

# MAPPING DIGITAL MEDIA: LEBANON



# Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon

**A REPORT BY THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS**

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# Mapping Digital Media

The values that underpin good journalism, the need of citizens for reliable and abundant information, and the importance of such information for a healthy society and a robust democracy: these are perennial, and provide compass-bearings for anyone trying to make sense of current changes across the media landscape.

The standards in the profession are in the process of being set. Most of the effects on journalism imposed by new technology are shaped in the most developed societies, but these changes are equally influencing the media in less developed societies.

The **Mapping Digital Media** project, which examines the changes in-depth, aims to build bridges between researchers and policymakers, activists, academics and standard-setters across the world. It also builds policy capacity in countries where this is less developed, encouraging stakeholders to participate and influence change. At the same time, this research creates a knowledge base, laying foundations for advocacy work, building capacity and enhancing debate.

The Media Program of the Open Society Foundations has seen how changes and continuity affect the media in different places, redefining the way they can operate sustainably while staying true to values of pluralism and diversity, transparency and accountability, editorial independence, freedom of expression and information, public service, and high professional standards.

The Mapping Digital Media project assesses, in the light of these values, the global opportunities and risks that are created for media by the following developments:

- the switch-over from analog broadcasting to digital broadcasting;
- growth of new media platforms as sources of news;
- convergence of traditional broadcasting with telecommunications.

Covering 60 countries, the project examines how these changes affect the core democratic service that any media system should provide—news about political, economic and social affairs.

The **Mapping Digital Media** reports are produced by local researchers and partner organizations in each country. Cumulatively, these reports will provide a much-needed resource on the democratic role of digital media.

In addition to the country reports, the Open Society Media Program has commissioned research papers on a range of topics related to digital media. These papers are published as the **MDM Reference Series**.

# Mapping Digital Media: Lebanon

## Executive Summary

Lebanon is considered as one of the freest countries in a region dominated by dictatorships. However, it is plagued by sectarian divisions and a confessional government system. Political groups often form around sects and traditional feudal leaders, almost all of whom are supported by foreign countries. Media development, and digital media development in particular, reflects this harsh reality.

Thanks to digital media, Lebanon's residents have access to a variety of news platforms, from 24-hour cable channels to internet sites and text message services. Despite easy access to Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, CNN, BBC, and others through subscriptions to pirated cable bundles or satellite receivers, Lebanese households prefer local news channels. However, this does not translate into greater plurality of opinions. Many new sources simply replicate the voices expressed through traditional media. Whatever plurality there is, mostly predated media digitization. For plurality was always present, with Lebanon's different political parties more or less free to express themselves.

Most of the country's news media outlets support and represent the agenda of a political personality or party. And most of them are owned, managed, or financed by local or regional powers. While this structure ensures a pluralistic press system, it transforms many of the news media into propagandists for their patrons.

The *za'im* (Leader) system, a socio-political power structure where a feudal elite dominates public life and represents the interests of the country's religious sects, leaves little room for independent and marginalized voices, or for diversity—unless it be the diversity of this same elite. Although the Lebanese people choose their representatives more or less freely, they tend to elect their members of parliament from a limited pool of dominant politicians and their less powerful, but closely affiliated, allies. Independent candidates are rarely able to join the public discourse. No candidates have yet used digital media to seriously contest this system, although some youth groups have used social media to react to specific issues in political campaigns.

The same political agendas reflected in traditional media also exist online. According to *Arab Media Outlook 2009–2013*, the top news websites in Lebanon belong to, or reflect, the same political parties that own the country's traditional media.

However, some emerging voices have carved out a space with blogs and online social networking tools. A growing community of online activists exerts some influence in the socio-political and cultural realms, especially among young people, but they have yet to rival the power of traditional media.

Multiple political assassinations, massive protests, a major Israeli assault in 2006, street fights in 2008, constant shifts in top government posts, and mounting sectarian tensions reflecting local and regional power struggles have, moreover, made the work of journalists increasingly difficult. The intensified partisanship that most Lebanese media have exhibited since 2005 has helped to lower standards.

In this context of political instability, journalists agree that digitization has a positive effect on their work, but they complain that the media are far from exploiting its potential. Newspapers merely post their print stories on the net without taking advantage of interactivity. Journalists interviewed for this report evinced a healthy distrust of the uncontrolled quality of online material. They also suggest that digital media outlets which support citizen journalism actually exacerbate partisan bias.

At the same time, social activism has benefited from digitization. The first draft of a comprehensive animal rights law, the banning of the honor crime code from the law, the protection of 170 historic buildings slated for demolition, and greater media coverage of issues concerning migrant/domestic workers were all achieved through digital activism. Organizations' official websites and Facebook groups are the most commonly used digital tools, and have the greatest impact.

Digital activists still face many hurdles, including poor internet speeds, access to resources, privacy issues, lack of skilled personnel, general lack of legislation and government support, issues surrounding the sectarian system, and censorship. Nevertheless, activists broadly agree that the advantages offered by digital platforms and social media greatly outweigh the disadvantages.

Digitization has had little or no effect on changes in the media market or the impact of ownership on media performance and independence. This may be because Lebanon remains in a protracted state of transition to digitization, exacerbated by a rough political climate.

Market changes are few and limited to the entrance of a handful of new players who were excluded earlier for political reasons. They are simply new political players mimicking established (partisan) media groups in their ownership and performance. These include OTV, Murr TV, and their affiliated radio stations, in addition to various websites, most of which are extensions of traditional media or mouthpieces of political parties, and in most cases both. One exception is *Al-Akhbar* newspaper, which represents a unique form of independence and an exceptional success story, propelled at least partly by advances in online media.

The current business model that Lebanese media rely on has not been affected by digitization. It still relies on partisan and foreign financial support, in addition to the traditional business models which mainstream media have used for decades.

However, interviews with various executives indicate that new business models for the media are being actively considered, based on increased commercialization, aggressive marketing, and a move to online media investment, especially in regard to regional audiences and external competition. This does not mean, however, that partisan and foreign cash-flows will stop any time soon.

Laws and regulations that govern traditional media have been applied to the digital media, and special laws and regulations for the internet, mobile telephony, and other digital media have yet to be established. Likewise, the old mode of operation that put the traditional media firmly in the grip of dominant politico-sectarian groups, and keeps them there, is also at work with the digital media. No concrete regulations, efforts, or plans have been put in place to help citizens, and the laws and proposed regulations mainly serve the interests of the operators and businesses without any idea of limiting the powers of the dominant politicians and sectarian groups that control traditional and new media alike.

The same system and logic that govern the broadcast media and allocate broadcast licenses to the dominant political powers also determine the licensing of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and the operation of mobile phone services

Although the government has occasionally tried to improve this situation—for example, when the Ministry of Information launched consultations in 2010 with media owners, journalists, advocacy groups, and politicians to identify parameters for a new comprehensive legal framework—Lebanon will have to make gigantic efforts before it can hope to embrace the digital era with a set of laws and regulations that could meet the needs of citizens and business.

The government has started to crack down on social media activists and bloggers, trying to eliminate critical online content, closing social media forums, and tracking down the people behind them. Stories of low-profile police arrests, interrogations, and intimidations abound in the social media arena and the blogosphere.

In 2010, the public prosecutor accused three citizens of defaming President Michel Suleiman, after they posted negative comments on their blogs and on a Facebook group that the president's supporters had created. Imad Bazzi, an activist who turned to blogging after being jailed several times for critical newspaper articles, found that online journalism was no protection. Mr Bazzi has said that he and six other bloggers have been arrested, interrogated, and intimidated many times since 2005.

Extra-legal methods have been used to identify the individuals behind anonymous online postings and web content. Such incidents are mostly low-profile and go unreported by the mainstream media, in part because they are often kept secret by the individuals who have been intimidated and threatened.

# Context

The small state of Lebanon comprises a broad spectrum of cultures, chronic political instability, and a precarious economy. Many perceive the country as one of the most liberal and democratic in the Arab world, with its population constituting a mosaic of religious sects and ideologies. Lebanese people brag about having the freest country in a region dominated by dictatorships. Still, the country is plagued by sectarian divisions and a confessional government system, with political groups often forming around sects and traditional feudal leaders, almost all of whom are supported by foreign countries.

The vast majority of Lebanon's population is considered Arab, with a small minority of Armenians and a growing foreign workforce, including domestic workers and laborers from South Asia, Africa, and neighboring Arab countries, especially Syria and Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The state recognizes 17 religious sects, the five largest of which are Shia, Sunni, Maronite, Druze, and Orthodox. The government system guarantees that these sects control the main positions in government.

Lebanon's sectarianism also constitutes its main distinguishing cultural characteristic and the source of its peculiar freedom, multiculturalism, and diversity, spanning the most conservative to the most liberal. Foreign languages, especially English and French, are widely spoken along—and sometimes simultaneously—with the native Arabic.

Despite the constant political turmoil and economic problems, Lebanon has maintained high literacy and school enrollment rates, in addition to high brain-drain rates. Overall literacy exceeds 90 percent, with extremely low illiteracy rates (less than 4 percent) among those younger than 40.<sup>2</sup> In 2008, the country enrolled 907,211 school students and 167,165 higher education students.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Republic of Lebanon, Central Administration of Statistics, "Lebanon in Figures, 2008," at <http://www.cas.gov.lb/> (accessed 1 February 2011) (hereafter Republic of Lebanon, "Lebanon in Figures").

2. Republic of Lebanon, "Lebanon in Figures."

3. Republic of Lebanon, "Lebanon in Figures."

Over 86 percent of the country's estimated 4.2 million inhabitants are urban dwellers. Most of them are concentrated in and around Beirut. Around 44 percent are under the age of 25.<sup>4</sup>

Economic indicators (see Table 1) reflect a weak and precarious economy. Although estimated numbers show total GDP making substantial increases after 2007 and expected to exceed US\$ 45 billion in 2012, the actual numbers between 2005 and 2007 reflect only a moderate increase from US\$ 21.8 billion to US\$ 25 billion, casting doubt on whether Lebanon will meet these estimates.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, GDP per head increased from US\$ 5,824 to US\$ 6,666 during the same period, which also witnessed a substantial increase in inflation. These indicators should be read in the context of the colossal total external debt that stood at 71 percent of GNI in 2009 and reached 117 percent in 2003.<sup>6</sup>

Three major political events since 2005 greatly influenced every aspect of Lebanon's media: the 2005 assassination of the prime minister, Rafic Hariri, and the major political realignments, shifts in power, and turmoil that followed; the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon; and the recent popular uprisings throughout the Arab world. When approaching any section of this study, the reader should keep in mind that many of the changes and trends were more likely due to these political events, the poor state of the economy, and the 1975–1990 civil war that shaped most of the post-1990 period, rather than the media shift from analog to digital.

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4. Republic of Lebanon, "Lebanon in Figures."

5. International Monetary Fund (IMF), "World Economic Outlook Database," October 2010.

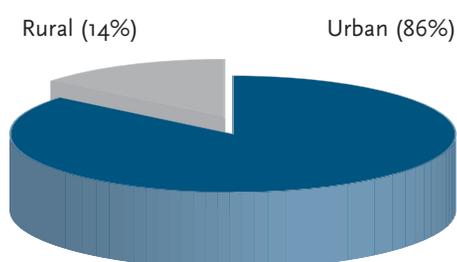
6. World Bank, "Country Data," at <http://data.worldbank.org/country/lebanon> (accessed 1 February 2011).

# Social Indicators

Population: 4.2 million (2010)

Households: 934,000 (2009)<sup>7</sup>

*Figure 1.*  
Rural–urban breakdown (% of total population)



*Source:* Republic of Lebanon, Central Administration of Statistics, “Lebanon in Figures,” 2008, at <http://www.cas.gov.lb/> (accessed 1 February 2011)

Lebanon has had no official census since 1932, partly because of fear that repercussions may result from unveiling substantial shifts in demographics, particularly in a country made up of many religious minorities that share political power based on their perceived proportion of the population. Estimates of religious composition fluctuate from one source to another. Lebanon has 18 official sects. A recent demographic study by Statistics Lebanon found “27 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 27 percent Shia Muslim, 21 percent Maronite Christian, 8 percent Greek Orthodox, 5 percent Druze, and 5 percent Greek Catholic, with the remaining 7 percent belonging to smaller Christian denominations.”<sup>8</sup>

7. International Telecommunication Union (ITU), December 2010.

8. US Department of State, “Lebanon,” November 2010, at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148830.htm> (accessed 5 March 2011).

Lebanon's ethnic composition is predominantly Arab (95 percent), in addition to a small minority of Armenians (4 percent).<sup>9</sup> Arabic is Lebanon's official language, although most Lebanese also speak either English or French or both. Armenian is widely spoken among the Armenian-Lebanese community. English has become more widely used and taught than French in the past two decades.<sup>10</sup>

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9. CIA, *The World Factbook*, "Lebanon," 2011, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html> (accessed 5 March 2011).

10. J. Melki, "Journalism and Media Studies in Lebanon," *Journalism Studies* 10(5) (2009), pp. 672–690.

# Economic Indicators

*Table 1.*  
Economic indicators

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010o	2011f	2012f
GDP (current prices), total in US\$ billion	21.86	22.44	25.06	30.08	34.93	39.24	41.46	44.90
GDP (current prices), per head in US\$	5,824	5,969	6,666	7,900	9,054	10,041	10,474	11,197
Gross National Income (GNI) (current \$), per head	5,670	5,670	6200	6,990	7,720	9,020	n/a	n/a
Inflation (average annual rate in % against previous year)	0.51	7.21	5.96	6.36	3.41	5.08	5.73	4.2

*Notes:* o: outlook; f: forecast; n/a: not available. Data on inflation after 2010 are estimates.

*Sources:* International Monetary Fund (IMF), "World Economic Outlook Database," December 2011, for data on GDP and inflation; World Bank (for GNI).

# 1. Media Consumption: The Digital Factor

## 1.1 Digital Take-up

### 1.1.1 Digital Equipment

Most Lebanese households can access content provided by digital media through signal converting devices, as the majority have TV and radio sets. As of 2005, 75 percent of households had radio,<sup>11</sup> and 98 percent had TV.<sup>12</sup>

In 2006, there were 30,000 subscribers to direct-to-home satellite services, and 700,000 subscribers to terrestrial multi-channel TV in 2005.<sup>13</sup> By 2009, 61 percent of Lebanese had access to satellite TV programs directly or through cable TV.<sup>14</sup> The percentage of households with computers increased from 25 percent in 2005 to 31.68 percent in 2010.<sup>15</sup> In addition, total fixed internet subscriptions increased from 230,000 to 315,000 during the same period,<sup>16</sup> and fixed broadband subscriptions increased from 130,000 to 200,000 between 2005 and 2010.<sup>17</sup>

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11. International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators*, June 2011; see <http://www.itu.int/opb/publications.aspx?media=electronic&parent=D-IND-WTID.OL-2011> (hereafter ITU, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators*, June 2011). Series: proportion of households with a radio; definition: proportion of households with a radio.

12. ITU, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators*, June 2011. Series: proportion of households with a TV; definition: proportion of households with a TV.

13. ITU, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators*, June 2011. Series: terrestrial multi-channel TV subscriptions; definition: number of subscribers to terrestrial multi-channel TV.

14. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape," Media Direction OMD Report, June 2010 (hereafter AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape").

15. ITU, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators*, June 2011. Series: proportion of households with a computer; definition: proportion of households with a computer.

16. Based on ITU, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators*, June 2011. Series 1: population; Series 2: fixed (wired) internet subscriptions per 100 inhabitants.

17. Based on ITU, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators*, June 2011. Series 1: population; Series 2: fixed (wired) broadband internet subscriptions per 100 inhabitants.

Household ownership of PCs is much less, but growing. By 2008, ownership of at least one PC per household increased from 24 percent in 2005 to 31.6 percent in 2010.<sup>18</sup> Of these households, around 82 percent had fixed broadband internet subscriptions in 2008. It is noteworthy that the number of internet subscriptions exceeds the number of households which own PCs (315,000 fixed internet subscriptions compared with 256,000 households with computers in 2008),<sup>19</sup> which suggests that people who do not have a PC at home connect to the internet at work or at internet cafés.

Internet users in Lebanon are mostly young. According to a 2009 study, 66 percent were aged 15 to 29, while only 18 percent were over 40.<sup>20</sup> The three chief activities internet users engage in are chatting, email exchange, and music downloads.<sup>21</sup> News consumption comes a distant fourth among both males and females.<sup>22</sup> And while Lebanese can access news through any of the mentioned media, local television remains the main source of news (see section 1.2.1). (See Table 2.)

*Table 2.*  
Households owning equipment, 2005–2010

	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010	
	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH
TV	784	98	793	98	899	98	908	98	915	98	n/a	98
Radio	602.4	75.3					n/a					
PC	192	24	203	25.1	241	26.3	256	27.6	276	29.5	n/a	31.6

*Notes:* HH: households owning the equipment; THH: total number of households in the country; PC: personal computer; n/a: not available.

*Source:* International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

### 1.1.2 Platforms

A plethora of media sources that carry news and entertainment content are available to the Lebanese public, but one main source dominates access to news: the illegal cable distribution of TV channels. Although concentrated mainly on film and TV series subscriptions, pay-TV penetration in Lebanon does not exceed 2 percent, one of the lowest averages in the region.<sup>23</sup> However, this number is misleading as most households

18. ITU, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators*, June 2011. Series: proportion of households with a computer; definition: proportion of households with a computer.

19. Based on ITU, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators*, June 2011. Series 1: population; Series 2: fixed (wired) internet subscriptions per 100 inhabitants; Series 3: proportion of households with a computer.

20. Target Group Index Lebanon (TGI Lebanon), “Lebanon Internet Scene,” 2009, market research report by Media Direction OMD (hereafter TGI Lebanon, “Lebanon Internet Scene”).

21. Social media platforms such as Facebook are included in this category.

22. Social media platforms such as Facebook are included in this category.

23. Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook 2009–2013*, Dubai Press Club, 2010, p. 98 (hereafter Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook*).

access prime pay-TV content, such as ShowTime, Orbit, Arab Radio and Television (ART), and Al Jazeera through illegal cable subscriptions that offer pirated bundles for a low monthly fee averaging US\$ 10. According to AGB-Ipsos Stat Lebanon, around 80 percent of households had access to pirated cable services in 2010.<sup>24</sup>

An estimated 660 illegal cable providers are distributed throughout the country, serving an estimated 1 million subscribers,<sup>25</sup> with each provider acting as a de facto gatekeeper for his geographic area.<sup>26</sup> They subscribe to the premium satellite packages and other pay-TV services and then retransmit the signals through cable wires to their own subscribers, bundling pay-TV with free-to-air channels to provide customers with an average of 80 channels.

Mushrooming throughout a lawless country after the destructive civil war, illegal cable providers became an omnipresent reality from the early 1990s. During that period and until 1999, they were naturally at odds with premium television service providers.<sup>27</sup> The significantly low price of the all-inclusive bundle provided by illegal cable vendors left little room for competition, a matter that prompted the main providers recently to ask for a higher annual fee.

Most people who do not subscribe to such services live in remote areas where the poor infrastructure precludes this option.<sup>28</sup> Alternatives to the dominant illegal cable services include having satellite receivers at home (15–20 percent of Lebanese households in 2009), opting for terrestrial TV (less than 5 percent of households in 2009), or subscribing to microwave video distribution systems (MVDS) such as Cablevision or Econet (around 1 percent of households in 2009).<sup>29</sup> Internet protocol television (IPTV) has not yet been adopted, mainly because of the slow internet service.

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24. AGB-Ipsos Stat Lebanon, “TV Reception 2008–2010,” 2010 (hereafter AGB-Ipsos Stat Lebanon, “TV Reception”).

25. Matt Nash, “Cup Killers,” *Now Lebanon*, 7 June 2010, at <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=175170> (accessed 20 January 2011).

26. Interview with Z.A., illegal cable provider, Beirut, 25 December 2010.

27. Interview with Sleiman Fares, president of Fiberwaves SAL and adviser for United Cable of Lebanon, Beirut, 7 January 2011. According to Mr Fares, when a copyright law was introduced in 1999 to protect Microsoft against piracy of computer programs, illegal cable providers were forced to negotiate with Showtime, Orbit, and ART. They reached an agreement whereby all providers would collectively pay an annual fee of US\$ 2.5 million to the three companies. Al Jazeera Pay-TV did not exist at the time. Showtime and Orbit merged in 2009 into Showtime-Orbit Network (OSN).

28. Interview with Sleiman Fares, president of Fiberwaves SAL and adviser for United Cable of Lebanon, Beirut, 7 January 2011.

29. AGB-Ipsos Stat Lebanon, “TV Reception.” Microwave video distribution systems transmit their signals from the station to subscribers via wireless digital broadcasting.

Table 3.

Platform for the main TV reception and digital take-up, 2005–2010

	2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010	
	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH	No. of HH ('000)	% of THH
Terrestrial reception*	396	12.9	196	7.9	171	7.9	150	7.4	155	4.2	107	3.3
– of which digital*	n/a											
Cable TV reception*	2,445	79.6	2,044	82.9	1,601	74.4	1,431	70.1	2,574	71.3	2,415	75.1
– of which digital*	8	3	22	0.9	21	0.9	20	1	17	0.5	29	0.9
Satellite reception*	279	9.1	248	10.1	433	20.1	524	25.6	1,025	28.4	827	25.7
– of which digital*	n/a											
IPTV*	n/a											
Total**	784	98	793	98	899	98	908	98	915	98	n/a	98

Notes: HH: households owning the equipment; THH: total number of households in the country; n/a: not available.

Sources: \* Ipsos Stat Lebanon AGB NMR; \*\* ITU.

As Table 3 shows, there is little information about digital reception in Lebanon, with the exception of cable and possibly satellite reception. This is partly because the transition to digital has not yet been implemented officially (see section 2). The small number of receivers of digital cable also reflects the fact that most audiences still watch analog TV.

According to the official Digital Migration Strategy for TV Broadcasting, most television services in Lebanon are delivered via UHF free-to-air analog TV, MVDS, unlicensed cable TV, wireless distribution, and direct-to-home satellite (DTH). All the UHF terrestrial television broadcasters in Lebanon still employ analog transmission, and most household TV receivers are analog too. The main digital television services are delivered via satellite and digital video broadcasting multicast services (DVB-MS). To receive digital signals, subscribers use a set-top box that decrypts the signal and converts the digital TV signal to analog.<sup>30</sup>

Table 4.

Internet and mobile telephony penetration rates (total subscriptions as % of total population), 2005–2010

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Internet	5.6	7.5	6.2	7.5	n/a	n/a
– of which broadband	3.2	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.7	4.7
Mobile telephony <sup>12</sup>	24.5	27.0	30.4	34.2	57.0	68.0
– of which 3G	n/a					

Note: n/a: not available.

Source: ITU.

30. Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), “Digital Migration Strategy for TV Broadcasting,” November 2008, at <http://www.tra.gov.lb/Digital-Migration-Strategy-for-TV-Broadcasting-plan> (accessed 1 February 2011).

Although in 1994 Lebanon was among the region's first adopters of mobile communication services, today it is falling behind most of its neighbors. In 2008, broadband penetration in Lebanon reached only 5 percent,<sup>31</sup> compared with 20 percent in Cyprus and 11 percent in Qatar.<sup>32</sup> The same year, mobile penetration stood at 35 percent in Lebanon, compared with 131 percent in Cyprus and 201 percent in Qatar.<sup>33</sup> The reason for this stagnation may partly be attributed to the high cost of mobile telephony. In fact, Lebanon is among the region's most expensive providers of mobile phone and internet services, with residents paying, for example, three times the price charged for one Megabyte per second (Mbps) in Morocco.<sup>34</sup> (Section 5.1.1 considers the debate on internet and mobile telephony technology in Lebanon.)

## 1.2 Media Preferences

### 1.2.1 Main Shifts in News Consumption

The introduction of digital media provided Lebanon's residents with a variety of platforms for news, from 24-hour cable news channels, such as Al Jazeera, to internet news sites, and text messages breaking news to subscribers. However, this variety of options does not always increase the plurality of opinions. Indeed, many of the new sources simply replicate the voices expressed through traditional media (see section 1.2.2). Still, it is important to note that most mainstream media, especially TV, have yet to transition to digital and the country remains in a transitional period between the digital and analog eras.

Although satellite news stations such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, CNN, BBC, and others are readily available in most households through subscriptions to pirated cable bundles or satellite receivers, most viewers prefer local news channels.<sup>35</sup> A 2009 Nielsen survey revealed that none of the international satellite news channels was among the preferred top 10 channels in Lebanon.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in a survey that asked viewers about their favorite television stations, 61 percent of participants answered Lebanese Broadcasting Company (LBC), while New TV (NTV) received 54 percent, Orange TV (OTV) 39 percent, Future TV 27 percent, Murr TV 26 percent, and Al Manar TV 25 percent.<sup>37</sup> The remaining four channels chosen by participants were regional and foreign stations focusing on entertainment and sports.<sup>38</sup> (See section 1.3.2.)

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31. ITU, June 2011.

32. J. Haidar, "Lebanon's Choking Telecommunication Bottlenecks," *ArabAd* magazine, September 2010, p. 9 (hereafter Haidar, "Lebanon's Bottlenecks").

33. Haidar, "Lebanon's Bottlenecks."

34. Haidar, "Lebanon's Bottlenecks."

35. This is true regardless of whether local channels broadcast through analog or digital signals. OTV (launched in 2007) and Murr TV (forced to shut down in 2002 and relaunched in 2009), two local TV channels, only broadcast via satellite.

36. Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook*, p. 97.

37. Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook*, p. 97. As indicated in the report, the percentages do not add up to 100 percent because many people chose several stations as their favorite.

38. Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook*, p. 97.

Regarding online media, a study in *Arab Media Outlook* noted that 23 percent of Lebanese people read news online more than five times a week, while 40 percent do so between one and four times a week, and 37 percent four times a month or less.<sup>39</sup> In addition, a 2009 Nielsen survey found that the top Arabic news websites Lebanese people visit most often are Tayyar.org (20 percent), Annahar.com (10 percent), Almanar.com.lb (7 percent), and Lebanese-forces.com (7 percent).<sup>40</sup> Comparably, 82 percent said the website they visited most often was Facebook.

Finally, Lebanon's unstable security has encouraged many to subscribe to breaking news services via text messaging. In addition to many news websites (e.g. Al Nashra and Lebanon Files), radio stations (e.g. Free Lebanon), local TV (e.g. LBC and NTV), and regional satellite channels (e.g. Al Jazeera) provide this service, usually for a monthly fee of US\$ 10.<sup>41</sup>

### 1.2.2 Availability of a Diverse Range of News Sources

The scholar N. Dajani described Lebanese newspapers as “viewpapers.”<sup>42</sup> His contention applies to most of the country's news media outlets, each of which supports and represents the agenda of a political personality or party. Most outlets are owned, managed, or financed by local or regional powers.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, this structure ensures a pluralistic press system in which journalists are free to criticize the government—or at least some sides in the government—without retribution. On the other hand, the media's reliance on political supporters transforms most of them into propagandists for their patrons' viewpoints.<sup>44</sup>

Looking at the content of local television channels, for example, one can easily tell that OTV is a mouthpiece for the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Future TV for the Future Movement (FM), Al Manar for Hezbollah, and NBN for the Amal Party. Murr TV and LBC, although more commercially oriented, clearly favor the March 14 Alliance (which had a parliamentary majority until January 2011), while NTV favors the March 8 Alliance (which has been in power since January 2011). The last three stations, although less conspicuously associated with political parties today due to current political alignments, nevertheless acted as propaganda organs for political parties or politicians in the past.<sup>45</sup>

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39. Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook*, p. 95.

40. Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook*, p. 95.

41. D. Abi Saab, “Breaking News Services: Cellular Phones Help Strengthen the Relationship between Audiences and their Favorite News Outlets. And LibanCall is Behind the Trend,” *Assafir* newspaper, 29 September 2009, at [www.elnashra.com/articles-1-15068.html](http://www.elnashra.com/articles-1-15068.html) (accessed 6 February 2011).

42. N. Dajani, *Disoriented Media in a Fragmented Society: The Lebanese Experience*, American University of Beirut, Beirut, 1992, p. 11 (hereafter Dajani, *Disoriented Media*).

43. M. Fandi, *(Un)Civil War of Words: Media and Politics in the Arab World*, Praeger, Westport, CT, 2007 (hereafter Fandi, *(Un)Civil War of Words*); C.B.T. Baldwin, “Lebanon,” in *World Press Encyclopedia* vol. 2, 2003, pp. 66–81; see [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_gx5223/is\\_2003/ai\\_n19143140/pg\\_8](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_gx5223/is_2003/ai_n19143140/pg_8) (accessed 6 February 2011); M.M. Hammoud and W. Afifi, “Lebanon,” in Y.R. Kamalipour and H. Mowlana (eds), *Mass Media in the Middle East: A Comprehensive Handbook*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1994, pp. 160–178 (hereafter Hammoud and Afifi, “Lebanon”).

44. Y. Dabbous, “Media with a Mission: Why Fairness and Balance are not Priorities in Lebanon's Journalistic Codes,” *International Journal of Communication* 4 (2010), pp. 719–737 (hereafter Y. Dabbous, “Media with a Mission”).

45. The Lebanese Forces started LBC, which during the war propagated their political agenda; the Communist Party founded New TV (NTV) before it sold it to the Khayat family; the owner Gabriel Murr (brother of former interior minister and deputy prime minister Michel Murr) used Murr TV to promote his parliamentary bid in 2002 before the government shut it down.

The political distribution of TV stations more or less extends to print, radio, and even digital news platforms. The same political agendas reflected in traditional media exist online. According to *Arab Media Outlook 2009–2013*, the top news websites in Lebanon belong to, or reflect, the same political parties that own the country's traditional media (see Table 5).<sup>46</sup>

Accordingly, it can reasonably be argued that digitization may not have helped increase news plurality in the country. On the one hand, plurality was always present, with Lebanon's different political parties more or less free to express themselves. On the other hand, the same pool of politicized voices and agendas merely migrated online. However, although alternative opinions—outside the given political allegiances—have so far had no significant presence, particularly in mainstream online news, some emerging voices have carved a respectable and growing space for themselves using blogs and online social networking tools. A growing community of online activists has succeeded in exerting some influence in the socio-political and cultural realms, especially among young people, but they have yet to gain the power of traditional media (see sections 3.2 and 3.3).

## 1.3. News Providers

### 1.3.1 Leading Sources of News

#### 1.3.1.1 Print Media

Historically, Lebanon has had one of the highest ratios of private newspapers per head in the Arab world.<sup>47</sup> This remains true today despite a long-standing decree issued in 1953 to limit the number of licenses for newspapers to 25 permanent political dailies, among which up to 15 are Arabic political dailies.<sup>48</sup> According to the Ministry of Information, Lebanon today publishes 14 privately owned political daily newspapers,<sup>49</sup> 12 in Arabic, one in French, and one in English.<sup>50</sup> No accurate or independent figures on the newspapers' circulations exist.<sup>51</sup> The Ministry of Information states that the two most popular Arabic newspapers published are *Assafir* and *Annahar*, with 50,000 and 45,000 daily copies, respectively.<sup>52</sup> However, a local director of planning at Media Direction OMD contends that the real numbers are much lower.<sup>53</sup> He estimated that

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46. Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook*, p. 95.

47. W. Rugh, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics*, Praeger, Westport, CT, 2004.

48. A. Boutros, *Comprehensive Legal Matters in Print and Broadcast Media*, Dar al-Minhal, Beirut, Lebanon, 2009, p. 113 (Arabic ايضاق يف لم اشرا (م ال عال او رشن ل (hereafter Boutros, *Comprehensive Legal Matters*).

49. This number is not accurate, as some recently launched newspapers, such as *Al-Binaa* and *Al Jomhouria*, are not listed, while others that discontinued publication remain on the list.

50. Ministry of Information, "Newspapers, magazines and news agencies," n.d., at <http://www.ministryinfo.gov.lb/Main/MediaMap/Newspapers-magazinesandagencies.aspx> (accessed 18 November 2011).

51. L. Trombetta, "Media Landscape: Lebanon," European Journalism Centre, 8 November 2010, at [http://www.ejc.net/media\\_landscape/article/lebanon/#13](http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/lebanon/#13) (accessed 6 February 2011) (hereafter Trombetta, "Media Landscape: Lebanon").

52. Trombetta, "Media Landscape: Lebanon."

53. Interview with Wissam Chehabeddine, director of planning at Media Direction OMD, Beirut, 6 February 2010.

*Annahar's* circulation does not exceed 15,000, a figure consistent with a 2004 study on Arab media by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.<sup>54</sup>

Most Lebanese newspapers are serious in tone, heavily covering—and commenting on—local, regional, and international politics, and including social and cultural reports. With few exceptions, Lebanon's daily newspapers can be qualified as non-commercial. Many were not established chiefly to generate profit, and their content usually carries clear ideological and political undertones.<sup>55</sup>

The 2009 national readership survey by Ipsos Stat estimated that the five most popular newspapers in Beirut were *Annahar*, *Al Balad*, *Al Mustaqbal*, *Assafir*, and *Al Akhbar*. Founded in 1933 and 1974, respectively, *Annahar* and *Assafir* have long been considered to be among the country's top newspapers. Focussing mainly on political news, they also cover social and cultural issues. Historically taking a rightist stance, *Annahar* today supports the March 14 Alliance, while the historically leftist *Assafir* supports the March 8 Alliance. Established by the Hariri family in 1995, *Al Mustaqbal* is a mouthpiece for the FM and its leader Saad Hariri, the former prime minister and son of the late Rafic Hariri. Founded in 2003, *Al Balad* is a commercial newspaper printed in tabloid format. Using aggressive and controversial promotional campaigns, it focusses on political, social, and cultural issues but tends to be more sensational.

Relaunched in 2006,<sup>56</sup> *Al Akhbar* quickly established itself as an audacious liberal newspaper, with investigative reports and a sharp critical tone. Uniquely featuring historically taboo subjects, the newspaper has been widely accused of supporting the March 8 Alliance and even of being the mouthpiece of Hezbollah, despite numerous reports harshly critiquing this political alliance's leaders, ideologies, and decisions. Nevertheless, the newspaper's tone contrasts starkly with the rhetoric and policies of the March 14 Alliance. *Al Joumhouria* and *Al Binaa* are the latest additions to the Lebanese newspaper scene. While little research about the two papers exists, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party controls the latter, while the former is controlled by former defense minister Elias Murr,<sup>57</sup> nephew of Gabriel Murr who controls the Murr family's media empire.<sup>58</sup>

### 1.3.1.2 News Websites

Although the five most popular websites in Lebanon are not local (see section 3.1), Lebanese audiences tend to visit local websites for news. Popular national news sites tend to be an immediate source of mainstream news about Lebanon, particularly because they have been able to post breaking news items quickly.<sup>59</sup> Most

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54. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Statistics on Arab Media," *Arab Reform Bulletin* 2(11) (December 2004), at [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/New\\_Chart.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/New_Chart.pdf) (accessed 6 February 2011).

55. Y. Dabbous and A. Hamdan, "The Hunted," *IPI Global Journalist*, 1 January 2006, at <http://www.globaljournalist.org/stories/2006/01/01/the-hunted> (accessed 8 February 2011).

56. *Al-Akhbar* was first registered in 1953, and historically affiliated with leftist and communist Lebanese parties it did not publish regularly until 2006. Because the Lebanese press law allows the government to revoke the license of any registered periodical that fails to publish issues for three consecutive months (Press Media Law, art. 29, 1962), many license holders publish one issue every three months just to fulfill this regulation. Like many others, *Al-Akhbar* owners kept its license by following this tactic until it was bought by Hassan Khalil in 2006.

57. M. Akil, "Elia Murr's al Joumhouria Opens its doors to Al-Hakim" (Arabic «رملا سرايلا تيرومج» حشفت ل ادباوبأ حشفت), 28 November 2011, *Assafir* newspaper, at <http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?ArticleId=2711&EditionId=2013&ChannelId=47704> (accessed 29 November 2011).

58. Both newspapers have had old licenses that go back several decades, but are appearing for the first time as daily political newspapers.

of these local news websites were only recently established. Like offline news sources, some of them belong outright to political parties, while the rest tend to favor one side or the other. Also available are online versions of the same traditional media outlets (e.g. Naharnet.com, *Annahar's* news website). They do not, however, figure in the list of the top five most popular online news providers in Lebanon in 2011.<sup>60</sup>

The FPM's Tayyar.org is the most popular of these websites.<sup>61</sup> Established in 2001 to promote the FPM and the agenda of its leader General Michel Aoun, the site offers breaking, local, and international political news, in addition to cultural and social news. Elnashra.com, a self-proclaimed independent news site, occupies the second position. Its content nevertheless tends to sympathize with the perspectives of the March 8 Alliance and the FPM. Elnashra.com offers Lebanese and international instant and daily news, covering politics, technology, business, and other topics. It also provides live internet radio broadcasts and clippings from local newspapers. Third in rank, Lebanese-forces.com is the mouthpiece of the political party that carries its name. It provides the same variety of news others offer with an overt slant in favor of its owner's agenda. In fourth place, LebanonFiles.com mostly relays local news stories and bulletins from the mainstream news media, but also includes some independent reporting by its staff.<sup>62</sup> Finally, NowLebanon.com is a political and variety news website that favors the FM and the March 14 Alliance.<sup>63</sup>

*Table 5.*  
Most popular online news providers, 2011

Local news site	Global traffic rank	Traffic rank in Lebanon
1. Tayyar.org	4,657	7
2. Elnashra.com	8,894	8
3. Lebanese-Forces.com	14,267	11
4. LebanonFiles.com	17,687	12
5. NowLebanon.com	21,384	16

Source: Alexa.com, at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 10 February 2011).<sup>64</sup>

### 1.3.1.3 Television

Most Lebanese TV stations can be considered commercial, but all are owned, supported, or favorable to major local politicians. Lebanese TV programming includes a diverse diet of entertainment, news, and political talk shows. Newscasts and political talk shows dominate the primetime evening slots (7.45 p.m. to 11 p.m.), while international series and movies alongside locally produced shows and soap operas dominate

59. A. Itani, "Answers to Research Questions on Digital Content and News," ThinkMedia Labs, February 2011, p. 4.

60. Alexa.com, at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 10 February 2011).

61. Alexa.com, at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 10 February 2011).

62. See [www.lebanonfiles.com](http://www.lebanonfiles.com) (accessed 10 February 2011).

63. Trombetta, "Media Landscape: Lebanon."

64. According to the website, the ranking, which spans a period of one month, "is calculated using a combination of average daily visitors and page views over the past month. The site with the highest combination of visitors and page views is ranked #1."

the rest of the time. News content predominantly focusses on political content, particularly the activities and announcements of local and regional politicians. Newscasts offer little airtime to non-political news and often ignore social, lifestyle, and public interest news, including stories about crime, domestic violence, sectarianism, electricity shortages, and inflation.

On the rare occasions that these stories are covered, they are mostly contextualized within an attack on a politician usually opposed to the station's political patrons. Consistently, news talk shows focus on politicians and political analysis and often offer heated political debates. Investigative reporting programs have been rare but some stations, such as NTV, tend to invest in them more than others.

Until the mid-1980s, Lebanon's domestic television scene was limited to two stations that were first established as private outlets and then acquired by the government in 1977 and merged into one company called Télé Liban (TL) (see section 2). In 1985, LBC, then operated by the Lebanese Forces militia, went on air with a modest telecast schedule. Soon, it became the most popular station in the country. Its success encouraged political parties and businesspersons to venture into the field.<sup>65</sup> Subsequently, TV stations rapidly mushroomed until the 1994 Audiovisual Law limited their number to a handful of stations distributed among the major politicians who also represented the major religious sects.<sup>66</sup>

LBC has been the country's leading local station for the past 10 years, although its ratings have been declining recently (54 percent in 2005, 48 percent in 2007, and 42 percent in 2009).<sup>67</sup> Today, LBC is controlled by the Lebanese businessman and former Lebanese Forces sympathizer Pierre el-Daher.<sup>68</sup> Very rich in entertainment and locally produced Arabic entertainment and news shows,<sup>69</sup> the channel's news attracts a large audience, despite its being favorable today to the March 14 Alliance, a member of which is the Lebanese Forces party.

NTV is Lebanon's fastest growing local station.<sup>70</sup> Expanding its audience reach (21 percent in 2005, 29 percent in 2008, and 32 percent in 2010), it climbed from fourth to second rank in two years.<sup>71</sup> Relunched in 2001 by a local business tycoon Tahseen Khayyat after its forced closure in the mid-1990s by the government, the station tends to favor the March 8 Alliance, although it is one of the few in the country focussing on investigative reporting and often criticizing the political side it supports, albeit mildly.

Originally launched in 1991 by local businessman Gabriel Murr, Murr TV was shut down by the government in 2002 and relaunched at the beginning of 2009.<sup>72</sup> Its grid offers a handful of popular programs, but its

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65. D. Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World: A Survey of the Electronic Media in the Middle East*, Iowa State University Press, Ames, IA, 1999, pp. 67–82 (hereafter Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World*).

66. Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World*.

67. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

68. Trombetta, "Media Landscape: Lebanon."

69. Interview with Wissam Chehabeddine, director of planning at Media Direction OMD, Beirut, 6 February 2010.

70. Interview with Wissam Chehabeddine, director of planning at Media Direction OMD, Beirut, 6 February 2010.

71. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

72. Trombetta, "Media Landscape: Lebanon."

newscasts and political shows remain limited in popularity,<sup>73</sup> despite some recent gains. Like NTV, Murr TV offers a handful of popular programs and has also been gradually increasing its reach (21 percent in 2009, 25 percent in 2010).<sup>74</sup> The content of its newscasts and political talk shows puts it squarely within the March 14 Alliance.

Founded in 2007 as a mouthpiece for the FPM and its leader General Aoun, OTV features a handful of leading entertainment and news shows that explicitly publicize his agenda. The station increased its audience reach from 18 percent in 2008 to 26 percent in the first half of 2010, and remains highly popular in FPM strongholds.<sup>75</sup>

Launched in 1993 by the former prime minister and billionaire businessman Rafic Hariri, Future TV is a declining station, with its 38 percent reach in 2005 sinking to 20 percent in 2009.<sup>76</sup> Mouthpiece for the FM and its leader Saad Hariri, it has moved from second to fourth rank in two years.<sup>77</sup> Like OTV, its newscasts and political programs overtly publicize the FM's agenda and its programs are mainly popular in the party's strongholds.<sup>78</sup>

Also of note is Hezbollah's Al Manar TV, which continued to broadcast after the 1994 Audiovisual Law without a license,<sup>79</sup> with the understanding that it would only cover news about the resistance against Israel. Eventually, however, the station had a full array of programs with the clear support of Hezbollah and its political and cultural agenda. During the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, Al Manar's agenda-setting role and its survival of constant Israeli bombardment caused its popularity to surge across the Arab world.<sup>80</sup>

All of the above outlets operate websites for their stations. Except for Almanar.com.lb, which can be compared with the Al Jazeera website, most of these online platforms are typically not online news sites but could rather be described as online promotion for the television stations. Most of them do include the latest newscast feeds and several offer a video of their news bulletins or a specific show, but these sites do not act as comprehensive news websites that viewers could use as an alternative to the television station. In addition, the political parties that control most of these websites have more active alternative platforms online, namely, the party's own website. Tayyar.org, for example, is the official website for General Aoun's FPM. It is more popular than OTV's online version, and ranks as Lebanon's seventh most popular website (see section 3.1.1).<sup>81</sup>

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73. Interview with Wissam Chehabeddine, director of planning at Media Direction OMD, Beirut, 6 February 2010.

74. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

75. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

76. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

77. Interview with Wissam Chehabeddine, director of planning at Media Direction OMD, Beirut, 6 February 2010.

78. Interview with Wissam Chehabeddine, director of planning at Media Direction OMD, Beirut, 6 February 2010.

79. Al-Manar eventually got a license in 1998.

80. Interview with Wissam Chehabeddine, director of planning at Media Direction OMD, Beirut, 6 February 2010.

81. According to Alexa.com, "The 1 month rank is calculated using a combination of average daily visitors and page views over the past month." See Alexa.com, "Top Sites in Lebanon," at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 23 March 2011).

The gains and losses of these TV stations are directly related to the fortunes of the political parties that support them. As mentioned in section 5.1.3, the success of (and even the granting of licenses to) these stations are related to the success and dominance of the political parties that back them. The rise of OTV, for example, followed the return of General Aoun from forced exile and the gains of his party. The closing and reopening of Murr TV and the granting of a license to NTV are likewise directly related to the political shifts that affected their owners.

*Table 6.*  
Reach of television stations (%), 2005–2010

Station	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Jan–Jun 2010
LBC	54	48	48	47	42	43
NTV	21	23	22	29	29	32
Murr TV	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	21	25
OTV	n/a	n/a	5	18	20	26
Future TV	38	33	31	25	20	20

*Note:* n/a: not available. Reach refers to the percentage of the total audience exposed to the outlet at least once on an average day.

*Source:* AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, “Lebanon Media Landscape.”

### 1.3.1.4 Radio

Lebanon boasts one public and 41 privately owned radio stations (20 AM and 22 FM),<sup>82</sup> most of which have commercial licenses with grids heavily based on music, entertainment talk shows, and socio-cultural programs. Only a handful have “class-A” licenses that allow them to broadcast political content and news. Consistent with other Lebanese news media, radio news providers reflect the agendas of their political and sectarian affiliations. (See Table 7.)

Currently the leading news radio station, the FPM-affiliated Sawt El Ghad, boasted a 19 percent reach in 2010.<sup>83</sup> Along with Arabic music and entertainment, the station mainly broadcasts bulletins of local and international political news. Long affiliated with the Lebanese Phalanges party and founded in 1975, Voice of Lebanon (*Sawt Lubnan*) is the first commercial radio station in the country. More serious and news-oriented than its counterparts,<sup>84</sup> it reached 18 percent of the population in 2010.<sup>85</sup> In the past few years, ownership of the station has been contested in the courts between the current leadership of the Phalanges party and the heirs of Simon Al Khazen, a former Phalanges vice-president who controlled the station in the period after

82. Trombetta, “Media Landscape: Lebanon.”

83. RDM Lebanon Wave 1, 2010, and Wave 2, 2009, “Lebanon Media Landscape,” Media Direction OMD Report (market research by AGB-Ipsos), June 2010 (hereafter RDM, “Lebanon Media Landscape”). Sawt El Ghad comes second in terms of reach after Radio Rotana Delta, which is exclusively devoted to music and entertainment programs.

84. Trombetta, “Media Landscape: Lebanon.”

85. RDM, “Lebanon Media Landscape.”

the civil war. In early 2011, the station was split into two stations using the same name, as both sides await the final court decision about the rightful license and name owner.<sup>86</sup>

Founded in 1978, Sawt-Lubnan Al Hurr is affiliated to the Lebanese Forces party. Mainly broadcasting Arabic political programs and news bulletins, the station had a 15 percent audience reach in 2010.<sup>87</sup> Also broadcasting in Arabic, Sawt Al Mada was established by the FPM in 2009. It had a 10 percent reach in 2010.<sup>88</sup> Radio Orient, affiliated to the FM, was founded in 1995. It features a mix of news, entertainment, and political and sports shows. Radio Orient broadcasts in Arabic but also includes two news bulletins in English and French.<sup>89</sup> Also of note are Hezbollah's Itha'at Al Nour, the Communist Party's once popular Sawt el-Shaab, and the SSNP-supported Sawt Al Hurriyat. Most of these stations also broadcast live online, and Radio Orient additionally broadcasts via satellite. Finally, Radio Liban is the only public radio station in Lebanon, established as Radio Orient in the mid-1930s (see section 2.1.1).

*Table 7.*  
Reach of radio stations offering news bulletins (%), 2009–2010

	2009	2010
Sawt El Ghad	22	19
Sawt Lubnan	18	17
Sawt Lubnan Al Hurr	17	15
Sawt Al Mada	9	10
Radio Orient	10	9

*Note:* Reach refers to the percentage of the total audience exposed to the outlet at least once on an average day.

*Source:* RDM Lebanon Waves 1 and 2, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

### 1.3.2 Television News Programs

LBC's evening newscast has for years been the leading news bulletin in Lebanon (10.11 rating points in 2009 compared with 3.1 points for the second best, NTV).<sup>90</sup> The station, however, has been steadily losing rating points to the competition. NTV, for instance, has been growing, reaching 4.13 rating points in 2010. In addition, OTV grew from 2.4 rating points in 2009 to 3.17 in 2010, and Murr TV went from 1.61 to 2.34 during the same period.<sup>91</sup>

86. L. Abou Rahal, "Two radio stations using the same name: Voice of Lebanon" (Arabic: «صوت لبنان»), Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=37&article=596667&issueno=11685> (accessed 20 November 2011) (hereafter Abou Rahal, "Two radio stations using the same name").

87. Abou Rahal, "Two radio stations using the same name."

88. RDM, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

89. RDM, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

90. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

91. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

As mentioned in section 1.2.1, Lebanese audiences favor the main local newscasts over regional and international alternatives. This was particularly true in the post-2005 period, when the country witnessed cataclysmic political events, including a series of high-profile political assassinations, including that of a prime minister, huge public demonstrations, a major shift in power after the departure of Syrian troops from the country, a destructive Israeli war in 2006, and a government in turmoil, with the post of prime minister changing hands four times during that period. Zeina Berjawi of the local *Assafir* newspaper notes that political events since 2005 have refocused the news and the audiences' attention on the local, rather than the regional and international: "The more local events occur and the worse things get, the more people consume local news."<sup>92</sup> (See Table 8.)

Table 8.

Ratings of the five most popular local television newscasts, 2009–2010

Channel (time slot)	2009	2010
LBC main news bulletin (8 p.m.)	10.1	8.9
NTV main news bulletin (7.45 p.m.)	3.1	4.1
OTV main news bulletin (7.45 p.m.)	2.4	3.1
Murr TV main news bulletin (7.52 p.m.)	1.6	2.3
Future TV main news bulletin (8 p.m.)	1.0	1.1

Source: AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

Lately, however, entertainment satellite channels have been winning Lebanese audiences away from their local TV stations, and particularly away from the local newscasts.<sup>93</sup> Although local TV stations still dominate the ratings, studies have shown that consumers—particularly women—are increasingly tuning in to satellite TV series and films during the local evening newscast time slot of 7.45–9 p.m. (see Figure 2).<sup>94</sup>

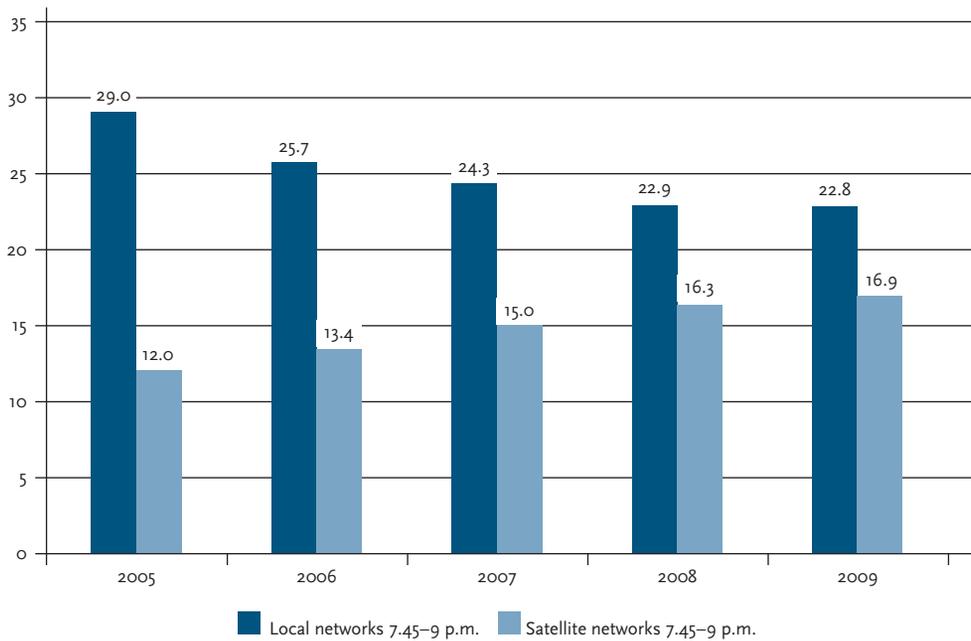
92. Interview with Zeina Berjawi, journalist for *Assafir* newspaper, Beirut, 27 December 2010.

93. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

94. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

Figure 2.

Television ratings (% of HH) of local and satellite networks, 2005–2009



Source: AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, “Lebanon Media Landscape.”

### 1.3.3 Impact of Digital Media on Good-quality News

Digital media have allowed the extension and multiplication of existing local news programming (through online, on air, and satellite media), while simultaneously pushing local news providers to improve the quality of their product and cater to a wider audience, due to pressure from the many new local, regional, and international competitors. However, the former effect of increased reach is more evident than the latter effect of improvement in content quality, mainly due to the calamitous local political events detailed above. In addition, because digital migration in Lebanon has also meant a migration of the patronage and partisanship that afflict the traditional media, the quality of news has more or less remained the same—particularly in terms of news objectivity. In other words, many of the digital platforms reflect the same partisan bias as their traditional counterparts, and often act as propaganda outlets for their political patrons.

Although both analog and digital media, taken together, do provide a pluralistic bouquet of voices and offer what may be described as a rich public sphere, the reality presents a diversity of dominant voices and hegemonic political agendas, while many other voices remain marginalized. Furthermore, most Lebanese people tend to follow almost exclusively news media that support their political affinities and hence have a biased understanding of the country’s political and socio-economic realities.<sup>95</sup>

95. Y. Dabbous, “Media with a Mission.”

While international news sources on satellite and online do offer alternatives to the local political agendas, studies indicate that the most popular news sources remain the partisan local newscasts on TV and their affiliated online websites. However, the same studies show that local audiences are slowly migrating to the alternative international media and non-news formats. Therefore, digital migration has had two effects: the extension of the traditional local news content to other media (satellite and internet), and the slow but steady migration of some audiences towards entertainment programs on satellite stations. Both of these consequences do not predict a rosy future for news in Lebanon.

## 1.4 Assessments

It is too early to understand the full impact of digitization on news offer and choice because the country remains in a transition, stuck between the digital and analog eras. Nevertheless, the ongoing transition to digital has extended the reach and multiplied the voices disseminated by the media and to a lesser extent intensified the competition for audiences, and thereby may have contributed to slight improvements in news quality. However, the coinciding political turmoil has limited the effect of digitization on news quality with respect to providing more accurate, objective, and balanced news, and instead has further strengthened the dominance of partisan news content which in effect has migrated into the digital realm.

When it comes to news offer, whether in the analog or digital age, the political agenda of Lebanese news institutions still overrides all other commercial and professional priorities. A former senior producer at Al Jazeera noted, “The loyalty toward the owner and his agenda supersedes the journalistic responsibilities of Lebanese media professionals.”<sup>96</sup> Amal Hamdan contended that even citizen journalism feeds into the same news frames. “Cell phones have helped people take photos or videos of certain events and transfer them to sympathetic media. This increased the media’s access to these events,” but this does not translate into more diverse news, as the content was used to advance political agendas.<sup>97</sup>

On the receiving end, Lebanese audiences remain loyal to their partisan news sources, although there are signs of slow change that can be attributed to the digital shift. But this change is not necessarily in the direction of choosing good-quality news; rather, it only involves shifting to a different media genre, such as the online version of the same partisan news source. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig spoke of a double social contract between Lebanese leaders and journalists, on the one hand, and between audiences and the press, on the other.<sup>98</sup> Audiences perceive the media as channels of communication transmitting the views of their respective favorite leaders rather than fair and balanced news about them. Research suggests that 47 percent of Lebanese people choose newspapers that reflect their own views.<sup>99</sup> This reality has translated to online and satellite sources, and the availability of a larger variety of regional and international news has not necessarily attracted Lebanese audiences or changed their news tastes.

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96. Interview with Amal Hamdan, former senior producer at Al Jazeera English, Beirut, 10 January 2011.

97. Interview with Amal Hamdan.

98. Interview with Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, Professor of Media Law and Regulation at the Lebanese American University, Beirut, 7 March 2011.

99. Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook*, p. 94.

The only media content that seems to sway the Lebanese away from their local news sources is entertainment. Viewers are increasingly tuning in to TV series on satellite during the main local newscast time slots, and to Facebook and other online social networks mainly for entertainment purposes. This may suggest that the digital shift is contributing to audiences' apathy towards news, rather than increasing the appeal of good-quality news.

## 2. Digital Media and Public or State-Administered Broadcasters

### 2.1 Public Service and State Institutions

#### 2.1.1 Overview of Public Service Media; News and Current Affairs Output

This section focuses on two broadcasters, Télé Liban (TL) and Radio Liban (RL), both essentially government-owned and controlled, although TL has long ago erased the line that separates public from state-administered broadcasters.

TL, the first TV station in the country, is registered as a public company and was until 1996 owned jointly by the government and private investors.<sup>100</sup> In 1996, the government acquired most of the private shares and virtually became the sole owner. However, according to a senior TL manager, the government left 1 percent of the station's stocks in the hands of private owners in order to maintain its standing as a commercial private company rather than a public institution.<sup>101</sup>

In addition, the government has appointed a board of directors that runs the station, in an effort to separate it from direct government control, although in effect whoever occupies the position of Minister of Information exerts much power particularly over its news operation.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, while TL is allocated a government budget, it also funds itself through advertising. However, only a meager amount of its budget comes from this source due to the tough competition from the much better equipped and funded private TV stations. Tawfic Halawi, TL's technical director, estimates that only 1 or 2 percent of its budget today comes from advertising.<sup>103</sup>

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100. D. Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World*.

101. Interview with a senior manager at TL, 16 January 2011.

102. J. Melki, "Television and the State in Lebanon," dissertation, University of Maryland, Baltimore, MD, 2008 (hereafter Melki, "Television and the State in Lebanon").

103. Interview with Tawfic Halawi, TL's technical director, Beirut, 12 December 2011.

TL has a long and complex history. Until the middle of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), TL (and formerly its two entities La Compagnie Libanaise de Télévision and Télé Orient)<sup>104</sup> remained the sole TV broadcasters in the country and enjoyed a full monopoly over the broadcasting spectrum and TV advertising revenues (see section 5.1). The 1994 audiovisual law ended TL's official monopoly and opened the market to the many private stations that mushroomed during the closing years of the civil war. While the civil war devastated TL's operation, facilities, and status, the postwar private stations and their patrons—most of whom occupied major government positions—had no interest in allowing TL to flourish and therefore chose not to invest in its revival and development. So, the station that had dominated Lebanon's audience and market since its initial transmission in 1959 today remains in a moribund state, suffering from obsolete equipment, inadequate staffing, and insufficient funding.

In recent years, rating companies have mostly ignored TL, and those that did include it in their reports positioned it as a distant last. An unpublished 2005 Information International report showed that only 3.3 percent of surveyed Lebanese audiences watched TL news, compared with 54 percent for LBC, 36 percent for NTV, 27 percent for Al Manar, 20 percent for Future TV, and 9 percent for NBN.<sup>105</sup> More recent ratings show TL in the last two or three positions,<sup>106</sup> but today Lebanese audiences have even more local and international options from which to choose, including the two most recently established local stations, OTV and Murr TV. While TL's private competitors take up more market shares and improve their programming and equipment, TL is left to slowly crumble and shrink. Still, some TL employees hope the government will one day decide to revive this once popular station, and that the switch to digital may accelerate this decision.<sup>107</sup>

TL's goldmine remains its extensive archive of locally produced programs. Today, its programming schedule—spanning the hours of 7 a.m. to midnight—comprises a heavy diet of these locally produced entertainment programs, talk shows, and political and news programs. It produces three 30-minute newscasts during the day and a longer evening newscast at 7:30 p.m. Mainly due to government interference, a limited budget, and poor facilities, TL's newscast constitutes a monotonous laundry-list of often belated statements from top government officials with a slant towards the political side which happens to control the Ministry of Information at the time. The poor quality of its newscast is often mocked by Lebanese comedians who depict it as trying to catch up with news from the past century.<sup>108</sup>

A week-long content analysis of TL's programming grid in June 2009 found that entertainment programs took up 33 percent (2,530 minutes) of the week's grid. Similarly, information magazine programs took up 25 percent (1,920 minutes), news took up 21 percent (1,601 minutes), children's/youth programs 6

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104. TL was the result of the 1977 merger between two TV companies, La Compagnie Libanaise de Télévision (CLT) and Télé Orient.

105. Information International, "A Public Opinion Poll of Lebanese TV Audiences," October 2005, unpublished report.

106. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

107. Interview with a senior manager at TL, 16 January 2011.

108. "Erber Tenhal," a political and social satire show that mocks Lebanon's TV newscasts, and highlights the blatant bias of the private TV stations, especially Future TV and OTV, showing how each touts the agenda of its political patron. When it mocks TL, however, the show focuses on the station's outdated newscast, often showing it presenting an event from the 1960s as breaking news.

percent (450 minutes), culture 6 percent (420 minutes), advertising 6 percent (420 minutes), documentaries 2 percent (120 minutes), and video clips 1 percent (90 minutes).<sup>109</sup> Both TL and RL are required by law to provide a specific proportion of certain program strands (see section 2.2.2 for details).

While the present state of RL is slightly better than that of TL, it essentially occupies the same position, with poor ratings and poor popularity. However, it falls more clearly within the state-owned category. Unlike TL, where some (mostly ineffective) mechanisms exist to limit government interference, RL is more tightly and directly controlled by the government. The station has always been fully state-owned since its transfer from French control in 1946,<sup>110</sup> and its station today is housed inside the building of the Ministry of Information. However, the government invested more generously in RL, partly because radio requires substantially less funding than television, but also because the government received foreign funding for this project. TL's monthly budget in 2009 stood at US\$ 320,000,<sup>111</sup> while RL's exceeded US\$ 550,000.<sup>112</sup> (See section 6.2.1.)

According to RL's website, the station was relaunched with the help of the French Foreign Affairs Ministry, which offered a grant of US\$ 1 million to revamp the station in 2001.<sup>113</sup> And unlike TL, by mid-2007 RL had already replaced its analog production and transmission equipment with digital gear, although the process of achieving that feat was long and disruptive.<sup>114</sup> According to RL's general manager Mohammed Ibrahim, the station had to stop producing and airing new programs between 2005 and 2007 while its digital equipment was installed and its staff trained. During this period, RL was only broadcasting from its archives. Mr Ibrahim notes that the Ministry of Finance directly funded the transition and contracted a Swiss company to provide the new digital equipment and train RL's sound engineers, directors, and journalists. It also flew a number of RL employees to Switzerland for advanced training.

As mentioned earlier, RL has the ability to produce and transmit digital content. However, the radio station still transmits in analog, mainly because no audiovisual law so far regulates digital transmission over local airwaves.<sup>115</sup> Today, RL not only produces all its content digitally, it is also digitizing its vast analog reel archive. Ibrahim notes that the switch to digital production has had no impact so far on the station's programming, although he admits "the new technology is more efficient and much easier to operate."<sup>116</sup> Yet the station has not added any programs or services, whether catering for certain minorities or otherwise. Mr Ibrahim says that RL already has time allocated for Lebanese Armenian programming and runs newscasts in English, French,

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109. Maharat Foundation, "A Study of the Media Coverage of the Parliamentary Elections in Lebanon June 2009," Beirut, 2009 (hereafter Maharat Foundation, "A Study of the Media Coverage of the Parliamentary Elections in Lebanon"). The Maharat Foundation describes itself as "a team of Lebanese journalists united by a common purpose, which is to achieve a freer journalism and to defend and promote free expression in order to build a much more democratic society." See <http://maharatfoundation.org> (accessed 12 December 2011).

110. Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World*.

111. Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World*.

112. Interview with Mohamed Ibrahim, general manager of Radio Liban (RL), Beirut, 24 March 2011.

113. Radio Liban, "Qui sommes-nous?," at <http://www.96-2.com/qui-somme-nous.php> (accessed 20 March 2011).

114. Interview with Mohammed Ibrahim, general manager of RL, Beirut, 16 December 2011.

115. Interview with Mohammed Ibrahim, general manager of RL, Beirut, 16 December 2011.

116. Interview with Mohammed Ibrahim, general manager of RL, Beirut, 16 December 2011.

and Armenian, in addition to its many Arabic newscasts. Aside from news, it airs an eclectic mix of mainly Arabic talk shows, entertainment programs, and music varieties. In addition, it runs some entertainment, cultural programs, and music in various languages.

Like TL, RL's historic popularity and dominance over the radio market before the civil war has mostly disappeared. Most recent radio rating studies do not even list it among the numerous private radio stations that compete viciously in Lebanon's tight radio market. A 2010 Ipsos-Stat report lists the 12 most popular radio stations, which do not include RL.<sup>117</sup>

### 2.1.2 Digitization and Services

Neither TL nor RL has switched to digital transmission, and the former's production equipment is still analog-based, according to Hasan Chaccour, TL's programs and production director. Tawfic Halawi, TL's technical director, notes that TL has still to be allocated a government budget to purchase digital transmission equipment; only one of its studios is digitally equipped and the rest have mostly obsolete analog gear.<sup>118</sup> In addition, Mr Chaccour says no initiatives for supporting the digitization process of TL, whether financially, politically, or legally, have been introduced or even discussed by the government.<sup>119</sup> Mr Halawi says the political situation has delayed the start of discussions about this matter. "We were supposed to start trial simulcast transmission last year but the current political turmoil pushed our issues off the government's agenda," Mr Halawi lamented.

### 2.1.3 Government Support

At the national level, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) is the main body responsible for studying, implementing, and regulating the digital switch-over. According to Mohamad Ayoub, TRA's senior spectrum manager, the authority is still in the preliminary stages of planning the switch-over in Lebanon and is not even certain about the reaction of the council of ministers or Parliament to the allocation of resources and creating legislation for switch-over.<sup>120</sup> Although TRA has proposed a plan and timeline for the switch-over, the government has yet to act on it, and this has caused much doubt about the 2015 goal to switch off analog transmission (see section 5).

Mr Ayoub discussed some potential effects of digital switch-over on TL. He stated that the added potential of digital transmission may allow TL to replicate its programs and use its vast archive to offer multiple channels. This may potentially bring additional badly needed revenue to TL, and thereby help it to regain its pre-civil war strength and compete more effectively in the TV advertising market. Mr Ayoub also noted that TRA might use TL and its facilities as an experimental means to implement the Digital Migration Strategy.<sup>121</sup>

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117. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, "Lebanon Media Landscape."

118. Interview with Tawfic Halawi, TL's technical director, Beirut, 12 December 2011.

119. Interview with Hasan Chaccour, TL's programs and production director, Beirut, 12 December 2011.

120. Interview with Mohamad Ayoub, senior spectrum manager at TRA, Beirut, 7 December 2011.

121. Interview with Mohamad Ayoub, senior spectrum manager at TRA, Beirut, 7 December 2011.

This possibility might give TL the power to supervise and run the digital transmission of all TV stations in Lebanon, since digital transmission will not necessitate multiple transmitters for each private station (see section 5). Although it is not clear how private TV stations may feel about granting TL control over their transmitters, some TL managers were almost certain this would take place. Mr Halawi contends, “TL will have the exclusive technical management rights granted to it for the digital transmission. This is an advantage for TL since it will attract more money to the station.”<sup>122</sup>

However, Mr Ayoub said that the principles of transparency and market deregulation will make competition inevitable in the digital age, and “for competition to take place, we can’t give exclusive technical management rights to TL.”<sup>123</sup> He further explained that TL historically had the exclusive technical management rights to use the frequencies of the TV spectrum, but in 1994 the government limited TL’s exclusive rights to a specific number of VHF channels, whereas UHF channels were distributed among the other TV stations. Mr Ayoub remains unsure as to whether the Lebanese government will give TL—as is the case with Telif Company in France—the exclusive technical management rights for transmission, or instead offer it a package of channels, which is the usual arrangement around the world. Given the government’s neglect of the public media institutions in recent decades, and the continued interest of leading politicians—who own most of the country’s private media outlets—in keeping the public media weak, it is hard to see how TL will be granted these exclusive rights.

#### **2.1.4 Public Service Media and Digital Switch-over**

The poor funding and government neglect of the state broadcasting media, particularly TL, has left these organizations with an uncertain future. While RL has undergone a lengthy and disruptive process to digitize its transmission and production equipment, as well as staff training, TL still has to initiate the process or even acquire a budget for the equipment. And while RL now produces all its programs digitally, and TL has only one digital studio, both stations continue to broadcast in analog.

The minor shift from analog to digital production has done little to improve the reach or influence of these stations. On the contrary, the long and disruptive digitization process that RL had to undergo may have hindered its operation and delayed its revival, and is likely to hinder the operation of TL as it goes through the similarly disruptive transition that entails installing new equipment, training staff, and dealing with government bureaucracy and delays. Similarly, the delay in initiating the transition phase for TL is costing valuable time, and the station that badly needs to catch up with its private competitors seems to be left behind in its post-civil war state of chronic neglect. While this gloomy assessment is mainly attributed to government policy, the high costs and disruptive process of switching from analog to digital is certainly a contributing factor in both delaying the revival and advance of the impoverished state media and in aiding their private competitors.

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122. Interview with Tawfic Halawi, TL’s technical director, Beirut, 12 December 2011.

123. Interview with Mohamad Ayoub, senior spectrum manager at TRA, Beirut, 7 December 2011.

## 2.2 Public Service Provision

### 2.2.1 Perception of Public Service Media

Media managers interviewed for this report were aware of laws and regulations that provide for public service provisions, but few had a clear understanding of the details. For instance, one manager was not certain about the hourly limits per week or the programming schedule for educational, informational, and entertainment content (see section 2.2.2 for details). He was aware of a certain minimum number of hours that is required for newscasts and for locally produced programming. However, he did say that the programming and the legal departments mainly follow these issues closely.<sup>124</sup> Another manager was not even aware of what penalties the government would impose if the media violated laws pertaining to public service provisions (see section 2.2.2 for details).<sup>125</sup>

Since Lebanese citizens do not pay a license fee and no studies have addressed this, one can only derive conclusions from general studies about Lebanese audiences and their preference for media institutions that are aligned with their own political beliefs rather than their awareness of the responsibilities of broadcast media as public service providers. This may not reveal much about how the public regards and understands public service provisions, but we can safely speculate that the public is not very aware of the details about the public service provisions in the country's laws and regulations.

### 2.2.2 Public Service Provision in Commercial Media

Public service provisions are a marginal issue in the operation of commercial terrestrial TV stations. Most journalists interviewed for this report had little information on the subject, mainly because their news and programming departments take care of these matters. Politicians were no better informed, because a ministry is in charge of monitoring and enforcing these provisions—even if the monitoring and enforcement process is ineffective, to say the least. Every now and then, a politician complains on air about the lack of responsibility displayed by local media, but that is usually in the context of a political retaliation with specific aims.

The Audiovisual Law No. 353/1994 and the Book of Specifications of TV and Radio Corporations (Decree 7997/1996)<sup>126</sup> address what regulations broadcast media should abide by and contain items related to public service principles. Art. 30 of the Audiovisual Law stipulates that terrestrial radio and TV institutions are required to broadcast free of charge an average of one hour per week of programming that addresses national

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124. Interview with K.K., NTV, Beirut, 12 December 2011.

125. Interview with J.R., OTV, Beirut, 25 February 2011.

126. Decree No. 7997/1996, "Ratification of the Book of Specifications of TV and Radio Corporations, 1st and 2nd Category," National Audiovisual Council.

127. National guidance programs include material produced by the government, especially the Ministry of Information, promoting national and government achievements and national pride, such as ads about the Lebanese Army and achievements of certain ministries. It also includes editorials produced usually during uncertain times or war and conflict.

guidance,<sup>127</sup> education, health awareness, culture, and tourism.<sup>128</sup> Art. 7 of that same law requires licensed institutions to uphold the freedoms of individuals, plurality in expressing ideas and opinions, objectivity in broadcasting news and events, and protecting the public interest. It also obliges broadcast media institutions to respect the Book of Specifications on programming matters.

The Book of Specifications provides ample stipulations for public service provisions. Chapter 3, pertaining to programming, specifies a minimum of 730 hours per year of locally produced programs, which must include at least 280 hours of news programs, 129 hours of music and short plays, 90 hours of games and competitions, 146 hours of programs for children and youth, and 166 hours of cultural, social, sports, documentary, and development programs. These are requirements for broadcasters. In addition, television stations with category-A licenses<sup>129</sup> are required to broadcast, between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., at least one hour per week of “programs of national orientation as well as programs in the field of education, health, guidance, culture and tourism.”

The Book also includes “principles” specific to newscasts and political programs. These require stations to give enough space for news programs and “present them objectively,” while keeping in mind the nation’s main interests. In addition, it requires the stations to differentiate between propaganda/advertising and objective information. The principles call for the direct participation of citizens with the aim of exposing various opinions on national debates by organizing political and social symposiums. Other provisions require a minimum of one political program per week and two news bulletins per day, with each bulletin at least 30 minutes long. Moreover, the principles require newscasts to be broadcast in standard Arabic but also provide for newscasts in other languages, as long as the time allotted for non-Arab newscasts does not exceed that of the Arabic newscasts.

These regulations have not been updated since the mid-1990s, and therefore the ongoing switch to digital has had little or no effect on public service provisions. First, terrestrial TV and radio stations have still to switch to digital transmission. Second, these laws do not address cable TV, which remains to a large extent illegal (see section 5). Third, even satellite TV, which transmits digitally, has not been affected. One interviewed manager noted that the law does not extend public service provision to the satellite realm.<sup>130</sup> In fact, all interviewed media managers were operating under the assumption that these laws and regulations only apply to local terrestrial broadcasting. Finally, even the online medium has not extended the dissemination of public service content. The law does not address public service provisions for online media.

Moreover, the reality is that even local radio and television stations, which the laws and regulations target, do not necessarily abide by these regulations since so far no effective enforcement of this monitoring exists,<sup>131</sup>

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128. E. Nassif, *Media in Lebanon: A Legal Study*, Lebanese University Press, Beirut, 2001, p. 216 (Arabic: *سايلا، ءينوناق ءسارد: نانبلا يف مال عال* (Arabic: *سايلا، ءينوناق ءسارد: نانبلا يف مال عال*)).

129. Stations that are permitted to broadcast news and political programs.

130. Interview with J.R., OTV, Beirut, 25 February 2011.

131. Maharat Foundation, “A Study of the Media Coverage of the Parliamentary Elections in Lebanon.”

with few exceptions and mainly when violations affect certain political powers. The center responsible for monitoring broadcast content in Lebanon, which is part of the National Audiovisual Council, is under-equipped, understaffed, and underfunded. The main monitoring that takes place is of elections coverage, which is often funded by external sources and has specific aims.

## **2.3 Assessments**

Public service and state media have not yet been substantially affected by the switch to digital, mainly because the country has not fully switched over, but also because of poor funding and government neglect of the state broadcasters, particularly television. TL does not even have a budget for digital switch-over or for the acquisition of digital production and transmission equipment. On the other hand, RL has acquired both digital production and transmission equipment although it still broadcasts in analog. Still, the long and disruptive process of digitizing its equipment negatively affected RL's progress and development. In fact, the minor shift from analog to digital production has done little to improve the reach or influence of both these stations. On the contrary, the long and disruptive process for RL and the negligence of TL have hindered their development and aided their private media competitors.

Public service provisions have not changed between 2005 and 2010 and remains of little or no significance, partly because the country still has not undergone a full transition to the digital era, particularly for terrestrial broadcasting that remains in analog. But even public service content by satellite, cable, and online does not exist because the law does not clearly require it for satellite and cable, and the government does not effectively monitor it for terrestrial TV and radio stations, which largely ignore these regulations.

## 3. Digital Media and Society

### 3.1 User-Generated Content (UGC)

#### 3.1.1 UGC Overview

Table 9.

The 10 most popular websites, February 2011<sup>132</sup>

	Site
1	Facebook.com (1.2 million members from Lebanon)
2	Google.com
3	Google.com.lb
4	Live.com (Hotmail, Windows Live Messenger, etc.)
5	YouTube.com
6	Yahoo.com
7	Tayyar.org
8	Elnashra.com
9	MSN.com
10	Wikipedia.org

Source: Alexa.com.

Of the 10 most popular websites in Lebanon (see Table 9), three involve user-generated content (UGC), namely Facebook, YouTube, and Wikipedia. None of the established media that migrated online features on this list, although two local sources of news, Tayyar and Elnashra, rank seventh and eighth respectively. These two sites, like other local online news services, mainly provide breaking news through online text updates, rarely using images or video. With few exceptions, such as Tayyar, none of the traditional media that migrated online (e.g. *Annahar*, *Assafir*) or the purely online news websites (e.g. Elnashra, LebanonFiles) provides room for interaction. Most do not even have a space for reader comments.

132. According to Alexa.com, “The 1 month rank is calculated using a combination of average daily visitors and page views over the past month.” See “Top Sites in Lebanon,” at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 23 March 2011).

### 3.1.2 Social Networks

Facebook remains the most popular website in Lebanon.<sup>133</sup> It beats Google, the first-ranked website globally, in terms of average daily visitors and page views.<sup>134</sup> According to SocialBakers.com, Facebook members from Lebanon exceed 1.2 million users.<sup>135</sup> Taking into consideration the country's low internet penetration rate, this number is equivalent to 122.7 percent of Lebanon's online population.<sup>136</sup>

The reasons behind Facebook's popularity have been widely discussed in the press and academic literature.<sup>137</sup> A further consideration in Lebanon is the fact that most Lebanese people have parents, children, spouses, and friends living abroad. In a survey of youth media habits, J. Melki found that most participants used online social networking primarily for fun, to connect with family, and to connect with existing friends.<sup>138</sup>

YouTube is Lebanon's second most popular social networking site, and the fifth most popular website. However, YouTube is at a disadvantage in Lebanon because of the country's slow internet connection.<sup>139</sup> Links to YouTube are nonetheless heavily shared on Facebook. Political parties and their electorates often use this social networking site to promote their views or denounce a blunder by their opponents. Lebanese people living abroad also share personal videos with families and friends.

Wikipedia, followed by Blogger, Twitter, and LinkedIn, trail behind Facebook and YouTube.<sup>140</sup> All four websites are, however, among the top 15, a clear indication of the popularity of online social networking in this country.

### 3.1.3 News in Social Media

Of the most popular social networks in Lebanon, Twitter tends to be a source of both national and international news.<sup>141</sup> Facebook also acts as a news source but in a more indirect manner, with people sharing links from YouTube and news sites or changing their Facebook avatar to support a political party, personality,

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133. See "Top Sites in Lebanon," at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 23 March 2011).

134. Alexa.com, "Top sites," at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/global> (accessed 23 March 2011).

135. Socialbakers.com, "Lebanon Facebook Statistics," at <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/lebanon> (accessed 23 March 2011).

136. Socialbakers.com, "Lebanon Facebook Statistics," at <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/lebanon> (accessed 23 March 2011).

137. See, for example, K. Baek, A. Holton, D. Harp, and C. Yaschur, "The Links that Bind: Uncovering Novel Motivations for Linking on Facebook," *Computers in Human Behavior* 27 (2011), pp. 2243–2248; K.M. Sheldon, N. Abad, and C. Hinsch, "A Two-Process View of Facebook Use and Relatedness Need-Satisfaction: Disconnection Drives Use, and Connection Rewards It," *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 100 (2011), pp. 766–776; S. Tong, B. Van Der Heide, L. Langwell, and J. Walther, "Too Much of a Good Thing? The Relationship Between Number of Friends and Interpersonal Impressions on Facebook," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (2008), pp. 531–549; K. Young, "Social Ties, Social Networks and the Facebook Experience," *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society* 9 (2011), pp. 20–34.

138. J. Melki, *Media Habits of MENA Youth: A Three-Country Survey. Youth in the Arab World*, Issam Fares Institute, Beirut, 2010 (hereafter Melki, *Media Habits of MENA Youth*).

139. A. Itani, "Report for Open Society Media Program," ThinkMedia Labs, 2 February 2011, p. 3.

140. Alexa.com, "Top Sites in Lebanon," at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 23 March 2011).

141. Alexa.com, "Top Sites in Lebanon," at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 23 March 2011), p. 5.

or cause.<sup>142</sup> Social networks such as Twitter and Facebook also play an important role in the exchange of social and cultural news.<sup>143</sup>

All in all, however, online social networks do not serve as primary news media. J. Melki's study of media habits of youth in Lebanon, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) revealed that 84 percent of young people surveyed say they use online social networking both for fun and for connecting with existing friends, while 58 percent and 55 percent respectively use it for connecting with family and making friends. In addition, 44 percent say they used it to express opinions, 9 percent to conduct business, and only 5 percent for political activism.<sup>144</sup> This study, which noted negligible differences across the three countries, corroborates another national survey of internet consumption in Lebanon, which found that the time spent on social media in Lebanon is more devoted to chatting and social exchange. In fact, 76 percent of the males and 67 percent of the females interviewed said they go online mainly to chat.<sup>145</sup>

## 3.2 Digital Activism

### 3.2.1 Digital Platforms and Civil Society Activism

The use of digital platforms for civil society activism in Lebanon remains in its developmental stage, but, nevertheless, is spreading quickly. While the degree of online engagement varies for each non-governmental organization (NGO) and civil society organization (CSO), each organization interviewed for this study has at least a website and a Facebook page. Other social media tools like Twitter and blogs are not as commonly used, but all the organizations interviewed said they were either in the process of implementing these and other Web 2.0 tools, or planned to do so in the near future.

More importantly, digital activism already shows real—albeit humble—signs of an impact, leading to important achievements, such as the first draft of a comprehensive animal rights law, the banning of the honor crime code from the law, the protection of 170 historical buildings slated for demolition, and greater media coverage of issues concerning migrant and domestic workers. These achievements and the state of digital activism are detailed below.

Among the multitude of available digital platforms, organizations' official websites and Facebook groups are the most commonly used and have the greatest effect. According to Safa Hojeij, a co-founder and board member of Animals Lebanon, if the animal rights and welfare organization did not have a presence on Facebook, their initiatives would not get as much attention from mainstream media. She described a 2010 campaign to shut down an Egyptian circus performing in Lebanon, due to multiple cases of illegal trade

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142. Alexa.com, "Top Sites in Lebanon," at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 23 March 2011).

143. Alexa.com, "Top Sites in Lebanon," at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 23 March 2011).

144. Melki, *Media Habits of MENA Youth*.

145. TGI Lebanon, "Lebanon Internet Scene."

and abuse of its animals. Ms Hojeij stated that the “story got us a lot of media attention in both traditional and digital realms: local and regional television stations, newspapers, magazines, and online publications.”<sup>146</sup> According to her, the campaign succeeded in shutting down the circus for one month.

This half-victory, however, acted as a catalyst to draft the first animal legislation in the country, and the media buzz that surrounded it garnered a huge harvest of attention and support from local, regional, and international animal advocacy groups and sponsors. The entire initiative was launched and disseminated via their website, electronic mailing list, and Facebook page. In November 2011, and for the first time in Lebanon’s history, a proposed animal rights law was heading to Parliament for discussion.<sup>147</sup> Immediately after the Lebanese Minister of Agriculture officially received the draft law, Animals Lebanon announced it would launch a campaign to gather the 25,000 signatures needed to support the bill in parliament. Digital and social media are expected to play a critical role in collecting these signatures.

While Ms Hojeij stresses that traditional and digital platforms “balance each other, because we reach a certain group through digital media and others through traditional media,” she praises the benefits of using digital platforms to reach a wider audience. “We get to a lot more people, especially abroad, and the number and frequency of participation has increased in all aspects: volunteers, donors, sponsors, rescues, etc.”<sup>148</sup>

For the NGO and advocacy group Palestinian Civil Rights Campaign Lebanon, the use of digital platforms is an essential but largely untapped tool. The founder and director, Franklin Lamb, explains that while his organization currently only has a website, he strongly favors a much greater online presence. He admits they lack the skilled personnel to initiate and oversee such platforms. “Even our website needs a lot of work. But we’re small and very busy, and haven’t been able to do Facebook, Twitter, and so on.”<sup>149</sup>

Nonetheless, the benefits of this limited online presence are “overwhelming,” according to Mr Lamb. “The ease of instant and elaborate communication ... It’s incalculable; the ease of communication, coordination, and collaboration as tools of advocacy.”<sup>150</sup> While these attributes are benefits of the medium in general, they are also specific to the Lebanese context in terms of the particular cause of Palestinian rights. Reports about the Palestinian situation in Lebanon, never mind detailed information about the issue, are largely missing from traditional media.<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, digital platforms are also more effective at reaching Lebanese youths, who are a critical target for activists working on the Palestinian cause.

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146. Interview with Safa Hojeij, co-founder and board member of Animals Lebanon, Beirut, 10 February 2011.

147. B. Al Quntar, “Animals Rights Law Heads to Parliament” (Arabic رَدُّ...ناملربلا ىلا ناوي جلاب قغرا ل نوناق), 25 November 2011, at <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/26387> (accessed 25 November 2011).

148. Interview with Safa Hojeij, co-founder and board member of Animals Lebanon, Beirut, 10 February 2011.

149. Interview with Franklin Lamb, founder and director of Palestinian Civil Rights Campaign Lebanon, Beirut, 21 February 2011.

150. Interview with Franklin Lamb.

151. S. Kawzally, “Mukhayamat/Camps’—Palestinian Life in Lebanon,” at <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/5954-lebanese-newspaper-sets-its-sites-coverage-palestinian-life-lebanon> (accessed 17 November 2011); R. Badran, quoted in H. Lee, “Refugees and Rights,” 26 March 2010, at <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=156559> (accessed 17 November 2011).

The digital realm also allows these NGOs and CSOs to circumvent censorship. According to Mr Lamb, while traditional media (particularly the local English-language newspaper *Daily Star*) do publish the organization's articles on issues surrounding the Palestinian situation in Lebanon, these media outlets often edit the articles substantially for length and content. Online, however, Mr Lamb says he can self-publish the unedited versions, which are often much more powerful and loaded with striking imagery, historical anecdotes, and emotive terminology.<sup>152</sup>

At the opposite end of the digital spectrum is Social Media Exchange Beirut (SMEX), an NGO that offers social media training and consulting to Lebanese civil society and NGOs. With both a non-profit arm and a for-profit arm (SMEX & Co, a recent addition), this organization/company uses practically every digital platform available and continues to implement more. According to Jessica Dheere, founder and director of SMEX, their robust online presence has led to an increase not only in volunteers, collaborators, and contributors, but also to a stronger relationship with them. "The hard numbers are going up, but the quality of the relationships is also intensifying, so much so that we had to think of a way to give us greater financial control over our initiatives, which is where the idea for SMEX & Co came in."<sup>153</sup>

For the SMEX training coordinator Naeema Zarif, digital media "create a public sphere and allow people to gain access to a sphere that did not exist before. By learning how to tell your own stories and build your own platforms, networks, and communities, by thinking about how to reach the people that you need and put things into a plan, it helps people to think more strategically about their campaigns and messaging."<sup>154</sup>

A pertinent example is the League of Independent Activists (IndyACT) initiative to expose private beach resorts' racist entrance policies against domestic workers and people of certain skin colors. According to IndyACT's communications officer Ali Fakhry, despite possessing a report from Human Rights Watch and video footage of an incident as evidence, most news media outlets refused to run the story. "So," Mr Fakhry said, "we put it on Facebook and YouTube and bypassed the mainstream media. It soon went viral, and we started getting calls and emails from the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, France 24, BBC, Voice of America, among others." After the foreign press covered the story, the Lebanese media found themselves obliged to do so too, so that IndyACT's strategy to leverage digital and social media for this cause worked.<sup>155</sup>

Farah Salka, program coordinator for Nasawiya, a collective of feminist activists committed to gender justice and equality, agrees that digital media allow activists to develop their own communities and garner greater contributions, deeper involvement, and more funding. With digital platforms,

you can reach millions of people who are otherwise inaccessible, especially in terms of geographical location, those outside Beirut and even outside Lebanon. You get more visibility

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152. Interview with Franklin Lamb, founder of Palestinian Civil Rights Campaign Lebanon, Beirut, 21 February 2011.

153. Interview with Jessica Dheere, founder of SMEXBeirut and SMEX & Co, Beirut, 10 February 2011.

154. Interview with Naeema Zarif, coordinator of training of SMEXBeirut, Beirut, 10 February 2011.

155. Interview with Ali Fakhry, communications officer of IndyACT (League of Independent Activists), 20 July 2011.

and exposure. We get people who call after seeing the website and want to contribute, learn more about Nasawiya, and sometimes make donations. Things are so much quicker and cheaper. We can do things on the spot and monitor our numbers on-line. We can explain to people who we are, update them about our initiatives, invite them to our events, and share resources and comments with them.<sup>156</sup>

While Nasawiya currently has an official website, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts, it is constantly on the lookout to integrate new platforms and continues to experiment with Web 2.0 applications, such as StumbleUpon, Grou.PS, and other internal communications applications, because “the world is running with technology these days, and you have to too.”

Likewise, members of the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECORVAW)<sup>157</sup> believe that “through social media, we can raise more awareness, especially among younger women, to know more about their rights and about domestic violence, especially since this generation has more access to the internet.” Both interviewed women credit their online presence for the notable increase in the number of internship applicants, particularly those coming from abroad.

They add, however, “if we use even more social media, we will have more beneficiaries and volunteers, including some locals. If it’s always international, we [may] not get [as much] local investment as we would like.” While LECORVAW has a website, a Facebook account, and a recently established Twitter account, the organization would like to incorporate many more online tools. The major obstacle faced, however, is the lack of knowledgeable personnel and financial resources to bring such people on board to implement these tools. “We don’t have the software, or people that we can hire to be full-time to work on social media. We really have a lack in budgeting for staff.”

Still, many Lebanese NGOs and CSOs participate actively in the opportunities for political and civil activism offered by digital media. Many successful events took place to commemorate the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day, including two awareness marches on 8 March 2011. Nasawiya and No Rights, No Women, two of the organizations responsible for coordinating the marches, advertised the events almost exclusively online, via Facebook, on the websites and blogs of feminist and women’s rights groups, and on alternative digital news forums (e.g. NowLebanon.com, YaLibnan.com). They used no advertisements in mainstream media, with the exception of the local arts and entertainment magazine *Time Out Beirut*. While the turnout was not staggering, both events received substantial local and international media coverage from Murr TV, Future TV, LBC, Daily Star, *L’Orient-Le Jour*, *Al Balad* newspaper, and Reuters, among others.

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156. Interview with Farah Salka, program coordinator of Nasawiya feminist collective, Beirut, 14 February 2011.

157. Interview with project coordinator and board member of Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (confidentiality requested), Beirut, 3 February 2011.

These two events were one very small part of a much broader, decades-long initiative to increase Lebanese women's rights on multiple fronts. Activists relied heavily on digital tools to advertise public events and increase community dialogue on these issues. The cumulative effects, in combination with litigation, advocacy, and public events, have led to some small successes. One example was the official implementation of tougher sentences for honor crimes in the country on 4 August 2011.

Another issue that has seen significant involvement on the part of Lebanese citizens is the agenda to establish a secular state in place of the current sectarian confessional system. A series of rallies and sit-ins between February and May 2011 drew participants from all over the country, including rural areas. The largest rally on 20 March 2011 attracted an estimated 10,000–15,000 protestors, three times the size of the previous protest.<sup>158</sup> The increase in numbers at first signaled a growing movement. However, several subsequent rallies—for instance a protest organized by *Laique Pride*, an anti-sectarian movement, in May 2011 that drew only 700 participants—raised serious questions about the sustainability of the movement.<sup>159</sup> Like other local organizations championing the same cause, *Laique Pride* promotes its events primarily on Facebook and has a digital following of over 5,000 members. However, in stark contrast to the feminist initiatives mentioned above, and despite larger turnouts at rallies, the movement reached a stalemate only a few months after its inception due to internal fragmentation and lack of unified goals and strategies.<sup>160</sup> This highlights an important limitation of digital tools in the face of insufficient strategic planning and conflicting rhetoric and goals.

Clearly, Lebanese NGOs and CSOs realize the vast benefits digital platforms have for activism. Granted, there are many obstacles activists in the country face on a daily basis, whether in terms of the digital realm (internet speed, access to resources, privacy issues, and skilled personnel), or more generally offline (lack of legislation and government support, the sectarian system, and censorship). Despite these hurdles, there is a broad consensus that the advantages that digital platforms and social media offer for the activist community are worth the difficulties of implementing them, and greatly outweigh any potential disadvantages. As Ms Dheere of SMEX justifies, “there are a lot of positive things to be learned from these tools. While the tools need to be adapted for the local situation, that adaptation is already happening, and I think it will work itself out. But to be able to see real change in that aspect, it's still 5–10 years down the road. We don't know what the localized version looks like yet; it's still too soon to tell.”<sup>161</sup>

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158. *Al Jazeera*, “The Arab Awakening,” at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/2011/02/2011222121213770475.html> (accessed 20 November 2011).

159. S. Sikimic, “Laique demonstrators call for secular state,” *Daily Star*, 16 May 2011, at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/May-16/Laique-demonstrators-call-for-secular-state.ashx#axzz1dxvmgleK> (accessed 17 November 2011).

160. L. Shedrawy, “The Revolution Did not Pass Through Here” (Arabic انہ نہ رمت مل قروشلا), 24 November 2011, at <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/26250> (accessed 25 November 2011).

161. Interview with Jessica Dheere, founder of SMEXBeirut and SMEX&CO, Beirut, 10 February 2011.

### 3.2.2 The Importance of Digital Mobilizations

The roles and missions that the NGOs and CSOs interviewed for this study espouse are certainly relevant to mainstream Lebanese society. However, the government and the various Lebanese political factions largely ignore and may even suppress these issues. While they may lend support to a cause once it has already been initiated, provided that it does not conflict with party beliefs, they are not at the forefront.

Political activism in Lebanon is limited to rallying support for sectarian leaders, mainly before elections or during other purely political campaigns. It is difficult to understand the role digital media play in most political causes, partly due to the enormous amount of money spent on such events and the central role played by traditional media conglomerates, which are directly controlled by political parties. To be sure, digital activism remains secondary in most political campaigns launched by the majority of political parties and groups, but signs of increased importance offered to digital media by these groups are starting to emerge.

Nevertheless, lesser political causes—in the Lebanese sense, such as gender equality and justice, the rights of women, minorities, and the disenfranchised, media literacy and digital literacy, activism skills, animal rights, and the environment—are all issues that resonate strongly within Lebanese civil society and among its activists. This is especially true for individuals and groups in civil society that seek change and progress but lack the know-how, funds, resources, and forums to speak out.

### 3.3 Assessments

As in most parts of the world, digitization has multiplied news platforms in Lebanon. Audiences now have access to national and international traditional media (some of which have migrated online), regional and international satellite news stations, local and international online news websites, and social networking sites. Subscriber audiences can also check the news on their mobile phones or through email.

But despite this variety, the Lebanese tend to use a limited number of options, often depending on their political backgrounds. Although they use Twitter and Facebook to read about national and international events or link to YouTube for watching viral videos, the time they spend on social networks is predominantly for leisure and entertainment, such as chatting and sharing comments and photos on Facebook. The prime source for local and political news remains local traditional media or news websites, most of which support one local party or the other.

Political activism continues to harvest greater support both in terms of numbers and dialogue among traditional media. While small in comparison, the burgeoning sector of civil activism has seen increased exposure through the number and diversity of events, and a steadily increasing number of citizen participants. To support their efforts, they rely heavily on digital platforms to inform the civic-minded of events and initiatives, create dialogue, and translate that online dialogue into offline action. Still, many NGOs and CSOs remain limited in their use of digital media, mostly due to the lack of skilled personnel and the dearth of resources and funds that can support the initiation and maintenance of the digital technologies useful for civic activism.

## 4. Digital Media and Journalism

### 4.1 Impact on Journalists and Newsrooms

#### 4.1.1 Journalists

Like many of their peers worldwide, Lebanese journalists have seen their work change considerably since 2005. While the digitization of journalism has caused some of these changes, other changes have been linked to the unstable political situation of the country since 2005.

The year 2005 ushered in a new turbulent era in Lebanon that was triggered by a series of high-profile assassinations, including that of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, which prompted massive protests and forced Syrian troops out of Lebanon, thereby changing the balance of power. These events created two major political camps: the March 8 Alliance that included Hezbollah, the FPM, and others, and was viewed as supportive of Syria and Iran, and the March 14 Alliance that included the FM, the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), and others, and was viewed as opposed to Syria and allied with the West, particularly the United States. Exacerbating the unstable situation were the July 2006 war and the May 2008 deadly military showdown between the two blocs that clashed in Beirut and elsewhere in the country. Discord between the two blocs has left the country crippled and constantly on the brink of civil war.

In this environment, Lebanese journalists had to adapt to the pressures of recurring war and tensions, constant political turmoil, and ongoing humanitarian crises. Amal Hamdan explained, “We had to be on call 24/7 because of the political and security developments. We were not only covering Lebanon but also a regional and international story unrolling in Lebanon.”<sup>162</sup> Bushra Abdul Samad, Beirut correspondent for Al Jazeera Arabic, talked about “a nervous breakdown.” She said: “You have to deal with all these traumatic events and stand there, talking live, as if nothing happened, when you’re in fact scared to death. It is a lot of stress.”<sup>163</sup> Abdul Samad pointed out, however, the experience was also “professionally enriching and dignifying.”

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162. Interview with Amal Hamdan, former senior producer at Al Jazeera English, Beirut, 10 January 2011.

163. Interview with Bushra Abdul Samad, Beirut’s correspondent for Al Jazeera Arabic, Beirut, 4 January 2011.

The tensions crippling Lebanon during the past few years have not only made journalism more challenging and stressful but also much more partisan and subjective (see section 4.1.2). In its 2008 report on freedom of the media in Lebanon, the Maharat Foundation interviewed 61 journalists about the condition of their profession in Lebanon. All journalists agreed that independence and objectivity do not exist in the media companies where they work.<sup>164</sup> A sequel report by the same foundation in 2009 found that 85 percent of the interviewed journalists offered the same answer.<sup>165</sup>

But the change in journalists' work was not only due to political instability. All the interviewed reporters and editors confirmed that new technology made life both easier and harder for journalists. Media professionals spoke about the ease of accessing and distributing information, the challenges of operating as multimedia reporters, and the convergence of various media upon one digital platform. Some journalists, however, considered the current state of digitization in Lebanon insufficient and superficial.

All 14 television, print and wire service reporters, and editors interviewed for this report agreed that digitization has made access to information easier and faster. Instead of having to go to a library or an NGO to dig for data, journalists can today browse for information online. Rajeh Khoury, senior commentator for *Annahar* newspaper, spoke of a "tsunami of information" now available at his fingertips. Mr Khoury noted, however, that the instantaneous availability of information has also made his work more challenging. "You have to be connected 24 hours," he explained. "You need to keep abreast of all the developments and have to cope with more competition and an increasing demand for something special and unique."<sup>166</sup>

Several, mostly young, journalists said they now go online to conduct interviews. *Assafir's* Zeina Berjawi, for example, explained that she uses Facebook sometimes to collect reactions about a given subject.<sup>167</sup> Natasha Yazbeck, reporter for Agence France Press (AFP) in Beirut, interviews people on G Chat and Skype.<sup>168</sup> "It does make it a lot easier. Instead of spending three hours trying to get people on the phone I've got two of the people I need to interview on chat," she said.<sup>169</sup> Sobhiya Najjar, the producer of an environmental program on Future News, said that she often consults virtually with European environmental experts for her show.<sup>170</sup>

Interviewed journalists addressed how technological developments have particularly facilitated the transfer and dissemination of information. Nicolas Blanford, correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* in Beirut, explained that when he first came to Lebanon, he filed his stories by dictating them over the phone from his Beirut office. "Now you can be anywhere in Lebanon, shoot pictures, file copy, and send audio

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164. Maharat Foundation, *Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Lebanon 2008*, Beirut, 2008, p. 7.

165. Maharat Foundation, *Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Lebanon 2008*, Beirut, 2009, p. 26.

166. Interview with Rajeh Khoury, senior commentator for *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 28 December 2010.

167. Interview with Zeina Berjawi, journalist for *Assafir* newspaper, Beirut, 27 December 2010.

168. Interview with Natasha Yazbeck, reporter for Agence France Press (AFP), Beirut, 11 December 2010.

169. Interview with Natasha Yazbeck, reporter for AFP, Beirut, 11 December 2010.

170. Interview with Sobhiya Najjar, environmental program producer at Future News, Beirut, 7 December 2010.

files over the internet,” he said.<sup>171</sup> Amal Hamdan explained that the news channel’s reporters now send their material via broadband, already edited on laptops in the field. They are also expected to tweet on location, often beating news wires in breaking the news, she added.<sup>172</sup>

Not all the country’s news operations are equally advanced, however. NTV, for example, rarely uses these tools.<sup>173</sup> As noted in other sections, the news industry in Lebanon is in the midst of a transitional period, slowly—but not uniformly—moving toward digital platforms. As the Al Jazeera example shows, international outlets working from Lebanon tend to be more advanced, setting a model for others to follow. Karma Khayat, associate news director of NTV, revealed that the station is currently in the process of buying digital video cameras. Most of NTV’s production gear is still analog.<sup>174</sup>

Reporters working for international media in Lebanon spoke of the challenges they face as multimedia journalists. Mr Blanford complained that multitasking was difficult.<sup>175</sup> Ms Yazbeck concurred, describing the stress she experiences when multitasking:

We do web clips, right? Just visuals to go with the story, which puts a lot more pressure on me ... I have got my camera—my little thing, I have got my audio recorder, I have got my brain on, and I am trying to do it all, but I am not a professional photographer or a professional camera woman, so I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing with this. I’m struggling with it. What am I doing with this little thing? It’s bouncing around! I cannot focus on my story.<sup>176</sup>

Many journalists in Lebanon still have not experienced this anxiety. Although most news institutions now have websites, their digital platforms are reproductions and sometimes mere clones of the traditional version. The media consultant David Ibrahim alleged that most Lebanese news outlets either do not know how or do not want to take advantage of digital convergence, interactivity, and other online tools.<sup>177</sup> As a result, he said, their online presence is a mere digital duplication of the offline version. For example, newspaper websites are not constantly updated throughout the day. Even the most important institutions, such as *Annahar* and *Assafir*, update their sites on a day-by-day cycle, with some offering a breaking news crawler. Recently, *Al Akhbar* started updating the top story on their website several times a day while leaving the rest of the stories from the newspaper intact. Moreover, up until 2009, most newspaper websites did not offer any multimedia beyond the texts and images published in the actual paper. Today, *Annahar* has a web TV recording, updated intermittently, and *Assafir* offers a slideshow.

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171. Interview with Nicolas Blanford, correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Beirut, 2 December 2010.

172. Interview with Amal Hamdan, former senior producer at Al Jazeera English, Beirut, 10 January 2011.

173. Interview with Karma Khayat, associate news director at NTV, Beirut, 12 January 2011.

174. Interview with Karma Khayat, associate news director at NTV, Beirut, 12 January 2011.

175. Interview with Nicolas Blanford, correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Beirut, 2 December 2010.

176. Interview with Natasha Yazbeck, reporter for AFP, Beirut, 11 December 2010.

177. Interview with David Ibrahim, media consultant and former journalist, Beirut, 1 December 2010.

Even so, most newspaper websites do not offer blogs, readers' forums, and in some cases they do not offer tools for commenting on articles. Indeed, some newspapers only offer PDF scans of their print pages. In addition, the websites of TV stations feature selected recordings of their best programs, pictures, and information about the outlet and the program grid. Some, such as Murr TV, also offer live streaming of their TV programs. But most TV websites leave no room for interactivity and audience contribution. In sum, almost all Lebanese news media treat their websites as secondary extensions of their original product, where the online content is mainly recycled and copied from the original source.

Journalists in Lebanon, and especially the veterans, seem overwhelmed by, and quite happy with, the endless information resources that new media offer but much of their practice is unchanged. Because the online versions are mere copies of the original forms, the daily schedule, deadlines, and work processes of journalists remain the same. For example, at Al Jazeera English TV in Qatar, journalists are expected to blog and tweet as they cover events; at the Lebanese *Annahar*, on the other hand, journalists have no such extra tasks.<sup>178</sup> Mr Khoury said that since he now has hundreds of online news sources at his fingertips, he is expected to read many of them before he writes his column. However, he notes that the rest of his job, namely his writing style, schedule, and deadlines, remains unchanged.<sup>179</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Ethics

With the wealth of information available online and the pressure of the race for scoops, journalists may sometimes be tempted to use unchecked facts, leading to the publication of inaccurate news. Nonetheless, Lebanese journalists seemed quite critical of such behavior, mainly because they essentially distrust material available online. Several interviewed journalists insisted on the importance of checking online information. Unlike print media, "quality on the internet is not controlled," Nisrine Ajam, journalist at Future News, said.<sup>180</sup> Ms Berjawi added: "Online writers are not as careful as they are in newspapers or in other traditional media. If I read a subject online, I know that there is no one to control quality. It is chaos. The real source of the news is unknown. When I read a newspaper, I know who owns it and who is behind it. But when I browse a site, I may not know who is behind it. How can I trust it in this case?"<sup>181</sup>

This skepticism is particularly pronounced over blogs. All 14 journalists interviewed cautioned against using the blogosphere as a source of information without carefully checking all facts. Although Lebanon's blogs are quite popular in the region, registering 14,000 daily visits,<sup>182</sup> traditional journalists seem doubtful about these new platforms' credibility. Mr Khoury noted, "Blogs are still not credible sources. You do not know who is behind them. You do not know who is checking the facts. You do not know how much they verify the information they present. They are not very reliable."<sup>183</sup>

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178. Interview with Amal Hamdan, former senior producer at Al-Jazeera English, Beirut, 10 January 2011.

179. Interview with Rajeh Khoury, senior commentator for *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 28 December 2010.

180. Interview with Nisrine Ajam, journalist for Future News, Beirut, 12 January 2011.

181. Interview with Zeina Berjawi, journalist for *Assafir* newspaper, Beirut, 27 December 2010.

182. T. Saghbini, "Lebanese Bloggers: Pioneers in the Arab World," *Bikyamasr.com*, 29 September 2010, at <http://bikyamasr.com/wordpress/?p=17692> (accessed 15 March 2011) (hereafter Saghbini, "Lebanese Bloggers").

183. Interview with Rajeh Khoury, senior commentator for *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 28 December 2010.

Another source of inaccuracy, journalists claimed, is the intensified partisanship that most Lebanese media have exhibited since 2005. Lebanese news has become even more biased, often stretching facts to fit political agendas. It is true that the Charter of Professional Honor (*Mithak Sharaf al Mihna*), Lebanon's code of ethics for journalists, does not advocate objectivity, fairness, or balance as ethical standards in journalism.<sup>184</sup> In fact, the charter defines the role of newspapers as one of “mobilizing public opinion in defense of the country, of right and justice, and resisting aggression and unjust forces” (Art. 5). While this does not exactly correspond to the political parties' respective agendas, it stands far from the paradigm of press objectivity, since it ties the newspapers' *raison d'être* to a nationalist mission.

Several journalists complained about the inaccuracy that plagues Lebanese news, which often promotes one or another agenda. A recent case in point is the coverage of the March 14 rally on 13 March 2011, during which the Alliance members celebrated their sixth anniversary. Television stations in favor of the March 14 bloc spoke of between several hundred thousand and over a million demonstrators.<sup>185</sup> Their opponents limited the number to around 60,000.<sup>186</sup>

The interviewed journalists suggest that digital media, which support citizen journalism, only exacerbate partisan bias. Whatever ordinary people pick up on their cell phones is used to promote the various parties' agendas and is often presented out of context. Recalling the coverage of a particular incident by a citizen journalist, Ms Dabbous-Sensenig, media professor at the Lebanese American University (LAU), said: “The way the news media dealt with it was quite disturbing and distorting; it was completely decontextualized.”<sup>187</sup> She warned against the prejudice that such coverage can encourage.

All in all, the skepticism journalists reported about online media suggests that they do not recklessly use any information available on the internet before they double-check it. In other words, the conservative reservation some journalists have about new media sources is helping to avert potential inaccuracies. This does not mean that Lebanese newspapers and televisions are immune to distortion—quite the contrary. The inaccuracies they display, however, are rooted in their partisan agendas rather than in digitization.

## 4.2 Investigative Journalism

### 4.2.1 Opportunities

The introduction of an Arabic handbook on investigative journalism, prepared by the Maharat Foundation, notes that investigative reporting in Lebanon and the Arab world remains in its earliest stages, as most

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184. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon,” Arab Center for the Development of the Rule of Law and Integrity, May 2007, p. 82, at [http://www.acrli.org/Files/PDF/Media/English/P2/Lebanon\\_MediaReportP2\\_En.pdf](http://www.acrli.org/Files/PDF/Media/English/P2/Lebanon_MediaReportP2_En.pdf) (accessed 12 December 2011) (hereafter Dabbous-Sensenig, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon”).

185. Murr TV and Future TV 8 evening newscasts, 13 March 2011.

186. Al-Manar and OTV evening newscasts, 13 March 2011.

187. Interview with Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, assistant professor of media at the Lebanese American University, Beirut, 19 January 2011.

journalists still lack knowledge of its concepts and methods.<sup>188</sup> Investigative journalism in Lebanon is relatively rare, relies heavily on political sources, and is itself highly politicized, due to the partisan nature of the Lebanese news media and the absence of Lebanese media laws that guarantee access to information.<sup>189</sup>

Access to information is one of the most daunting obstacles to investigative journalism in Lebanon. “There is nothing that says you have the right to retrieve information, and there is nothing that says you do not have that right,” Ms Dabbous-Sensenig said. “In other words, they encourage you to try but then they say no.”<sup>190</sup> Consequently, most journalists rely on political contacts to access information for investigative reports. Interviewed journalists reported that nepotism and favoritism are the usual routes to insider information. A journalist close to a certain politician will be favored over others and have access to information that that politician possesses.<sup>191</sup> However, as this politician will only release information that serves him or damages his opponents, this arrangement contributes to the overall politicization and de-legitimization of investigative journalism.

To make things worse, the politicized and partisan nature of Lebanese news media frequently obscures the difference between investigative journalism and political advocacy. In other words, most journalism that purports to be investigative reporting is often politicized, whether intentionally or not, and perceived by audiences as a partisan assault on a politician or political side.

International and regional organizations, such as the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), help encourage this brand of reporting across the region. ARIJ recruits reporters, trains them, funds their work, and posts articles online or in various traditional media. They also provide legal protection for investigative journalists.<sup>192</sup> As Rana Sabbagh, executive director of ARIJ, explained, many journalists across the Arab world have little understanding of investigative journalism, mainly because they do not distinguish between facts and opinion.<sup>193</sup> This issue is particularly stark in Lebanon’s partisan press. Daoud Kuttab, head of the ARIJ board of directors, complained that Lebanese journalists have so far resisted ARIJ’s constant attempts to offer training in investigative journalism in Lebanon and to create investigative cells at the country’s various media institutions.<sup>194</sup>

Nabil Dajani, a founding member of ARIJ and a former chairperson of its board, offered a harsher but also more optimistic view: “Investigative journalism in mainstream Lebanese media is almost nonexistent. Most investigative reporting in Lebanon comes from outside the mainstream media, from civil society groups and

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188. G. Sadaka, A. Rammal, and T. Mikhael, “Investigative Reporting: Principles and Applications,” Maharat Foundation, Beirut, 2009, p. 3.

189. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon,” p. 15.

190. Interview with Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, assistant professor of media at the Lebanese American University, Beirut, 19 January 2011.

191. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon,” p. 16.

192. Interview with Rana Sabbagh, executive director of Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), Amman, 27 November 2010. See also ARIJ, “Our News,” at <http://arij.net/?cat=79> (accessed 16 March 2011).

193. Interview with Rana Sabbagh, executive director of ARIJ, Amman, 27 November 2010.

194. Interview with Daoud Kuttab, head of board of directors of ARIJ, Amman, 22 January 2011.

independent reporters.” Mr Dajani noted that investigative journalism in Lebanon is in its infancy but is growing steadily.<sup>195</sup>

Still, Lebanese media have occasionally published or broadcast news that may be considered investigative reports on corruption, political patronization, social problems, and other issues. NTV and Murr TV, in particular, try to distinguish themselves by presenting investigative reports in their newscasts (Murr TV) or in programs such as “*Al Fassad*” (New Television, NTV) and “*Lelnasher*” (NTV). In one example, the crew of “*Lelnasher*” broadcast in March 2011 an investigative report about a cave in southern Lebanon endangered by a nearby rock-crusher plant. The program prompted the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, to intervene, putting a stop to the work of the plant.<sup>196</sup> *Al Akhbar* newspaper tries to follow the same approach.

Because journalism in Lebanon is largely aligned with partisan media agendas, many reports that purport to be investigative journalism often have clear political and sometimes sectarian aims. In one example, Murr TV broadcast a series of purported investigative reports about sectarian territorial conflicts in the town of Lassa, a mountainous village above Byblos shared by Shiite and Maronite residents. The reports claimed that the Shiite residents supported by Hezbollah had illegally appropriated Christian-owned lands in the area. Several of the reports insinuated that the Shiite residents were outsiders trying to take over the historically Christian area, although Shiites, among other sects, have lived in that particular region for centuries. This issue, like several other purported investigative reports in Lebanon, had little effect in moving judicial authorities to investigate the legitimate owners of the lands. The reports, however, did score political points against Hezbollah, and more importantly stirred sectarian hatred in the area. When asked about the coverage of this particular issue, Mr Dajani responded, “I don’t call this journalism, let alone investigative journalism.”<sup>197</sup>

For all the reasons discussed above, real and credible investigative journalism in Lebanon remains rare, particularly for a country with rich journalism traditions and a long history of press freedom. Ms Abdul Samad noted, “We do not have much investigative reporting here. I may be exaggerating, but I can only think of one journalist who seeks facts regardless of his political views.”<sup>198</sup>

Nevertheless, digitization may have somewhat helped the few investigative journalists deal with the issue of access to information. Mr Ibrahim explained that reporters now find a wealth of information online although, he cautioned, the amount of data online remains very limited compared with data in developed countries.<sup>199</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Threats

Most interviewed journalists explained that the many threats facing investigative reporters in Lebanon have little to do with digitization and much more to do with state corruption and the unstable political climate.

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195. Interview with Nabil Dajani, founding member and former board chairperson of ARIJ, Beirut, 10 November 2011.

196. Interview with Malek Halawi, editor-in-chief of “*Lelnasher*,” Beirut, 17 March 2011.

197. Interview with Nabil Dajani, founding member and former board chairperson of ARIJ, Beirut, 10 November 2011.

198. Interview with Bushra Abdul Samad, Beirut’s correspondent for Al Jazeera Arabic, Beirut, 4 January 2011.

199. Interview with David Ibrahim, media consultant and former journalist, Beirut, 1 December 2010.

Ms Ajam, for example, recalled how the owner of a chemical plant threatened her over the phone when she published an investigative article about the environmental dangers of his factory.<sup>200</sup> Sateh Noureddine, senior editor at *Assafir*, confirmed that investigative reporters eventually have to deal with the reactions of powerful people in Lebanon, businessmen, politicians or clerics, many of whom are corrupt. “You either name them or you do not. And you will be punished if you do. That’s how things have always been and that’s how they will stay.”<sup>201</sup>

Journalists seeking to unveil corruption among powerful elite circles in Lebanon have always been, and will always be, in danger of reprisals. This has more or less created a culture of self-censorship among some journalists who know well the hazards of investigating rampant corruption, especially in political circles.

Several journalists spoke of the danger of confronting political power, not only in investigative reports but also in regular news stories. “Control of the Lebanese press through violence is almost as frequent as non-violent forms of control,” Mr Dajani wrote.<sup>202</sup> The years 2005 and 2006 in Lebanon have in fact seen a series of assassinations targeting journalists such as Samir Kassir, May Chidiac, and Gebran Tueni. Attacks in this context were not, however, related to compromising facts that these journalists had exposed but rather to political opinions that they expressed. The murder of Mr Tueni, for instance, was more a political assassination than an assault on the truth, partly because Mr Tueni was a politician, in addition to being a journalist and main stakeholder in the prominent *Annahar* newspaper. Ms Chidiac, while not a politician, was an open supporter of the Lebanese Forces. But Mr Kassir was neither a politician nor a supporter of a political party or a politician, but his outspoken opposition to Syrian policies and intervention in Lebanon were widely published.

One may argue that the rise of the internet, especially social media, may pose risks for Lebanon’s journalists because of the increased online surveillance opportunities. However, no evidence has been reported of such increased threats, particularly to investigative journalists. Nevertheless, because the General Directorate of General Security monitors the internet activities of both journalists and non-journalists, and because Lebanon’s courts arbitrarily apply print law to online cases (see section 7.1.2.1), there have indeed been increased surveillance threats to all residents, including journalists. (See section 7.3.3.)

### 4.2.3 New Platforms

Bloggers are known to be active in political mobilization.<sup>203</sup> They have promoted a woman’s right to grant her children Lebanese nationality, helped block legislation to regulate the blogosphere, prepared a march for secularism in April 2010, and helped monitor parliamentary elections in May of the same year.<sup>204</sup> Social media

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200. Interview with Nisrine Ajam, journalist for Future News, Beirut, 12 January 2011.

201. Interview with Sateh Noureddine, senior editor at *Assafir* newspaper, Beirut, 6 January 2011.

202. Dajani, *Disoriented Media*, p. 53.

203. Saghbini, “Lebanese Bloggers.”

204. Saghbini, “Lebanese Bloggers.”

have also helped several activists to gain national exposure and attention from television and newspapers. Animal rights activists, feminist groups, and other NGOs have used Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms to spread their message in Lebanon and beyond (see section 3.2). However, all these examples originate in civil society and activist groups and not the mainstream news media, whose investigative journalism's quality and quantity remain weak in output (see section 4.2.1).

At the level of investigative reporting, however, little data are available. Bloggers in Lebanon, like many around the world, tend to express opinions or promote a given cause. Most of the campaigns in the blogosphere, and the writings about them, relate to activism and political or social mobilization. Little focus is on the systematic long-term inspection of hard facts.

#### 4.2.4 Dissemination and Impact

No sources on investigative journalism in Lebanon are readily available but one may infer from the state of the media in general that digitization has had a limited effect on the dissemination and impact of investigative journalism.

With the rise of mobile phones, satellite television, and the internet, a range of additional outlets now facilitates the dissemination of investigative reports in Lebanon. But despite this wealth of choice, journalists question whether information posted on non-traditional media has the same impact as stories in mainstream news outlets.

Although the younger generation is quite comfortable with digital media, and may increasingly be consuming news exclusively from news websites and social networks, the country is still in transition, slowly moving toward the state that most Western and many Arab countries have already attained.<sup>205</sup> Only 18 percent of Lebanon's internet users, for example, are aged 40 and above.<sup>206</sup> Internet penetration among the wealthiest 15 percent reaches a record 81 percent and 85 percent (for females and males, respectively) but drops to 13 percent among the poorest 40 percent of the population.<sup>207</sup>

Given this reality, information that does not reach traditional mainstream media, including investigative pieces, remains more or less on the fringes. Of course, some cases have been recorded where information posted online was picked up by mainstream media. More often, however, stories posted online have less chance of affecting public opinion. As Mr Blanford from the *Christian Science Monitor* put it, "Yes, you have a lot more outlets to disseminate news, but there is still the feeling that if you have a great scoop or a great investigative piece and you cannot get it published by a mainstream newspaper or on TV, it's not going to have the same cachet."<sup>208</sup>

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205. Such is the opinion of most administrators in Lebanese media interviewed for this section. See, for example, interview with Karma Khayat, deputy news and political program manager at NTV, Beirut, 12 January 2011; interview with Ghassan Hajjar, managing editor of *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 11 March 2011; interview with anonymous publisher, former managing editor of a famous newspaper, Beirut, 16 March 2011.

206. TGI Lebanon, "Lebanon Internet Scene."

207. TGI Lebanon, "Lebanon Internet Scene."

208. Interview with Nicolas Blanford, correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Beirut, 2 December 2010.

It is important to note that Lebanon has traditionally enjoyed a relatively free press where people could more or less criticize the government.<sup>209</sup> Dissemination of information through traditional media channels, including occasional investigative reports, has seldom been an issue. In this sense, digital media did not arrive as an open alternative to a closed door.

## 4.3 Social and Cultural Diversity

### 4.3.1 Sensitive Issues

A country with 17 religious sects, a sizable Armenian community, and a large population of foreign workers, Lebanon boasts a diverse range of minority groups. Some, like the Armenians, have their own outlets or time slots on the mainstream media. One group, however, continues to be pushed to the fringes of social and political life and is culturally considered an anomaly:<sup>210</sup> the homosexual community.

According to *Helem* (Dream), a Lebanese advocacy group protecting the rights of gays and lesbians, Art. 534 of the Penal Code is erroneously applied to force homosexuals into at least one year of jail.<sup>211</sup> A senior researcher at the Centre for Lebanese Studies in Oxford suggested that if “publicly known, a person’s gay or lesbian sexual orientation might be grounds for a crime of honor.”<sup>212</sup> Established in 2004, *Helem* has not yet received its registration number from the Interior Ministry and is therefore not officially recognized.<sup>213</sup> Almost immediately after its establishment, *Helem*’s officers were interrogated by police,<sup>214</sup> received a complaint from Beirut municipality, and faced a lawsuit.<sup>215</sup>

Another group with few rights are immigrant workers. Since 1973, more than 200,000 women have escaped the poverty of their homelands and come to work as domestic helpers in Lebanon. Converging from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Nepal, and Bangladesh, among others, “some have their dreams fulfilled; others find themselves in a financial and emotional bind,” as the International Labor Organization put it.<sup>216</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, around one domestic worker dies every week.<sup>217</sup> The main causes

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209. Interview with David Ibrahim, media consultant and former journalist, Beirut, 1 December 2010; interview with Amal Hamdan, former senior producer at Al Jazeera English, Beirut, 10 January 2011.

210. Helem.net, “Homophobia in Lebanon,” at <http://helem.net/marsad/node/9> (accessed 16 March 2011) (hereafter Helem.net, “Homophobia”).

211. Helem.net, “Homophobia.”

212. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Lebanon: Whether crimes of honour occur today, especially in instances involving gays and lesbians,” RefWorld, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,4565c22547,4565c25f563,3ae6acb714,0.html> (accessed 16 March 2011).

213. Helem.net, “Is Helem Legal?” at <http://helem.net/node/60> (accessed 16 March 2011).

214. A. Sandels, “Talking to: Helem Coordinator Georges Azzi,” 17 May 2009, at <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=93725> (accessed 16 March 2011) (hereafter Sandels, “Talking to: Helem Coordinator”).

215. Sandels, “Talking to: Helem Coordinator.”

216. International Labor Organization, “Maid in Lebanon: protecting the rights of migrant domestic workers,” 13 April 2006, at [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/insight/WCMS\\_069056/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/insight/WCMS_069056/lang--en/index.htm) (accessed 16 March 2011).

217. Y. Bayoumy, “Trapped maids face life of abuse in Lebanon,” Reuters, 17 December 2008, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/12/18/us-lebanon-maids-abuse-idUSTRE4BH04R20081218?feedType=RSS&feedName=lifestyleMolt> (accessed 16 March 2011) (hereafter Bayoumy, “Trapped maids”).

of death include suicide, falling while attempting to escape employers, and untreated illness.<sup>218</sup> Employers are seldom prosecuted. Also mistreated are male workers coming from poor families in neighboring Arab countries such as Syria and Egypt, particularly the former after 2005.

Also important are the limitations that partisanship has imposed on the media. As discussed throughout this study, Lebanon's media are largely controlled by local political groups and their regional sponsors. Because political divisions are often aligned with sectarian distribution, most of Lebanon's media end up representing the interests of a sectarian establishment. Consequently, they often leave out or distort news that benefits their confessional competitors or opponents.<sup>219</sup> For example, Future TV is controlled by the FM and indirectly supported by Saudi money, and Al Manar TV is controlled by Hezbollah and indirectly supported by Iranian funding. The former station and its political patrons are associated with Sunni sectarian establishments in Lebanon, and the latter is associated with Shiite sectarian establishments. Due to the local and regional political alignments that have largely pitted Sunni and Shiite sectarian establishments against each other, the arguments, perspectives, and speakers of opposing sides and their regional supporters all but disappear from opposing TV stations.

The government's refusal to issue new licenses for political dailies, limiting the number to 25 (Decree No. 74/1953<sup>220</sup>), created a substantial demand for old licenses, consequently increasing the cost of establishing newspapers and magazines, and making print media inaccessible to many independent entrepreneurs.<sup>221</sup> As a result, only the rich elite who benefit from regional financial support can afford to start up a political newspaper in Lebanon, let alone a TV or radio station, which costs very much more.

#### 4.3.2 Coverage of Sensitive Issues

Lebanon's Press Law does not preclude the licensing of political publications with diverging agendas.<sup>222</sup> Decree No. 74 of 1953 stipulated that out of the 25 political dailies allowed, 10 can be published in non-Arabic languages, while eight of the 20 periodicals allowed can be issued in foreign languages. This opened the door for publications in English, French, and Armenian, among others.<sup>223</sup> Moreover, Art. 13 of the 1994 Audiovisual Law imposed a stipulation for pluralism in the ownership of private audiovisual media. Ms Dabbous-Sensenig notes that although "these 'diverse' broadcast stations obtained their licenses regardless of any professional criteria ..., they still reflect *to some extent* the confessional diversity of the Lebanese population."<sup>224</sup>

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218. Bayoumy, "Trapped maids."

219. Y. Dabbous, "Media with a Mission."

220. Boutros, *Comprehensive Legal Matters*, p. 113.

221. C.B.T. Baldwin, "Lebanon," *World Press Encyclopedia* Vol. 2, 2003, at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_gx5223/is\\_2003/ai\\_n19143140/pg\\_8](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_gx5223/is_2003/ai_n19143140/pg_8) (accessed 16 March 2011).

222. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, "ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon," p. 87.

223. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, "ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon," p. 87.

224. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, "ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon," p. 88.

In spite of this variety of voices, the licensing process greatly limits individuals' or groups' ability to acquire a media outlet in Lebanon. Ms Dabbous-Sensenig explains, "Pluralism in the Lebanese media laws is understood in its narrowest sense . . . , and is a far cry from the concepts of media pluralism and cultural diversity referred to in documents of the Council of Europe or European Union."<sup>225</sup> For legislators in Lebanon, diversity and pluralism seem to be synonymous with political diversity, which to a certain extent does exist. The country's various media are more or less divided among the dominant political parties in the confessional democracy, although many marginalized political groups remain cut off from mainstream media access, particularly television.

Minority groups in Lebanon, however, have not had the opportunity to establish their own publications. For instance, Helem's efforts to get an official non-political periodical license for its publication *Barra* (Out) have so far proved futile.<sup>226</sup> In addition, homosexuals seldom make it into mainstream programs and newscasts or articles in traditional media—a few recent articles in *Al Akhbar* newspaper are exceptions. As one *Daily Star* journalist put it: "Many times the stories were blocked. Sometimes they had already been written, but were taken off the page. On other occasions, especially when a reporter who had the confidence of the chief editors wrote something, we were able to print an article on gays."<sup>227</sup> Censorship in many such cases does not come from a governmental agency but is self-inflicted.

The plight of domestic helpers and immigrant workers has traditionally been a secondary issue, often ignored in the mainstream media. The 2005 documentary "*Maid in Lebanon*," however, raised awareness of the problem and brought the abuse of human rights into the mainstream.<sup>228</sup>

On the other hand, the coverage of inter-religious tensions has been quite pronounced in the media. Because in most cases confessional divisions are aligned with political affiliations, many TV and radio stations or newspapers have come to represent the voice of one sectarian group or another. In this sense, media coverage—although diverse—exacerbated the religious and ethnic divide in Lebanon and fanned the flames of sectarianism.

Finally, as discussed in section 4.3.1, Decree No. 74/1953 also imposed a limitation on opportunities for media ownership in Lebanon. This legal constraint meant that only powerful elites with financial support from regional powers are able to purchase licenses and own print and audiovisual media outlets. Since 1953, therefore, licensing has exacerbated partisanship in the Lebanese papers and airwaves and made the press vulnerable to regional and local political intervention.

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225. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, "ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon," p. 90.

226. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, "ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon," p. 90.

227. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, "ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon," p. 69.

228. L. Diab, "Maid in Lebanon' reveals lives of migrant workers," *Daily Star*, 27 August 2005, at [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=1&categ\\_id=1&article\\_id=17997#axzz1GoBmHpux](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=1&article_id=17997#axzz1GoBmHpux) (accessed 16 March 2011).



- television stations' compliance with a fixed advertising rate for all candidates;
- weekly reports to the SCEC by TV stations on all electoral advertising and promotions;
- prohibiting content that may trigger religious, confessional, or ethnic sensitivities or acts of violence or riots, or support terrorism, crimes or sabotage;
- prohibiting free electoral advertising on television;
- prohibiting TV content in favor of a specific candidate or alliance list at the expense of others;
- requiring TV channels to broadcast three hours per week of voter education programming;
- securing equal access to media for all candidates and lists during the campaign period;
- prohibiting acts of libel, slander, and defamation toward any candidate or alliance list;
- prohibiting content that may be a means of pressure, intimidation, mistrust, or promise of material or in-kind benefits;
- prohibiting distortions, falsification, omissions, or misrepresentation of information;
- a campaign silence 43 hours prior to the beginning of the polls.

The new law also introduced a set of directives regulating outdoor advertising during elections, but it ignored online media.<sup>236</sup> Abbas Abou Zeid, from the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), noted that the new regulations did not have much impact on the 2009 elections coverage, which remained biased and politicized. He pointed out that traditional and online media claimed objectivity but in practice supported one or another candidate or party and helped spread rumors that may have influenced voters' choices.<sup>237</sup> A content analysis of Lebanese media by the EU's Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) to Lebanon confirmed that TV stations had clearly favored the political candidates or blocs their owners supported.<sup>238</sup>

Moreover, Lebanon's local news websites followed the same trend, mainly because the same dominant politicians that own the traditional media control the main websites too. All in all, digitization has not produced any palpable changes in the coverage of elections.

#### 4.4.2 Digital Political Communications

Between January and April 2009, in the run-up to the elections, the major political parties spent US\$ 2,503,095 on outdoor election advertisements, 38 percent of which was spent by the FM, 21 percent by

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236. National Democratic Institute, "Final Report," pp. 23–24.

237. Interview with Abbas Abou Zeid, member of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections, Beirut, 17 March 2011.

238. For example, OTV and Al-Manar TV devoted 66 percent and 68 percent respectively of their news coverage to the March 8 Alliance, and both of them 23 percent to the March 14 Alliance. Conversely, Future News and Murr TV allocated respectively 66 percent and 57 percent of the coverage to the March 14 Alliance, and 22 percent and 30 percent to the March 8 Alliance. In addition, independent candidates received little coverage: 3 percent on NBN, 4 percent on OTV, 5 percent on each of Al-Manar, LBC, NTV, and Murr TV, and 6 percent on Future News. See the EU's Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) to Lebanon, "Media Monitoring Results," EU EOM Lebanon 2009 Parliamentary Elections, 8 June 2009, at [http://www.eucomlebanon.org/en/monit\\_results](http://www.eucomlebanon.org/en/monit_results) (accessed 17 March 2011) (hereafter EU EOM, Lebanon, "Media Monitoring Results").

the FPM, and 15 percent by the Lebanese Forces.<sup>239</sup> The country's streets and buildings were cluttered with competing political messages and images. Ads promoted specific candidates, parties, or entire blocs, and the majority of the posters showed the face of one dominant politician or another, or what is commonly referred to as a *za'im* (leader).

The *za'im* system, a socio-political power structure where a pool of feudal lords dominates public life and represents the interests of the country's various religious sects, leaves little room for independent and marginalized voices or for diversity—unless it is the diversity of these same dominant voices. Although the Lebanese choose their representatives more or less freely, they tend to elect the country's members of Parliament from a limited number of dominant politicians and their less powerful but closely affiliated allies. Independent candidates rarely find the opportunity to be part of the public discourse.<sup>240</sup> The campaign machines of the mainstream *za'im* and the media they often control leave little room for alternative contenders and marginalized voices. No candidates have so far used digital media to seriously contest this system, although some youth groups have used social media to react to certain issues in political campaigns.

This feudal culture that favors the dominant political leaders, rather than the possibilities afforded by the digital revolution, determines political diversity in terms of coverage, or the lack thereof. Independent parliamentary candidates have received little news coverage on the country's television stations—reaching 6 percent at most<sup>241</sup> (see section 4.4.1). Therefore, any diversity that has existed pertains only to the dominant political leaders and their allies but precludes the independent voices or even the politicians not aligned with one or other *za'im*. Consequently, as Gilmour explains, Lebanon has only a partly democratic system in which voters consistently choose from the same pool of political personalities.<sup>242</sup>

The use of online political communication tools has yet to pose a serious threat to the dominant politicians. Nevertheless, Omar Boustany, an advertising consultant, noted that young Lebanese people have used online social networking to question the campaigns of the main contenders.<sup>243</sup> They may not have seriously threatened the political order of the *za'im*, but they resisted in their own way the politicians' monopoly over the electoral message. For example, one FPM billboard ad that portrayed a beautiful young woman read “*Sois belle et vote*” (Be pretty and vote), playing on the original French proverb “*Sois belle et tais-toi*” (be pretty and shut up). Offended citizens created a Facebook group protesting against this patriarchal representation, “highlighting the fact that unilateral communication with no possibility for viewer reaction or commentary was being hijacked,” wrote Mr Boustany.<sup>244</sup>

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239. T. Khoury, “Political Ads Expenditure on Outdoor—Lebanon,” *ArabAd* magazine, June 2009, p. 48.

240. M.W. Suleiman, “The Role of Political Parties in a Confessional Democracy: The Lebanese Case,” *Western Political Quarterly* 20 (1967), pp. 682–693.

241. EU EOM, Lebanon, “Media Monitoring Results.”

242. Gilmour, *Lebanon*.

243. O. Boustany, “You Have a Lebanese Elections Request. Do You Accept?” *ArabAd* magazine, June 2009, p.44 (hereafter Boustany, “You Have a Lebanese Elections Request”).

244. Boustany, “You Have a Lebanese Elections Request.”

## 4.5 Assessments

Journalists in Lebanon agree that digitization has already had a considerable effect on their work. It has made an enormous amount of information available at the click of the mouse, obliterated the time in which news breaks around the world, and helped various media converge in many cases into one digital platform. But with development comes responsibility. Lebanese journalists now operate in a much harsher environment, fiercely competing with regional and international news and entertainment media to attract audiences. Journalists in the field must learn to use new technologies and multitask in an already tense and difficult work environment, while editors and commentators must stay connected at all times, following the latest news by the minute.

Despite these differences, some journalists in Lebanon still feel the media are far from maximizing the benefits of going digital. They claim that when newspapers in Lebanon go online, for example, they merely post their print stories on the net, without taking advantage of the internet's interactive features. In addition, many journalists still do not trust online news sources, let alone the blogosphere, chiefly because the latter is not bound by any laws or ethical codes.

More importantly, the tumultuous political events in Lebanon since 2005 have overshadowed the effect of digitization on journalists' daily work. Many political assassinations, massive protests, a major Israeli assault in 2006, street fights in 2008, constant shifts in top government posts, and mounting sectarian tensions reflecting local and regional power struggles have made the work of journalists increasingly difficult. Journalists have found themselves caught in the crossfire, often trying—for the most part sincerely—to remain fair and balanced. In fact, Lebanon's traditional news media since 2005 have become increasingly biased and politicized, and the online news coverage has often followed suit.

Although digitization has created a boundless platform for marginalized voices and non-mainstream political candidates and for investigative journalists to explore corruption, this more or less uncontrolled environment has not yet achieved its potential to expand the public sphere and liberate information, largely due to entrenched social and political structures.

Certainly, digital media have offered many marginalized groups tools to advocate their issues and increase awareness of their neglected rights. For example, digital media have provided a voice for Lebanon's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community. However, the online presence of such marginalized groups has yet to make them an acknowledged or legitimate part of society (see section 3.2.1).

The serious threats journalists face when they investigate corruption or simply address a taboo issue have created a culture of self-censorship. The price several renowned journalists have paid has more or less encouraged this. At the same time, investigative journalism has not flourished in Lebanon, although some attempts have been recorded by NTV and *Al Akhbar* newspaper, because many journalists do not differentiate between news and views. In a press system largely based on political patronage, a brand of journalism based on the systematic gathering of hard facts has proved to be quite rare.

# 5. Digital Media and Technology

## 5.1 Spectrum

### 5.1.1 Spectrum Allocation Policy

Until 1994, control over the broadcasting spectrum in Lebanon alternated between total government monopoly and illegal takeover by certain political groups. The Audiovisual Law of 1994 reorganized the broadcasting spectrum, limiting the number of TV and radio stations that had proliferated during the post-civil war years of the early 1990s. Although the period since 1994 witnessed the establishment of semi-autonomous institutions responsible for regulating the spectrum and organizing licensing (see section 5.1.2), the implementation nevertheless favored dominant politico-sectarian groups and squeezed out other players.

Since the establishment of the Lebanese state, the government-affiliated TV and radio stations (see section 2) has had exclusive broadcasting rights and dominated the spectrum. This monopoly did not go unchallenged, particularly when some groups in government used the state-administered stations' newscasts to propagate their political agendas. In fact, many groups attempted to run clandestine radio stations during the 1950s and 1960s, but the government eventually succeeded in closing their operations or persuading them to stop transmission, while allowing them to keep their equipment.<sup>245</sup> Consequently, the civil war that began in the 1970s offered a suitably lawless environment for resuming illegal transmission and the incentive for new groups to acquire transmission equipment to both broadcast their messages and jam other stations that reached into their tiny localities. The war period, therefore, ushered in a new period of chaotic expansion and the proliferation of radio and TV stations across the country. When the war ended in the early 1990s, some 180 radio stations and 40 TV stations were broadcasting in Lebanon,<sup>246</sup> with most stations covering the provinces where their political patrons dominated.

Although the 1994 Audiovisual Law came as a welcome effort to reorganize the messy broadcasting environment, its implementation created much controversy. Representing and supported by the major religious sects, a handful of dominant politicians were easily able to secure licenses for their TV and radio stations

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<sup>245</sup> Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World*.

<sup>246</sup> Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World*.

while limiting access to their opponents. Certain well-established stations were denied permits while other stations that had not satisfied licensing requirements easily received theirs (see section 5.1.2). Simultaneously, while almost all stations at one point or another violated broadcasting laws, only a targeted few were held accountable and had their licenses revoked—for obvious political reasons. In general, the 1994 Audiovisual Law and the manner in which it was implemented favored three largely overlapping groups: major religious sects, dominant politicians, and affluent individuals.<sup>247</sup> This situation remains largely unchanged today with few exceptions, for instance the few new broadcasting licenses granted (e.g. OTV) and the resumption of broadcasting for some media that had been banned earlier (e.g. Murr TV). (See section 5.1.3.)

### 5.1.2 Transparency

Although the 1994 law has created semi-independent bodies responsible for allocating and organizing the spectrum, in practice these are highly politicized and award and limit spectrum in biased and a non-transparent manner in order to serve the dominant political groups in Lebanon.

The 1994 Audiovisual Law established three semi-independent advisory bodies to regulate TV and radio broadcasting: the National Council for Audiovisual Media (NCAVM), responsible for evaluating licensing applications and monitoring licensed stations; the TRA, responsible for technical spectrum matters, including the digital transition and the maximum allowable number of stations (see more on the TRA in section 7); and the Committee for Establishing Model Bylaws and Practices, in charge of regulating content, production, and programming. The three advisory bodies report their recommendations to the Cabinet of Ministries, which has the final word. While these institutions gave the impression of independence from government, in effect the same dominant powers influenced them. Nevertheless, the government made sure to promote their independence and the transparent process used to evaluate license applications.

When the Minister of Information, Farid Makari, was faced with accusations of bias in distributing broadcast licenses, he referred to the NCAVM, stressing its independence and highlighting the scientific basis of its recommendations. When pressed on why licenses were distributed among the major politicians, he referred to the newly established media law that limited individuals to holding 10 percent of a station's shares.<sup>248</sup> Both responses were, of course, misleading. Most shareholders of each of the four stations that received licenses were relatives and close associates of the controlling politicians, as argued in section 6.1, and the government heavily influenced the decisions of NCAVM and the TRA.<sup>249</sup>

The NCAVM evaluated applications inequitably and applied the laws inconsistently. Three regulations played a major role in their decisions to approve or reject licensing applications: common ownership, diversity, and feasibility laws. The common ownership law prevented a person from owning shares in more than one

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247. Melki, "Television and the State in Lebanon."

248. *Annahar* newspaper, "The Cabinet of Ministries Confirms the Distribution of Audio-Visual Media among the members of the Power Establishment," 18 September 1996, p. 1 (in Arabic) (hereafter *Annahar*, "The Cabinet of Ministries Confirms the Distribution of Audio-Visual Media").

249. Melki, "Television and the State in Lebanon."

broadcasting company. When this rule was violated, NCAVM could choose which company's application to reject. When NTV and LBC both violated this law, LBC's application was approved, and the burden of the violation was put on Radio Sawt El Ghad, while NTV's application was rejected, and the onus was put on the TV station and not on Radio Delta.<sup>250</sup> In the case of Murr TV, however, NCAVM ignored this rule altogether.<sup>251</sup>

The diversity condition forbids concentration of ownership in one religion, region, or family. Although every one of the approved stations violated this rule, NCAVM approved all their applications. For instance, over 70 percent of Murr TV's corporate shares were owned by Orthodox Christians and most of its shareholders came from the town of Bteghreen. Similarly, 55 percent of LBCI's shares were owned by Maronite Christians, nine out of the 19 owners of NBN were Shiite Muslims, and 59 percent of Future TV's shares were owned by Sunni Muslims, and over 43 percent were owned by members of the Hariri family.<sup>252</sup>

The feasibility condition was aimed at ensuring a company's financial health. NCAVM rejected the licenses of numerous applicants due to inadequate facilities and equipment, but approved the Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's application, although NBN had not yet been established.<sup>253</sup> A senior manager at NTV complained: "they denied us a permit on that basis although we had a complete running operation for years, while NBN was given a permit based on two pieces of paper and a blueprint."<sup>254</sup> Moreover, the decisions to allocate spectrum to the various applicants were largely non-transparent, made behind closed doors and under the influence of dominant politicians, and the stations that were not granted permission had to take their cases to the courts to get details about the decisions, such as in the case of NTV.<sup>255</sup>

### 5.1.3 Competition for Spectrum

The three semi-independent bodies responsible for allocating and organizing the spectrum were practically tools in the hands of the dominant politicians who used these institutions to award themselves spectrum resources and to prevent their opponents from accessing them (see section 5.1.2).

TRA played an important role in limiting access to spectrum. When the NCAVM was under fire by journalists for not approving more than four private stations (and TL), it cited TRA's recommendation to limit broadcasting to only five TV and 18 radio stations.<sup>256</sup> The fact that today more TV stations are broadcasting—Al Manar, Télé Lumière, OTV, and NTV—demonstrates the political bias in TRA's continuing decision to limit spectrum. But even back in the mid-1990s, a public debate ensued when Pierre el-Daher, CEO of LBC,

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250. *Annahar* newspaper, "Summer and Winter Over the National Council's Roof: The Stockholders Onuses are Relative", 20 September 1996, p. 4 (in Arabic).

251. Melki, "Television and the State in Lebanon."

252. Melki, "Television and the State in Lebanon."

253. *Annahar*, "The Cabinet of Ministries Confirms the Distribution of Audio-Visual Media."

254. Interview with a senior manager at NTV, 14 June 2006.

255. Interview with a senior manager at NTV, 14 June 2006.

256. *Annahar* newspaper, "The Text of Makari's Decision Regarding the Licensing File," 18 September 1996, p. 2 (in Arabic).

announced his intention to digitally transmit and explained how this would open up much more space for additional stations. The government quickly blocked that effort, explaining that digital transmission required further evaluation and regulation. The government and TRA appear to be in no rush to implement these regulations and allow more stations to transmit terrestrially.

Of course, exceptions were made. NTV's application was approved in 2000 when Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was briefly ousted from power, and OTV was granted a license in 2006 when its patron, the FPM leader General Aoun, returned from exile and his party won a major share of seats in Parliament. Both examples confirm that spectrum allocation is primarily a political decision, although other factors such as the cost of acquiring the license play an indirect role. Dozens of stations closed after the civil war mainly because they could not afford the expensive licensing fee established by the 1994 Audiovisual Law. Some stations tried to merge with other companies but none succeeded, as TRA's limitations on spectrum and NCAVM's biased practices guaranteed denying them licensing. In the end, NCAVM rejected 47 TV and radio applications, most of which happened to oppose the government.<sup>257</sup>

This biased practice was not limited to licensing, however. Stations that had been granted licenses but fell out of favor due to their political stances were swiftly pushed out. Take for example the case of Murr TV, a station originally controlled by the Murr brothers. In the post-civil war period, Michel Murr became a prominent Orthodox Christian parliamentarian, minister, and later deputy prime minister. His brother Gabriel Murr oversaw the family's business and built a media empire with the political support of his brother.<sup>258</sup> At the beginning, Murr TV's political line was moderate and pro-government.

When Gabriel Murr decided to move into politics and aligned himself with the opposition (that is, his brother's opponents), the two became embroiled in a major dispute that culminated during the June 2002 Matn by-elections, in which Michel's daughter Marina ran against her uncle. He won by a slim margin but was accused of using the TV station illegally to promote his campaign. The judge cited the media law that forbids the use of broadcast media to promote or advertise on behalf of political candidates and issued an order to close the station in September 2002. While most observers agreed that Murr TV did indeed violate the law, most also argue that other TV stations did the same but were never punished. However, unlike Murr TV, the other stations did not lose their political cover. The station was not reopened until a major shift in power occurred in 2005. Speaking to the press, the Minister of Information, Ghazi Aridi, who held the same position during Murr TV's closure and in 2005 when Parliament voted to reopen it, said, "The political reality and balance of powers has changed," a clear indication that the earlier decision was purely political.<sup>259</sup> Murr TV resumed broadcasting in 2009.

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257. *Annahar* newspaper, "Approving Licenses for 4 TVs and 12 radios from both classes," 17 September 1996, p. 3 (in Arabic).

258. A.Y. Ahmed, "The Closing of Murr TV: Challenging or Corrective for Satellite Broadcasting in Lebanon?," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, 2002, at <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall02/Murr.html> (accessed 6 January, 2006).

259. Lebanonwire.com, "Lebanese parliament votes to reopen anti-Syrian TV station," 15 August 2005, at <http://www.lebanonwire.com/0805/05081601AP.asp> (accessed 22 January 2011).

## 5.2 Digital Gatekeeping

### 5.2.1 Technical Standards

The growth rate of Lebanon's mobile communications industry lags behind most of its neighbors (see *I.1.2*).<sup>260</sup> It is therefore not surprising that a fierce debate about mobile technology and services rages in the media and among consumers. Complaints target the high costs of mobile services, the slow speed of internet connections, limited broadband penetration, and the quasi-monopoly of Ogero, the government's telecommunications operator. Public officials remain unwilling to cooperate, probably because mobile communications revenues help cover a sizable amount of the country's national debt. As the *Executive Magazine* put it, "worsening economic conditions made mobile sector revenue look extremely enticing for alleviating the state's financial pressures. Telecoms became entangled in a debate placing revenue maximization and improvements for consumers at opposing sides of the table."<sup>261</sup>

Debates going as far back as 1999 involve political decision-makers, network operators, telecoms experts, consumer advocates, and journalists. *ArabAd*<sup>262</sup> magazine recently noted, "The impact on the Lebanese economy not to embrace broadband now would be the equivalent of Lebanon not to have embraced learning foreign languages a generation ago."<sup>263</sup> NowLebanon.com has also called on the Lebanese government to invest in broadband technology.<sup>264</sup> It reported that NowLebanon.com, like many of its counterparts, finds itself unable to provide WebTV because of the slow internet connection. Marwan Hayek, Alfa Mobile's chairperson and CEO, invited the Lebanese government to privatize the mobile phone sector or to adopt a public-private partnership model that would encourage more investment. More recently, Murr TV interviewed a telecoms expert on the current stagnation. "Many businesses refuse to invest in Lebanon for this reason," the expert complained.<sup>265</sup>

Curiously, and despite the irregularity of the cable and satellite television situation in Lebanon, much less has been said in the Lebanese public sphere about this subject, perhaps due to the ability of consumers to access premium channels at a very low cost (see section *I*).<sup>266</sup> (See also sections *5.3.1* and *5.3.2*.)

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260. This study was conducted and written well before the Lebanese government decided in October 2011 to substantially lower the cost of broadband internet and mobile phone subscriptions and dramatically increase the speed of broadband internet and introduce G3 to mobile services. Nevertheless, these decisions have faced slow implementation and their impact has still to be seen or studied.

261. T. Schellen, "Communications—The Ongoing Drama," *Executive Magazine*, December 2004, at <http://www.executive-magazine.com/getarticle.php?article=6725> (accessed 4 February 2011).

262. *ArabAd* is a regional business magazine published in Lebanon. Calling for reform, it devoted its September 2010 issue entirely to mobile communications in the Middle East, calling for reform.

263. Haidar, "Lebanon's Bottlenecks," p. 6.

264. J. Ghannam, *Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011*, Center for International Media Assistance, Washington, D.C., 3 February 2011, pp. 14–15. At <http://cima.ned.org/publications/social-media-arab-world-leading-uprisings-2011-0> (accessed 12 December 2011).

265. Murr TV, "Special Report on the Internet in Lebanon," main news bulletin, 10 January 2011.

266. Interview with Sleiman Fares, president of Fiberwaves SAL and adviser for United Cable of Lebanon, Beirut, 7 January 2011.

## 5.2.2 Gatekeepers

A peculiar system in place since the civil war makes gatekeeping a matter of bundling channels and gives the upper hand to the many pirate cable operators that effectively control the distribution of TV and satellite channels to most Lebanese audiences.

Local terrestrial TV stations still have to switch to digital transmission (see section 5.1.3). The service is, however, provided by some of the country's illegal cable providers, as well as microwave video distribution systems (MVDS), such as Cablevision or Econet (the two legal cable companies).

The unusual nature of the cable and satellite systems in Lebanon imposes unexpected gatekeepers between producers and consumers. It is difficult to speak of digital broadcasting gatekeepers without a careful examination of the Lebanese television situation.

As discussed in section 1.1.2, around 80 percent of households subscribe to pirated cable services.<sup>267</sup> Only remote rural areas do not have access to this system and mainly watch local terrestrial stations. The rest of Lebanon has access to local, regional, and international TV productions for a mere US\$ 10 fee.

In 2006, a coalition of illegal cable providers, working under the name United Cable Operators of Lebanon (UCL), offered around 200 digital stations on top of the regular 80-channel bundle cable pirates provide.<sup>268</sup> Customers who wished to subscribe received the digital signal through the same analog cable connection by buying UCL's locally manufactured receivers (STB Platinum) and paying an extra fee.<sup>269</sup> UCL's system offered subscribers a substantial choice of programs for a limited charge that many Lebanese homes can afford. This system helped to make virtually any satellite TV channel accessible to all Lebanese people.

Bundling, however, is another story. The unusual system imposes two types of filters: one at the level of the head-end digital provider (UCL's central station), and a second at street level, where pirate cable operators have remote access to the subscriber management system database (see section 5.3).

For MVDS companies, such as CableVision and Econet, subscription fees may be prohibitive, as demonstrated by the limited number of people who use their services (around 1 percent of the population).<sup>270</sup> Bundling, on the other hand, also involves filtering. CableVision's marketing and sales manager, Samir Bekdashi, revealed, for example, that the company takes sectarian tensions into consideration when providing a deliberate balance of religious programs representing the different Lebanese groups.<sup>271</sup> It leaves stations featuring pornographic

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267. AGB-Ipsos Stat Lebanon, "TV Reception."

268. UCL is not legally registered yet, although a request to do so has been filed by its stakeholders. The entity's shares are distributed among various illegal providers.

269. Interview with Sleiman Fares, president of Fiberwaves SAL and adviser for United Cable of Lebanon, Beirut, 7 January 2011.

270. AGB-Ipsos Stat Lebanon, "TV Reception."

271. Interview with Samir Bekdashi, marketing and sales manager at CableVision, Beirut, 15 January 2011.

material out of the proposed bouquet. UCL and some other illegal cable providers do the same (see section 5.3.1). The logic that controls this system precludes any “must-carry” or “must-allow” rules in Lebanon.

### 5.2.3 Transmission Networks

Despite the chaotic condition of the country’s cable TV services, the government has, to date, been reluctant to issue any laws to regulate the industry.<sup>272</sup> In such an environment, tensions have risen over spectrum appropriation between UCL and CableVision. Sleiman Fares, a UCL adviser, explained that Cablevision, owned by Group Med, part of the Hariri family’s business empire,<sup>273</sup> freely and illegally broadcasts on direct-to-home public frequencies.<sup>274</sup> CableVision, meanwhile, challenged UCL’s use of digital airwaves to broadcast digital signals through wireless from the central station to the street-level operators.<sup>275</sup> (See section 5.1.2 for allocation of spectrum to terrestrial and local satellite transmission networks.)

## 5.3 Telecommunications

### 5.3.1 Telecoms and News

The question of news distribution through telecoms companies is limited by the dearth of content provided and the separate organization of distribution companies.

While the Ministry of Telecommunication (MoT) uses its backhaul service in Jouret Al Ballout to transmit to various satellite transmitters, the government’s telecoms operator Ogero (*Organisme de Gestion et d’Exploitation de l’ex-société Radio-Orient*) handles IP content distribution. Meanwhile, private mobile operators (MTC Touch and Alfa) distribute text media content, mainly unsolicited advertisements and some fee-based breaking news services.

Although the recent launch of 3G services in November 2011 is likely to encourage higher demand on media content over mobile phones, telecoms services in Lebanon still do not offer any bundled services. In addition, only one IPTV platform operates in a closed environment in Beirut (operated by Orange Business Services and Solidere) over private networks.<sup>276</sup>

In the cable and satellite industry, however, the situation is different. The choice of channels and their ranking in a cable television bundle is the sole responsibility of illegal cable providers. These providers each have a

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272. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon,” p. 19. A copyright law, issued to protect CDs and DVDs, has been used against illegal cable providers by pay-TV providers such as Arab Radio and Television (ART) and Orbit.

273. Saad Hariri is a former prime minister and head of the FM today.

274. Interview with Sleiman Fares, president of Fiberwaves SAL and adviser to United Cable of Lebanon, Beirut, 7 January 2011.

275. Interview with Samir Bekdashi, marketing and sales manager at CableVision, Beirut, 15 January 2011. It should be noted here that, although it is also illegal, UCL’s analog cable system is not of great concern to CableVision, according to Bekdashi.

276. Interview with Bashar Khatly, telecoms specialist and TL board member, Beirut, 25 November 2011. See also AMEinfo.com, “Orange Business Services and Solidere bring IPTV to Lebanon,” 20 October 2008, at <http://www.ameinfo.com/172113.html> (accessed 8 February 2012).

given number of receivers—usually 100—for a given number of channels. Signals for the 100 channels are transferred to 100 transmodulators and then transmitted to customers via analog cables.<sup>277</sup>

Illegal cable providers freely choose which channels to transmit and in which order. Their choices may be based on customers' preferences but are also influenced by personal, ethical, religious, cultural, political, and commercial factors. One illegal cable provider explained that he conducted a survey of 1,000 neighborhood residents, asking about their preferences, before he decided what to include in his bundle.<sup>278</sup> Another provider explained, "Politics, religion and ethics play a large role in the bundling."

Illegal cable providers sometimes receive financial incentives to include certain channels in their transmission. For example, some providers include unknown channels for a limited trial period if their owners pay an extra fee.<sup>279</sup> Another instance is when providers offer digital to analog conversion services. Mr Fares explained that both Murr TV and OTV, the only two Lebanese stations transmitting digitally, pay UCL a fee to convert the TV stations' digital signals into analog. This provides an alternative to subscribers who are not equipped to receive digital signals and allows Murr TV and OTV to reach such consumers through UCL's analog cable operators.<sup>280</sup>

The government has so far been reluctant to issue any laws regulating the illegal cable and satellite systems, mainly due to the political leverage that such providers enjoy. In addition, as Ms Dabbous-Sensenig reported, some illegal cable providers enjoy political support from local leaders.<sup>281</sup> Society's welfare may also be at stake. "Such regulation would deprive thousands of families of their main source of income," Ms Dabbous-Sensenig wrote, describing the Information Ministry's perspective.<sup>282</sup>

### 5.3.2 Pressure of Telecoms on News Providers

Barely any cases were reported where telecoms operators (including mobile operators) have exerted direct pressure on news providers, mainly because the organizations that control these distribution channels are either one and the same as the news providers (such as terrestrial and direct satellite transmission) or do not carry substantial amounts of news content (such as mobile telephony). One exception is cable TV, where on rare occasions some (illegal) neighborhood cable operators temporarily switched off a local TV channel. For example, an LBC political satire program mocked Hezbollah's secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah on 1 June 2006. Some illegal cable providers in Beirut's southern suburb and other Hezbollah strongholds promptly banned the station from their respective bundles.<sup>283</sup> LBC was eventually restored when matters calmed down.<sup>284</sup>

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277. Interview with S.I., illegal cable provider, Beirut, 27 December 2010.

278. Interview with M.Z., illegal cable provider, Beirut, 27 December 2010.

279. Interview with M.Z., illegal cable provider, Beirut, 27 December 2010.

280. Interview with Sleiman Fares, adviser for United Cable Company, Beirut, 7 January 2011.

281. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, "ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon," p. 21.

282. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, "ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon," p. 20.

283. Interview with M.Z., illegal cable provider, Beirut, 27 December 2010.

284. Interview with M.Z., illegal cable provider, Beirut, 27 December 2010.

## 5.4 Assessments

Spectrum allocation in Lebanon is highly politicized. Despite the Audiovisual Law in 1994 and the establishment of semi-independent bodies (mainly NCAVM and TRA) to deal with spectrum allocation and regulation, the practice of granting and denying licenses to broadcast media has been greatly influenced by the dominant powers in government and the distribution of resources among the religious sects in the country. Those who have strong political backing happen to receive licenses easily, while those who are opposed to the government and have weak political patronage are left to fight an often lost battle.

While on paper the regulations and laws are suitable for the country, in practice they are biased and inappropriate for Lebanon. Instead of offering an objective mechanism for spectrum allocation and regulation, both NCAVM and TRA serve in practice as tools in the hands of powerful politicians not only to limit access but also to legitimize the government's unfair practices. In the end, the implementation of the Audiovisual Law always turns into a "confessional distribution scheme, and the main political leaders push for dividing the broadcast media among themselves and limiting access to outsiders."<sup>285</sup>

As Lebanon still has not switched to digital terrestrial transmission, questions about the digital dividend have not yet arisen, as no extra radio-frequency space has been freed up. In addition, as mentioned (see section 5.1.3), since TRA has actively limited spectrum well below the potential of even analog terrestrial transmission, the question of white space has not attracted much attention. Many political groups have pushed to open up more spectrum space but mainly for their own stations and not for the public interest (see sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3).

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285. Interview with a senior manager at NTV, 14 June 2006.

# 6. Digital Business

## 6.1 Ownership

### 6.1.1 Legal Developments in Media Ownership

The most significant legal developments in ownership occurred in the early to mid-1990s when a sweeping audiovisual law halted the rapid and chaotic expansion of illegal TV and radio stations and allowed for private companies to own television and radio broadcasting companies, setting the rules and boundaries for such ownership. With the exception of minor legislation pertaining to satellite transmission in 2002 and political advertising in 2005, no significant regulatory changes pertaining to media ownership have taken place since the 1994 Audiovisual Law.<sup>286</sup>

However, several organizations and legislators have developed, proposed, and lobbied for new media laws. The most recent of these is the Maharat Foundation's proposed bill in December 2010. The bill, which proposes major changes in media ownership laws and the various media-related penal codes, among others, has been submitted to Parliament's Media Committee, but it is not clear if and when it may be put to the vote in Parliament. If the law does pass, it may have vast implications for media ownership, especially as it proposes the elimination of Lebanese citizenship as a condition for ownership.<sup>287</sup>

### 6.1.2 New Entrants in the News Market

There have been several entrants to the news market since 2005, all of them launched either due to changes in the political landscape or because of developments in online media. Two TV stations, their affiliated radio stations, and a newspaper have been the main newcomers.

OTV, founded in 2007 by General Aoun, the formerly exiled leader of the FPM, and Murr TV, owned by the Murr family, were relaunched in 2009 after six years of forced closure (see section 1.3). Both stations

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286. Boutros, *Comprehensive Legal Matters*.

287. Maharat Foundation, "Proposed Media Law," 26 November 2010, at <http://www.maharatfoundation.org/news/more.php?id=44&page=1&t=0> (accessed 12 February 2011).

benefited from a major shift in politics in 2005 (see Context) that facilitated their acquisition of broadcasting licenses.

A strange entrant to the news market in 2006, *Al Akhbar* newspaper<sup>288</sup> launched its operation at the end of the 2006 war and more importantly at a time when many newspapers around the world were faltering and failing. *Al Akhbar* quickly established a strong brand that benefited tremendously from its online presence but also from its critical tone, audacity in addressing taboo subjects, and emphasis on investigative reporting. *Al Akhbar's* website quickly gained audience shares so as lately to be ranked by Alexa.com as the number one online newspaper in Lebanon (rank 21 in the country), beating the much older and more established newspapers *Annahar* (rank 23) and *Assafir* (rank 31).<sup>289</sup>

Although *Al Akhbar's* success has undoubtedly been facilitated by its online presence, the shift to digital media has had little to do with the reasons behind the establishment of these three major media operations, and a lot to do with the political circumstances in post-2005 Lebanon. Still, several small but growing online news operations did take off after 2005, mainly due to the development of online news and the increase in demand for it. Many of these online news outlets are mere extensions—and often clones—of the existing traditional mass media. Political parties established a significant number of them, such as Lebanese-Forces.com<sup>290</sup> and Tayyar.org, both of which are related to political events: the return of FPM's General Aoun from exile and the release of the Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea from prison, respectively. A handful of sites did, however, launch primarily as online news operations. Although most of them may lean in one political direction or another, some like Elnashra.com and LebanonFiles.com do attempt to present themselves as independent professional news operations.

### 6.1.3 Ownership Consolidation

To a large extent, horizontal and vertical mergers, a rare occurrence in Lebanon, have little direct effect on pluralism and diversity, as ownership in the first place is widely partisan, and any merger will simply shift political control of a media institution from one partisan hand to another. In other words, there are very few independent non-partisan media institutions that will turn partisan as the result of a merger.

The Hariri Group's acquisition of the *Daily Star* in 2010 is one example.<sup>291</sup> While it is too early to assess the impact of this acquisition, one interviewed journalist working for this English daily noted that little has changed so far.<sup>292</sup> This may partly be due to the *Daily Star's* original tone which leaned towards the March 14 Alliance, but also because the acquisition has been too recent to produce any tangible outcomes. As noted

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288. *Al-Akhbar's* chief owner is Hassan Khalil, an outspoken Lebanese banker and financier. It is run by a group of veteran journalists known for their leftist ideologies.

289. See Alexa.com, at <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LB> (accessed 20 March 2011).

290. Although existing since 2005, the site was officially launched in 2007 after LF leader Samir Geagea was released from prison.

291. Hariri Group and other business groups from Qatar, rumored to be connected to the Qatari Prime Minister, Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, acquired the *Daily Star* in late 2010 from the Mroue family, which founded the paper in 1952. The same family (specifically Kamel Mroue) founded the famous pan-Arab newspaper *al-Hayat*.

292. Interview with R.H., journalist, *Daily Star*, Beirut, 26 March 2011.

in the next section, Lebanese media when taken together are highly pluralistic and diverse, but this diversity only reflects the dominant political powers and may exclude many weaker and independent voices. In other words, Lebanese media reflect high partisan diversity. This state of affairs limits the effects of horizontal and vertical mergers—which are rare to start with—on diversity and pluralism.

#### 6.1.4 Telecoms Business and the Media

As discussed in various sections of this study, Lebanese media are far from being described as independent, and almost all media institutions are dominated by partisan or government interests. In addition, the Lebanese telecoms industry is tightly regulated and directly controlled by the government.

The two mobile phone companies, Mobile Interim Company 1, operated by Zain (MTC Group) and Mobile Interim Company 2, operated by Alfa (Orascom Telecom Holding), and the fixed telecoms network operator LT (operated by the government-owned Ogero), remain to date state-owned.<sup>293</sup> In addition, these operators do not currently have any joint media ventures in Lebanon and are exclusively focussed on operating the Lebanon's mobile and fixed phone companies for the government. In 2008, Zain and Alfa were each awarded four-year contracts to run the two mobile companies. The contracts were extended in 2011 for an additional year.<sup>294</sup> Although Ogero was established in 1972 mainly to operate the Lebanese-French Radio Orient, since 1994 it has focussed exclusively on developing and running the country's fixed telephone and internet networks and infrastructures.<sup>295</sup> This situation limits the influence of the telecoms industry's involvement in the media sector and its impact on the independent performance of the media.

#### 6.1.5 Transparency of Media Ownership

Lebanon suffers from a lack in transparency of media ownership and limited access to official ownership documents. In contrast, most informed Lebanese people have a good idea about the main controlling politicians behind each of the major media institutions, almost all of which are partisan.

Although various laws—including media laws—require it to be made public, ownership information about any business, let alone media institutions, has historically been difficult to acquire. First, media institutions tightly withhold information relating to the names and shares of their own stockholders, and will usually react with suspicion and even anger to any researcher inquiring about the matter. Second, NCAVM, which is responsible for evaluating broadcast licensing applications and has the information, will only release—and hesitantly—the names of a broadcast media institution's board of directors. Information about these boards for print news is more easily available, as Art. 45 of the 1962 print media law requires newspapers to publish their names in the first issue of each month.<sup>296</sup> In addition, Art. 28 of the 1994 Audiovisual Law stipulates

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293. Efforts to privatize the telecoms industry since 2000 have been largely fruitless.

294. Orascom Telecom, "About us," 2010–2011, at <http://www.orascomtelecom.com/about/Contents/default.aspx?ID=765> (accessed 23 November 2011); Zain, "In the news," 2010–2011, at <http://www.zawya.com/zain/story.cfm/sidZAWYA20110302105534> (accessed 23 November 2011).

295. Ogero, "History," 2011, at <http://www.ogero.gov.lb/Published/EN/history.html> (accessed 23 November 2011).

296. Boutros, *Comprehensive Legal Matters*, pp. 126, 532.

that every radio and TV institution must publish in the official newspaper, three other local newspapers, and the trade registry the names of the chairperson and the members of the board of directors and the directors of the institution, in addition to making accessible to the public a list of names of the institution's stockholders. However, information about stockholders remains elusive. Even the news media themselves rarely report this information, and when they do, errors abound, as the following episode shows:

*Annahar* ... boasted about publishing the names of the stockholders [but it] ended up only publishing the names without the shares for each person. It even did not highlight the familial relationships between the stakeholders and in some cases published inaccurate information ("Full Names," 1996). In an October 4, 1996, article, *Annahar* buried the names of Rafik Hariri's family members at the end of the list. It used the last name of Hariri's wife Nazik as a stockholder rather than using both her maiden name and her husband's last name as is customary in legal documents ("Nazik Audeh" instead of "Nazik Audeh Hariri"). The same article listed the three sons of Minister Issam Fares as shareholders in Future TV when they were actually shareholders in LBCI, and their names did not actually appear in any post-1996 official document reviewed by this study. The way it was presented gives the impression that the Fares family controlled Future TV. The fact that *Annahar* has substantial business transactions with Hariri-owned media and non-media companies raises serious questions about its integrity. Furthermore, *Annahar* did not highlight the familial relationship between Pierre el-Daher and two of his sisters-in-law, which explains the mistaken impression during that period that Ministers Suleiman Frangieh and Issam Fares owned the station ...<sup>297</sup>

The only plausible but difficult way to acquire real ownership information is through the Office of Trade Registry (*maktab al sijil al tigari*), which serves as a depository of trade registration information. But even that source requires an authorized lawyer and the acquisition of the institution's trade identification number,<sup>298</sup> and is not simply accessible to the general public.

Nevertheless, ask any Lebanese citizen and they will easily explain that Future TV belongs to the Hariri family, Al Manar TV is controlled by Hezbollah, OTV by General Aoun, etc. This knowledge mainly reflects the content and brand of these dominant TV stations that overtly promote the political agendas of their patrons. However, the public's level of knowledge dwindles when it comes to the many other smaller media outlets and it disappears for the factual details about the names of stockholders.

Melki summarizes this culture that suppresses transparency in media ownership:

While most Lebanese can fairly accurately tell which political figure "owns" which channel, official documents that back these claims are not easily accessible. In addition, not one

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297. Melki, "Television and the State in Lebanon."

298. The trade identification number is the number issued for a company when registering in the trade registry. This same number is used to search for a company's registration documents.

manager (or employee) interviewed for this study divulged any ownership information—some were even offended and became hostile when asked. In Lebanon, ownership information is something to be closely guarded and most employees are kept in the dark about it. Even business reports in newspapers about shifts in ownership are vague and rare, and only seem to come out when they are linked to a lawsuit or scandal.<sup>299</sup>

## 6.2 Media Funding

### 6.2.1 Public and Private Funding

Estimating the trend in the Lebanese media's annual funding figures is not easy. Different sources provide varying numbers, and none accounts for what a former newspaper chief executive called “invisible funding,” namely political sponsorship and foreign aid (see section 6.2.2).

The government's funding of TL and RL, the country's only public TV and radio stations, remains meager, especially for TL. In 2001, TL received a budget of US\$ 100,000 per month from the government, a subsidy that should cover everything from salaries and operations down to utility and telephone bills, according to TL's programming and production director.<sup>300</sup> The monthly subsidy rose to US\$ 220,000 in 2005, and to US\$ 320,000 in 2009.<sup>301</sup> As the numbers show, the government's funding is not sufficient to make the station competitive, which has adversely affected its programming. TL receives very few revenues from advertising to compensate for this dearth in resources (see section 2).

Ironically, the government's radio station, which costs much less to operate than a TV station, receives substantially more funding than TL. According to its general manager, RL receives today over US\$ 550,000 per month from the government. Like TL, this budget covers every aspect of the station's operational expenses and personnel salaries.<sup>302</sup> In addition, RL has received considerably more investment funding than TL over the past decade, particularly for its revamping in 2001 and later for digitizing its production and transmission equipment.

Private media funding and investments are also difficult to accurately determine. Ipsos Stat Monitoring Data reveal a somewhat steady increase in advertising spending that seems to correlate with the country's political situation. For example, advertising spending dropped from over US\$ 500 million in 2005 to US\$ 443 million in 2006, the year Lebanon experienced a destructive Israeli military assault.<sup>303</sup> In 2009, media investments soared to a record US\$ 1 billion.<sup>304</sup> The increase coincided with that year's parliamentary elections, during which major political parties engaged in aggressive advertising campaigns. (See Figure 3.)

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299. Melki, “Television and the State in Lebanon.”

300. Interview with Hassan Chakkour, TL programming and production director, Beirut, 21 March 2011.

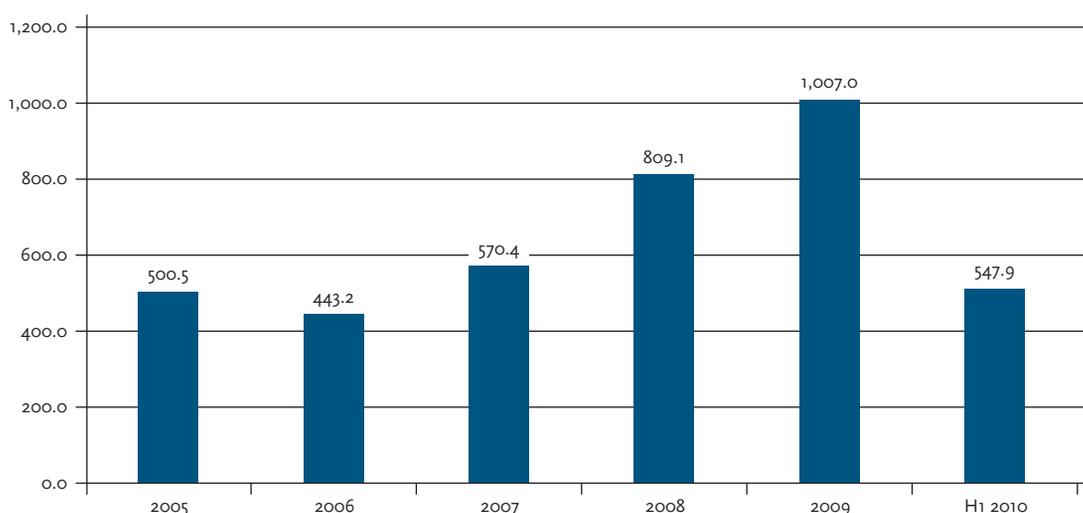
301. Interview with Hassan Chakkour, TL programming and production director, Beirut, 21 March 2011.

302. Interview with Mohamed Ibrahim, general manager of RL, Beirut, 24 March 2011.

303. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, “Lebanon Media Landscape.”

304. AGB-Ipsos Stat People Meter, “Lebanon Media Landscape.”

Figure 3.  
Advertising spending (US\$ million), 2005–2010



Note: H1: first half.

Source: Ipsos-Stat Monitoring Data.

TV stations received the largest share of these revenues. Ipsos MediaCT estimated that media spending in 2010 reached US\$ 943.9 million for TV, US\$ 63.2 million for newspapers, and US\$ 46.3 million for radio.<sup>305</sup> *ArabAd* magazine, however, argues that Ipsos-Stat's numbers are considerably inflated, mainly because they are based on official rate cards and do not account for the deals Lebanese media offer to advertising agencies.<sup>306</sup> Such numbers unfortunately remain unavailable. Ipsos-Stat's Chief Operations Officer himself admits, "The credibility of our reported figures is always called into question," due to the persistent lack of transparency in the pricing of advertising.<sup>307</sup> *ArabAd* estimated that the 2010 figures for TV stations amounted to US\$ 63 million, and those for newspapers reached US\$ 37 million.<sup>308</sup> Table 10 reflects the disparity.

Table 10.  
Comparison of data on total advertising spending (US\$ million), 2005–2010

	Ipsos MediaCT	<i>ArabAd</i> 's estimated real figures
TV	943.9	63
Newspapers	63.2	37
Magazines	55.5	15
Radio	46.3	12.5
Online	0.0	3.3

Source: *ArabAd* magazine, February 2011

305. E. Aoun, "2010 Regional Annual Growth Figures," *ArabAd* magazine, February 2011, pp. 6–7 (hereafter Aoun, "2010 Regional Growth Figures").

306. Aoun, "2010 Regional Growth Figures."

307. Aoun, "2010 Regional Growth Figures."

308. Aoun, "2010 Regional Growth Figures."

Interestingly, the internet's share of advertisements remains meager compared even with newspapers (US\$ 3.3 million against US\$ 37 million in 2010), according to *ArabAd's* estimation. Although an increasing number of people today prefer to spend time online than to read newspapers, the internet still does not pose a serious threat to newspapers.

Ghassan Hajjar, managing editor of *Annahar* newspaper, explained that digital media are not immediate competitors to newspapers in Lebanon, as they are in the United States or Europe, because readers over 40 still prefer newspapers.<sup>309</sup> More importantly, senior executives in a position to decide where advertising revenues go still prefer newspapers over online media. "We have no problem with getting ads for the paper, but we always have to try hard to promote our website and urge businesspersons to place their ads in it," Mr Hajjar said.<sup>310</sup> He added, however, that the *Annahar* team is well aware that the situation will change in one or two generations as more young readers get their news online. For this reason, the newspaper is in the process of developing its online platform as an alternative to the printed newspaper. Rashed Fayed, communication consultant for Future media, agrees with Mr Hajjar. He explained that newspapers in Lebanon are not yet in danger, although they will one day be so. Future media are accordingly developing their online presence to avoid the crisis.<sup>311</sup>

The competition most newspapers in Lebanon face comes mainly from billboard advertising. According to a senior manager at *Annahar*, the lack of regulations and enforcement for the billboard industry has taken valuable revenue from newspapers.<sup>312</sup> Lebanon's billboard industry, which rapidly and chaotically developed after the civil war, continues to grow across the country and could cause further competition to newspapers and other media in the future.

Despite the weak funding for digital media businesses, particularly online, Lebanon's delayed digital progress works unintentionally in favor of the traditional media, by giving them time to learn from the experience of other countries and to adapt to the digital revolution before it catches its traditional media off-guard. Moreover, because digital and media literacy remains moderate among most of the population, Lebanese outlets face little pressure and seem to have plenty of time to consider alternatives before the current business model becomes obsolete. Newspapers are already considering online migration and commercialization as potential solutions for a problem they will soon face. (See section 6.3.1.)

## 6.2.2 Other Sources of Funding

Government subsidies (for TL and RL) and advertising revenues are not the only sources of funding for the media. In a tight media market and a climate of tough competition among the various media companies, "invisible money" flourishes, according to a former newspaper chief executive.<sup>313</sup> The former head of a major

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309. Interview with Ghassan Hajjar, managing editor of *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 11 March 2011.

310. Interview with Ghassan Hajjar, managing editor of *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 11 March 2011.

311. Interview with Rashed Fayed, communication consultant for the FM, Beirut, 9 March 2011.

312. Interview with N.T., senior manager at *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 26 April 2009.

313. Interview with a former newspaper chief executive, Beirut, 16 March 2011.

newspaper and magazine publishing empire claimed that many of Lebanon's media are funded by local political groups and most—including non-partisan commercial newspapers—receive money from foreign sources. Contributors include, but are not limited to, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Libya, Iran, various European countries, and the United States.<sup>314</sup> This practice, according to the same source, existed long before the civil war. Media executives from various sectors meet with government officials from the contributing country and promise, in return for a given sum of money, to “refrain from criticizing the donor in question.”<sup>315</sup> The anonymous source even admits having done so on several occasions, especially during the civil war.

Literature on Lebanese media confirms these claims. M. Fandy spoke of a symbiotic patronization where local media receive capital from foreign governments in return for a “complete editorial commitment to the country or movement offering funding.”<sup>316</sup> Mr Dajani explained that outside powers and interests continue to use Lebanese media to play an active role in the country's and the region's affairs.<sup>317</sup> M.M. Hammoud and W. Afifi also alleged that partisan and foreign funding continues to undermine the independence of Lebanon's media.<sup>318</sup>

While definite evidence for political funding remains elusive, the practice is common knowledge among media professionals and critics. It can be measured by a given news outlet's sudden shift in tone following a senior manager's visit to a foreign country.

## 6.3 Media Business Models

### 6.3.1 Changes in Media Business Models

One cannot speak at this stage of a change in Lebanese media business models, as traditional media remain dominant. Although newspaper circulation has decreased recently and younger people continue to flock to online sources, older people get their news mainly from TV news and newspapers, and traditional media still attract almost all of the advertising revenues.<sup>319</sup> More importantly, the dominant political money further strengthens the position of established media markets. As Mr Blanford puts it:

There is a steady drift towards internet-related media and away from the more old-fashioned print traditional newspapers. It's happening everywhere, but less so in Lebanon. It's a bit different because the funding of newspapers in Lebanon tends to be different. You have

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314. Interview with a former newspaper chief executive, Beirut, 16 March 2011.

315. Interview with a former newspaper chief executive, Beirut, 16 March 2011.

316. Fandy, *(Un)Civil War of Words*, p. 163.

317. Dajani, *Disoriented Media*, p. 11.

318. Hammoud and Afifi, “Lebanon.”

319. E. Aoun, “2010 Regional Annual Growth Figures,” *ArabAd* magazine, February 2011, pp. 6–7; interview with Ghassan Hajjar, managing editor of *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 11 March 2011.

political actors who will help fund some newspapers, and others will use more traditional business means to sell advertising or get subscribers or financial backers. And the newspapers have had a tough time in Lebanon in recent years, which is a reflection of newspapers having a tough time everywhere. But it hasn't been due to the same move towards digitization and the internet like elsewhere internationally.<sup>320</sup>

Despite this lack of urgency, Lebanese media owners know it is only a matter of time before the traditional business model becomes obsolete. Although political money may not go away, various media are already seeking other business models. Their plans include online migration, commercialization, and aggressive marketing.

Mr Hajjar, for instance, revealed that *Annahar* will soon appear in a more commercialized format.<sup>321</sup> It will include sections on health, cars, for women, etc., in a bid to attract more readers and different kinds of advertisers. The newspaper will conduct an aggressive marketing and advertising campaign to launch its revamped version, but none of these moves seem to be directly related to digitization, although one exception to this is its intention to improve its online edition to make it more interactive and more attractive to younger users and advertisers.

Mr Fayed said that, as of spring 2012, the Future media empire (Future News, Future TV, *Future* newspaper, Radio Orient, Cable Vision, and the newly acquired *Daily Star* newspaper) will consider a new editorial and business plan. Like Mr Hajjar, Mr Fayed suggested that his company is considering an aggressive marketing campaign to lure readers and advertisers, although this has little to do with digitization.<sup>322</sup> Both men mentioned that the *Al Balad* newspaper's business model, which is based on a commercial tabloid style and massive sales, marketing, and advertising campaigns, may be a successful model to emulate.

NTV's Ms Khayat said that her TV station was considering another business model, although it is currently increasing its reach by the year. Among its future measures is a focus on developing its internet services and encouraging online advertising.<sup>323</sup>

## 6.4 Assessments

Digitization has had little or no effect on the changes in the media market or on the impact of ownership on media performance and independence. This may be because Lebanon remains in a protracted state of transition to digitization, exacerbated by a rough political climate. Numerous archaic laws (see sections 7.1 and 7.2), a dysfunctional government, and constant political instability continue to delay Lebanon's full

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320. Interview with Nicolas Blanford, correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Beirut, 2 December 2010.

321. Interview with Ghassan Hajjar, managing editor of *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 11 March 2011.

322. Interview with Rashed Fayed, communication consultant for the FM, Beirut, 9 March 2011.

323. Interview with Karma Khayat, deputy news and political program manager at NTV, Beirut, 12 January 2011.

embrace of digitization. In addition, the media remain highly politicized and monopolized by dominant politicians, who continue to retain a strong grip on every aspect of the media. The few market changes that have occurred are limited to the entrance of a handful of new players who were excluded from the market earlier for political reasons, and who are simply new political players emulating the other partisan media groups in their ownership and performance. These include OTV, Murr TV, and their affiliated radio stations, in addition to various websites, most of which are extensions of traditional media or mouthpieces of political parties, and in most cases both.

The sole exception is *Al Akhbar* newspaper, which presents a unique character of independence and an exceptional success story propelled at least partly by advancements in online media. Otherwise, little has changed in the Lebanese media market between 2005 and 2010; dominant politicians backed by sectarian groups continue to divide the media market pie between themselves and exploit the media for financial and political gain.

The same can be said about media ownership and its impact on the performance and independence of the media. Lebanese media that can be described as independent are rare to begin with, and ownership has historically influenced the tone and agenda of media institutions, most of which perform as mouthpieces for political groups. Although some minor changes in media ownership have occurred in the Lebanese media market between 2005 and 2010, digitization has had very little to do with these changes.

The current business model, which ensures the survival of the media in Lebanon, despite the wars and crises that plague the country and regardless of the digital revolution that currently jeopardizes many media outlets, mostly relies on partisan and foreign financial support in addition to the traditional business models mainstream media have used for decades. Although advertising figures suggest ample funding, *ArabAd* magazine questions the numbers, insisting that they are vastly lower than suggested. This model places Lebanon's media at the mercy of partisan and foreign interests and undermines their independence. Although, taken together, the various media represent a diverse array of opinions, the editorial decisions they make and the slant they adopt imperil freedom of expression and encourage a biased partisan approach to news. Interviews with various executives revealed that media in Lebanon today are considering new business models, based on increased commercialization, aggressive marketing, and a move to online media investment, especially with regard to regional audiences and external competition. This does not mean that the partisan and foreign flow of cash will stop any time soon, however, and it also keeps open the question of the impact of digitization on the business models of this transitional market.

# 7. Policies, Laws, and Regulators

## 7.1 Policies and Laws

### 7.1.1 Digital Switch-over of Terrestrial Transmission

#### 7.1.1.1 Access and Affordability

Little can be said about the provisions that govern access and ensure affordability to citizens, as barely any exist. Lebanese Telecommunications Law No. 431<sup>324</sup> has no provisions that address these matters effectively. The only sections of the law that remotely refer to consumers' rights are Arts 26 and 28. Art. 26 ensures the availability of telecoms services "to all nationals and residents in all regions of the country."

Ensuring the availability of services, however, is a far call from making access affordable or subsidizing digital transition. In addition, Art. 28 stipulates, "In the interest of consumer protection, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) may impose prices and tariffs on Service Providers if it becomes aware of monopoly pricing or of a situation that enables monopoly pricing." This provision may in theory result in affordable pricing. However, the current exorbitantly high costs of fixed and mobile phones and internet services provide ample evidence that this provision offers no protection to consumers. In fact, the costs of mobile phone and internet services that are imposed by the state-owned monopolies of this industry rank among the highest in the world.<sup>325</sup>

#### 7.1.1.2 Subsidies for Equipment

Schemes for the payment of subsidies to those who cannot afford set-top boxes or digital TV sets are equally ineffectual. TRA's 2009 Consumer Affairs Regulations offer little in this regard and merely expand on interpreting the provisions mentioned above while detailing the processes for consumer claims and disputes procedures.<sup>326</sup>

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324. Telecommunications Law No. 431, 2002, at <http://www.tra.gov.lb/Legal-framework> (accessed 13 March 2011).

325. M. Prothero, "Planned ban on Skype outrages Lebanon's overseas called," *The National*, 16 June 2010, at <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/planned-ban-on-skype-outrages-lebanons-overseas-called> (accessed 13 March 2011).

326. Consumer Affairs Regulations, TRA, 19 June 2009, at <http://www.tra.gov.lb/Regulation-CAR> (accessed 11 March 2011).

TRA did, however, publish online in 2008 a consultation document that included references to consumers' rights,<sup>327</sup> but no concrete decisions, laws, or processes for these matters have been implemented. The document counts the extensive public benefits of the transition: more channels and programming, higher picture quality, additional services, etc. It squarely holds consumers responsible for acquiring digital reception equipment, and vaguely and sporadically refers to the costs and disadvantages the digital transition will cause to consumers. For example, it notes that the transition may cause irritation to consumers who do not yet have digitally equipped TV sets and offers two recommendations to remedy this matter.

First, TRA suggests an extended transition period of simultaneous digital and analog transmission. Second, it emphasizes that digital reception equipment should be available in the market, failing to specify which side—government or industry—would be responsible for providing such equipment. Using curious language, it notes, “In some countries a subsidy has been provided to the poorest and/or remaining market segment to accelerate the deployment of digital set-top boxes and to minimize any loss of TV service for the consumers.” Obviously, this statement does not hold either the government or the industry responsible for providing this subsidy, and worse, it does not even word it in the form of a recommendation. But even if TRA's strategy were to include stronger language for consumer protection and citizen rights, the government's past performance promises little relief going forward on these issues.

### 7.1.1.3 Legal Provisions on Public Interest

The government's failure to protect citizens' and consumers' rights comes as no surprise, as Lebanon has not been known for its consumer protection laws, and the history of its government is replete with examples of disregard and lack of accountability towards its citizens, and in many cases even discrimination and intentional neglect towards certain social, religious, and economic strata. This sentiment was reflected in the cynical and pessimistic responses of many scholars, activists, and citizens interviewed for this report. Many cannot even conceive of an analog switch-off, as the country is nowhere close to being prepared for it. SMEX's Ms Dheere says, “It's hard to believe the authorities would switch off analog signals given the current sub-par infrastructure and exorbitant costs we pay for access to the internet and mobile services.”<sup>328</sup>

Barely any glimmers of hope surface when listening to officials and experts responsible for organizing and studying the transition from analog to digital. Mohamad Ayoub, senior spectrum manager at TRA—the main body responsible for studying, implementing, and regulating the digital switch-over—claims that consumer protection rights are part of TRA's plan. He notes, however, “This issue is still undeclared because it is in its initial planning phases. There is a possibility that we could follow the US approach, where each customer would receive coupons for buying a receiver.”<sup>329</sup> Another interview with a veteran lawyer and legal expert on this matter offers no tangible indication of such protection and clearly reflects the low priority politicians and their various consultants and advisors give to this matter. The interviewed lawyer blames

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327. Digital Migration Strategy for TV Broadcasting, TRA, November 2008, at [http://www.tra.gov.lb/Library/Files/Uploaded%20files/Broadcasting\\_Migration\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.tra.gov.lb/Library/Files/Uploaded%20files/Broadcasting_Migration_Plan.pdf) (accessed 11 March 2011).

328. Interview with Jessica Dheere, co-founder, SMEXBeirut, Beirut, 11 March 2011.

329. Interview with Mohamad Ayoub, senior spectrum manager at TRA, Beirut, 7 December 2011.

political instability and the recent collapse of government for the halt in drafting and implementing laws, but could not comment on why citizen and consumer protection provisions were not included in the first place, or whether civil society had been engaged in the process of drafting these laws.<sup>330</sup>

#### 7.1.1.4 Public Consultation

Very little has been done to engage citizens and civil society groups in the decision-making process for the digital switch-over, but this is not surprising in a country like Lebanon. In fact, several interviewed civil society groups specializing in media research, training, and development complained that they were not aware of any efforts to engage them in this decision-making process

Ms Dheere said, “This is actually the first time I’ve even known that such a switch-over plan is in place.”<sup>331</sup> Representatives from Hibr and DivInMedia had a similar response. Nevertheless, Ms Dabbous-Sensenig, LAU professor of Media Law and Regulation and a foremost Lebanese expert, said an open call was advertised in newspapers for those interested in joining the decision-making process for the draft information technology and communication law. “I sent my resumé, but they didn’t respond. I think the call was just for the sake of showing that they are involving experts, but in reality the authorities were responsible for all the planning.”<sup>332</sup> This skepticism, typical of Lebanese citizens’ views of their government, reflects the widespread sense of official apathy toward anything related to public interest. Apart from statements of hope and speculation, no concrete regulations, efforts, or plans are in place to help citizens, and the laws and proposed regulations mainly have in mind the interests of the operators and businesses.

### 7.1.2 The Internet

#### 7.1.2.1 Regulation of News on the Internet

Although to date no specific laws or regulations exist for internet communication and content and the distribution of content over mobile platforms, various existing laws have been used to regulate these new media.<sup>333</sup> According to Mr Boutros,<sup>334</sup> the same laws that regulate mobile and fixed telephony and those that regulate the mailing system apply to internet communication, by default. These laws mainly pertain to the right to privacy and have been consistently applied to the new medium by the courts.

However, the courts’ applications of existing laws to internet content have been controversial, arbitrary, and inconsistent. Mr Boutros notes that at the beginning internet content was not considered a publishing tool, and therefore the courts did not apply laws that govern print publishing or audiovisual broadcasting

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330. Interview with A.B., lawyer and media law expert, Beirut, 18 March 2011. By collapse of government, the lawyer was referring to the 2011 ouster of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the appointment of a government made up of the former opposition forces.

331. Interview with A.B., lawyer and media law expert, Beirut, 18 March 2011.

332. Interview with Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, professor of Media Law and Regulation at the Lebanese American University, Beirut, 7 March 2011.

333. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon,” p. 82; Boutros, *Comprehensive Legal Matters*.

334. Interview with Adel Boutros, lawyer and legal scholar, Beirut, 18 March 2011.

to internet content.<sup>335</sup> He explains, however, that the direction more recently has been to apply print media laws to internet content, particularly for copyright law, but the regulations and their implementation are increasingly vague with respect to codes pertaining to responsibility for what is published online (see section 7.1.2.2). Mr Boutros says that until such time as special laws for the internet are adopted, responsibility for online content remains within the realm of general laws that govern contracts, responsibilities, and general penal codes.<sup>336</sup> As no special law for the internet exists, the courts have used these general laws on a case-by-case basis to designate responsibility to the author/poster, the site, or the server.<sup>337</sup>

### 7.1.2.2 Legal Liability for Internet Content

Efforts to create a new internet law in recent years have resulted in major debates in the public sphere but little action by government. A recent Information and Communication Technology (ICT) law proposed by the government remains stuck in Parliament and has still not been ratified. The parliamentary subcommittee for ICT proposed a controversial law that was widely rejected by civil society and the industry. The law, which contains vague and restrictive provisions for online signatures and transactions and internet exchange processes, did not receive much input from the various Lebanese stakeholders before inception. “We only knew about it six days before it was published,” said Nabil BuKhalid, president of the Lebanon Chapter of the Internet Society.<sup>338</sup> Reiterating the sentiment of various interviewed experts and activists, Mr Bukhalid dismissed the proposed ICT law as a “police policy.”<sup>339</sup>

The proposed law threatens to create a restrictive online environment. Art. 92, for instance, stipulates that anyone who wishes to provide online registration and e-signatures or any other related online services must have a prior license from the proposed Electronic Signatures and Services Authority.<sup>340</sup> According to Mr BuKhalid, this will result in more paperwork, more bureaucracy, more delays, and less revenue. In addition, the legislation specifies that the proposed regulatory body reports to the Audit Bureau, but no provisions subject this body to the regulations that govern public institutions. This, according to Mr BuKhalid, allows it to financially break any organization when it desires, without accountability.

Particularly troublesome is Art. 82, which allows for the warrantless search and seizure of administrative and financial files, and the confiscation of computer hard drives and accessories. This provision infuriated many in the industry and in civil society and generated an outcry that resulted in postponing a Parliament vote on the law. In fact, various Lebanese groups quickly lobbied against the proposed ICT law right after it was announced, including the Maharat Foundation, which has been at the forefront of studying and proposing new media laws and which reacted with surprise and dismay to the proposed law that ignored many of

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335. Boutros, *Comprehensive Legal Matters*, p. 309.

336. Boutros, *Comprehensive Legal Matters*, p. 311.

337. Boutros, *Comprehensive Legal Matters*, p. 494.

338. Interview with Nabil BuKhalid, president of the Lebanon Chapter of the Internet Society, Beirut, 5 January 2011.

339. Interview with Nabil BuKhalid, president of the Lebanon Chapter of the Internet Society, Beirut, 5 January 2011.

340. For a copy of the proposed law, see <http://www.slideshare.net/gdeek/draft-ict-law> (accessed 10 March 2011).

the foundation's prior proposals.<sup>341</sup> On 10 June 2010, stakeholders from various organizations met with leading government officials, including the information minister, to complain. Five days later, the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, postponed the ICT law, and today it remains in limbo.

Complaints about the proposed ICT laws extend beyond the proposed provisions, however. Darine Sabbagh, marketing manager at Integrated Digital Systems, said that “the legislation comes too late and is built by people who do not understand the internet. Legislation is necessary but think-tanks and different stakeholders need to contribute to it.”<sup>342</sup> Mr BuKhalid more starkly noted, “Those working on that law are creating rules that are abnormal for businesses, for social networking, and for the industry. This would kill the industry in an era where a democratic society is key for development.” He protested that the law is too broad and vague. “The ICT law was supposed to deal with e-transactions, but it turned out to cover excessively more than that.”<sup>343</sup> SMEX's Ms Dheere described the proposed law as flawed. She welcomed the June 2010 decision to postpone the vote, but complained that “no effort was made to include the public or civil society in redrafting this law.” Ms Dheere worries that the “law is set to go before Parliament again with few changes.”<sup>344</sup> Roula Mikhael from the Maharat Foundation reflected this same sentiment, complaining about the arbitrary decisions taken in developing these laws without consideration for their impact on various stakeholders.<sup>345</sup>

The lack of clear laws pertaining to new media, especially internet content, has created a confusing legal environment. Today, different—sometimes contradictory—laws govern such issues in Lebanon and can be found in the penal code, the elections law, the law of publications, the military code of justice, and the Audiovisual Law, creating, according to M. Kraidy, “a logistical nightmare of overlapping jurisdictions.”<sup>346</sup>

According to Tony Mikhael, the Maharat Foundation's legal expert, two general directions dominate legal cases when it comes to content published online: subjecting the published content to the publications (print media) law or to the various other criminal and penal codes. Since October 2011, the former direction has become more common, thanks to a decision by an appeals court (see below) that explicitly considered the internet a publishing instrument (medium).

Five legal cases illustrate the confusing legal environment and this direction. In 2000, Lebanese vice police raided the offices of Destination, a local ISP, in an attempt to force it to reveal names of the owners of Gaylebanon.com, a website promoting homosexual rights in Lebanon (see section 7.3.3).<sup>347</sup> In connection with this case, two citizens were prosecuted in a military court for tarnishing the reputation of the vice police:

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341. Interview with Roula Mikhael, director of Maharat Foundation, Beirut, 23 November 2011.

342. Interview with Darine Sabbagh, marketing manager at Integrated Digital Systems, Beirut, 5 March 2011.

343. Interview with Nabil BuKhalid, president of the Lebanon Chapter of the Internet Society, Beirut, 5 January 2011.

344. Interview with Jessica Dheere, co-founder of SMEXBeirut, Beirut, 11 March 2011.

345. Interview with Roula Mikhael, director of Maharat Foundation, Beirut, 23 November 2011.

346. M. Kraidy, “Reform in Lebanon: New Media, New Politics?” 2011, at <http://carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=downloadArticlePDF&article=42368> (accessed 15 March 2011).

347. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon.”

Ziad Mughraby, Destination's general manager, and Kamal Batal, executive director of the Multi-Initiative on Rights: Search, Assist, Defend (MIRSAD), a Lebanese human rights organization that publicized the case through an email.<sup>348</sup> Both men were "convicted of violating Article 157 of the Military Penal Code, which bans defamation of the army or the flag," and each was fined US\$ 219.<sup>349</sup>

In 2007, a criminal court judge in Beirut convicted a Lebanese citizen of defaming the president after he sent a mass email accusing the president of benefiting from deals that transferred public lands to private owners. The offender was sentenced to a short term in prison, but more importantly, the judge considered the mass email as satisfying the definition of a "public statement," a required condition for a statement to be considered defamation by law.<sup>350</sup>

In 2010, the Lebanese public prosecutor accused three citizens of defaming the president after posting negative comments on their blogs and on Facebook (see section 7.3.3). After their arrest, Naim Hanna, Antoine Ramya, and Chibl Kasab were released on bail by a Beirut criminal court that referred them to another criminal court. The case remains pending, but the important point is that their case was not referred to the publications court.

Next, in what was touted as a landmark court case in October 2011, an appeals court established that the internet is to be considered a publication instrument (i.e. print medium), that websites are considered publications that are therefore subject to the publications law, and that all disputes pertaining to content published online fall under the jurisdiction of the publications court.<sup>351</sup> This decision pertains to a lawsuit filed by retired Major General Jamil Al Sayyed against a press officer of the FM.<sup>352</sup> The lawsuit accused Ayman Jezzini of responsibility for a series of defamatory articles published on *Almustaqbal.org*, a website owned by the FM. The appeals court applied the publications law to this case, acquitting Jezzini and noting that he was not in charge of the website at the time of publication.

The same month, another almost identical lawsuit was referred to the publications court. In this case, a senior FM officer accused an FPM leader of allowing the publication of defamatory articles on FPM's website. Although the latter two lawsuits have obvious underlying political forces at play,<sup>353</sup> they are both considered by the legal community as precedents that will set the trend for future new media lawsuits, particularly those pertaining to content and defamation, at least until a comprehensive media law is in place.

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348. Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Internet, Gay Rights Targeted," at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2000/09/22/lebanon-internet-gay-rights-targeted> (accessed 10 December 2011).

349. Warren Singh-Barlett, "GayLebanon.com Case Causes Stir," at <http://www.onlinepolicy.org/turing/000925.dailystar.gaylebanondotcom.shtml> (accessed 10 December 2011).

350. Interview with Tony Mikhael, legal expert for the Maharat Foundation, Beirut, 18 January 2012.

351. Youkal.net, "The Publications' Court Decrees that Web Sites are Considered Media Instruments", at [http://www.youkal.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=37289:2011-11-01-13-31-08&catid=46:2009-11-26-22-00-14&Itemid=118](http://www.youkal.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=37289:2011-11-01-13-31-08&catid=46:2009-11-26-22-00-14&Itemid=118) (accessed 10 December 2011).

352. Former head of General Directorate of General Security who was ousted in the aftermath of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri's assassination.

353. Both were between two major opposing political groups, but each was initiated by a different side.

However, Mr Mikhael notes that this move adds to the confusion, as the publications law is not equipped to deal with the internet. For example, the publications law differentiates between periodicals and non-periodicals, with important implications pertaining to responsibility of the author, owner, supervisor, and disseminator. In this regard, how will the courts categorize online content? And how will they treat audiovisual content? Many other questions highlight the legal mess of dealing with online content.

## 7.2 Regulators

### 7.2.1 Changes in Content Regulation

Little has changed since 2005 in the regulatory framework and the transition from analog to digital. Just as Lebanon remains in an extended state of transition into the digital era, so—correspondingly—the laws and regulations pertaining to digital transmission and the internet remain in a state of suspension. Several proposed laws, some highly controversial, with provisions for the establishment of relevant regulating bodies, have yet to be passed or even discussed in Parliament (see section 7.1).

### 7.2.2 Regulatory Independence

In theory, the law has provided for mechanisms to ensure the independence of those regulating the media from government and political parties, but as discussed earlier, the three supposedly independent bodies that regulate the media are in practice tools in the hands of the government, used to limit access to opposition forces and bolster the media fortunes and power of the dominant political groups. The 1994 Audiovisual Law established three semi-independent advisory bodies that report to the Cabinet of Ministries:

- NCAVM, responsible for evaluating broadcast licensing applications and monitoring licensed stations;
- TRA, responsible for technical spectrum matters, including digital transition and the maximum allowable number of stations;
- the Committee for Establishing Model Bylaws and Practices, in charge of regulating content, production, and programming.

While in theory these institutions are independent of the government, in effect the same dominant political powers influence and control them (see section 5.1).

According to Dabbous-Sensenig, unlike in 1994 when the government proactively and aggressively regulated broadcast media, today it seems to have little interest in regulation. She laments that media policymaking in Lebanon has been almost dead for the past 15 years. “In 1994, the political powers had great interest in regulating the industry because each political party needed to initiate its own TV station to broadcast its ideologies while blocking others from doing so, but today the political parties are not paying much attention to regulate the internet as they do not perceive the regulations will offer similar benefits.” In addition, she notes that the lack of experts in this field further exacerbates the problem and results in proposed legislation that lacks understanding of the digital realm. “The authorities in Lebanon are not capable of regulating the

internet.” The current system relies on implementing outdated laws to regulate a new medium, according to her.

### 7.2.3 Digital Licensing

Sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3 offer a comprehensive account of the highly politicized, unfair, and non-transparent broadcast media licensing and spectrum allocation system. The same system and logic that govern broadcast media and allocate TV and radio licenses to the dominant political powers are at play when it comes to licensing internet service providers (ISPs) and the operation of mobile phone services. Y. Gonzalez-Kikhano indicates that a handful of dominant politicians have formed alliances with international companies to take over the market’s mobile telephony operators, ISPs, and audiovisual institutions, for example, “[former] Prime Minister Hariri’s ISP Cyberia, Future TV, and ‘financial empire’ Oger-Liban; Audi Bank’s alliance with the local ISPs Data Management and Inconet (now merged as IDM ...); and Nizar Dalloul’s (a relative and a business partner of Hariri) shares in LibanCell (one of the two mobile operators in Lebanon) and the ISP Terranet.”<sup>354, 355</sup>

Although there is still no law regulating the licensing of ISPs, today “a handful of ISPs are allowed to operate by obtaining a ‘license’ by decree from the Council of Ministers.”<sup>356</sup> However, the government retains a monopoly on the sale of international bandwidth and access to uplinks, a matter that has kept the cost of internet services in Lebanon extremely high—despite a 70 percent reduction in the cost of international bandwidth in 2006—and simultaneously extremely slow and lagging behind all its neighbors in internet penetration rate.

Although the government has occasionally made some effort to improve this situation—for example, the Ministry of Information launched a series of consultations in 2010 with media owners, journalists, advocacy groups, and politicians to identify broad parameters for a new comprehensive legal framework—gigantic efforts are still required before the country can fully embrace the digital era with a sufficiently sophisticated set of laws and regulations that can satisfy the needs of its citizens and businesses.

In addition, the government needs to build some trust with the various stakeholders in the country, particularly regarding the internet, as an increasing number of citizens and civil society groups grow impatient with the poor state of the internet infrastructure and services. Three of these groups are currently working to build public support to pressure the government into dealing with this urgent matter. Flip the Switch, Fast Lebanon, and Ontornet (a name that plays on the words *ontor*—Arabic for wait—and *net*) have been working hard on awareness and pressure campaigns. The groups claim that the government has been artificially keeping the cost of internet services high and its speed low, despite available technology and equipment. For instance, the

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354. Y. Gonzalez-Kikhano, “The Internet and Globalization of Lebanese Media” (Arabic لاصتالو مالعالا لئاسو فملوعو تنرتنالا فلبش (ةينانبللا), in *Al-Fadaa al-Arabi*, ed. Franck Mermier, trans. Frederick Maatuk, Kadmus Publishers, Damascus, 2003, cited in Dabbous, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon.”

355. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon,” p. 34.

356. D. Dabbous-Sensenig, “ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon,” p. 20.

groups claim that the equipment for 3G mobile technology has been available in Lebanon for some time, and that an international fiber optics connection which reached the city of Tripoli several years ago has still not been connected to the rest of the country. The three groups, which are united in their concerns but differ in their strategies and tactics, have called for several mass public protests in the past two years.<sup>357</sup>

## 7.2.4 Role of Self-regulatory Mechanisms

Aside from the pre-digital period's Syndicate of Press Editors and the Syndicate of Publishers' Union,<sup>358</sup> no self-regulating bodies specific to digital media exist in Lebanon. The two bodies have had little to do with digital media, and their influence remains limited in this regard, partly because they are already entangled in their own problems.

## 7.3 Government Interference

### 7.3.1 The Market

The stories of NTV, Murr TV, and later OTV (see sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3) offer ample evidence of state interference to control market entry and maintain a quasi-monopoly over the broadcasting industry. In all these cases, dominant politicians and their supporting officials in the government unfairly declined or revoked licenses of political opponents in the pre-digital period.

### 7.3.2 The Regulator

As the country remains in transition to digitization, little has changed in terms of interference by state authorities. Few relevant examples exist to date, mainly due to the lack of licensing regulations for digital media, but also due to the political climate in Lebanon, where various competing groups seek protection from the dominant political powers. In addition, little change can be expected when digitization comes in, as the same dominant politicians who continue to control the traditional media are poised and ready to take over the new media.

### 7.3.3 Other Forms of Interference

Lebanon's history is rife with violence, intimidation, and extra-legal pressures on journalists and media organizations, especially during the civil war years (1975–1990). Moreover, despite boasting the highest level of press freedom in the region, even post-civil war Lebanon has witnessed substantial incidents of violence and intimidation against the media.

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357. Interview with S.A., Flip the Switch activist, Beirut, 25 March 2011. Please note that after the research for this report was substantially complete, several developments took place, mainly in October 2011, including the government's decision to reduce the cost of broadband internet and increase its speed, in addition to finally introducing G3 mobile internet services.

358. Lebanon has two press syndicates, the Syndicate of Press Editors and the Syndicate of Publishers' Union.

The targeted killings of journalists and news managers after the civil war diminished but did not completely cease. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), eight journalists have been killed in Lebanon since 1992.<sup>359</sup> Many other journalists have been wounded or intimidated, and their stations, offices, and equipment often destroyed or damaged.<sup>360, 361</sup>

Between 2005 and 2008, media institutions have often been targeted by local fighting groups. In addition, Lebanese journalists regularly reported incidents of beatings and intimidations.<sup>362,363,364,365</sup> None of these incidents has much to do with digitization. However, incidents may become more frequent in the digital era. For example, after translating and publishing several reports from WikiLeaks in 2010, *Al Akhbar* newspaper's website was hacked and rendered inaccessible for several days. The web was also blocked in Tunisia after it published translated WikiLeaks reports depicting the Tunisian president in a bad light.<sup>366</sup>

While one would expect similar cyber attacks on the mainstream news media to increase in the future, not all incidents engage the use of digital media by professional journalists and many events go beyond the hacking of digital content. For example, the digital revolution in Lebanon has led to an increased number of arrests of social media activists, accompanied by the elimination of content from online forums.

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359. Committee to Protect Journalists, Lebanon, 2010, at <http://cpj.org/mideast/lebanon/> (accessed 22 March 2011).

360. Recent killings include the 2005 assassinations of *Annahar's* Samir Kassir and Gebran Tueni. During the 2006 war, an Israeli air bombardment killed Loyal Najib from *Al-Jaras* magazine and AFP, and Suleiman al-Chidiac, from LBC, and wounded dozens of other journalists. Indiscriminate Israeli bombings in 2010 also killed Assaf Abu Rahal, of *Al-Akhhbar*. Also, LBC's May Chidiac survived an assassination attempt in 2005. In 2006, three journalists from NTV narrowly survived an Israeli airstrike in south Lebanon. Cameramen Abed Khayat and Ziad Sawan and reporter Bassel al-Aridi were covering the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon when their car was destroyed and they were seriously injured. See Committee to Protect Journalists, "Israeli forces strike Al-Manar TV facilities," 2006, at <http://cpj.org/2006/07/israeli-forces-strike-almanar-tv-facilities.php> (accessed 22 March 2011).

361. At the outset of the 2006 war, Israeli attacks destroyed Hezbollah's various broadcasting institutions, including multiple Al-Manar transmitters throughout Lebanon, but they also targeted other transmitters, including Hezbollah's critic LBC, TL, and Future TV, as well as several cellphone towers. See Committee to Protect Journalists, "Attacks on the press in 2006: Lebanon, 2006," at <http://cpj.org/2007/02/attacks-on-the-press-2006-lebanon.php> (accessed 22 March 2011).

362. In the aftermath of the 2005 spate of assassinations, journalists from news outlets associated with one political group became targets of the opposing group. For example, in 2006, during a protest against a Danish newspaper's cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, a disoriented crowd attacked and roughed up several reporters in Beirut. See Committee to Protect Journalists, "Attacks on the press 2006," 2006, at <http://cpj.org/2007/02/attacks-on-the-press-2006-lebanon.php> (accessed 22 March 2011).

363. In the aftermath of a 2007 bomb blast in Aley, a stronghold of Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), news crews from three stations came under attack from an angry mob while the journalists were interviewing eye-witnesses. See Committee to Protect Journalists, "Lebanon: Army imposes restrictions on coverage of northern clashes," 2007, at <http://cpj.org/2007/05/lebanon-army-imposes-restrictions-on-coverage-of-n.php> (accessed 22 March 2011).

364. Most recently, in 2011, a mob of supporters of ousted Prime Minister Saad Hariri attacked an Al Jazeera crew and set its van on fire. The Al Jazeera team was covering a pro-Hariri demonstration in Tripoli from the rooftop of a nearby building. While they were not physically harmed, the news team members were trapped for several hours until the Lebanese army evacuated them from the building. See Committee to Protect Journalists, "Al-Jazeera attacked in Lebanon and West Bank," 2011, at <http://cpj.org/2011/01/al-jazeera-attacked-in-lebanon-and-west-bank.php> (accessed 22 March 2011).

365. Attacks on journalists in the field were not limited to civilian crowds, and the Lebanese army and the country's security apparatus did not always act as rescuers. In 2007, journalists from *Al-Akhhbar*, *Al-Balad*, AFP, and Al-Alam TV covering the exodus of Palestinian refugees from Nahr el-Bared refugee camp reported being beaten by the Lebanese army. See Committee to Project Journalists, "Army imposes restrictions on coverage of northern clashes," 2007, at <http://cpj.org/2007/05/lebanon-army-imposes-restrictions-on-coverage-of-n.php> (accessed 22 March 2011).

366. Committee to Protect Journalists, "After running leaked cables, websites face harassment," 2010, at <http://cpj.org/2010/12/after-running-leaked-cables-websites-face-harassme.php> (accessed 22 March 2011).

In 2010, the judiciary accused three citizens of defaming President Michel Suleiman, after posting negative comments on their blogs and on a Facebook group the president's supporters had created. Naim Hanna, Antoine Ramya, and Chibl Kasab were arrested, interrogated, and later released (see section 7.1.2.2). According to social media activist Assaad Thebian, the three men's comments were quickly removed and users were prevented from commenting, and later the Facebook group was eliminated. Their arrests triggered a storm of tweets and blogs that protested the government's violation of the social activists' freedom of expression rights.<sup>367</sup>

Many activists and regular citizens have reported being interrogated and intimidated by the Lebanese security forces for what they had posted on Facebook or in their blogs, and in many cases they noted the suspicious disappearance of comments and entries and the closure of online forums of social networking groups. Imad Bazzi, an activist who recently turned to blogging after being jailed several times for critical newspaper articles, discovered quickly that the arrests resumed after digitization. Mr Bazzi noted that he and six of his blogger friends had been arrested, interrogated, and intimidated many times since 2005.<sup>368</sup>

More disturbingly, some incidents revealed extra-legal tactics intended to identify the people behind anonymous online postings and web content. A well-known incident in 2000 related to a website promoting gay and lesbian rights in Lebanon indicates how aggressive the Lebanese security forces can be in dealing with online speech. The security officers raided the offices of Destination, a local ISP, and tried naively to force the staff to reveal the identity and location of the owners of the website Gaylebanon.com (see section 7.1.2.2).<sup>369</sup> While this incident reveals the security apparatus's lack of understanding of internet technology (the website was hosted on a US server and ISPs have no ability to obtain the information requested), it nevertheless highlights the government's attitude to freedom of expression in the digital sphere and the lack of legal guarantees and protections for speech online. While this event received some media coverage, numerous other low-profile incidents go mostly unreported by the mainstream media, and are often kept secret by the intimidated and threatened individuals, as many interviewed social media activists and citizens indicated.

## 7.4 Assessments

The framework of the policies, laws, and regulations pertaining to digitization have failed overall to respond effectively to the new challenges, mainly because the old laws and regulations that govern traditional media have been applied to the digital media, and special laws and regulations for the internet, mobile telephony, and other digital media have still to be established. Likewise, the old mode of operation that has put the traditional media firmly in the grip of dominant politico-sectarian groups is at play with the digital media. The same dominant politicians who controlled traditional media in the analog era are emerging today as the main patrons of the digital media era.

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367. For more details, see <http://bit.ly/hqBpeW> and <http://bit.ly/cNW13b> and <http://bit.ly/eE0R0M> (accessed 22 March 2011).

368. Imad Bazzi, AKA Trella, "Blogging has proven to be the most influential form of activism in Lebanon," *Aswat*, 2010, at <https://www.aswat.com/en/node/4172> (accessed 23 March 2011).

369. D. Dabbous, "ACRLI 2007 Country Report: Media in Lebanon."

In addition, the government has done very little to protect the interests of consumers and citizens, either following the shift to digital or during the transition period from which the country is yet to emerge. Also, the government made barely any effort to engage citizens and civil society groups in the decision-making process for digital switch-over. Overall, no concrete regulations, efforts, or plans have been put in place to help citizens, and the laws and proposed regulations mainly serve the interests of the operators and businesses without any concerns to limit the powers of the dominant politicians and sectarian groups that today control the traditional as well as the new media.

The nature and degree of interference by state authorities have substantially increased between 2005 and 2010, but only a few of these interferences can be attributed to digitization, as the main culprits are the political upheavals and wars that have plagued the country since 2005. However, more incidents related to digitization have started to become public and are likely to increase. Increasingly, the government has been cracking down on social media activists and bloggers, trying to eliminate critical online media content, closing down social media forums, and tracking down the people behind them. Stories of low-profile police arrests, interrogations, and intimidations abound in the social media arena and blogosphere.

The amount and extent of public consultations with respect to new media technologies remain meager in Lebanon, and most stakeholders—with the exception of the dominant political powers, their advisors, and affiliated businesses—are ignored. The few examples of government attempts to engage civil society have been dismissed by prominent experts as superficial publicity ploys and meaningless actions that lack any concrete results. In the end, the dominant political powers shape the laws and regulations to fit their own commercial and political interests.

Nevertheless, an increasing number of NGOs and CSOs have been working hard to highlight these problems, spreading awareness about the dire state of the digital media infrastructure and services in the country, offering alternative proposals to controversial government bills, and calling for actions and protests to pressure government.

Since the country still has not conceived laws and regulations for digital media—whether for the internet, mobile phones, or other digital technologies—there is as yet no change or impact on pluralism and diversity in digital broadcasting.

# 8. Conclusions

## 8.1 Media Today

The mostly negative developments that have taken place since 2005, in connection with the independence and diversity of the news media, their content, and the plurality of their voices, can be attributed predominantly to the cataclysmic political events that have gripped Lebanon and the region. However, some positive developments that may be attributed to digitization have also taken place.

### 8.1.1 Positive Developments

The few positive exceptions between 2005 and 2010 relate mainly to the new opportunities the internet affords to activists, civil society groups, and a small number of online news media. Thanks to the spread of Web 2.0 tools, the country experienced an increase in voices and diversity in online content, spearheaded by the many activists who did not have an outlet to express their opinions except through the traditional media controlled by dominant political powers. While most of the mainstream local online news media remain predominantly an extension and mere reflection of the offline media, an increasing number of bloggers and social media activists have begun to slowly but steadily occupy more space in the public sphere. Nevertheless, many citizens and organizations remain cut off from this new medium due to lack of resources and poor digital and media literacy, and some are forcibly deterred from freely expressing their opinions in the public sphere through extra-legal actions and acts of intimidation.

### 8.1.2 Negative Developments

Lebanese media, their institutions, content, laws, and regulations have all been gravely affected by the political calamities triggered in 2005. In addition, a destructive Israeli war against Lebanon in 2006 followed by frequent political deadlocks and government shutdowns left the country in a protracted state of transition from the analog to the digital era. This environment of political chaos and legislative stalemate mainly served to preserve the status quo of media ownership and representation. The same dominant politico-sectarian powers that controlled much of the media in the post-civil war period remained in control of the new and emerging media technologies and directed the media to serve their often competing and contradictory political and commercial interests, causing further divisions and hostilities in Lebanese society. With no

thanks to digitization, even the few newcomers to the media table gained access due to the shifts in the political climate.

## 8.2 Media Tomorrow

The main factors that will influence the future of media over the next five years depend on stable governance and the political climate in the country and the region. Major legislative, logistical, infrastructural, technological, and commercial issues continue to await the government's attention, as businesses and civil society groups continue to lobby, protest, and propose solutions to this dismal state of neglect and apathy.

Most likely, the next achievements will be on the legal front. Several draft laws have been proposed for information communication and technology, digital transmission, and advertising. Progress was obstructed in 2011 by a four-month vacuum in government and later by major regional political events, especially in Syria. In addition, a shortage of relevant experts, a lack of understanding of digital media, and a mentality of control, clientelism, and confessionism have caused many more delays and stagnation. Calls for protests by grassroots organizations and proposed laws by some NGOs are likely to push these to the top of the public agenda if no major war or political event supervenes.

Another priority may be digital switch-over and analog switch-off. The internationally mandated deadline for analog switch-off on 17 June 2015, set by the Geneva 2006 Agreement, may serve as leverage to push the government into acting. In addition, the existence of a body responsible for this offers the proper framework for the transition. TRA, which has spent several years studying the different options for this step, is still waiting for the government to act on legislation and funding.

Other developments that may take place subsequently may include a rapid flourishing in the media industry as more spectrum becomes available and the infrastructure improves. In addition, given the laws and traditions of freedom of expression and the press, Lebanon should experience more diversity and pluralism of voices across all media. All this may also increase the demand for more digital media professionals, journalists, experts, teachers, and scholars.

# List of Abbreviations, Figures, Tables, and Companies

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

AFP	Agence France Presse
ARIJ	Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism
ART	Arab Radio and Television
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
CNN	Cable News Network
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DTH	Direct to Home Satellite TV
DVB-MS	Digital Video Broadcasting Multicast Services
EU EOM	EU Election Observation Mission
FPM	Free Patriotic Movement
GDI	Gross Domestic Income
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IndyACT	League of Independent Activists
IPTV	Internet Protocol Television
ISP	Internet Service Provider
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
LADE	Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections
LAU	Lebanese American University
LBC	Lebanese Broadcasting Company
LECORVAW	Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered

Mbps	Megabyte per second
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MIRSAD	Multi-Initiative on Rights: Search, Assist, Defend
MoT	Ministry of Telecommunication
MVDS	Microwave Video Distribution Systems
NCAVM	National Council for Audio-Visual Media
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NTV	New Television
Ogero	Organisme de Gestion et d'Exploitation de l'ex-société Radio-Orient
OTV	Orange TV
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
PSP	Progressive Socialist Party
RL	Radio Liban
SCEC	Supervisory Commission for Electoral Campaigns
SMEX	Social Media Exchange Beirut
TL	Télé Liban
TRA	Telecommunications Regulatory Authority
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UCL	United Cable Operators of Lebanon
UGC	User-Generated Content
UHF	Ultra High Frequency
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VHF	Very High Frequency

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## Companies

Agence France Presse	Media Direction OMD
Alexa	MTC Touch
Alfa Mobile	Murr TV
Audi Bank	New TV (NTV)
British Broadcasting Company (BBC)	Nielsen Company
Cable News Network (CNN)	Oger-Liban
CableVision	Ogero
Cyberia	Ontornet
Data Management	Orange TV (OTV)
DivInMedia	Orascom Telecom
Econet	Orbit
Fiberwaves SAL	Reuters
Group Med	ShowTime
Hariri Group	ShowTime-Orbit Networks
Inconet	SMEX & Co
Inconet Data Management	Social Media Exchange Beirut (SMEX)
Ipsos	Terranet
Ipsos Stat Lebanon AGB NMR	United Cable Company
La Compagnie Libanaise de Télévision (CLT)	United Cable of Lebanon
Lebanese Broadcasting Company (LBC)	United Cable Operators of Lebanon (UCL)
Liban Telecom	Zain (MTC Group)
LibanCell	

## Mapping Digital Media: Country Reports

1. Romania
2. Thailand
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17. Moldova
18. Japan
19. Argentina
20. South Africa
21. Turkey

**Mapping Digital Media** is a project of the **Open Society Media Program** and the **Open Society Information Program**.

## Open Society Media Program

The Media Program works globally to support independent and professional media as crucial players for informing citizens and allowing for their democratic participation in debate. The program provides operational and developmental support to independent media outlets and networks around the world, proposes engaging media policies, and engages in efforts towards improving media laws and creating an enabling legal environment for good, brave and enterprising journalism to flourish. In order to promote transparency and accountability, and tackle issues of organized crime and corruption the Program also fosters quality investigative journalism.

## Open Society Information Program

The Open Society Information Program works to increase public access to knowledge, facilitate civil society communication, and protect civil liberties and the freedom to communicate in the digital environment. The Program pays particular attention to the information needs of disadvantaged groups and people in less developed parts of the world. The Program also uses new tools and techniques to empower civil society groups in their various international, national, and local efforts to promote open society.

## Open Society Foundations

The Open Society Foundations work to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. Working with local communities in more than 70 countries, the Open Society Foundations support justice and human rights, freedom of expression, and access to public health and education.

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