the war, and their influence on Lebanese political life would grow in strength in the post-war period.

Even in the post-war era, the power-sharing system, the weakness of the state, and the strength of the political and sectarian groups that are often supported by external regional players have made governance in this precarious nation a challenge. Additionally, it has made competition within each group difficult. The recurring conflicts, whether the devastating wars with Israel and the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, which lasted from 1982 to 2000, or internal political, security, and economic crises, have further crippled the country, thereby impacting its media.

Indeed, the media reflect the political and social architecture of Lebanon. To begin with, most religious and political groups are represented on some level of the media system in one form or another. This makes the Lebanese media stand out in a region where free expression and pluralism are limited.

Historical Developments

The Lebanese media were pioneers in the region in terms of both publishing and broadcasting. The first Arabic newspaper to be published by Arabs, *Hadikat Al-Akhbar*, was launched in 1858 in what today is modern Lebanon. This was followed by several other newspapers published by the *nahda* literati. *Nahda* refers to the cultural renaissance that took place in the Levant and Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, on the eve of World War I, there were 168 publications published in Beirut alone.

As the Ottoman Empire, dubbed the “sick man of Europe”, faltered, its grip over the provinces it controlled tightened before its ultimate collapse. As a result, some of these intellectuals and journalists fled to the more autonomous Egypt where they would establish prominent newspapers. Among these was the renowned *Al-Ahram* daily, which had been established by the Taqla brothers. Other publishers and writers, however, opted to stay put and agitate for freedom at a heavy cost—death. On 6 May 1916, a cohort of intrepid leaders, including 16 journalists, was sent to the gallows by the brutal Ottoman Wali Jamal Pasha, “the bloodshedder,” in what would later be named Martyrs’ Square (El-Richani, 2020).

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, Lebanon fell under French Mandate and witnessed strict controls on free expression. Nevertheless, the vibrancy of newspapers born out of individual effort would continue. After Lebanon’s declaration of independence from France in 1943, the Lebanese press would enjoy even more freedom. In fact, their coverage of corruption in the first government was partially credited with the 1952 resignation of the republic’s first president, Bechara El-Khuri.

The period between independence and the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 also witnessed the launch of Lebanese television, which, unlike in other countries in the region, began as a private and commercial enterprise offering regular programming. In 1959, the *Compagnie Libanaise de Télévision* (CLT) was launched and was followed in 1962 by *Tele Orient*, another commercial broadcaster. Despite the broadcast of advertisements, the two channels failed to yield profits. Their financial troubles were further exacerbated by the start of the civil war. Therefore,

in 1977, the government intervened and bailed them out by merging the two companies to form *Télé Liban (TL)* of which it owned 50% of the shares. The remaining private sector shares were later purchased by Rafik Hariri, a future Lebanese premier who was later assassinated in 2005. Hariri eventually sold his shares in *TL* to the state and set up a privately-owned television station and media empire.

With the start of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and unlike the Arab press which embodied the slogan “no voice rises above the voice of the battle,” the diversity of views in Lebanon would remain extant. The liberal *An-Nahar* daily was critical of Egypt’s president and Pan-Arab leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, whereas others were more sympathetic to the Pan-Arab cause. For instance, the popular and now defunct *As-Safir* published daily Abdel Nasser quotes on the back page throughout the decades and labeled itself the “newspaper of Lebanon in the Arab world and the paper of the Arab World in Lebanon.”

The polarization of the press, though a welcome manifestation of free expression and pluralism, reflected the increased divisions in the Lebanese polity and eventually resulted in conflict. In 1975, a number of factors caused the rupture including gross inequalities and the regional crises afflicting the country, which saw the influx of the Palestinian *feda'yeen* or armed groups into Lebanon. The civil war, which spanned nearly 15 years, witnessed the emergence of militia tabloids alongside newspapers representing the entire political spectrum. In 1977, an amendment to the press law was passed in an effort to stifle the press seen by then President Elias Sarkis as inciting strife (Khazaal, 2018, p. 72). The amendment was, however, difficult to implement in this Hobbesian “war of all against all”. Meanwhile, in the 1980s, pirate television and radio stations would emerge challenging the national broadcaster *TL*, which sought to sanitize coverage of the war and further what Khazaal (2018) termed “the peace bubble” (p. 68). One of these television stations, *LBC*, managed to attract a wide audience despite its flagrant affiliation to the right-wing Christian militia at the time. Following the end of the war, the channel severed its links to the disbanded party, whose leader was imprisoned. Yet, the channel still remains prominent to this day (El-Richani, 2015, pp. 49–50).

After 1990, during the post-war years, newspapers and media in general benefitted from the return of commercial activity despite the

limitations on free expression imposed by the Syrian caretakers. Live coverage of protests was banned (Rugh, 2004, pp. 202–04), censors were implanted in television stations, and journalists were often closely monitored. In 2002, *MTV*, a popular broadcaster was accused of violating Article 68 of the electoral law, although even the Minister of Information at the time admitted that this was just a pretense and the closure was on “purely political” grounds (Kraidy & Khalil, 2009, pp. 129–32).

The next rupture was the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri along with several other politicians and journalists in 2005. This led to major protests and the emergence of the March 8 and March 14 political camps, with the former consisting of pro-Syria parties and groups and the latter of a coalition of parties and politicians who were against Syria’s long-standing interference in Lebanon. The massive protests and international pressure eventually forced the Syrian troops to leave and effectively ended Syrian tutelage over Lebanon. Shortly after the withdrawal of Syrian troops and the weakening of Syria’s influence in 2005, the decree to close *MTV* was reversed, and the station eventually relaunched in 2009.

In July 2006, a devastating war between Israel and Lebanon erupted causing vast destruction. Rising from the ashes was the *Al-Akhbar* newspaper, which, despite its close links to Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, as the coverage of the Syrian civil war would later reveal, offered a refreshing and brazen approach to news and a break with protocol news. In May 2008, civil unrest flared up between the two polarized groups: March 8 and March 14. During this period, the Hariri-affiliated *Future Media* empire, belonging to the March 14 coalition, were forced off the air for four days by armed gangs affiliated with the powerful March 8 coalition. ‘This is Lebanon. We were not protected, as we should have been. And, nothing will or can stop them from doing it again as simple as this’, lamented a *Future TV* executive (El-Richani, 2016, p. 80). Lebanon today, though politically stable, is in dire economic and financial straits that have resulted in the closure of many businesses including a series of media outlets such as *Future TV* and the *Al-Safir* daily.

Political System and Legal Framework

The Lebanese political system is characterized by power-sharing, which for all intents and purposes has rendered the state weak. Political power is shared among political and sectarian patrons commonly referred to as *zu'ama* (or *za'im* in singular). Denigrated as “les fromagistes” by President Fu'ad Chehab, who attempted to strengthen the state during his tenure in the late 1950s, this political and sectarian elite is only interested in their share of the proverbial pie and has subsequently benefitted from the system of patronage and clientelism (AbuKhalil, 1998, p. 197). As mentioned earlier, the 18 officially recognized religious groups are proportionally represented in parliament and government. The National Pact, an oral agreement among the independence leaders, has traditionally allotted the position of president of the republic to a Maronite Christian, the premiership to a Sunni Muslim, and the position of speaker of parliament to a Shi'a Muslim.

Despite this attempt at sharing power among the groups, the strength of some *zu'ama* and parties has resulted in a series of impasses, leaving key posts vacant for several years. The current president, Michel Aoun, was elected in October 2016, nearly two and a half years after his predecessor left office. His predecessor, Michel Suleiman, was elected president also after a vacancy in the presidency and after regional players intervened to end scuffles that erupted in May 2008 between the two dominant camps in Lebanon, March 14 and March 8. The tussle over influence and profit also delayed civil servant appointments including the post of director of the state television *TL* and, more importantly, delayed the agreement over the electoral law leading to the postponement of parliamentary elections, which finally took place in May 2018—nine years after the May 2009 elections. Although the postponement of the elections was allegedly for security reasons relating to the ongoing Syrian civil war, some observers believe it was due to a squabble over the electoral law. The formation of the cabinet has also usually been a matter of contention. Following the parliamentary elections in May 2018, it took nine months to finally establish a council of ministers after much wrangling over cabinet portfolios, veto power, and the number of portfolios each party and religious group would get. Less than a year later, the prime minister would resign in light of an unprecedented economic and financial crisis

and rampant protests. After three months of political wrangling, a new council of ministers was formed to face the crippling economic crisis, an issue further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government, however, resigned in August 2020 following the harrowing explosion in the Beirut port that claimed 200 lives and billions of dollars in damages. The blast, much like the economic crisis, appears to be a result of mismanagement, corruption and criminal negligence.

In addition to the corruption and clientelism that exist, the size of the state, which is small by all measures, has also greatly impacted both the political and media system and augmented Lebanon's financial woes. This reality is reflected in the media system to a large extent, characterized by a high degree of political parallelism or media partisanship. In terms of structural pluralism or media ownership, the political and sectarian groups are all, more or less, represented on the level of the media system whether by direct ownership or indirect affiliation. While the broadcasting licensing system, to be described below, paved the way for external pluralism where each religious group or political entity would own its own channel, there are a number of successful outlets such as *LBCI* and *Al-Jadeed* that have been pluralized internally both in terms of content and staff.

Meanwhile, the state broadcaster *TL*, which also reflects the state in terms of its weakness and lackluster output, is unable to compete with the privately-owned media. The representative rationing that has arguably crippled governance is also practiced within the station with sharp political divisions among departments and disagreements, leaving the position of director vacant for years on end. This and its limited annual budget, which is equivalent to what the popular privately-owned television networks spend in a month, have meant that any aspirations for the channel to fulfil its promise, serve the public, and sow national unity remain naïve at best (Buccianti & El-Richani, 2015, pp. 24–26).

Before delving into a discussion of the legal framework, it is worth noting that, paradoxically, the level of freedom extant in the country is largely due to state weakness rather than liberal laws. The weak state cannot always impose its harsh laws, particularly against media outlets that are supported by powerful owners or backers.

The laws currently on the books include the press law, which dates back to 1962 and the audio-visual media law which was passed in 1994. The press law has remained largely unchanged, save for some amendments including the 1977 decree 104, which penalizes journalists for offending the president, religious groups, or foreign leaders. The press law also proposes sanctions for impersonating a journalist, which on paper applies to anyone who is not on the Press Association registry. Today, the majority of media practitioners are not enrolled in the Press Association's registry and therefore fall afoul of this article. For this reason, it could be regarded as a boon for the media that the laws are not strictly observed. Other contentious articles that are rarely enforced are articles 16, 20 to 23, and 25 of the Lebanese press laws that stipulate the imprisonment of journalists for press offenses such as defamation and libel.

Another contentious law relevant to the print media is decree number 74 that was issued by President Camille Chamoun in 1953, which states that no further political publications other than the 110 extant ones can be licensed until the number drops to 25. The decree tasked the ineffective Ministry of Information with withdrawing licenses from dormant publications. The Ministry, however, never fulfilled this role, therefore rendering these licenses assets that could be sold to wealthy entrepreneurs who were keen on starting a newspaper. The advent of the Internet and the move towards digital publications, however, has thoroughly weakened this monopoly on the public sphere and rendered the licenses more or less worthless.

Another oversight duty the Ministry of Information has refrained from exercising is its monitoring of the finances of media outlets to ensure they remain independent. As the media largely rely on political money to sustain themselves, the Ministry's neglect of this role has allowed the media to sustain themselves through financial subsidies from philanthropists, politicians, and foreign governments seeking to play an influential political role, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, the USA, and the like. At the same time, broadcasting is regulated by audio-visual media law 382/94, which came about after the civil war to organize and regulate the audio-visual sector and effectively end the already challenged monopoly of *TL* over the airwaves. The law stipulated the formation of the National Audio-Visual Council (NAVC), which was

tasked with approving applications for licensing television stations. The NAVC members were selected by parliament and the government in equal measure, rendering them politically captive to those parties and the politicians who selected them. Licenses were therefore granted to the *de facto* powers and along sectarian lines rather than to worthy applicants. For instance, *Al-Jadeed TV*, owned by an adversary of the then PM Rafik Hariri, was forced to shut down after having its application rejected for dubious reasons. After four years of litigation, the State Council arbitrated in its favor, and *Al-Jadeed* was granted a license in 2000. Meanwhile *NBN*, often jokingly referred to as the Nabih Berri Network in reference to its effective owner, the Speaker of Parliament, received its license despite not meeting the requirements. Other licensees included the now defunct *Future TV* owned by the influential Hariri family, *Murr Television (MTV)*, owned by the influential Greek Orthodox Al-Murr family, and the *Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC)*, formerly owned by the Lebanese Forces militia, whose members were persecuted in the post-war period. Later, Hezbollah's *Al-Manar*, which began broadcasting in 1991, was also granted a license. Meanwhile, *Télé Lumière*, set up by the Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon as a non-profit television station, continues to broadcast without a license. In 2006, the Free Patriotic Movement was also granted a license to establish *OTV* following the return of current President Michel Aoun from exile. According to one of *OTV*'s executives, the license would not have been granted easily "had there been no political side behind this station" (El-Richani, 2016, p. 76).

In addition to licensing, the NAVC was also tasked with monitoring broadcast media to ensure they upheld the laws, although this was done in an *ad hoc* fashion. The few instances where they would censure a station for violating the law were often at the behest of political actors.

The Ministry's task to monitor the finances of television outlets to ensure their revenue streams stem from legitimate sources, such as advertising and production enterprises, has also been suspended. This is evidenced by a cursory look at the media market which is simply inadequate to sustain the media outlets extant in Lebanon (El-Richani, 2016, p. 123). In an interview with the author, the then Minister of Information recalled how the NAVC cynically told him not to bother

with the laws because of the entanglement of politics and the media (El-Richani, 2016, p. 75).

It is important to note here that this state of affairs does not mean that all the media laws have been suspended. On the contrary, issues relating to defamation and spreading false news, for example, often result in time-consuming litigation. Still, there have been calls by media professionals and advocacy groups to modernize the media laws, in part because they are outdated and do not take into consideration technological advancement and its impact on the media, but also because the current laws are difficult to implement with vague articles and expressions that run against the spirit of the Lebanese constitution. One example is the harsh sanctions for violations of the elusive ideal of objectivity, which again has luckily been overlooked.

Although these initiatives have been discussed by the communications committee in parliament, they remain dormant for now and are yet to be passed. The advocacy groups that deliberated media rights and regulations within organized meetings also know full well that the final piece of legislation would also be far from ideal as it would be drafted and passed by parliamentarians who have a large stake in the media. Until new laws are passed, however, it is important to take stock of the *de facto* situation in Lebanon in addition to that which is *de jure*.

Economy and Ownership Patterns

Lebanon is a small state in every sense of the word. This means that, particularly in terms of political communication, which has limited regional traction and is highly competitive, the market is saturated and subscription and circulation rates woefully inadequate to sustain the media. Furthermore, the unprecedented economic and financial crisis in which the country has found itself since 2019 has also exacerbated matters with advertising expenditures being cut by approximately 70%–90% (Arab Ad, 2020).

Many media outlets have therefore had to rely on political subsidies from their political backers, which, as recent closures have revealed, is not sustainable, particularly in light of the serious economic problems facing the country. In October 2018, *An-Nahar* issued a blank copy to raise the alarm about the financial woes facing the Lebanese media

and spur politicians to form a cabinet and confront these challenges. In December 2019, the newspaper started a campaign to collect donations that would ensure its survival.

Political parallelism is therefore high with many of the media outlets subsidized or owned in part or full by political actors. On the level of broadcasting, external pluralism, where each party or religious group is represented, is rather high. Alongside the national broadcaster, which toes the government line, the Shi'ite power brokers are represented by two television stations: *NBN* is owned by long-serving speaker of parliament and a *za'im*, Nabih Berri, who heads the Amal Movement, whereas Hezbollah owns *Al-Manar* through affiliated shareholders. Also, the influential Sunni Hariri family owned *Future TV* until it shut down in 2019. Striking a sectarian balance, *MTV* is owned by the influential Greek Orthodox Al-Murr family, *LBCI* is owned by the Maronite Christian Pierre Daher, and other shareholders have also been licensed. After a long legal battle, *New TV*, which was rebranded as *Al-Jadeed* and is owned by a then-Hariri rival, also obtained its license. The party of the current president, the Free Patriotic Movement, also launched its own television after its members returned from exile. Finally, the Catholic Church also continues to run a non-profit television station *Télé Lumière* (El-Richani, 2013, p. 71).

The print industry is not much different and also includes a series of partisan newspapers, such as *Al-Anba'* run by the Progressive Socialist Party, *Al-Bina'* run by the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, and *Al-Mustakbal* run by Hariri's Future Movement. Other newspapers are supported in part or full by a variety of political shareholders or contributors: *An-Nahar* is owned by several political shareholders, including at one point the Hariri family, *Al-Akhbar* is owned by investors close to Hezbollah, and *Al-Diyar* is owned and run by the eccentric publisher Charles Ayoub, who, in 2011, openly wrote an editorial about the "gifts" and broken promises he had received from Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Hariri, among others (El-Richani, 2016, p. 152). The newspapers *Al-Liwa'* and *El-Sharq* are both close to Hariri and Saudi Arabia with the latter owned by the head of the editor's association, Awni Al-Kaaki, and his sibling, whereas *Al-Liwa'* is owned by the Salam family. Other newspapers in the March 14 camp include *Al-Jumhuriyya*, which is owned by the former Minister of Defence Elias Murr, the

francophone *L'Orient le Jour*, which is owned by the wealthy Edde, Chouieri, and Pharaon families, and the anglophone *The Daily Star*, founded by prominent journalist Kamel Mroueh but currently owned by Hariri associates as well as Qatari associates. *The Daily Star* decided in early 2020 to suspend its print edition and continue only with digital distribution. Meanwhile in October 2020, the French daily *L'Orient le Jour* launched its English-language edition *L'Orient Today*.

Other newspapers include the now defunct, once prominent leftist Pan-Arab daily *Al-Safir*, owned by Talal Salman and funded by a variety of regional stakeholders, including the wealthy investor and philanthropist Jamal Daniel in 2014. After 42 years of uninterrupted publishing, the newspaper folded in 2016. Another newspaper that folded in 2018 was the catchall commercial newspaper *Al-Balad*, owned by the Kuwaiti Al-Wataniya company, which, for a number of reasons, failed to capture the interests of Lebanese readers. Despite this wave of closures, one newspaper, *Nida' Al-Watan*, and two recent digital platforms, *Daraj* and *Megaphone* have emerged in recent years. While *Nida' Al-Watan* champions the March 14 camp, *Daraj* and *Megaphone* are independent in so far that they are not linked to parties or officials in the country. The two digital platforms, however, both rely on grants from European donors, which raises questions about long-term sustainability.

This ownership structure prompted media scholar Nabil Dajani (2013) to claim that media freedom in Lebanon is a myth, citing restrictions imposed by financiers on the media they support. While this may be true to a certain extent, in so far as one rarely finds criticism of Saudi Arabia on Hariri-affiliated media or of Iran in Hezbollah-affiliated media, critical and strident views about all political actors and regional and international players are prevalent in the Lebanese media and readily accessible to all.

Nevertheless, following the rise of Rafik Hariri to the premiership and the consolidation of ownership over several media outlets, there was a serious concern that pluralism might be limited and criticism of his policies could be snuffed. The sprawling Hariri conglomerate across several industries from banking and contracting to real estate and insurance included at one point a considerable media portfolio. The Hariri media empire acquired shares in a number of publications, such as the liberal *An-Nahar* and *Al-Liwa'*, and it also owned entire media

outlets, including two television channels, one newspaper, and one radio station, *Radio Orient*. This moguldom has been largely undone by Rafik Hariri's son and former Prime Minister Saad Hariri who is now facing financial difficulties (Nötzold, 2015, p. 80). Indeed, *Future News* satellite channel ceased operations in 2012, five years after its launch, followed by the closure of *Future TV* in September 2019, the *Future Media* empire's flagship, after years of stagnation and unpaid salaries. The *Al-Mustakbal* daily also discontinued its print edition in June 2019, 20 years after its launch.

Meanwhile, *LBC*, one of the leading television stations in Lebanon, also flirted with the idea of conglomeration, and for a period of five years, it merged with Saudi Mogul Al-Waleed bin Talal's *Rotana* media empire. This union, however, ended in acrimony with a series of lawsuits; *Rotana* retained *LBCSat*, and *LBC* had to launch a new satellite channel called *LDC* in 2012 (El-Richani, 2015, pp. 52–55).

Undoubtedly, there is a high level of political parallelism in the Lebanese media. The politics and media nexus, though sometimes lamented, can also be regarded as a boon in that all groups are more or less represented and have a platform, whereas attempts at mainstreaming might result in the further marginalizing of vulnerable communities. On the other hand, it is also worth noting that the most successful media outlets, such as *LBCI* and *Al-Jadeed*, are internally pluralistic and offer solid professional content. These media outlets have managed to reach viewers from beyond their traditional built-in partisan audiences. While echo chambers certainly exist, highly critical views of the Lebanese political and sectarian elites are readily available on the level of the media system.

Technology and Infrastructure

The Lebanese state has a monopoly on the lucrative telecommunications sector, which is the highest revenue generator for the government (Hodali, 2019). Mobile telecom services are provided by two privately-owned companies, *Alfa* and *MTC Touch*, managed by the Egyptian telecom company *Orascom Telecom, Media and Technology (OTMT)* and the Kuwaiti *Zain*, respectively. According to the statistics by the

International Telecommunication Union (ITU) (2019), approximately 65% of the population subscribe to mobile cellular phone services.

Despite Lebanon's pioneering role in terms of publishing and broadcasting, embracing the Internet was a slightly slower affair due to slow connections offered at exorbitant prices. While DSL Internet was launched in Lebanon in 2007, the Internet, which falls entirely under the Ministry of Telecommunications and is overseen by the state-owned Ogero Company, remained slow for nearly a decade, so much so that people referred to it as *ontor* (*ontor* being Arabic for wait). Until 2017, Internet speeds were kept low and costs high for a variety of reasons including corruption. Allegations of corruption, including the discovery of illegal parallel networks, resulted in the sacking of the director of Ogero who also occupied a high post in the relevant ministry. In recent years, the instalment of 6,000 kilometers of fiber instead of copper cables has also helped improve speeds and decrease the digital divide between urban and rural areas (Executive (Middle East), 2017). The drop in prices following the change of leadership has also increased Internet penetration in Lebanon, which, in 2018, was estimated at 78% by the ITU.

In a testament to the weakness of state structures, the filtering or blocking of websites—though limited in scope—is carried out on an *ad hoc* basis by the Ministry of Telecommunications. Currently, there are blocked websites relating to pornography, homosexuality, copyright breaches, and gambling. Meanwhile, cybercrimes are usually investigated by the Cybercrimes Bureau at the behest of the public prosecutor. The Cybercrimes Bureau was established in 2006 “without a legislative decree” (Freedom House, 2017). In 2018, there were 38 summonses for posts written online that resulted in forcing citizens to apologize or remove the content, whereas there were 63 reported cases in 2019 according to the Muhal Observatory for Free Expression.¹

While Internet penetration is on the rise, 99% of Lebanese still watch television with 94% believing that it is an important source of news (Dennis, Martin, & Hassan, 2019). Nevertheless, due to the rise in the use of smartphones to receive news from 76% in 2017 to 92% in

1 The Muhal Observatory for Freedom of Expression has documented all 2019 cases on their website which can be accessed on the following link <https://muhal.org/en/cases/>.

2018, most media outlets have now established much followed social media accounts as well as apps (Dennis et al., 2019). *LBC*, *MTV* and *Al-Jadeed* have also introduced paywalls for full access to their online content in an attempt to generate more revenue. Meanwhile, content by the alternative news platform *Megaphone*, which began on *Facebook*, is primarily designed to be disseminated on social media platforms and to target the ever-growing number of Lebanese people who get their news from social media sites. The most popular social media application according to a survey is *WhatsApp* with 92% users, followed by *Facebook* with 78%, *YouTube* 68%, and *Instagram* at 45% (Dennis et al., 2019).

In a bid to raise revenue in October 2019, the council of ministers adopted the infamous and now revoked “*WhatsApp* tax” proposal, which intended to levy a monthly USD 6 tax for the use of *WhatsApp*. This led to mass protests across the country with demonstrators displaying their anger at the government’s incompetence in dealing with the deep economic crisis, eventually leading to its resignation.

Challenges

The Lebanese media system currently faces three key challenges. Like most media around the world, the heightened fragmentation of audiences due to the infinite choices made available via the Internet has led to the scattering of “eyeballs” and, therefore, advertising revenue. While in terms of political communication and due to political and economic crises, there is an unquenchable thirst for local news, the saturated market cannot continue as it stands. Staff redundancies, media closures, and cost reduction have been regular occurrences over the past years. At the same time, political money funneled into media outlets to serve political actors in their contentions over the control of Lebanon is expected to continue even if that, too, will diminish due to the economic strain impacting the country. Still, partisan media may indeed look at more cost-effective ways of reaching their built-in audiences. The series of media outlets folding and closing, though lamentable in terms of job losses, is also an expected byproduct of the marketplace model. Thus, the commercially viable media need to orchestrate ways to remain relevant, be it by introducing paywalls or investing in enticing programs.

Another key challenge facing the Lebanese media is the absence of current laws that take stock of technological advancements and the new realities created by them. Although the codified laws are currently only loosely applied, they still need to be updated to safeguard freedom of expression and the rights of journalists and citizens alike. Recently, there has been an increase in the number of summonses and arrests made against social media users, which clearly indicates the need for a new law that addresses the online media and clarifies the job description of the Cybercrimes Bureau.

The third and final challenge relates to the state television, *Télé Liban*. While a public service broadcaster would help to overcome the problems of rampant commercialization and unabashed polarization in Lebanon, *TL* in its current form does not and cannot meet those expectations. The government will, therefore, need to decide whether it can afford to inject the ailing station with more funds and thereby support it, or to cease its operations altogether thereby limiting losses.

Outlook

As outlined above, the Lebanese media, much like the country itself, are in dire straits. As audiences continue to fragment, political stakeholders who had traditionally sustained the Lebanese media are finding more efficient and effective platforms. Meanwhile, the commercially viable channels are struggling to produce content that they hope will retain their audiences. While more austerity measures in the media are expected, possibly including further closures, it is believed that the remaining outlets will continue due to the demand for local content. The successful television stations are those that have, to some degree, pluralized internally, particularly in terms of content and staff composition. It is therefore expected that this pluralism, which is a central feature of the Lebanese media, will remain intact. Moreover, the ever-diminishing digital divide has also ensured that even the most marginal of voices would be able to connect with their audiences to varying degrees and in varying ways, such as through social media.

The main concern for the Lebanese media in the coming months and years as it grapples with an unprecedented economic crisis, however, is not the invisible hand resulting in the closure of non-profitable

endeavors, but the visible and forceful hand clamping down on free expression.

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