

LEBANESE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN A TIME OF CHANGE

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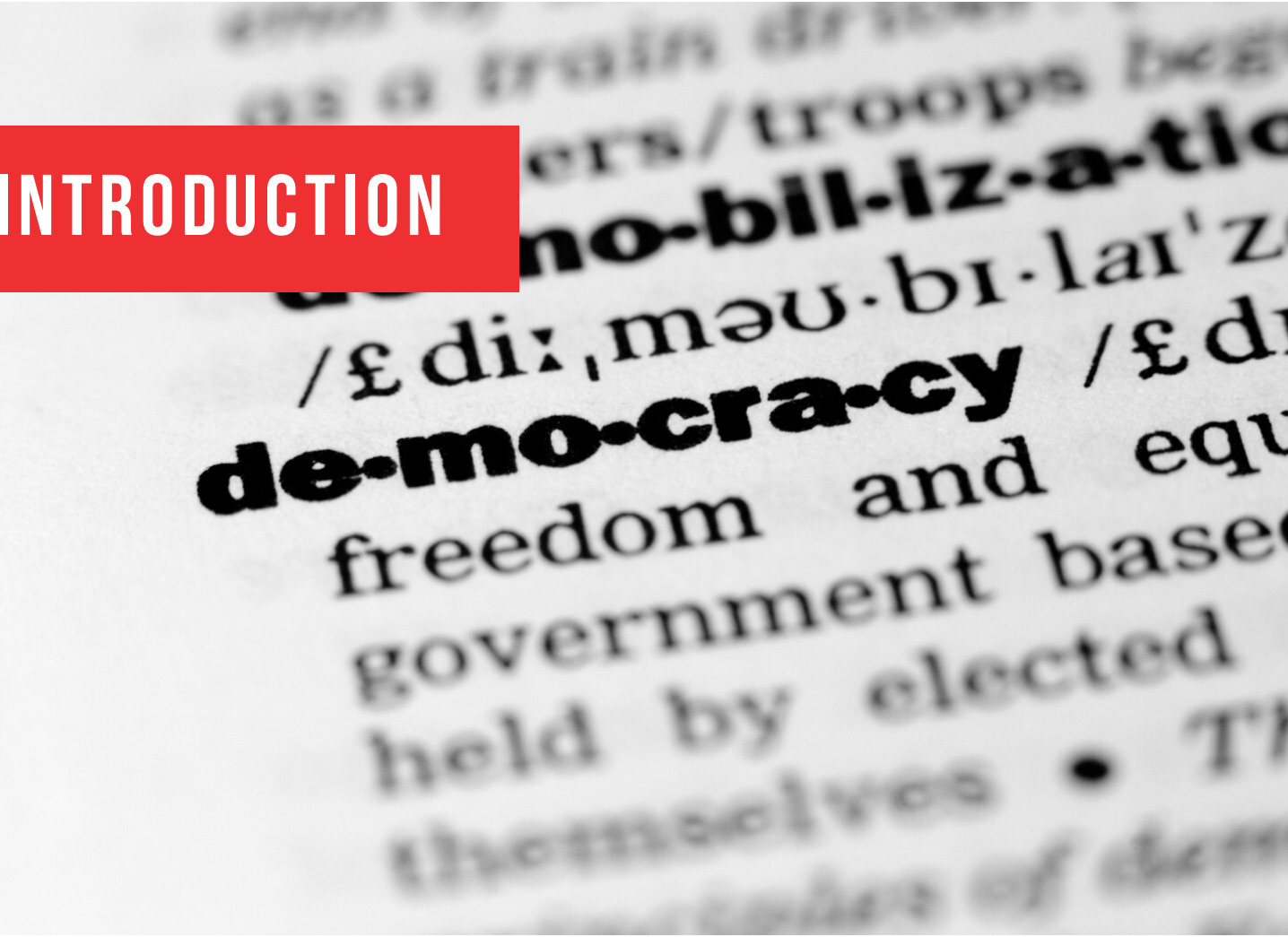
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INTRODUCTION



de·mo·cra·cy /ɛdɪː,məʊ.bɪ.laɪ'z/
freedom and government based on the principle of equality

Within the framework of the Media for Peace Project - M4P (dtec.bw), Maharat Foundation and the University of the Bundeswehr Munich organized a conference on "Lebanese media and democracy in a time of change", on December 13, 2022 in Antwork Beirut.

The one-day conference brought together researchers from the University of the Bundeswehr Munich, media professionals, political experts, activists and academics from Media Studies, Journalism, International Relations and Conflict Studies working in Lebanon. The meeting discussed how the younger generation uses social media to bring about political change and contribute to peace-building, in addition to the change in the media landscape in Lebanon in light of the digital reality.



PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

Opening remarks:

In the beginning, the executive director of Maharat Foundation, Roula Mikhael, gave a speech in which she welcomed all those present and praised the efforts of the organizers of the conference, stressing the importance of such meetings in light of the political transformations that Lebanon has been witnessing since 2019, which made it extremely important to study the way Lebanese youth deal with communication media and alternative media.

Afterward, the head of the M4P project, Sonja Kretzschmar, made a speech, in which she thanked the audience and expressed her pleasure at participating in this conference, and then gave a brief overview of the M4P project and its purpose.

In her speech, she declared the following:

This project is based on digital media and its benefits, as it offers great possibilities such as access to new information, in addition to exchange and discussion around it. In light of the significant challenges faced by the media, such as hate speech, media propaganda, and the spread of misleading news, the project aims to change the reality using peace journalism or conflict-sensitive journalism, through the innovative, sustainable and ethical use of digital technology in journalism which constitutes a tool for conflict-sensitive work, de-escalation, and peace promotion in conflict and post-conflict areas.



PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

The research focuses on these two countries, due to their historical, cultural, social and political diversity, and the fact that they represent opposite poles in terms of press and media practices, and sensitivity to conflict and peace. Thus, this project aims to enhance the ability to communicate, specifically in Lebanon, which is suffering from many crises at the moment.

Based on this, interviews will be conducted with relevant experts and individuals in fields such as journalism or NGOs located in these two countries, to identify examples of best practices as well as challenges, threats and possibilities for improvement. In parallel, the analysis of social media (especially Twitter content) will be used to identify key topics and understand the presence and spread of disinformation in the internet sphere related to Lebanon and Afghanistan.

Hence, the goal of the M4P project is to contribute to scientific discussions and to the studies of journalism, communication studies, and international relations. A journalism platform for conflict-sensitive journalism, de-escalation and peace-building will also be developed in collaboration with Media Lab Bayern, with the active participation of local stakeholders. The prototype will be evaluated and can serve as a blueprint for Conflict-Sensitive journalism and peace journalism.

In conclusion, Kretzschmar expressed her happiness to be in Beirut, and the importance of achieving communication projects with people from Lebanon to exchange experiences, in addition to the importance of getting to know more about Lebanese media and democracy in times of change.



PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

First session: The changing role of media and democracy in Lebanon

This session addressed the shift in media discourses with the emergence of alternative platforms, imposing a counter-discourse that breaks taboos, providing spaces for marginalized voices and for issues that are not a priority in traditional media, while giving a voice to activists and citizens instead of traditional politicians.

The speakers and founders of alternative media platforms discussed how they challenge traditional discourses in their media agendas, their vision of democratic change, and their role in accountability and peacebuilding.

This session was moderated by Ali Rammal, academic at the Lebanese University, with the participation of Diana Moukalled, co-founder and Managing Editor of Daraj, Jean Kassir, executive director of Megaphone News, Karl Haddad, co-founder of the Naqd Politics Platform, and Nayla Khoury, co-founder and host of the Polytalk podcast.



PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

At the beginning of the session, Ali Rammal explained the importance of the media in Lebanon in the democratic transition, saying, "the geopolitical changes in the region have reflected on Lebanon to generate the so-called Geo-Media changes, which means that the Lebanese media system has shifted from the premise of being a national system that cares about national issues to becoming a part of a regional media subsystem based on political projects or, alternatively, a subsystem of an international one. As a result, we now find ourselves in a state of media alliances beyond the borders of Lebanon, and this is reflected in the lack of confidence in the role of the Lebanese media in solving the issues of Lebanese society exclusively" he said.

He considered that the media in Lebanon has thus lost its credibility in terms of its ability to propose solutions at the level of political and non-political reforms, and therefore has lost its capacity to keep pace with and influence Lebanese society. Alternative platforms or the so-called alternative media were born to fill this void.

Ali Rammal opened the session in which the participants are supposed to give answers about whether they were able to respond to these challenges and be a real and effective alternative to the traditional media.

PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

The answers were distributed as follows:

Nayla Khoury, Polytalk podcast

"Despite the large budget allocated for production in traditional media organizations in Lebanon, alternative media managed with a smaller budget to break the monopoly of power enjoyed by traditional media through the use of social media and thus reach a larger segment of the public and form a public opinion. It has also given more space than traditional media for marginalized people or groups to express their ideas."

Karl Haddad, Naqd Politics

"What distinguishes alternative media from traditional media today is that its editorial policy does not represent a personal agenda or opinion, a funder or a specific party, but actually represents the members of the platform, unlike traditional media that express a political message or a certain political agenda imposed by funders. Thus, alternative media today has blown up all the barriers that were imposed by presenting what is happening on the political and social scene transparently and by highlighting taboo topics that traditional media does not tackle."

PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS



Karl Haddad, Naqd Politics

"Alternative media today prioritizes and focuses its coverage on a range of topics such as issues of marginalized groups, women's issues and issues of corruption and violations, so as not to duplicate the existing media and to give space to all parties."

Diana Moukalled, Daraj

"To turn the perpetrator and the victim into equal parties and consider the point of view of both is very dangerous. Therefore, the responsibility of alternative media lies in providing context, information and background to what is happening from an angle that gives the victim the loudest voice and not the perpetrator."

PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

Jean Kassir, Megaphone News

"Lebanon suffers from a shortage of data due to the fear of numbers and the presence of demographic fears, and on another level, there are files about which information cannot be accessed, such as the file of the port explosion. Therefore, a journalist should not only be able to obtain information, but also investigate and verify its authenticity, and the alternative media should have a supervisory role over all information and images."

Diana Moukalled, Daraj

"Lebanon is experiencing difficulty in accessing information because we are in a hostile structure to any true information and even the Access to Information Law is being obstructed. Therefore, networking with institutions that deal with the issues being addressed has become a need. Obviously, social media platforms ease access to information, despite the increasing number of information that needs to be verified."

PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

Karl Haddad, Naqd Politics

"Today, it is crucial to network with regional platforms and disseminate information about remote, underdeveloped regions, as the political and sectarian structure in place exacerbates division within Lebanese society. Hence the role of alternative media in reconciling divergent views, customs, traditions and way of thinking closer."

"The fact that the youth are asking to hold criminals accountable, regardless of their sect, is the biggest step out of the sectarian system. The goal today is not to change the regime, but to change the political mentality in addition to political, legislative, constitutional and practical work."

At the end of the session, Ali Rammal thanked the attendees, and continued saying: "today we need a national discourse detached from sectarianism and personal interests, far from the corruption of the political sphere in Lebanon, and for this purpose, more cooperation between platforms is necessary to reach unity. The individual impact of each platform may be localized and positive, but the impact of all platforms may lead to the change that we hope to achieve."



PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

Second session: The role of social media in peacebuilding in Lebanon: Poison or panacea?

This session addressed the impact of social media on conflict, peace, and on protest movements. It also aimed to determine how social media is embodying conflict and peace in Lebanon and the wider Arab world.

Experts and speakers discussed how conflicts and tensions in Lebanon or initiatives of international organizations (addressing either the national or international level) are perceived in the field of Lebanese social media, how conflicts are changing in light of the digital reality, and whether users with large audiences can contribute to peace, reconciliation or understanding.

The session was attended by Roula Mihael, the Executive Director of Maharat Foundation, Dr. Nasri Messarra, the head of the Department of sociology and anthropology and director of the master of media and communication at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, Ali Annan, director of the project "Lebanon: supporting influencers on social media to eliminate social tensions" of the Berghof Foundation, and Maria Bou Zeid, head of the media department at the Notre Dame University-Louaize.

PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

The answers were distributed as follows:

Ali Anan, Berghof Foundation

"The main issue lies in the extremists in our societies, in Lebanon, there is a sizable group of them, and they are visible in the media and on social media. Thus, everyone is involved in corruption in one way or another, and now, within all this negativity, people are suffering from an economic and financial crisis."

Maria Bou Zeid, Notre Dame University-Louaize.

"In Lebanon, social media show the division on the Lebanese scene due to the lack of awareness in the use of these tools. Also, the user in Lebanon receives information selectively in accordance with his ideas and the consolidation of his convictions, and does not try to be exposed to opinions and ideas that differ from his convictions or preconceived ideas, which is commensurate with the divided society in which we live."

"On the other hand, the role of social media, and more specifically alternative media, in giving a voice to the voiceless is undeniable. "

PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS

Roula Mikhael, Maharat Foundation

"Through the work of Maharat in the field of peacebuilding, it was noticed that the financial resources spent on peacebuilding are not considered sufficient compared to the resources spent on wars, manipulation and the dissemination of fake news. Social media reflect the current divisions, the fear of the other, and conflicts within the society, which appear in daily hashtags as well as in the discourses aiming to attack others."

"Social media has played a key role in the Arab revolutions, as it has provided a space for activists and journalists to express their opinions. In Lebanon, social media platforms played a big role in the October 2019 movement, especially Twitter, which contributed to rallying people in the streets and helped organize demonstrations. Therefore, people, including journalists from traditional media, are following social media which they consider an essential resource for news, especially since activists on the ground rely on them to spread news directly."

PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS



Nasri Messarra, Saint Joseph University

"One of the problems we suffer from is that social media and new media are analyzed from the same lens as traditional media. Opinions on social networking sites should not be viewed from a quantitative perspective but from a qualitative perspective. The system either imprisons the activist or forces him to delete his tweet. Therefore, it is impossible to talk about any results on social media without studying them scientifically. "

Maria Bou Zeid, Notre Dame University-Louaize.

"With regard to digital media education, the solution lies in providing media education to users at an early age, and developing strategies to combat fake news, so it is necessary to teach children in schools how to use social media and verify sources to identify rumors and propaganda."

PART 1: ACADEMIC WORKSHOP SESSIONS



Ali Anan, Berghof Foundation

"The youth category plays an important role in fostering peace, specifically influencers who have a large number of followers. Working with them is important to capitalize on the power of social media, although some of them have a certain agenda, something that also applies to social media sites that sometimes create conflicts with the aim of attracting more attention and followers."

Roula Mikhael, Maharat Foundation

"The ceiling of freedom of expression in Lebanon has risen since 2019, as the taboo related to several issues has been broken, especially in light of the fact that Qatar and Jordan are now considered better than Lebanon in the freedom of expression ranking, which raises questions. But the reality shows that investigative journalism is expanding in Lebanon and freedom of criticism has been maintained despite all the difficulties."

Later, a subgroup of sessions was held on innovation and media in Lebanon, peace journalism, and safety during journalistic work, in addition to a workshop on problem-solving methodology.



PART 2: PRACTICE-ORIENTED WORKSHOP SESSION

Innovation Landscape Lebanon

The first session was held under the title "**Innovation Landscape Lebanon**", in which the Maharat Foundation team gave a presentation on the most prominent challenges facing media outlets, and the role played by Maharat in helping these media outlets improve their content and develop their capabilities.

Among the most prominent of these challenges are the obstacles in the legal environment governing these emerging outlets, in addition to the absence of "Open Data", which is the basis for content creation, as well as the lack of academic preparation and the absence of university curricula and programs that encourage innovation.

The team explained the role played by Maharat in developing the capacities of content creators through the programs, workshops and trainings provided to journalists, which aim to provide them with additional tools that enable them to convert their written content to multimedia content, in addition to increasing networking between them and marginalized communities whose voices Maharat always tries to amplify.



PART 2: PRACTICE-ORIENTED WORKSHOP SESSION

At the level of “Open Data”, Maharat monitored the media coverage of local Lebanese channels and social media during the 2022 parliamentary elections, the media appearances of candidates, all political positions, the access of traditional parties and emerging forces to media, in addition to the participation of women in media, and put them all at the disposal of the public within a free database on its website.

The Maharat team also presented the Maharat Tracker, which monitors the hashtags that were used and published on social media, and the Fact-O-Meter section of the website, which follows up on all information, rumors and political statements. Subsequently, journalists from Maharat verify if the information is accurate using a clear methodology before publishing the fact check in the Fact-O-Meter section.



PART 2: PRACTICE-ORIENTED WORKSHOP SESSION

Peace Journalism Landscape Lebanon

The second session was held under the title "**Peace Journalism**", presented by the president and founder of the media for peace organization (MAP) Vanessa Bassil, who confirmed that the organization's journey with peace journalism began with the organization of the first workshop, which brought together media students in Lebanon from different universities, regions and religions, she continued saying: "We aimed through meetings to break down the barriers and stereotypes that they may have, in order to strengthen the relationships between them."

According to Bassil, the first workshop was a success because of the new idea she put forward, which is peace journalism, as many people were interested in learning about it and how to practice it in a country experiencing many crises. "In the second workshop in 2012, we were discussing how we as individuals can work for peace, and how we as journalists can build bridges of understanding between different communities in Lebanon," she added.

Bassil explained that the goal of creating MAP was to "attract more people, gather more young journalists, and increase the role of the media in peace-building". The organization defines peace as not an alternative to war, but the development of society.



Bassil elaborated that at MAP, they are heavily involved in the principle of gender equality and the principle of dialogue and aim to reach a positive peace, build the capacities of media students and journalists, bring people together and find common interests between different groups.

She pointed out that a major workshop is organized in cooperation with various universities in Lebanon every year to develop the capacities of journalists and media students and train them to cover human rights reports, in addition to how to deal with refugee topics and issues.



PART 2: PRACTICE-ORIENTED WORKSHOP SESSION

Peace Journalism Landscape Lebanon

At the end of the day, a workshop was held on the methodology of developing solutions to problems presented by Masiar Nashat, who is an M4P fellow. He shared with the audience global models and examples about some problems and how they were solved, pointing out that the user's feeling must first be understood.

The methodology to be adopted can be explained as follows:

Starting from understanding the problem, defining it and then doing qualitative research to discuss with users. You should not talk to them about what they think, but what they feel, and then try to find an innovative idea that would embody how users feel in a particular situation, instead of thinking about what they might want.

After that, the attendees participated in a practical exercise, where they were divided into groups and shared some problems and their feelings about them. Afterward, each member of the group tried to find solutions to the other member's problems and then presented these solutions in the form of a visual work or a picture.

At the end of the workshop, Nashat declared that "it is very easy to come from Berlin and talk about solutions, while you are working here on the ground under difficult conditions, I can only say that I appreciate it."

In conclusion, Sonja Kretzschmar thanked all those present and all those who contributed to the success of this meeting, and also praised the valuable interventions made during this long day.



PART 2: PRACTICE-ORIENTED WORKSHOP SESSION

Keeping it safe- Journalism and Innovation

The third session dealt with "**aspects of safety in journalistic work**" and was presented by Ayman Mhanna of the Samir Kassir Foundation. He reviewed the global situation on the safety of the press and journalists and provided information on the numbers of journalists who have been imprisoned, killed or are still missing, stressing that the situation is moving in a negative direction.

He also explained the most prominent ongoing challenges facing journalists, such as the impunity of their abusers and their exposure to physical violence, torture and gender-based violence. He enumerated the types of safety that should be guaranteed to journalists, including physical, health, legal and economic as well as psychological safety, and this does not happen in the absence of a clear and comprehensive approach to safety.

He also spoke about the need for journalists to undergo training sessions that will prove beneficial during their work, which is what the Samir Kassir foundation does through workshops organized in this framework. He stressed that journalistic work is not only about the content, but also about working safely.

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