

Media With a Mission: Why Fairness and Balance Are Not Priorities in Lebanon's Journalistic Codes

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Investigating why fairness and balance are not priorities in Lebanon, this article suggests that the country's historical and sociopolitical evolution favored a partisan model where press institutions are either owned by or supportive of political blocs, parties, or personalities. Factors such as the *za'im* system, foreign patronization, institutionalized sectarianism, social inequality, and the civil war reinforced partisan affiliations and created a double, unwritten social contract: An unspoken pact joins journalists and media owners, with the former serving the interests of the latter through their reporting. At the same time, an unwritten agreement connects journalists and citizens, who see the media as indicators of political opinion.

Background Information

Lebanon today is divided among several parties, forming two major blocs that reflect the tensions in the larger Middle East. Until this article was written, the Saudi-backed, pro-Western Future Movement was allied with both the Lebanese Forces and the Qornet Shehwan Gathering. Dubbed collectively as the "March 14 alliance," the three parties championed the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005, following the assassination of the Future Movement's leader, Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.¹ At the heart of the second bloc is the Iranian-backed, pro-Syrian Hezbollah. The alliance Hezbollah maintains with Amal, a secular socialist party, as well as with the Syrian Nationalists, the Free Patriotic Movement, and the Giants Movement, is known collectively as the "March 8 alliance."

Although this binary divide may suggest a civilizational tension in the Samuel Huntington style, Lebanon's political reality is much more complex, with alliances often shifting to reflect larger tensions in the tumultuous Middle East. Given the multiple troubles afflicting the area, it is very difficult to speak briefly of the stakes without simplifying the region's numerous issues. At the center of the knot are Lebanon's two neighbors, Syria and Israel. The intervention by Damascus in Lebanon, going back to the

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¹ It should be noted that the Progressive Socialist Party was part of the alliance when the 2005 Cedar Revolution broke out. The party, however, withdrew from the alliance in 2009.

1940s, escalated during the civil war and culminated between 1991 and 2005 (Salloukh, 2005). Syria used Lebanon to reinforce its negotiating position over the Israeli-Arab question, to fight proxy wars with Israel, to secure jobs for hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers, and to accumulate “staggering fortunes” (p. 19) through exports. Throughout this period, Syria controlled much of Lebanon’s internal and external policies. Its main allies were Hizbullah and Amal, although other parties, including the March 14 alliance, sought to gain Syria’s blessings at one point or another. It wasn’t until the assassination of Hariri in 2005—largely attributed to Damascus—that the March 14 alliance adopted a strongly anti-Syrian stance due to Saudi Arabia’s discord with Syria over the killing of Hariri.

Israel, which contested Syria’s control over Lebanon, allied itself during the civil war with Lebanon’s Christians, among others, to undermine Damascus’ power. Eager to protect its northern borders from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and later from Hizbullah, and also hoping to use the proxy war with Syria to strengthen its position in peace negotiations, Israel occupied Southern Lebanon up to the Litani river as of 1978 and launched major offensives against the small country in 1982, 1993, and 1996, before retreating to the official border in 2000.

Needless to say, Israel’s withdrawal raised serious questions about Hizbullah’s weapons² and its very mission as an armed resistance against Israel. For the Future Movement, which worked for a stability that would foster foreign investment, and for the Lebanese Forces and the Qornet Shehwan Gathering, which did not welcome the empowerment of a pro-Iranian, largely Shiite party at the expense of its Christian counterparts, Hizbullah’s right to bear arms was evidently to be contested. The latter’s position was, however, strengthened with the Israeli offensive against Lebanon in 2006. Orchestrated in agreement with President George W. Bush’s administration, the war failed to crush Hizbullah. Instead, it reinforced the organization’s position, radicalized Lebanon’s Shiites, and positioned the March 14 alliance as “traitors”—an argument that Hizbullah’s members continuously stressed (Quilty, 2007).

Also affecting Lebanon today are the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Supporting Hizbullah and the Future Movement respectively, the two oil-rich countries are among the most influential in the Middle East. Strengthened by the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the Iran of Ahmadi Najad plays a significant role today in reinforcing the leverage of Hizbullah. At the other end is Saudi Arabia, who sees itself as the protector of Sunnis in the area, and who is growing increasingly wary of the Shiite influence in the Middle East.³ Saudis are also becoming impatient about Hizbullah’s resistance agenda because a portion of their oil money is invested in Lebanon. The recent reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Syria, however, eased the pressure the oil-rich Gulf country put on the Iranian- and Syrian-backed Hizbullah.

² Of all Lebanese militias, Hizbullah was the only party allowed to keep its weapons following the end of the civil war. The rationale behind such a decision, the brainchild of Syria’s Assad, was that Hizbullah would resist Israel’s occupation of the South.

³ One must remember that the Saudi oil reserves are mostly in the northwest of the country, a region that is largely Shiite and dangerously close to Iraq and Iran.

"You have freedom of the press but lack a free press"—Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser to Lebanese journalists (Dajani, 1992).

Introduction

Lebanon's press is genuinely pluralistic and among the freest in the Arab world (Rugh, 2004). Lebanese papers, television channels and radio stations represent the entire spectrum of political and religious parties and can freely disparage the government. Historically, the press exposed the corruption of the first post-independence regime and led to the president's resignation in 1952. Newspapers frequently came into conflict with authorities but could rarely be silenced. Even when articles were occasionally censored, they were replaced with blank spaces as a sign of dissent (2004). At the same time, however, Lebanese media tend to be owned or supported by political personalities as well as parties, and do not criticize or harm the hand that feeds them (Baldwin, 2003; Dajani, 1992; Fandy, 2007; Hammoud & Afifi, 1994; Rugh, 2004; Sensenig-Dabbous, 2000). Highly partisan, Lebanon's press is relatively free, but not fair and balanced.

Based on interviews with Lebanese journalism professors and journalists from various Lebanese media outlets, this article attempts to understand the reasons behind the country's media reality. It focuses specifically on the unwritten code of ethics that discounts the importance of fairness and balance. The article further argues that sociocultural and political differences, including institutionalized sectarianism, social inequality, the za'im system, foreign patronization, and a 15-year civil war, have made the majority of Lebanon's media politically partial. To highlight the influence that sociocultural and political evolution exercises on the journalistic codes countries adopt and to underline Lebanon's divergence from the fairness paradigm in media ethics, this study also examines the factors that favored the introduction of fairness and balance as an essential part of the press code in the United States, where the very concept of objective news was first introduced (Dabbous, 2010; Mindich, 1998).

Fairness and Balance in Lebanon

Fairness and Balance

The dictionary definition of fairness refers to an approach "marked by impartiality and honesty, free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism" (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2006, p. 386). Balance, on the other hand, is the act of "arrang[ing] so that one set of elements equals another" (p. 78). In journalism, these ideals are not easy to describe. Fico and Cote's definition (1997), however, is close to the normative application of the two terms. Fairness, they write, involves the inclusion of the opposite side in conflict stories, while balance refers to the equal reference to the different sides of a dispute (Fico & Cote, 1997). Together, fairness and balance constitute one of the main tenets of objectivity (Cohen-Almagor, 2008; Mindich, 1998). Others include detachment, nonpartisanship, accuracy, and truthfulness. The two concepts have replaced the unachievable sense of objectivity as scientific neutrality, popular at the beginning of the 20th century (Durham, 1998; Fico & Cote, 1997). Mindich (1998) compares fairness and objectivity to a seesaw. "The idea here is that journalists can find truth by offering two competing truth claims," he wrote (p. 7).

Although journalism reviews and textbooks frequently refer to objectivity, fairness, and balance as standards of quality journalism, the concepts have been strongly questioned in the academic field, especially in the latter part of the 20th century (Durham, 1998). Some scholars questioned the ethics of the concepts. For them, equally providing both sides of a story could sometimes be distorting or unjust (Cohen-Almagor, 2008; Fuller, 1996; Hackett, 1984; Mindich, 1998; Rosen, 1993). Scholars pointed out that objectivity is an ideological device that serves to protect journalists (Tuchman, 1972), to improve the media's profit margins by maximizing circulation (Hamilton, 2006; Mindich, 1998; Ognianova & Endersby, 1996) and to preserve the status quo (Bennett, 1982; Chomsky, 1989; Glasser, 1992; Hackett, 1984; Lewis, 1999; Nichols, 1981; Tuchman, 1978). More importantly for this study, many scholars suggested that objectivity was practically unattainable. In his book on the history of objectivity, Mindich (1998) put the term in quotes to highlight its slippery, almost inaccessible nature. Hackett (1984) argued that language is not neutral; the use of words and idioms necessarily implies the presence of bias. Stuart Hall (1982) contended that media were not independent agencies that merely reflected reality. By structuring, selecting, and presenting facts, the press "defined, not merely reproduced, reality," Hall wrote (p. 64). Articles investigating partisan bias in the American media originally yielded mixed results (Hackett, 1984). More recent studies, however, found a tendency toward partiality with the rise of cable television and the increasing polarization in American politics (see, for example, Coe et al., 2008; Groeling, 2008; Niven, 2003; Peake, 2007; Weatherly, Petros, Christopherson, & Haugen, 2007).

Objectivity literature, therefore, suggests that the disregard for fairness and balance may not be a solely Lebanese problem. It is, according to Schiller (1981), the "invisible frame" (p. 2) that inevitably distorts as it attempts to prevent bias. As Gerbner (1964) wrote, "all news is views" (p. 495). Yet, although the universality of potential bias is virtually agreed upon, the Lebanese press code is still a special case, different from the journalistic ethics American media follow today. Unlike their U.S. counterparts, the majority of Lebanon's media outlets are practically used as mobilization tools for the people or parties they serve (Sensenig-Dabbous, 2000). At the heart of their mission are professional values favoring partiality. Although U.S. media are increasingly opinionated, with MSNBC and Fox News representing the two ends of the liberal-conservative spectrum, the press code of ethics in the United States mandates fairness and balance in journalism.

Disregard of Fairness and Balance in Lebanon

As Dajani explained (1992, 2001), Lebanon's media ownership is representative of the country's sociopolitical structure. It provides a balanced reflection of the various sects and political powers that coexist in this small piece of land. Most media in Lebanon are owned, managed, or financially supported by local or regional powers (Baldwin, 2003; Hammoud & Afifi, 1994). As a result, newspapers are transformed into what Dajani (1992) called "viewspapers" (p. 11) and so are other media outlets.

Fandi (2007) classified the political influence on Lebanon's media according to two different criteria: one that is based on the country's political players and another that mirrors the tensions between regional political supporters. For example, Future Television (Future TV) and al-Manar could be considered the mouthpieces of the Future Movement and Hizbullah, respectively. At the same time, they could also be regarded as the unofficial voices of Saudi Arabia and Iran on Lebanese and foreign issues. Because the

two regional powers back up the two local groups, they also support the groups' media outlets. On the positive side, this melting pot ensures a diverse, pluralistic press system and encourages journalists—who enjoy political patronage—to speak up freely without fear of retribution from the government (Rugh, 2004). On the downside, however, the media's reliance on political supporters leads to a symbiotic patronization, a "complete editorial commitment to the country or movement offering funding" (Fandi, 2007, p. 163).

Media laws in Lebanon often favor the patronization system, Dajani (2001) argued. When TV licenses were allocated in 1996,⁴ limiting the number of stations that originated during the civil war, the only five permits to own stations were given to five politicians of different sectarian and political backgrounds. The National Broadcasting Network's⁵ license was issued before the station even existed (Abu-Fadil & Tarabay, 2003). Many of the small operators of illegal stations established during the war were forced to close after 1996 (Baldwin, 2003; Dajani, 2001). "Weak political, economic, or confessional groups were naturally denied a license and therefore excluded from public debate," Sensenig-Dabbous (2000, p. 14) noted. More recently, and after he returned from exile in 2005, former army chief Michel Aoun launched a television station, Orange TV. Critics noted the connection between the outlet's name and the all-orange logo of Aoun's political party (Cochrane, 2007). The government's refusal to issue new licenses for print media also created a huge demand for old licenses, considerably multiplying the cost of establishing magazines and newspapers—a reality that made print media also inaccessible to independent entrepreneurs (Baldwin, 2003).

Scholars argue that Lebanese media outlets become especially unbalanced during political emergencies and other crises (Fandi, 2007; Harb, 2006). Following the Hariri assassination and the anti-Syrian uprisings in 2005, the media became an actual player in the political and street battles. Visual and verbal discourses, such as live coverage, news articles, talk shows, and editorials, echoed the protests sweeping the streets (Dabbous & Hamdan, 2005; Fandi, 2007). Media biases also exacerbated the recent tensions that pit March 14 and March 8 alliances against each other in the Parliament and on the street. Today, Lebanon's television stations are more or less divided into two camps, representing the schism that is currently dividing Lebanon. Future TV, Future News, and Murr TV represent the March 14 alliance. Al-Manar, NBN, and Orange TV reflect the views of the March 8 opposition (Cochrane, 2007). Although they belong to neither of the two political groups, LBC, now a public venture, is more sympathetic to the former group while New TV, owned by a Sunni businessman who personally disliked Hariri, is more favorable to the opposition.

Because the Hariris and Hizbullah are the blocs' leaders on each side, the TV stations they own have become exceedingly confessional and propagandist. Al-Manar, for instance, featured promo clips that hailed martyrs from the July War, commemorated Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and demeaned his political opponent, then Prime Minister Fuad Seniora (2007). Future TV, on the other hand, broadcast montages praising the late Rafic Hariri and promoting the March 14 alliance. The walls surrounding the

⁴ The Audio Visual Media Law was passed in 1994, but licenses were only distributed in 1996.

⁵ NBN is a Lebanese news station owned by Parliament Speaker and Amal Party leader Nabih Berri and his supporters. A mouthpiece of its owner's policies, the channel supports the agenda of the Amal Party.

station's headquarters in Beirut are still covered with posters picturing Hariri and the events leading to his assassination and beyond. These are just a few examples of bias among many that compromise the fairness of al-Manar and Future TV. In fact, the two stations are so involved politically they are considered integral parts of their respective party's political arsenal. As a result, both were attacked and partially destroyed: al-Manar during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and Future TV in the Hizbullah upheaval against Lebanese Sunnis and Druze in 2008.

A Double Social Contract

To understand Lebanon's media ethics, one should consider the relationship between politicians, media, and constituents in terms of a double contract binding the three groups. Linking leaders with the press on one side and audiences with media on the other, the contract indeed creates a continuous communicative link where outlets become an effective connection between leaders and followers rather than a mere source of objective news.

Rugh (2004) speaks of "an understanding of some kind between a newspaper's editors and a specific Lebanese political faction and/or foreign groups" (p. 90) whereby journalists are bound by an implicit contract denying them the right to criticize the party they represent. Forceful censorship rarely occurs, but journalists working for a given media organization know they cannot publish or broadcast material disfavoring their sponsors, so they often exercise self-censorship.

Another unwritten social contract binds Lebanese audiences with the media. Aware of the political affiliations of the various media outlets, the Lebanese approach news organizations as indicators of political opinions rather than sources of news. They access the media for their respective leaders' views. One should caution here that selective exposure is not limited to Lebanese audiences. As Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) demonstrated in their seminal research in Erie County, Ohio, people tend to expose themselves to the messages that conform to their attitudes and beliefs. Selective exposure is one of the most widely accepted principles in sociology and social psychology (Sears & Freedman, 1967). The concept, however, does not necessarily presume an unwritten contract between media and audiences, as is the case in Lebanon. The Lebanese media system is designed in a way to represent and address the main political factions and religious groups in the Lebanese society (Dajani, 1992; Sensenig-Dabbous, 2000).

The interviews conducted by the author confirmed the existence of this double social contract. Magda Abu-Fadil, director of the Journalism Training Program at the American University of Beirut, explained that political and economic pressures make fairness and balance in Lebanon and the Arab world "a rare commodity." She also explained that the Lebanese public is "so highly charged politically, it likes to follow news that reflects its own individual tastes" (M. Abu-Fadil, personal communication, November 12, 2007). Ramez Maaluf, director of the Beirut Institute for Media Arts at the Lebanese American University, explained that most media outlets in Lebanon today exist to spread specific messages (Dabbous & Hamdan, 2005). Their very mission is to reflect the ideologies of the parties that own them or the regional

forces that sponsor them. An *Al-Mustaqbal*⁶ journalist, who spoke on condition of anonymity, explained that his superiors “expected him to favor the Hariri bloc,” but mandated fairness in the coverage of non-political news (personal communication, November 15, 2007). An *Assafir*⁷ editor (personal communication, November 15, 2007), who also spoke on condition of anonymity, differentiated between the newspapers and stations directly owned by political parties or personalities and those owned by third-parties having political inclinations toward one political player or another. The former, the editor said, are merely mouthpieces of their proprietors. Examples of such outlets include *Al-Manar* and *Al-Mustaqbal*, owned by Hizbullah and the Future Movement, respectively. Media that are owned by third-parties tend to mandate fairness and balance, the editor argued, although they still identify themselves with one of the two political currents in the country (March 8 and March 14 alliances).

In many cases, journalists embrace this unwritten contract and find it a natural right, as many of them work in media conforming to their partisan preferences. *An-Nahar*⁸ local news reporter, Manal Chaaya (personal communication, November 15, 2007) affirmed that “it is a reporter’s right to embrace and advocate national issues. Journalism is more a mission and a patriotic duty than a profession.” May Chidiac, a senior talk show host at Murr TV (MTV), takes Chaaya’s opinion a step further. Vocal in her support of the Lebanese Forces, Chidiac believes that journalists are “entitled to disclose their political views” (Dabbous & Hamdan, 2005).⁹

Why Fairness and Balance are Not Prime Standards in Lebanon

To understand the reasons for bias in the Lebanese media, one should understand the country’s sociocultural and political evolution. Before reviewing these factors, however, this study looks at the sociocultural dynamics that led to the rise of fairness as an important journalistic tenet in the United States, the country where the very idea of objective news was born (Dabbous, 2010; Mindich, 1998).

The Rise of the Fairness Paradigm in the United States

The sociocultural factors. Funded and operated by political parties, American newspapers in the early 1800s acted as mouthpieces of the government and of its opposition. Editors saw readers as voters

⁶ *Al-Mustaqbal* is a Lebanese newspaper owned by late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The paper is considered the mouthpiece of the Hariri’s followers. *Al-Mustaqbal*, which means “The Future” in Arabic, is also the name of Hariri’s political party.

⁷ *As-Safir* is a leftist Arab nationalist newspaper. One of the most respected sources of news in Lebanon, it is still less biased than other media outlets. Its inclination toward the Amal party, due mainly to the political affiliation of its manager, is, however, unmistakable.

⁸ One of the most respected sources of news in Lebanon, *An-Nahar* is a right of center newspaper that has historically advocated Lebanonism and openness to the West. After the assassination of its publisher and general manager, Gebran Tueni, the paper became strongly anti-Syrian.

⁹ Chidiac paid dearly for expressing her views. On September 25, 2005, a bomb placed under the driver’s seat of her car injured her critically, leaving her without a left arm and leg. The perpetrators are largely believed to be Syrian.

and thus limited their journalistic content to political news and partisan advocacy (Baldasty, 1992). By 1850, however, many papers had distanced themselves from politics, serving broader reader interests. Independent from Whigs and Democrats, they offered a variety of content, such as crime, entertainment and sports. The press soon recognized the importance of advertisers as a potential source of funding. By the 1890s, papers had become mostly reliant on advertisements. Articles directly or indirectly supported businesses. Editors saw readers as consumers and strived to lure them through drama and entertainment. Journalism itself had become a business, whose chief goal is to make money (1992).

Several sociocultural factors promoted this major change. First, disputes and rising press expenses created a shift in party-press relations. Newspapers abandoned their partisan supporters and began to look for funding elsewhere. Meanwhile, the industrial revolution had considerably boosted production in all areas, creating a need for effective marketing. When businesses recognized newspapers' potential as advertising vehicles, they quickly became the industry's new source of revenue (1992). James Gordon Bennett, champion of the penny press, exemplified this trend. The father of modern journalism set his editorial policy based on business considerations. Aspiring to sell more copies, he avoided advocacy for the Whigs and/or the Democrats. His penny press covered the political debate from the center (Mindich, 1998).

Urbanization also accelerated the commercialization of U.S. papers. As people moved to cities, lured by the economic prospects that urban centers offered, they engaged in new activities and faced various problems. Papers adapted to citizens' needs (Baldasty, 1992). Perhaps more importantly, urbanization brought "unlike people together" (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Compelled to address such diverse audiences, the press gave up its partisan ties (Baldasty, 1992; Roger, 1912).

At another level, social sciences in the United States underwent a considerable transformation in the 1920s. Journals, books, and courses by psychologists and sociologists advocated the use of new statistical methods, moving the discipline toward science and quantification (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Many traditional social scientists resisted the trend, arguing that it would dehumanize research on human beings, but the new paradigm slowly prevailed. The rise of quantitative techniques affected most departments within the social sciences (1995). Scientific methods were applied to political science and public affairs (Schudson, 1998), promoting an objective study of political players and events. This objectivity paradigm reinforced the prominence of fairness and balance as a central ethical standard in American journalism.

Commercialism, industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the scientific approach in social sciences have all contributed to the prevalence of the objectivity standard in journalism. By 1918, the famous publisher Oswald Garrison Villard of the *Nation* was already calling for "giv[ing] both sides" of a story (Mindich, 1998, p. 7). In Lebanon, however, an entirely different set of sociocultural factors, mandated by the country's geography and historical evolution, yielded a different set of ideals, namely in terms of fairness and balance.

The Political Factor: Reform and Change. In his celebrated book, *The Good Citizen*, Schudson (1998) outlines four eras of U.S. politics, during which American political and civic life changed

dramatically. From the assent system, where gentlemen ruled (18th century) to a politics of affiliation, where parties reigned supreme (19th century), America evolved into education-based authority, where the system governs (20th century) and later to civil-rights politics, where the emphasis is on rights (today).

In the 18th century, social hierarchy determined who was to lead the country. Political franchise was in the hand of the affluent, a reality that was largely taken for granted. At the center of the system was the figure of the gentleman, deeply respected by the rest of the citizenry (Schudson, 1998). When the U.S. gained its independence in 1776, Americans divorced the British-like reverence of the gentleman. Voluntary associations rose, formed by citizens of all ages, social statuses, and dispositions. The system evolved around a politics of affiliation, where parties and coalitions thrived. Party loyalists were handed jobs and given favors. Toward the end of the 19th century, reform became unavoidable, leading to a new era (1998).

Politics in the 20th century moved from the heart to the head. At the center of this sanitized system were the ideals of the informed voter and the government by experts (Schudson, 1998). The authority of the law and the faceless system replaced the gentlemen's and the parties' rules. It is therefore not surprising that professional ethics and the objectivity model of journalism rose around the same time. Instead of being partisan mouthpieces, newspapers were now expected to report objective information and let the voter decide. As an integral part of the new system, papers shifted, like many other facets of the political life, from emotional partisanship to rational and systematic objectivity. As the essay will later demonstrate, the shift that took place in America toward the end of the 19th century did not occur in Lebanon, where a mixed system of gentlemen and partisan politics still prevails.

The Factors Favoring Partiality Standards in the Lebanese Press

Political Factors: The Za'im Figure and Foreign Patronization. Lebanon is largely known to be the only democracy in the Arab world. In reality, the small country's system is not comparable to its American or French counterparts. It is, as Gilmour (1983) said, "democracy, the Lebanese version" (p. 34). Lebanon's politics is a *mélange* of the 18th- and 19th-century systems in the U.S., as Schudson (1998) describes them. The Lebanese do elect their representatives in the parliament, but the candidates always include names from few prominent families of different sects controlling the country's political life. Despite the regular elections, the pool rarely changes.

At the center of Lebanon's system is the figure of the *za'im* (local notable), a political leader whose status resembles America's 18th-century gentleman and who asserts his authority through his lineage (1983). Sometimes more influential and definitely more liked than government officials, *za'ims* provide favors to the *ahali* (masses). They help them find jobs, settle their disputes, represent their sect or ideology, and persuade the central government to provide them with services. *Za'ims* often assume political positions, reinforcing their power over their constituents (1983). This crucial figure of the Lebanese political structure originates in the *iqta'* system of the 16th century. Given relative autonomy under Ottoman rule, Mount Lebanon was then ruled by local ethnic or tribal chiefs, the *muqata'jis*. The latter collected taxes under the supervision of the Ottoman *walis* (rulers), managed the lives of the commoners on the land they controlled, and benefitted from several privileges accorded them by the

imperial power (Traboulsi, 2007). Before the 19th century, however, the authority of Lebanon's za'ims transcended religious affiliations. Different za'ims controlled ahali of various sects (Makdisi, 1996). But as confessionalism rose in the middle of the century, the power of each feudal leader within a given region became more or less associated with a particular religion. The political parties the za'ims erected were also divided according to sectarian affiliations (Suleiman, 1967).

Profiting from the weakness of the central government—especially during the civil war—and striving to please their constituents, za'ims established hospitals, schools, employment offices, public transport, and cooperatives (Kraidy, 1998). Along with these services, they also erected their own media outlets (Fandi, 2007; Rugh, 2004). "Media in Lebanon were originally created to be political organs," Maaluf explained (Dabbous & Hamdan, 2005). The *As-Safir* editor, who spoke on condition of anonymity, affirmed that all newspapers, televisions, and radio stations in Lebanon are either owned by a political party or a za'im, who has his own agenda (personal communication, November 15, 2007).

Yamak (1966) argued that the preponderance of the za'im figure in Lebanese elections has resulted in legislation that centers around the notables' personal agendas at the expense of a definite national policy. In the same way, the influence of za'ims over the media they own has resulted in a partisan press with multiple—and sometimes divisive—agendas. As *An-Nahar* journalist Manal Chaaya (personal communication, November 15, 2007) puts it, one cannot but expect a news outlet to reflect the policies of its owner, making sure his views are publicized while opposing ideologies are downplayed. That the media are owned by za'ims and by political personalities or parties automatically disfavors the fairness and balance code. Lebanon's political system, in which za'ims transfer power to their heirs when they die and constituents are obliged to depend on—and therefore vote for—their traditional za'ims, ensures that the media in Lebanon will remain partisan.

Also important in undermining the fairness and balance code in Lebanon is the role of foreign patronization. Regional and sometimes international powers have historically taken advantage of Lebanon's pluralism and the za'im system to settle their disputes or advance their interests by forging alliances or fighting proxy wars inside the Lebanese borders. As a result, Lebanese players rarely have a say in deciding the country's policies and its future, as most of the local scenarios are being imposed from the outside (Hiro, 1993; Khalaf, 2002). During the Ottoman rule, European powers often supported local rebellions in Mount Lebanon in a bid to weaken the Islamic empire's grip over the area (Traboulsi, 2007). Later, after the fall of the Ottomans, colonial France and Britain often manipulated local politics, elevating one za'im at the expense of another or pitting one against the other. In the same way, the 15-year civil war can largely be viewed as an "inside-outside dialectic," as Khalaf (2002, p. 52) termed it (see also Hiro, 1993; Khalaf, 1987; Traboulsi, 2007). As discussed earlier in this article, decisions, alliances, and tensions in Lebanon today depend largely on the interplay of influence exercised by Syria, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

This system of patronization, based on a winning symbiosis between internal and external players, leaves the Lebanon media vulnerable to foreign intervention and discourages the establishment of a press code based on fairness and balance in reporting (Baldwin, 2003; Dajani, 1992; Fandi, 2007; Hammoud & Afifi, 1994). Dajani spoke of five types of subsidies that foreign forces present to Lebanese

papers: (a) The party in question rents out the entire publication for a yearly or monthly fee, (b) governments or agencies pay to promote specific programs or causes, (c) contributors provide gifts of equipment or papers, (d) business firms concentrate their advertisements in media outlets that favor the political views of their corporate owners, and (e) political or religious groups pay the press to keep silent about a specific issue. To the credit of Lebanon's media, however, not all media outlets nor journalists have always acquiesced to foreign intervention—a truth that has manifested itself in the cycles of violence cycles against Lebanese journalists and editors, even before and after the civil war. Such measures, which serve both as punishment and as warning, have included numerous assassinations, kidnappings, and bombings of printing plants or offices (Dabbous & Hamdan, 2005; Dajani, 1992).

It must also be noted here that foreign patronization of the press is linked to the limited size of the Lebanese media market and the rampant corruption that infects Lebanon's political environment and public sector. Indeed, a commercial model based solely on subscription and advertising revenues (such as that of the United States) can hardly survive in a small country like Lebanon without financial support from outside sources. At the same time, the epidemic corruption in Lebanon—typical of a third-world country system—renders the idea of foreign subsidies acceptable.

The Sociocultural Factors: Institutionalized Sectarianism and the Differing Visions of Lebanese Identity. Lebanon, with 18 official religions competing for spiritual dominance over a piece of land the size of Connecticut, is notorious for its sectarian conflicts, epitomized by a 15-year civil war between 1975 and 1990. Dating back to the middle of the 19th century, sectarianism was institutionalized in 1943 when the independence leaders and builders of modern Lebanon signed the National Pact. The treaty distributed available positions of power to the various sects, making, for instance, the presidency a Maronite post and the prime ministry a Sunni one (Gilmour, 1983). Electoral and personal status laws were also defined along sectarian lines (Makdisi, 1996). Since then, confessionalism in Lebanon became “the basic principle in Lebanese life” (Gilmour, 1983, p. 28), with people's loyalty going first to their respective religious communities and then to the state (Dagher, 2000; Gilmour, 1983; Hiro, 1993; Khalaf, 2002; Traboulsi, 2007).

But looking at the sectarian divide as a mere religious issue is simplistic and misleading. Behind such loyalties are more ideological, socioeconomic factors, including the very definition of Lebanon, the inequality of wealth in a historically laissez-faire system, and the role of foreign patronization (Khalaf, 1987, 2002; Traboulsi, 2007).

Ideologically, modern Lebanon's identity has been contested since its inception as Le Grand Liban in 1920 (Salibi, 1988). The product of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between the French and the British, Lebanon's borders were delineated against the will of its citizens (Traboulsi, 2007) in a bid to ensure France's colonial control over a divided Syria. Unrelated to any natural or historical boundaries, the new frontier left the different communities that inhabit it unhappy. Since then, various currents, ranging from Arab and Syrian federalists to supporters of an independent Greater Lebanon, have sought to redefine the identity of the small country (Salibi, 1988; Traboulsi, 2007). Put simply, today's ideological disparities are as follows: Inspired by the Iranian Khomeini tradition, Hizbullah regards Lebanon as an arena for the Islamic armed resistance against Israel (Hamzeh, 1993), while the Future Movement, largely

formed of technocrats, would like it to be a haven for investors and tourists (Baroudi, 2002; Young, 1998). Christian groups, divided between the two in a hope to acquire leverage—despite their demographic disadvantage—anxiously want Lebanon to be a pro-Western sanctuary for the Arab followers of Jesus Christ (Dagher, 2000).

The Lebanese people's divisive commitment to their respective sects also echoes an effort to resist the inequalities created by the liberal economic system and the government's reliance on banking and services at the expense of other sectors (Khalaf, 2002; Traboulsi, 2007). Khalaf (2002) argued that the unequal distribution of benefits has led dissatisfied confessional communities to embrace radical ideologies and adhere to the strong patrimonial institutions that favor the well-being of their devotees over national consensus.

At the heart of Lebanon's confessionalism is also the foreign intervention's role in inflaming sectarian conflict. Makdisi (2000) argued that the Ottoman Empire and colonial European forces deliberately mobilized religious identities in Lebanon in an attempt to impose their respective visions of modernity through colonial and imperial projects. The tension between the Ottoman reform movement of 1839 and the rising European presence in the region ultimately destroyed the traditional social balance between Lebanon's largest communities, creating a religious strife that has lasted until today. Colonial forces later sponsored the country's major sects (Hiro, 1993), exacerbating tensions among the people of Lebanon. The Russians traditionally adopted Lebanon's Greek Orthodox Christians, the French protected the Maronite Christians, the British embraced the Druze, and the Ottomans privileged the Sunni Muslims (Gilmour, 1983). The various sects have profited from such favoritism to advance their interests in the struggle for internal power. Today, the major outside players have changed, but the role of foreign intervention in fostering sectarian and ideological differences remains the same.

But regardless of the dynamics that sectarianism, in fact, mirrors, the divide has imposed a political system, based upon the balance of power. "Lebanon's representative institutions are an essential condition of its stability, not a lucky by-product," wrote Hudson (p. 245) as early as in 1969. To maintain the balance he refers to, many institutions in Lebanon, especially public ones, are conventionally divided along sectarian lines. Governmental agencies, political organizations and parties, law courts, universities, hospitals, and charity organizations are often "known to be" affiliated with one sect or the other. It is therefore no surprise that many of Lebanon's media outlets are also segregated along confessional lines. Even press syndicates are divided according to the same principle. Convention—and not a formal law—dictates that the head of the Journalists' Syndicate be a Christian and the president of the Publishers Union a Muslim (Abu-Fadil & Tarabay, 2003). "Sectarianism, tribal affiliations and residual feudalism, couched in pseudo-modernism, remain in force and cloud good professional news coverage," Abu-Fadil said (personal communication, November 12, 2007). They also undermine the institution and application of a code favoring fairness and balance.

The Effect of the Civil War

The institutionalized confessional system that ensured political balance in the 1950s and the 1960s became the source of its doom in the 1970s. As the religious sects' demographics changed,

confessional leaders and their foreign supporters became increasingly dissatisfied with the distribution conventions (Abu-Fadil & Tarabay, 2003). Strong ideological clashes between the different sects, exacerbated by the rise of Israel, also inflamed political tensions. Threatened by the sea of Muslims surrounding them, Christians identified with the West more than they did with their Arab neighbors and advocated "Lebanonism" (Gilmour, 1983). Muslims and Arab nationalists, on the other hand, saw themselves as part of the greater Nasserist Arab world (1983). The surge of Palestinian civilians and PLO militants who fled Israel and rushed to Lebanon further complicated the situation (1983). On April 13, 1975, the longest civil war in the 20th century exploded, tearing the country apart for 15 long years (Hiro, 1993).

The Lebanese media, like all the country's institutions, were greatly affected by the war. Most of the major newspapers continued to publish, featuring reports about local events only. Papers lacking ties to patrons or militias went out of business while partisan papers became more biased and inflamed (Fandi, 2007; Rugh, 2004). Also contributing to the increase of polarization and bias was the difficulty of distributing papers amid the combat. During the war, Lebanon, and especially Beirut, was divided into enclaves. As a result, papers' circulation became restricted to the area or areas controlled by the outlets' respective supporters.

The audiovisual media were also affected by the war. Before its outbreak, only one radio station and two government-run television channels were allowed to broadcast under law. When the combat started, the audiovisual media were heavily censored and did not cover the armed conflict truthfully and thoroughly. As a result, 150 to 300 unlicensed radio stations and 40 to 50 television stations went on and off the air between 1975 and 1994 (Abu-Fadil & Tarabay, 2003).

All illegal stations were launched by political parties or militias (Boyd, 1991). "With the breakdown of the government-dominated communication infrastructure, these groups reasoned that they needed radio stations to inform and encourage their followers," Boyd wrote (p. 273). Militias and parties believed they would only be perceived as powerful organizations if they owned a station (1991). "These polarized factions did not only fight their battles on the street, but also on the airwaves," Nasr (2007, p. 7) wrote. Such developments also undermined fairness and balance in the Lebanese journalistic code. Radio and TV stations were specifically established to advocate a political point-of-view; their *raison-d'être* is partisan.

All in all, the civil war made an already partisan media even more vocally biased. Violent conflicts, distribution problems, and the proliferation of illegal advocacy stations further weakened the standards of fairness and balance.

Conclusion

In summary, Lebanon's media are relatively free to criticize the government, but they remain silent when it comes to their private political supporters. A double, unwritten social contract operates under these circumstances. An unspoken pact joins journalists and media owners, whereby the former serve the interests of the latter through their reporting. At the same time, an unwritten agreement

connects journalists and citizens, who see the media as indicators of political opinions. Therefore, one may argue that the ultimate contract takes place in the form of a continuous communicative link, operated through the press, between the za'ims and their ahali. Media replace the traditional interpersonal connections between the political leaders and their constituents.

As the analysis suggests, journalistic standards and ethics are largely cultural and shaped by the political, social, and economic environments surrounding the media. Able to secure profit through mass circulation and advertising, the U.S. media were able to slowly move away from partisan patronage. The industrialization, urbanization, rise of social sciences, and progressive reaction to the corruption of the Gilded Age all contributed to the emergence of objectivity—and later fairness and balance—as a prime standard of quality journalism. Lebanon's size and position, on the other hand, made it vulnerable to the political forces in the region. Middle Eastern and Colonial European powers triggered a century-long sectarian strife and weakened the local government, making the proliferation of the za'im system not only possible, but sometimes necessary. In such an environment, where loyalties to communal groups transcend those of the larger good, political patronage made fairness and balance an unlikely standard for Lebanese journalists.

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