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The quest for better information

Inside Lebanon's media labs

Simon Mangon – Synaps Network

Beirut is home to a groundswell of avant-garde publications striving to reinvent the public's relationship to information. There are many reasons why Lebanon, however small a country, would join the vanguard of a global transformation in the media landscape. Historically, it has provided a rare haven for free-thinking in the Arab world—a role that was diminishing until the 2011 uprisings in the region brought it back to life. Subject matter is plentiful, too: While wasteful wars and tedious politics are the bread and butter of conventional media, the paucity of reporting on socioeconomic issues leaves a lot to be said. And talent abounds within a middle class that nurtures communication skills, activist initiatives and an entrepreneurial spirit.

Yet for all these assets, Lebanon's new media outlets face considerable challenges in their efforts to produce readable and pertinent information. Market rules are as ruthless as the public is elusive. Of course, that is not unique to Lebanon. But local dynamics are a microcosm of those found elsewhere. Such media, which experiment within modest means offset only by dogged determination, pose an important question: Under what conditions does a society come to produce and circulate an image of itself that, to its own eyes, seems true?

One starting point, multiple journeys

Emerging media entrepreneurs consistently stress both the difficulty and the importance of closing the gap between prevailing narratives about their country in the established media, on the one hand, and the reality of their own daily lives, on the other. Lebanon, more than most places, lends itself to all manner of distorted representations. International outlets continue to portray the country through a mix of violent clichés inherited from its fifteen-year civil war and tired stereotypes that romanticise its nightlife and culinary scene. A founder

of Labne&Facts, a social media-based publication focusing on informative or inspirational vignettes, is determined to break out of these narratives: “We want to give a voice to Lebanese who innovate and propose solutions.”

While some outlets frame their work in contrast to simplistic narratives imposed from outside, others address the shortcomings of Lebanon’s own mainstream press. Politically affiliated TV channels and dailies regurgitate overwhelmingly partisan news and commentary, feeding the country’s divisions whilst leaving many Lebanese feeling overlooked. In response, a group of students set up Megaphone, which produces short videos unpacking topical issues for a Facebook audience. “Our platform was born out of deep frustration,” said one founder. “There was no outlet that fit our vision of society. So, we decided to show what it feels like, for people like us, to live in this country.” Daraj Media, a fast-growing, pan-Arab news platform, was created with the specific ambition of providing a third way, independent from political patronage and polarisation.

Similarly, promoting more “organic” perspectives on daily life is a central goal for Mashallah News, a website which since 2010 has pioneered this new wave of information platforms, and privileges “stories from here, about here.” The project requires that members of its team of professional and amateur correspondents, which now spans the Arab world, are based in the field full time. This stands in contrast to the approach of many Western correspondents working for major news outlets, who fly in to cover developments for a brief period of time then leave again. “French people resent how Fox News describes Paris suburbs as no-go-zones,” explained one Mashallah founder. “Lebanese people are just as upset when foreign media add their spin to their lives.”

As emerging outlets aim to bridge the gap between local realities and their reductive portrayals, they are experimenting with a wide array of communication tools which challenge conventional practices. Some, like Megaphone, Labne&Facts, Daraj or Raseef 22, a pan-Arab website for news and features, excel in short, visual formats in tune with the digital era. Others breathe new life into tried and tested methods. Kel Yom, for example, is a weekly newspaper aimed at children in school, providing them with quality reporting in Arabic. The Outpost, a beautiful “magazine of possibilities” that ran from 2011 to 2015 in the transformative context of the region’s uprisings, is survived by other substantive print publications, such as Bidayat (launched in 2012 to

“accompany and understand the Arab spring”) and Makaneyat (a 2018 newspaper initiative tackling urban issues). Meanwhile, Radio Mansion was launched in 2018 from a derelict house in Beirut which has since been transformed into a center for cultural initiatives. This station taps a popular appetite for internet-based audio platforms.

As they seek to break with imposed narratives and conventional forms of expression, emerging media face a recurring problem: How to define their engagement in an environment where politics is pervasive and yet so deeply tainted that any political standpoint is deemed suspect. Some are tempted to maintain an aura of neutrality. “I do think that we are independent and neutral,” suggested one professional reporter. “Our mission is not politics, but journalism.” At the opposite end of the spectrum, others take on the all-encompassing view that everything is politics. “Being neutral is already a political opinion,” claimed an activist working and writing for an emerging outlet. “There is a political project behind every media, to the extent that it shapes public opinion, portrays realities from a certain angle, and pushes a particular vision of the world.” Megaphone is a case in point, with videos that blend activism and journalism.

However, rare are those, like Bidayat, who assume a clear-cut ideological stance—in their case, unabashedly leftist. The prevailing trend is more ambiguous and, in some ways, more ambitious too: investing the public space with narratives that owe nothing to old-style politics, as if the only hope for the future will be found in something radically new.

A maze of a market

The greatest challenge for all emerging media, however, is a very practical one: money. Funding streams are typically scarce and unstable, to the point where the notion of a sustainable economic model is something of a holy grail. The public increasingly takes free information for granted—a tendency that is reflected in the spectacular decline of traditional dailies. A former journalist with L’Orient-Express, a Lebanese features magazine that ran from 1995 to 1998, summed up the crisis: “In the 60s, 100,000 newspapers sold every day, against 15,000 now. And digital media are not spared, given how hard it is to secure online subscriptions.”

In his view, ads do not provide the answer: “The advertising market is very weak in Lebanon. In the end, dailies have no choice but to rely on

political money.” Traditional television channels, which Lebanese audiences watch for over four hours per day on average according to a 2017 Ipsos-Nielsen survey, are the sector’s hegemon, capturing almost half of all money from a market which is said to shrink year after year. In this context, small-scale outfits lack any way to court large companies. Even partisan sources of income are flagging, according to Ayman Mhanna, the executive director of the Beirut-based SKeyes Centre: “Most Lebanese newspapers and TV channels live off their intimate connections with the political world. But patronage is growing scarce and journalists in such mainstream media often are not paid regularly anymore.”

In short, emerging media are trying to carve out a space in a sector that is deeply in crisis, with all the hardships and potential opportunities that such a crisis entails. The need for new business models is perhaps best illustrated by Assafir Al Arabi. This publication was launched in 2012 by sociologist Nahla Chahal as an attempt to exorcise the “impotence and fear of change in our region, caused by authoritarian regimes and pauperization.” At first, the project initiators entered into a relationship with the established daily Al-Safir, enjoying access to the latter’s distribution channels while saving on costs relating to premises, human resources and printing. In return, Assafir Al Arabi was circulated as a supplement to its parent publication, providing in-depth regional coverage through its pan-Arab network of correspondents. The arrangement ended when Al-Safir filed for insolvency in 2016, prompting Assafir Al Arabi to go all digital.

For now, emerging media rely heavily upon sheer devotion to the cause. Although all initiatives seek reliable funding, most don’t break even under the present circumstances. Rather, they often depend on pro bono work and other forms of voluntary support to make up for meagre revenue streams. Many media entrepreneurs draw on their personal savings, tap their family networks or retain an unrelated paid job to keep afloat, awaiting a lucky break that doesn’t always come. The Outpost’s founder, Ibrahim Nehme, recalled: “I spent my own money on it at the beginning. Then we had a few advertisements, but that didn’t work much. We also launched a crowdfunding campaign. But in the end, we didn’t manage to find a sustainable model.” The publication was broadly acclaimed even as it proved impossible to monetise.

Regardless of such economic realities, there remains an extensive pool of Lebanese journalists and citizens eager to make themselves heard via alternative channels. The founder of Bidayat, Fawwaz Traboulsi,

emphasized: “Contributors believe in our mission. They want the right place to publish their work. In a sense, there is a growing urge to publish, more than an increasing desire to read.” The resulting surplus of free material lowers the value of content, driving down the price even of professional reporting. Daraj, for example, has turned this glut into an opportunity, by becoming a place for journalists in full-time positions to sell alternative pieces that do not fit the criteria and biases of the conventional media houses in which they predominantly work.

In a market centering around free public content, income tends to flow from side-activities performed in addition to a given platform’s fundamental *raison d’être*. Both Daraj and Labne&Facts also act as producers, commissioned by clients to create video or social media material. Similarly, Kel Yom is considering producing bespoke educational programs. However, the profitability of such offshoots is impaired by the enormous investment, in both time and energy, that media entrepreneurs devote to their primary goal—the dissemination of quality journalistic content driven by their particular worldview.

Foreign aid plays a prominent role in squaring this circle, whilst serving the stated ambitions of Western governments to foster democratization, transparency and human rights in the Arab world. The 2011 uprisings and their violent fallout triggered a series of initiatives designed to “empower youth,” encourage “citizen journalism,” or counter “extremist narratives,” all of which have translated into financial support for emerging media. Compared to the budgets on which most such outlets usually run, the funding at the disposal of such initiatives is significant. For example, the Thomson Foundation, a British charitable organisation dedicated to raising the standards of journalism abroad, is currently spending eight million euros over three years on “the development of independent media in the region.”

Such external interventions are varied in scope, and present opportunities for virtually all information-related ventures. The European Endowment for Democracy has financed Makaaneyat’s work on urbanism. Meanwhile, Kel Yom received a grant from Canal France International, a French operator for media development, in order to support the digitisation of its content for children.

Yet stable core funding remains rare, with budgets mostly assigned to very specific projects. Thus, the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, a German donor, underwrote Assafir Al Arabi’s dossiers on the informal economy, migration, and the political left in the Maghreb. Some

initiatives focus on building proficiency within the sector through workshops and other fora that also serve as occasions for networking and marketing. Labne&Facts came into the limelight after winning a small monetary prize along with a mentorship opportunity in a “French-speaking women entrepreneurs” contest. One of its founders assessed the experience: “It was very informative and useful. With the help of training officers, we did a lot to improve our business plan and communication strategy.”

Although such assistance is often helpful, it does little to resolve the fundamental problem of finding reliable revenue. Nehme of The Outpost learned that lesson the hard way: “We were a great success. We received international awards. But awards aren’t an economic model. They don’t pay the bills.” Compounding these challenges is the fact that donors tend to press organisations they support to seek out independent funding streams, while shying away from the type of sustained investment that would allow their partners to consolidate and innovate beyond the start-up phase.

A related set of issues pertains to the ambiguous and often fickle framing of external funds. Democratization and other such fashionable but nebulous concepts often seem to feed into inconsistent priorities that leave potential partners puzzled as to what is expected of them. A news site focusing on the day-to-day lives of ordinary Lebanese may be asked to incorporate a “peacebuilding” or “social cohesion” agenda far removed from its own understanding of information needs. A Lebanese academic specialized in journalism lamented: “Emerging media, NGOs and social impact entrepreneurs all seem to be bundled into the same bag. Donors end up formulating very specific expectations that just don’t fit, for example, a journalist’s mission.”

Reconciling an organic view of change with the vision of those who could bankroll it is a recurring problem for those who deal with foreign grant-makers. A staff member at an Arabic-language outlet recounted: “Some donors have very definite ideas about what they want, and try to impose them on us. For instance, some asked us to publish in English. But that would mean shifting our identity entirely, and we are not going to change.”

A sphinx-like public

In an ideal scenario, a given media platform would not depend primarily on free work, friends and family, crony capital or foreign money, but

rather on a sustained give and take between those producing content and those consuming it. In the digital media age, however, the relationship between media and their public is perhaps the trickiest of all.

The fact that media outlets do not make enough money on publication sales to fund themselves is not new: They have long existed as a broker—between an audience on one side, and those corporations or public figures willing to buy access to that same social base on the other. Historically, political money and advertising have been indispensable in subsidizing certain media, making information affordable to end-users. At the same time, the latter's sizeable financial contribution ensured that the media retained some level of accountability toward their customers, and thus a degree of independence vis-à-vis bigger sponsors.

Today, in a market skewed by abundant free content and diminishing institutional money, emerging media stand before a public that is both enormous and hard to understand. Sphinx-like, it poses a riddle, as if consumers were asking: Where is the media that I want, which is tailored to my individual needs, financed by others but not strictly controlled by them?

Although virtually all emerging media ventures aspire to reinvent their relationship with the public, the challenge is daunting. Contrary to conventional wisdom, digital tools create at least as many problems as they solve—not least by offering the illusion of easy connection. On the face of it, email lists and social platforms remove the need for conventional distribution and promotion mechanisms. Likes and shares create a sense of instantaneous feedback. Interfaces such as MailChimp, Facebook, or Twitter generate ample data on viewers, down to their patterns of behaviour, geographic spread and socioeconomic background.

But none of this quantitative information answers the fundamentally qualitative questions about what the public seeks and finds in media output. Algorithms introduce a bias of their own, emphasizing certain trends over others—often at the expense of niche interests. A Daraj founder remarked: “Quite simply, anything related to breaking news will do great on social media.” Other media entrepreneurs find that promoting their content on Facebook, Twitter and elsewhere ultimately muddles their relationship with the public, because circulation is driven by obscure algorithms rather than their own priorities. An activist at Megaphone complained: “Facebook is a publisher, but one we never

meet, and cannot really trust. In the end, we need to rely more on a website of our own.”.

Meanwhile, the fact that digital viewers typically do not pay for content hinders the kind of research—in the form of polls, focus groups, and so on—on which traditional media rely to get to know their audience. In the current landscape, counting clicks tends to suffice, if the purpose is to show overall growth, prioritise popular content and maximise limited advertising opportunities.

Whether in the digital or the real world, there is a risk of being forced back by market dynamics into a relationship with the public that defeats its own purpose. Kel Yom can pride itself on being “the most widely read print newspaper in Lebanon,” with 6,000 paid subscriptions—all folded into school fees at private institutions. But its founders readily admit that their target audience is everything but the well-to-do, and they have yet to figure out a business model that could work for the benefit of less fortunate children. For its part, Makaaneyat circulates 1,000 free copies in cafes, which end up being picked up largely by people already sold to the cause. Megaphone, due to its activist bent, is particularly attentive to this problem. “At the beginning we were focused on the secular, liberal middle class—in other words ourselves,” one of its founders said. “But we feared being insular. Our friends at university like us, for sure. But others matter!”

In many ways, the “alternative” nature of emerging media contains an inherent obstacle to creating a more stable relationship with a broader audience. Even though unorthodoxy is at the center of their appeal, it also automatically places them on the margins—as “something else” to consult occasionally, rather than a focal point based on consistent visits and paid subscriptions. Ironically, some of their most ardent supporters also prove surprisingly loyal to the mainstream media that they simultaneously criticize. A Lebanese student in journalism explained: “Although I don’t trust conventional media, I need them for day-to-day news, to know what is happening in the country. I have all their apps on my phone. And at least I know them for what they are. Emerging media tend to be an open question.”

* * *

Emerging media suffer many woes, but these go hand in hand with their remarkable capacity for thorough experimentation and ongoing adaptation. Their travails are, in a sense, a blessing in disguise, forcing

constant processes of introspection, innovation and creativity. The real strengths of their models are to be found in their responses to this trial by fire.

In Lebanon, media entrepreneurs are already succeeding, if only in bringing new voices and original perspectives to the surface in an otherwise stagnant public sphere crowded with partisan bickering. In that sense, the whole sector presents producers and consumers alike with an opportunity to learn about themselves, as part of a broader quest to understand the transformations at work within their society. That is what emerging media initiatives collectively achieve, regardless of the economic sustainability of this or that platform: They call into question patterns of communication that have become obvious dead-ends. From there, a whole new landscape seems possible, just over the horizon.

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Simon Mangon interned with Synaps.