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# Lebanese Media Crisis and the Future

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Sharif ABDUNNUR and Krystle HOUIESS

Lebanon's media stands as a unique case in the region, built by a huge conglomeration of external and internal forces all feuding and uniting at once. This resulted in a unique "Lebanese School of Journalism" and media which for a long time was held to be one of the leaders in the region<sup>1</sup> and enjoyed exceptional freedom of expression especially compared to its neighboring countries in the region<sup>2</sup>. But in the last decade all that has changed and continues to rapidly deteriorate day by day. Talal Salman, founder and editor of the prestigious Lebanese daily newspaper *As-Safir* said "the Lebanese press, a pioneer in the Arab world, [today] is undergoing its worst crisis ever," words spoken as the long standing daily printed its last issue; this being just one of many of the media outlets currently in crisis or closing<sup>3</sup>.

Lebanon was one of the leaders in media in the region; establishing its very first printed newspaper in as early as 1858, "Hadikat al-Akhbar" (The Garden of News), right after Egypt which published "Al Tanbeeh"<sup>4</sup>. In Lebanon, media played a historic role not only towards freedom of expression but more prominently in the establishment of the country's political system. The press did more than monitor and critique politics, it was actually used as a tool in political survival in Lebanon. In many cases journalists gained some fame and established their names then made the leap into politics<sup>5</sup>.

But what was at the heart of this "excellence of journalism"? Was it freedom of the press? The strong educational infrastructure that trained

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(1) Mahamad Kawas. "Lebanon's Media Crisis." *Arab Weekly* 55 (2016): p. 22.

(2) Media Landscapes. "Lebanon." *European Journalism Centre*. Beirut, 2017

(3) AFP. "Why are Lebanese dailies falling silent?" *The New Arab* 31 March 2016.

(4) Mellor, Noha. *The Making of Arab News*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

(5) Kawas. "Lebanon's Media Crisis." *Arab Weekly*

journalists and prepared them for the field? Was it a unique collection of talent in this small country? It seems that while the educational system was strong, it was not exceptional. As for the freedom of the press, it was unique, due to the many factions and political parties all controlling their own platform—this created a diversity of voices and platforms and a multiplicity of opinions allowing for an exceptional freedom of expression<sup>6</sup>.

Yet all of this was not the vital difference that set “Lebanese Media” apart from the region’s; it was a small portion of the real cause of this success. In the first half of the twentieth century hundreds of newspapers had sprouted in Lebanon; “Lebanon’s press industry benefited from placing reporters and correspondents in capitals around the world as well as its unique role in bridging East and West”<sup>7</sup>. What truly was the cause was the unique political patronage of many external powers and their internal partners and representatives, all racing to create new media outlets to voice their political views and agendas<sup>8</sup>. Even the very creation of so many media outlets meant that no independent media outlet could exist: because of supply and demand... there simply was and still remains too much supply for very little demand; thus economically it remains impossible to create media outlets that are not “sponsored”<sup>9</sup>.

“Lebanon’s media scene was once a unique theatre for different political regimes in the Arab world to flex their muscles”<sup>10</sup>. With the rise of political and sectarian polarization in the region from 1970 to 2000 came a huge surge of regional funding of Lebanese Media. The country became a media hub for the region and thus “managed

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(6) Kawas. “Lebanon’s Media Crisis.” *Arab Weekly*  
Sarah El-Richani. *The Lebanese Media: Anatomy of a System in Perpetual Crisis*.  
Palgrave Macmillan 2016.

(7) Kawas. “Lebanon’s Media Crisis.” *Arab Weekly*

(8) Trombetta, Lorenzo. “Lebanon Media.” *Media Landscapes*, 2017.

(9) Tarek Ali Ahmad. “Why the Lebanese media industry continues to suffer.” 14 Sept 2016.  
*Al Arabiya in English*. 3 Dec 2017. <<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/television-and-radio/2016/09/14/Why-the-Lebanese-media-industry-continues-to-suffer.html>>.

Karim Barakat. “Media crisis in Lebanon: political or economic?” 31 March 2016. *The New Arab*. 20 Nov 2017. <<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2016/3/31/media-crisis-in-lebanon-political-or-economic>>.

(10) Kawas. “Lebanon’s Media Crisis.” *Arab Weekly*

to attract important financial support for its publications<sup>11</sup>. Investors included Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Tunisia's former president Ben Ali as well as Saudi royals<sup>12</sup>. The Investors also include Palestinian Liberation Organization (while headed by Yasser Arafat), various Qatari families, Arab Nationalist parties, Socialist parties, as well as numerous Western investors from various countries and regions all of whom financed an economically non-viable media structure<sup>13</sup>.

Gulf countries, Iraq and Libya, used to finance the Lebanese press so that it would carry out political battles [on their politicians' behalf]. As a result, Lebanese editors thought big and spent a lot of money. But today, that foreign money is gone.<sup>14</sup>

All of this helped in creating freedom of expression via diversity of funding and multiplicity of opinions, “an arena of political patronage and domestic and foreign influence peddling”<sup>15</sup>, but more importantly a bubble in which Lebanon’s media could flourish financially. The bubble saw the growth of media sectors: more TV stations, radio stations, print media... Now the bubble has burst!

In short: the funding has stopped, “Lebanon appears to be headed toward economic bankruptcy. Its chronic fiscal deficit, compounded with a trade deficit, is exposing the country’s financing needs”<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore the “Arab Spring” and recent political turmoil in the last decade have overthrown many of the old “investors” and thus their funds have vanished<sup>17</sup>. This is coupled with the fact that the “sidelining of Lebanese politics today manifested itself in funds shortage. The media

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(11) Barakat. “Media crisis in Lebanon: political or economic?” 31 March 2016

(12) Chloé Domat. “Is the writing on the wall for Lebanon’s news industry? .” *Middle East Eye* 15 January 2017.

(13) Alsharq-Team. “Media in Lebanon – A System of Crisis for a Nation in Crisis?” 09 11 2017. *Al Sharq*. 2 Dec 2017. <<http://www.alsharq.de/2017/mashreq/libanon/media-in-lebanon-a-system-of-crisis-for-a-nation-in-crisis/>>.

Kawas. “Lebanon’s Media Crisis.” *Arab Weekly*.

Domat. “Is the writing on the wall for Lebanon's news industry? .” *Middle East Eye*

Barakat. "Media crisis in Lebanon: political or economic?" 31 March 2016

(14) Chloé Domat. “Is the writing on the wall for Lebanon's news industry? .” *Middle East Eye* 15 January 2017.

(15) Trombetta, Lorenzo. “Lebanon Media.” *Media Landscapes*, 2017.

(16) Michael Young. “Is Lebanon Heading Towards Economic Bankruptcy?” *Carnegie*, 2017.

(17) Kawas. “Lebanon’s Media Crisis.” *Arab Weekly*.

crisis is then the latest episode in the Lebanese political deadlock”<sup>18</sup>.

Firstly, we have a defective media market and secondly, and more importantly, the media is funded [by political parties] and we are suffering from a large-scale political and economic crisis and thus the media was first to fall victim to this.<sup>19</sup>

To add upon all this Gulf Countries launched their own TV Channels, Media outlets and print media; preferring to swap sponsoring “Lebanese Media” outlets with the creation of their own (like *Al Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*) that simply broadcast and distribute to Lebanon and the entire region<sup>20</sup>. The new technology and ease of digital technology and media have made it more alluring for countries to create their own outlets rather than sponsor others.

So where does that leave Lebanon’s media which were “plagued by political funding” that allowed for a “lack of proper education” and training for those working in the media sectors; since they simply relied on “sponsors” rather than their own means to achieve and succeed<sup>21</sup>? Well the media outlets and industry in Lebanon remain “hostage to political agendas imposed by regional powers”<sup>22</sup>. Now that the bubble has burst, there is no longer any use for the hostage. Hence the position where we stand today.

Today regretfully Lebanese media have “lost [their] impact and... authority”<sup>23</sup>. Lebanese media are “drowning” and nothing is being done to save them in any way<sup>24</sup>. Simply put the Lebanese have way too many outlets for not enough audience. Thus even when media outlets are working properly, which is not at all the case, they are still not economically viable<sup>25</sup>. Hence, even though the current “business

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(18) Barakat. “Media crisis in Lebanon: political or economic?” 31 March 2016

(19) Tarek Ali Ahmad. “Why the Lebanese media industry continues to suffer.” 14 Sept 2016. *Al Arabiya in English*

(20) Domat. “Is the writing on the wall for Lebanon's news industry?.” *Middle East Eye* 15

(21) Ahmad. “Why the Lebanese media industry continues to suffer.” 14 Sept 2016

(22) Barakat. “Media crisis in Lebanon: political or economic?” 31 March 2016

(23) AFP. “Why are Lebanese dailies falling silent?” *The New Arab* 31 March 2016.

(24) Al Arabiya Media News. “Who is to blame for Lebanon’s media crisis?” *Al Arabiya News*. 25 March 2016

(25) Nada Bakri. “Lebanese media is 'in state of crisis'.” *The Daily Star* 17 Dec 2004  
Nabil Dajani. *Disoriented Media in a Fragmented Society: The Lebanese Experience*. Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992.

model” is not working, the few surviving media outlets in Lebanon are still fully reliant on local, regional and international “political donors”<sup>26</sup>.

For “Media in Lebanon” to survive they must be fully reshaped, the old systems and structures that the powers-that-be established must all be abandoned and new organic models established. We need to rebuild our media based on what the “real” audience wants and what the market could truly sustain.

Within the struggle of Lebanese media to clean out their own blind spots in areas of corruption and dependence on political “sponsors”, with the only perceived alternatives in co-dependence of content media and advertising, it seems high time to be honest about their chosen art. They must engineer and test new business models that cover the whole lifecycle of media, and of preaching truth as best as perceived<sup>27</sup>.

The media now, as they stand, no longer have funding, be it local or international<sup>28</sup>; nonetheless the content and structure remain in service of the sectarian elites and devoid of any material beneficial to national identity or development<sup>29</sup>. The new media need to go organically from the demands of the audience/market, be economically viable and profitable without outside sponsorship or patronage, and to be honest and not serve “the war propaganda”<sup>30</sup> nor as mouth piece for external powers<sup>31</sup>; they also need to have a sense of national service and identity<sup>32</sup>.

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(26) Alsharq-Team. “Media in Lebanon – A System of Crisis for a Nation in Crisis?” *Al Sharq*. 2 Dec 2017.

El-Richani. *The Lebanese Media: Anatomy of a System in Perpetual Crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016

(27) Thomas Schellen. “The Eternal Crisis: Media makers and their 2016 struggle for survival.” *Executive Magazine* 24 Jan 2017.

(28) Robin Mansell and Marc Raboy. *The Handbook of Global Media and Communication Policy*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

(29) Nada Bakri. “Lebanese media is 'in state of crisis!'” *The Daily Star* 17 Dec 2004.

Dajani. *Disoriented Media in a Fragmented Society: The Lebanese Experience*. Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992.

(30) Michael Young. “Is Lebanon Heading Towards Economic Bankruptcy?” Carnegie, 2017

(31) El-Richani. *The Lebanese Media: Anatomy of a System in Perpetual Crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016

(32) Dajani. *Disoriented Media in a Fragmented Society: The Lebanese Experience*. Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992

But the possibility of any reform in the Lebanese media remains far-fetched at best<sup>33</sup>. The powers-that-be in Lebanon are “morally and intellectually bankrupt”<sup>34</sup> and do “not seem willing to actually reform the system that is serving [them and their interests]... [instead] politicians will buy time through other gimmicks”<sup>35</sup>. Lebanon’s very power structure is innately halting any new ‘independent’ and/or market/need driven media (not just news but all media). As media are now a big part of identity, culture, society and, throughout the history of Lebanon, have been part of the political survival and success and remain so today,<sup>36</sup> the ‘feudal-like’ powers-that-be in Lebanon are not willing to allow for uncompromised voices. They want media in Lebanon to remain fully dependent on political patronage and outside sponsors to maintain control and avoid possible exposure or the rallying of opposing public opinions.

Thus it seems there is no realistic possibility to revitalize or reform the media outlets in Lebanon. The media outlets are on their way, if they have not already reached, to inevitable bankruptcy, closure or extreme downsizing. Thus the future lies elsewhere, not in the traditional outlets, not in the mediums controlled by the local, regional, or international powers-that-be. Rather in media forms that are lower cost and more accessible and, by very nature, not fully controllable. Low cost media outlets allow for the creation of content which does not rely on “donors” and “investors” and thus enables a new generation to create genuine content that is not compromised.

The future of media for Lebanon lies in “digital content”, for it has already begun to “replace printed [and traditional] content”<sup>37</sup>. Digital Online Media have already become a fact of life for all, whether a professional in media or simply a consumer<sup>38</sup>. The new advances in

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(33) Barakat. “Media crisis in Lebanon: political or economic?” 31 March 2016

(34) Young. “Is Lebanon Heading Towards Economic Bankruptcy?” Carnegie , 2017

(35) Ibid

(36) Dajani. *Disoriented Media in a Fragmented Society: The Lebanese Experience*. Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992

El-Richani. *The Lebanese Media: Anatomy of a System in Perpetual Crisis*. Palgrave Macmillan , 2016

(37) Bank Med. *Anaylisi of Lebanon's Media and Advertising Sector*. Bank Med. Beirut, 2014.

(38) Clay Shirky. “The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change.” *Foreign Affairs* 90.1 (2011): 28-41.

technology have created a generational divide which is wider than it has ever been, creating separation and miscommunication, as well as an inability for the older generation to naturally be part of the new media<sup>39</sup>. This all makes the new digital technology more and more enticing for Lebanon and the region.

Today journalists and media creators are finding more diverse and fascinating ways to tell their stories and create new content. For journalism the new digital era's most important feature is "transparency" and the ability for all to have a voice and to critique and participate<sup>40</sup>. This new technology has greatly affected everything in our lives, from culture to politics, identity, society and beyond<sup>41</sup>.

Our governments within the Middle East today, especially Lebanon, need to put in place policies to embrace and develop the new digital worlds rather than cower in fear and refuse the inevitable new medium; the tendencies to oppress and censor the new medium have proven to be a failure already<sup>42</sup>. Lebanon and developing nations need to realize that "fighting" the new digital medium is doomed to failure<sup>43</sup>.

One has to only look at the success of the new platforms for the extremist parties to see that the future lies there. The "online extremism" as it is referred to, inclusive of extremist right-wing parties and ISIS and many others, has helped such groups base the major part of their existence on these new digital platforms<sup>44</sup>. Traditional media

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(39) Jean M Twenge. *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. Atria Books, 2017.

(40) Rebecca Sian Wyde. "What is the future of journalism?" *The Guardian - International Edition* 15 April 2015.

(41) Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito and Danah Boyd. *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics*. Ed. 1. Polity, 2015

(42) Mike Shoag. *Can Social Media Help Developing Countries? Absolutely!* 25 July 2016. 28 Nov 2017. <<https://forumone.com/ideas/can-social-media-help-developing-countries-absolutely>>.

Maria Salam. "Role of Mass Media in Enhancing Education in Bangladesh." *Digital Development Debates* 2017.

(43) Jenkins, Henry. *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*. NYU Press, 2016.

(44) Steven Luckert. "Extremists Are Thriving On Social Media. How Should We Respond?" n.d. *Huffington Post*. <[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-luckert/extremists-are-thriving-o\\_b\\_14390260.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-luckert/extremists-are-thriving-o_b_14390260.html)>.



have not been able to overcome them and governments' attempts to censor the online digital realm have all failed<sup>45</sup>. The truth today is that the new digital media have overcome the traditional media; one simply has to look at the most notorious sensations of digital media that have used this outlet so successfully as part of their recruitment, success, and progress<sup>46</sup>.

Arab youth are part of the "New Arab Digital Generation", transforming the media industry from news to entertainment; they have moved away from traditional and more towards new digital realms. These allow them more freedom, are trust-worthy, and cannot be censored and controlled like traditional media have been and are and still being<sup>47</sup>.

At present there are more than 17 million people in the Middle East using the new digital media as their news source that is trusted more than traditional media<sup>48</sup>. "Arab nationals are more likely than Americans to get news from social media, and younger Arabs are more likely to trust it than their older compatriots"<sup>49</sup>. Today we are seeing the digital transformation in full effect in the Middle East<sup>50</sup>. The new generation have lost faith in traditional media, especially news, they have more trust in social media and digital media<sup>51</sup>.

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(45) Jason Burke. "How the changing media is changing terrorism." *The Guardian* 25 Feb 2016

(46) Brendan I. Koerner. "Why ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War." *Wired Magazine* April 2016.

(47) Noura Al Kaabi and Jayant Bhargava. "Young Arabs drive digital media growth in the region." *The National* 18 Nov 2014.

Henry T. Azzam. *The Arab World: Facing the Challenge of the New Millenium*. I.B.Tauris, 2002.

(48) Aziz Douai and Mohamed Ben Moussa. *Mediated Identities and New Journalism in the Arab World: Mapping the "Arab Spring"*. Springer, 2016.

Dana Liebelson. "Digital media revolutionizes journalism in the Middle East." *International Journalists Network* March 2011.

(49) Everette E. Dennis and Robb Wood. "Media in the Middle East: A new study shows how the Arab world gets and shares digital news." Harvard University, 2017

(50) Ema Linaker. "Trends, Analysis And Predictions For Digital Media In MENA In 2017." *The Entrepreneur - Middle East* 3 Jan 2017

Beyond, The Internet in the Arab World: Egypt and. *Rasha A. Abdulla*. Peter Lang, 2007.

(51) Everette E. Dennis and Robb Wood. "Media in the Middle East: A new study shows how the Arab world gets and shares digital news." Harvard University, 2017.

To give a general vision of where digital media usage is going across the world, one only has to look at the consumption and creation statistics to be convinced. Surveys have shown that digital media are a “must have” for 90 percent of youth, while TV is only desired by 36 percent<sup>52</sup>. This is mainly because they see traditional media as “one-way” and as biased and reflective of the powers-that-be’s dominance and agenda<sup>53</sup>. In just 1 Internet minute all of this occurs: 16 million text messages, 4.1 million YouTube videos watched, 46,000 photos uploaded to Instagram, 452,000 Tweets sent, 3.5 million Google search queries, 900,000 Facebook logins, and over \$751,000 USD spent online<sup>54</sup>.

The Arab Digital Generation has already turned towards technology and digital media; even when governments black-out Internet or censor sites, the youth still find ways to access the material and these attempts to censor only increase the youth’s thirst to seek out and distribute and create more of that material<sup>55</sup>. Thus “to better meet their citizens’ needs, Middle Eastern governments must understand the differences between generations”<sup>56</sup>. Today the new generations in the Middle East have fully embraced the new technology, so the governments in the region need to not only embrace but understand that this is a must, and they need to create policy and digital advocacy for the medium so as to not only benefit the society, but be able to monitor and benefit from the new mediums<sup>57</sup>. Digital media has fully infused

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(52) Deep Patel. “Gen Z Hates TV, And What That Means For Traditional Advertising.” *Forbes* 30 May 2017

(53) Todd Spangler. “Younger Viewers Watch 2.5 Times More Internet Video Than TV (Study).” *Variety* 29 March 2016.

Deep Patel. “Gen Z Hates TV, And What That Means For Traditional Advertising.” *Forbes* 30 May 2017

(54) Jeff Desjardins. “What Happens in an Internet Minute in 2017?” 2 Aug 2017. *Visual Capitalist*. 1 Dec 2017. <<http://www.visualcapitalist.com/happens-internet-minute-2017/>>.

(55) Sarah Charlton. “Arab revolt: social media and the people’s revolution.” *Channel 4 News*. 25 Feb 2011

(56) Ramez T Shehadi and Jayant Bhargava. “The digital and technological ties uniting Middle East generations.” *The Guardian* 28 Nov 2013, International Edition ed.

American University in Cairo; Middle East Centre; University of Oxford. *The Real (Arab) World: Is Reality TV Democratizing the Middle East? : and Other Studies in Satellite Broadcasting in the Arab and Islamic Worlds*. American Univ in Cairo Press, 2006

(57) McKinsey. “Digital Middle East: Transforming the region into a leading digital economy.” McKinsey & Company, 2016.

itself into the Arab World and Middle East and its ability to affect the human population can no longer be underestimated or ignored<sup>58</sup>.

What is left is for government, policy-makers, and the older generation to not only “catch-up” but to actually get ahead of the technology; this is currently our weakest link. “There will be more change, more disruption, more reshaping, more connecting—all of which will lead to a broader, deeper, and more rewarding landscape for communicators than ever before”<sup>59</sup>. Schools, universities, governments and NGOs in the Middle East all need to organically reshape their entire policies and structures, so as to encompass, adopt and fully take advantage of the new digital media realms, especially when it comes to news, media and entertainment<sup>60</sup>. This means a fundamental change in attitude from top-down and a change in policy and emphasis, coupled with adequate training and “modernization” of all sectors, especially censorship, that need to head more towards monitoring than blocking and controlling.

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(58) Acerbi, Alberto. “A Cultural Evolution Approach to Digital Media” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* (2016).

(59) Ema Linaker. “Trends, Analysis And Predictions For Digital Media In MENA In 2017.” *The Entrepreneur - Middle East* 3 Jan 2017.

(60) Javier Lesaca. “Fight against ISIS reveals power of social media.” Tech Tank. Brookings, 2015.

Gabriel Weimann. “New Terrorism and New Media.” Wilson Center, n.d