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**Structures of Change in Post-war Lebanon: Amplified
Activism, Digital Documentation and Post-Sectarian
Narratives**

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Abstract

In the shadow of the so-called Arab spring, a digitally-empowered activism has been steadily on the rise in Lebanon. Despite an archaic, sectarian and militia-based political system, a series of citizen-led collectives have emerged over recent years to tackle various forms of post-war state dysfunction, applying substantial pressure on local decision-makers. The impact of recent activist campaigns ranges from influencing parliamentary legislation related to media and environmental laws to halting major municipal and private real estate projects. Key to many of these actions has been the organisers' use of connective action, technology-assisted repertoires of resistance and documentation, lobbying of politicians and relationships with the media.

Perhaps most significantly, contemporary activist collectives in Lebanon are producing and advancing issue-focused, post-sectarian narratives that come in contrast to a political culture dominated by feudal and military elites that have been in power since the end of the civil war. By organizing online and often combining virtual and ground actions, these collectives call into question the traditional ways in which organizations have been defined in Lebanon as well as how Lebanese activism has been gauged in academic literature. The study of recent activism in Lebanon may also provide a more nuanced alternative to commonly held and somewhat exotified expectations for reform in the Middle East that often pay more attention to regime overthrow than more subtle changes in political culture and media practices.

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1. Introduction

With its row of interlocking concrete barricades, ubiquitous security cameras and machine-gun toting guards, Lebanon's interior ministry— headquarters of the national security forces— has never been a place welcoming to visitors, let alone protesters. But by early October, the streets facing the ministry had been the site of several demonstrations related to anti-corruption protests that filled public squares in the Lebanese capital throughout the summer of 2015. The security forces had arrested dozens of activists, but after strong criticism in the media, they appeared to be backing off the previous brutal tactics of blasting protesters with tear gas and water cannons. The police watched quietly from behind their fortified positions as a group of around a dozen activists approached the ministry walls on October 6 with buckets of red paint.

Brandishing brushes, the small group of activists, many among the core leadership of what had become known as the Youstink movement, had walked about half a kilometer from the Ministry of Finance tracing a red line on the pavement along the way with the goal of ending at the Central Bank. The guerrilla publicity stunt illustrated a protest demand by now popularized in the media: that the Lebanese state was refusing to release public money to solve the ongoing garbage crisis, which had seen trash piling up on the streets for several months. The protesters argued that government ministers favored handing out contracts to crony-owned private companies, a common modus operandi of the dysfunctional post-war Lebanese state and major cause of massive corruption across the country, well beyond garbage. Thus the slogan "You stink" (Translated from Arabic "Tol'eit Rehitkon") came to symbolize both a physical and metaphorical meaning— and with this in mind— one of the protest leaders, 27-year-old Assaad Thebian, began painting the words on one of the interior ministry's concrete barricades, located en route to the central bank. Finally a line had been crossed. The security forces broke their silence and moved quickly to apprehend Thebian, shoving him into a police jeep. As a few activists angrily chased after him, chanting slogans, a snapshot was uploaded to Facebook of Thebian in the backseat surrounded by officers; his face pushed down and mouth covered while still managing to lift one arm and waive a victory sign. That image and the story began to go viral.

The Lebanese security forces tried to stem the flood early, tweeting within minutes from their official account to over 100,000 followers that Thebian had been arrested “for the crime of desecrating the Lebanese flag.” This, they implied, was because the concrete walls surrounding the ministry had recently been painted—in a bid to make the buildings look less bunker-like—in the colours of the Lebanese flag. The police tweeted again to bolster their claim, this time attaching their own pictures of Thebian in the act, a red paintbrush in his hand. But soon dozens of tweeps replied and retweeted mocking the police, including high-profile journalists. Offline, a crowd began to gather in front of the ministry and live feeds began to air on television. One of the country’s leading bloggers and co-founder of You-Stink, Imad Bazzi, announced to cameras that they would not leave the narrow street, one of the busiest in the capital, until Thebian was freed. It was 3PM and traffic was beginning to pile up.

Satellite trucks pulled up as more local media arrived. They began to interview some of the other protesters who continued to paint on the asphalt in the middle of the street. One college-age female protester defiantly painted “You-Stink” again drawing arrows toward the ministry and a line of shield-wielding riot police. Other activists speaking live on TV questioned the government’s priorities: “So the courts can issue an arrest warrant for spray paint, but they haven’t they issued an arrest warrant over the garbage crisis?” Still others named a litany of public abuses that have gone unprosecuted, including the knifing of activists a week earlier by violent loyalists of an incumbent politician as police stood by and watched. “The politicians have written on every wall in this country with their corruption,” said another woman interviewed on camera.

The live feeds continued for over an hour, as the TV journalists periodically checked with Blogger Bazzi, a pony-tailed 30-something activist who was now negotiating on the sidelines with several police including a senior officer. There was no audio, but as the cameras zoomed in, the senior officer could be seen handing a phone to Bazzi. The You-Sink co-founder returned to the press noting that he spoke to Thebian over the phone and was promised he would be released as soon as activists left the street. But Bazzi added that he rejected the deal,

demanding Thebian's release before calling off the roadblock. Suddenly a police truck appeared at one end of the road and activists began shouting to the camera crews that security agents were trying to clear the street by force. The cameras zoomed in on the police truck as the activists sat on the ground and began chanting while negotiations continued. Finally, after a tense two hour standoff, Bazzi announced that Thebian has been released. The protesters left, the streets were reopened and TV channels returned to regular programming.

But what if the cameras were not there? Would one of Beirut's top police chiefs have spent two hours negotiating with a blogger? Would the riot police have stood by as a few dozen young men and women blocked the street in front of their headquarters?

Thebian was just one of some 200 activists that were arrested since anti-corruption protests began this summer and subsequently released, albeit far quicker than most. Some activists were the subject of weeks of media campaigns, hashtags and videos demanding their release such as a popular online comedian Pierre Hachach who was held for 11 days. With no previous media experience, Hachach is one of several new critical voices to emerge posting regular, widely shared satirical personal testimonies to Facebook about the state's failures. Even Hachach's release was webcast, when activists brazenly hoisted him in the air and threw rice and confetti in front of the police station, posting the video on the You-Stink Facebook page, which has close to 200,000 'likes.' Some citizen-supporters even recorded their own videos thanking authorities for the unjustified arrests because they drew more attention and 'likes' to activist pages. Others used their release to draw attention to police brutality, uploading pictures of bruised faces to their Facebook timelines. One released female detainee angrily detailed harsh conditions in the prison cells, lack of due process and threats of rape from officers, all in impassioned impromptu activist press conference before live television cameras.

These mainstream news clips are usually only aired once, but are often saved and re-posted (and thus stored for replay value) on the You-Stink page along with other activist videos documenting police brutality. The images and pictures are often cross-posted on several spin off groups such as "We Want Accountability", "Change is Coming," and "The People Demand."

With tens of thousands of combined likes and the exponential multiples of shares, these pages are broadcasting to audiences that rival, if not exceed those of several mainstream Lebanese television programs. They have also been instrumental in publicizing protests that brought tens of thousands to public squares in the streets of Beirut.

The new Facebook groups and organizations have even linked up with Lebanese diaspora communities in other countries, who have held personalized “You-Stink” signs (i.e. “Your Stink reached Paris”) and arranged rallies in front of embassies in Western capitals. Amateur filmmakers have created music videos and spoofs as graphic designers have created memes caricaturing politicians, with many of these images and themes making their way to physical placards in the protest space. Even prank calls are being uploaded, where government bureaucrats are recorded and mocked by pointing out massive state dysfunction. Examples include a man calling the national airline to have food delivered during traffic (highlighting the lack of public transport and city traffic planning). Another man calls the public telephone company demanding a new sea in the arid Bekaa Valley so that citizens can cool off since air conditioners don’t work due to the lack of state-provided electricity.

These viral clips, media frames and the activist social media platforms that push them out are not the product of formal or registered organizations, but rather they use digital media as organizing agents, a concept outlined by Bennett and Sandberg.¹ Thus, as opposed to traditional forms of collective action through unions or political parties, here participants are practicing “connective action” defined by the use of “broadly inclusive personalized action frames as a basis for technology assisted networking.”² Content is often created through “peer production” whereby individuals “contribute to a mutually valued product to produce a public good” often with personal recognition, in this case social media recognition, as a key incentive.³ Much like the pervasive staying power of viral posts and video galleries, instrumental in

¹ Bennett, Lance. Segerberg, Alexandra *The Logic of Connective Action* New York: Cambridge University Press 2013

² Ibid p. 2

³ Ibid p. 34

galvanizing momentum for planned street protests, “connective action leaves digital traces that help configure the action space.”⁴

In the West, the rise of connective action can be read in the context of theories on the “personalization of politics” in that they mark a younger generation’s shift away from institutional affiliation to political parties, workers’ unions or religious associations. Some of the factors attributed to this shift include a weakening of traditional structures in light of globalization, market deregulation, growing inequality and an overall decline in the confidence of government and big businesses. In Lebanon, one may argue that the rise of connective action networks and personalized action frames may be linked not only to globalization, but also to the dissolution, polarization and corruption of public institutions following the violence of the civil war and the militia-driven politics in the post-war period. In fact, in addition to the need for garbage collection, the failure of the state and its archaic sectarian power sharing system has been a major rallying cry in the protest space, both online and offline.

According to Bennett and Sandberg, connective action may also be attractive for disenchanting youth in that it preferences personal connection over ideology and thus allows individuals more leniency in their contributions, and arguably increased access to politics in general, bypassing the rigors of party membership.⁵ This point is particularly salient in Beirut where most major parties, workers’ unions and professional associations have been founded or co-opted by militias and are often reputed for ideological manipulation, corruption, authoritarianism and civil war violence.

In addition to its impact on established political institutions, connective action and peer-produced content is taking a toll on journalistic convention, whereby “news media is increasingly taking cues from social media.”⁶ This much is clear in the case studies provided above, but what are the dangers of hailing activist influence over mainstream media as a genuine social or

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid p. 197

⁶ Ibid p. 25

political gain? Sobiraj warns that new civil society groups are often romanticized, yet their overfocus on media attention can frequently be “futile” or even counterproductive. This is because resources are drained away from other political and organization activities and activists rarely receive the positive coverage they imagine.⁷ More specifically it is the “dogged pursuit of mainstream media attention” that comes at the expense of other approaches such as canvassing or holding open meetings.⁸

Such a critique resonates with the Youstink movement in that it has focused increasingly on media stunts like the red paint operation and other well-produced video clips that have grown to dominate the current content on its Facebook page. This shift seems to coincide with a reduction in the large scale street protests seen earlier this summer, leading some to conclude that movement is fizzling out. At the same time, You-Stink has increasingly come under attack for its failure to hold open meetings and seek a broader base that extends beyond middle class activists.⁹

Class divisions became a theme during street protests with heated arguments between You-Stink organizers and youth from the slums who often engaged in more violent confrontations with the police. Ali Nayel and Moghnieh note that You-Stink organizers acted to prevent such confrontations following demonization efforts by the interior minister, who claimed that the protest space had been infiltrated by foreign elements, drug addicts, even ISIS sympathizers.¹⁰ Thus a self-policing of the protest space ensued with some from the You-Stink movement disavowing the “infiltrators” and “undisciplined elements.” During the red paint operation for example, some activists complained that Bazzi could have negotiated much more from police and that some were willing to continue blocking the street, had he been more inclusive in the

⁷ Sobieraj, Sarah *Soundbitten: The Perils of Media-Centered Political Activism* New York: NYU Press 2011

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ali Nayel, Moe., Moghnieh, Lamia *The Protests in Lebanon Three Months After: A reading of police coercive strategies, emerging social movements and achievements* New Politics.org: <http://newpol.org/content/protests-lebanon-three-months-after>

¹⁰ Ibid

decision to disband.¹¹ Ali Nayel and Moghnieh conclude: “It became clear that You-Stink activists wanted any direct action to go through their filters and get their approval: a move to monopolize the public image and representation of the protests, not an unusual occurrence in sectarian Lebanese politics.”¹²

But while the authors exceptionalise such behaviour as being typical of “Lebanese sectarian politics,” Sobieraj finds very similar patterns in the “media centric activism” common during US elections, where far from engaging in pluralistic representation, such activists tend to discipline members speech and behaviour in a bid to impress the media and control the message.¹³

One key difference in the comparison is that while Sobieraj finds “the vast majority (of activism campaigns) received no meaningful mainstream news coverage,” quite the opposite can be said of the protest-media nexus in Lebanon. The You-Stink demonstrations and lead activists have received prominent and significant press coverage. Sympathetic channels have sent reporters to most street rallies for hours of live coverage, with the reporters often experiencing police brutality firsthand and thus exposing it to audiences. Leading channels have even broken regular programming to carry press conferences with Bazzi, Thebian and other “Youstink” figures live on TV, affording them the same importance given to politicians’ speeches. Thebian also appeared on one of the country’s most popular political talk shows, debating head to head with the chief of Lebanon’s police. Yet what did all this coverage accomplish?

Initially, the government reacted swiftly to the protesters’ complaints launching a garbage task force headed by a senior politician. Plans to issue new contracts to politically-connected waste companies were also halted under intense public pressure. Yet months into the crisis, the news

¹¹ Some of these complaints from other activists present that day can be read on Twitter, i.e.: http://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1sno2u4

¹² Ali Nayel, Moe., Moghnieh, Lamia *The Protests in Lebanon Three Months After: A reading of police coercive strategies, emerging social movements and achievements* New Politics.org: <http://newpol.org/content/protests-lebanon-three-months-after>

¹³ Sobiraj p. 18

coverage has died down, garbage is still on the streets and no ministers have resigned as demanded by You-Stink and other affiliated movements.

Perhaps part of the challenge for activists in Lebanon is the breadth and scope of the message. As Gamson and Wolfsfeld note: “the narrower a movement’s demands, the more likely it is to receive coverage that presents it sympathetically to a broader public.”¹⁴ This is typically the case when movements “challenge powerful groups and institutions and cultural codes in fundamental ways, thus risking being denied standing altogether or being branded as dangerous threats.”¹⁵ Here we can draw a parallel to the litany of demands being made by Youstink and other current anti-corruption movements in Lebanon. These demands include wide-ranging reform of the garbage collection sector (from private to public management), the resignation of key ministers and the downfall of the sectarian regime, which has underpinned the state’s power structure since its inception. Are these demands simply too large and controversial to gain a footing with the public? While some broadcasters have celebrated the protests, others have accused them of attempting to destabilize the state and cause havoc that suits the country’s enemies, alleging an “international conspiracy.”¹⁶

On the other hand, activist movements that predate the current garbage crisis-related protests (2011 to present), have been seemingly more successful at achieving tangible results. These include efforts to defeat internet legislation as well as battles over public space that have either cancelled or disrupted state or state-backed projects worth hundreds of millions of dollars. In these very targeted campaigns, specific projects were extensively researched by activists, lawyers and urban planning professionals, with key documents and visualization graphics leaked gradually both to social and mainstream media.

¹⁴ Gamson, William A., and Gadi Wolfsfeld. 1993. ‘Movements and Media as Interacting Systems’. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528 (July): 114–25

¹⁵ *Ibid* p. 121

¹⁶ In its evening news editorial, major broadcaster OTV alleged that the Youstink leadership was trained in Western capitals to bring instability to Lebanon:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hl572y4ITaI&list=FLYcnXHXxmNTUtyJip7ikBCg&index=6>

This better organized and more legally focused approach not only captured media attention but also leveraged that exposure to highlight very specific problems down to plot numbers and government decrees. Activists were thus able to cast severe doubt on what had been presented by the state as “positive” “development” projects good for tourism and the economy. Examples include the cancellation of a high rise tower that was to be built over ancient ruins (2013), the cancellation of a law that would restrict Lebanon’s internet (2012) the postponement and likely cancellation of a highway project that would destroy a historic neighborhood (2014) and a beach resort that would destroy a cemetery of genocide victims (2015). In all of these cases, movements managed to succeed at transferring their causes from the “uncontested realm” to the “contested realm” a powerful act of re-framing the mainstream media perception of reality, thus reshaping public discourse.¹⁷

The thread that ties both previous and current protest movements in Lebanon together is a combined use of connective action, ground action and media production. But can one activist space be viewed as simply more or less successful than another due to the perceived scope of accomplishments? What seems clear is that there are more subtle changes in power dynamics that need to be more closely examined, particularly the influence of newer and older media on political realities.

Chadwick points out that “all social institutions are media institutions.”¹⁸ And new Lebanese activist organizations, churning out news, videos, graphics and other type of media are certainly part of this. Going further, the formats and styles of media packaging and presentation constitute a “media logic” which “penetrates social, economic, cultural and political life.”¹⁹ Furthermore, the media “shapes the public’s expectation of what politics is” and for years, traditional Lebanese media– tied closely to political elites– has framed “political news” as the news of politicians’ lives: their speeches, meetings with other politicians and trips abroad. But increasingly activists movements, whether judged as successful or not, are encroaching onto

¹⁷ Ibid p. 119

¹⁸ Chadwick, Andrew *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* New York: Oxford University Press 2013

¹⁹ Ibid p. 19

this space. Perhaps because their audiences are so large and unable to ignore, they are securing increased air time and news coverage in mainstream print/web outlets and nightly newscasts. Thus the boundaries between old and new media, as well as the boundaries between politics and media, seem increasingly blurred and one must pay attention to the liminal space, as Chadwick describes it “the hybrid media system.”

This hybrid space is particularly relevant in Lebanon where entrenched power in the form of feudal family dynasties and sectarian militia party structures has offered relatively few opportunities for new voices. As Chadwick explains: “Existing media and political elites both have much to lose from the emergence of new media. Both must adapt or see their power decline and occasionally newer media technologies create new elites.”²⁰

In the Lebanese context, this power decline can be seen in the rise of new activist elites: from their ability to question and halt major projects, to the unprecedented street negotiations between police and bloggers, empowered in both cases by mass media coverage. Yet in the era of interactive social media platforms, multiple media logics²¹ emerge, allowing average citizens also to play an active role in cultural and political production beyond that of prominent activists. These newly empowered publics need not join activist organizations but may contribute media and discussion in the form of digitally uploaded photography, memes²² and personal video testimonies to name a few. At the same time, some political elites, established institutions and major corporations are also employing the tools of connective action to varying

²⁰ Ibid p. 21

²¹ Ibid

²² The Egyptian researcher Hani Morsi has defined the political impact of memes as “the digital artifacts of visual or textual humor, and the manner by which these mediated expressions disperse far and wide (i.e. *virally*) on the networks. Politically, we can see how these memes, often humorous in nature, can be communicators of the current political zeitgeist, and as subversive alternatives of traditionally dominant narratives in mainstream media. They lower the barrier to entry to the realm of political expression due to the ease with which they can be created, shared, remixed and re-shared. The viral nature of the spread of memes creates no forms by which collective political awareness is formed, and subsequently such democratized manner of mediated expression opens new avenues of political action driven by such *mimetic* mode of formation of political awareness.” In Lebanon, memes have emerged as new avenues for expressing political dissent as well as problematizing uncontested occasions such as Independence Day celebrations which were used as a springboard for memes questioning the need for sovereignty from the country’s politicians.

degrees of success. While the Lebanese police are often mocked for their tweets, a few Lebanese ministers have begun to hire their own social media teams to produce memes and viral content to rally supporters to their own causes. Yet here again, they are enlisting contributions from the public and interacting with often broader cross-sectarian constituencies than previous sectarian and clientelist structures allowed.

When large-scale protests broke out in Lebanon this year, journalists and analysts were quick to report the news using the frame of the so-called “Arab Spring,” asking whether or not such a movement would succeed in overthrowing political power or devolve into civil conflict. However such an analysis removes current protests from the context of previous campaigns in Lebanon and overlooks the many nuances of change that have been building up over recent years. There are also important structural and political differences to consider.

In Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and other dictatorship states, Howard and Hussain note the centrality of repressive regime tactics, the pressure of regional and international news coverage, and pre-existing, well-connected civil society movements as significant motivating factors for the uprisings that were witnessed.²³ Yet in Lebanon many of these factors have led to different outcomes. The regional and international media have largely ignored protest developments—with coverage led by local broadcasters—and despite Lebanon’s role as an early adopter of internet technologies, this trend has not led to any expedited or overt replacements of incumbent politicians. Perhaps most importantly, Lebanon’s fractured political structure, where power is shared by various militia and feudal leaders does not afford the repressive central power held by other regional regimes. Thus this absence of centralized power has carved out a more conducive space for the rise of new elites, empowered publics and negotiations with those in power.

This paper sets out to identify some of the ways in which hybrid media power is impacting the practice of politics in Lebanon, both by newer and older elites, looking not just at the overturning

²³ Howard, Philip N., Hussain, Muzammil M *Democracy’s Fourth Wave?: Digital Media And The Arab Spring* New York: Oxford University Press 2013

of state policies and projects but also at the more gradual daily negotiations and broader new avenues for expression that have entered a media space that rigidly defined what politics was. This paper also asks: in what ways do connective action and the personalization of politics provide alternative access to power within an aging sectarian power-sharing system? What new challenges and perils do these technologies and new elites simultaneously produce? Are some campaign tactics more effective than others or does the plurality of different protest modes contribute equally to more holistic reconfiguration of overall political culture, both from within and outside of the establishment? Can a fresh reading of the changes happening in Lebanon also inform a more nuanced view of the binary indicators of success/failure that are often used to frame other Arab uprisings?

2. Shaky foundations: post-war politics and political culture in Lebanon

By the early 1990s, much of Beirut and Lebanon were devastated by what is often labeled as the Lebanese civil war. From the French colonial architecture of the capital to smallest villages in the mountains, nearly two decades of shelling and shrapnel explosions had taken a toll on nearly every building in sight, many collapsed, others barely standing. But the legacy of the war ran much deeper than the physical scars that pummeled infrastructure. In a country of roughly four million, over 100,000 were killed and hundreds of thousands more were wounded or displaced. Undoubtedly the war impacted virtually every family, haunted by the militias that terrorized their neighborhoods and led countless street battles and massacres.

It's important to note that the Lebanese war was not strictly internal, sectarian or constant but rather an amalgamation of multiple conflicts fought over varying periods, involving a full range of political and geopolitical ideologies. The war had been sparked by clashes between dispossessed Palestinian guerrilla groups recently exiled to Lebanon following the declaration of the state of Israel and rightist Western-backed Lebanese Christian militias tied to colonial-era elites. The ensuing power vacuum and the rise of multiple militia groups vying for

power devolved over the years into internal struggles for power within the same sects, heightened by cold war rivalries, proxy wars and direct involvement through both weapons sales and troops deployments of the United States, Israel, Syria, Iran, France, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Italy and several other states. It was thus fitting that a settlement to this international war would also be reached through international involvement, via an accord signed in Saudi Arabia in 1989 with the support of major world powers. This was followed by an Amnesty law in 1991, which paved the way for the warlords to become post-war politicians, turning their militias into political parties. Thus for many Lebanese, the war had not really ended, it had merely taken on a new form.

Key to solidifying the new politicians' grip on political power was the politicized redistribution and licensing of broadcast and print media. Lebanon's 1994 Audio Visual Media Law licensed six TV stations, with nearly all tied directly to warlords, militias and politicians. The Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation was founded as a propaganda arm of the Christian militia, Lebanese Forces; Al Manar is Hezbollah's mouthpiece, NBN is backed by parliament speaker and ex militia leader, Nabih Berri; Future Television, a media empire including radio, newspapers and television, was founded by none other than Lebanon's first and most prominent post-war Prime Minister, Rafik Al Hariri. Other stations such as MTV and Al Jadeed, were founded by elite businessmen with political connections.

The same trend toward local and international political sponsorship of the press is also found broadly in Lebanon's over 100 licensed newspapers, many of them serving as mere propaganda arms of parties, while claims of bribes both by senior Lebanese politicians and foreign embassies have been exposed by some journalists.²⁴ Thus the pluralistic yet divisive nature of the Lebanese press allows attacks on the powerful, but these typically take the form of opinionated and propagandistic demagoguery aimed at the political foes of the media owner, rather than research-based systemic and institutional critiques. As Dajani notes: "the historic tendency of Lebanese journalists to speak for specific sectarian groups and to promote

²⁴ Dajani, Nabil *The Myth of Media Freedom in Lebanon* Arab Media and Society, issue 18, summer 2013

sectarian interests led media institutions to concentrate more on commentary and opinion rather than news and facts.”²⁵

It was within this culture of pandering and politician-centric news that massive post-war construction projects were contracted out to private firms to rebuild the capital and national infrastructure. Chief among these was the formation of the country’s biggest firm, The Lebanese Company for The Redevelopment and Reconstruction of the Beirut Central District, better known by its French acronym, Solidere. Tasked with rebuilding the bullet riddled and abandoned historic city center, the company was founded in 1994 by then prime minister Rafik Hariri, a billionaire and construction magnate, who argued that a privatization of city planning was the only solution to a speedy reconstruction. But there was little choice in the matter for the public, and Solidere leadership positions were stacked with Hariri cronies, including its chairman, Nasser Chammaa who was previously head of operations at Hariri’s construction firm. Other board members included prominent Beirut real estate magnets, contractors and bankers, many if not all associated with Hariri and his companies.²⁶

Although Solidere was a private firm it acted with the power of the state. As both prime minister and the largest shareholder, Hariri faced little opposition creating the multi-billion dollar company, which was created by government decree and empowered to claim all private property in the city center, offering relatively little compensation to original landowners. Meanwhile, Solidere’s plan to turn the once gritty city center into a luxury real estate space made it unaffordable for most of the Lebanese public, most of whom were still reeling from power and water shortages. And yet marble was imported from Spain for the new parliament building and street lights from Paris to fulfill Solidere’s stated goal and marketing slogan: “Developing the finest city center in the Middle East.”

²⁵ Ibid p. 2

²⁶ Battah, Habib “Erasing memory in downtown Beirut” Al Jazeera Digital Magazine, January issue, Jan 2014

But the priorities of the administration in investing in real estate over basic public services, the cleansing of the city center of its original inhabitants, the pittance in compensation payments, the glaring conflicts of interest among the board members and the wholesale privatization of the city center gained little traction in the press. Hariri's TV, radio and print outlets beamed out a narrative of rebuilding, foreign investment, jobs and new opportunities from the "rebirth" of the city center. An initial uproar from architects did create some limited modifications in the Solidere master plan, allowing some heritage buildings to be saved. But this process also allowed Solidere to legitimize itself by providing work those architects that had criticized it. At the same time, the majority of old buildings in the city were demolished, and entire historic neighborhoods were flattened in a tabula rasa approach that conveniently allowed for bigger and more marketable real estate plots. Thus the street grid was so radically altered and erased that the city became unrecognizable to previous residents.²⁷

The vast demolition work was often done under the guise of public safety, but some alleged that excessive amounts of dynamite were used to damage surrounding buildings to make the case for their necessary destruction.²⁸ Meanwhile, the construction also unveiled vast parts of the city's 5,000 year old history, and excavation work sprouted up across the city center, making Beirut the world's biggest archaeological dig during the 1990s. Yet leading archaeologists alleged that in the haste for development, little was being preserved out of hundreds of excavations that were being undertaken, and little was being conveyed to the public about such discoveries.²⁹ But questions about the lack of transparency in land management and acquisitions as well as irregularities in Solidere's operations, which were staffed by Hariri cronies, was largely silenced. A group of original landowners organized a short-lived "Stop Solidere" movement led by lawyer Muhammad Mughrabi who was representing dozens of claims of compensation. Mughrabi revealed that Solidere had offered to pay judges for cooperation in the low appraisal of property values. But Mughrabi's legal battle did not go on for

²⁷ Makdisi, Saree "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Front Lines/Border Posts (Spring, 1997), pp. 660-705

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Battah Habib "Activist fight to preserve Beirut's Roman heritage" BBC News, Sept 25, 2013: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24222755>

very long and in subsequent interviews he admitted giving up on the cause claiming that Solidere had fought hard to disbar him, and that he spent a decade clearing his name.³⁰

By far the biggest post war project, Solidere is just one of many quasi-state efforts in the post war period that saw the construction of a new airport, highways and other pieces of infrastructure. Most of these projects were executed by the Council for Development and Reconstruction, a state agency that also worked closely with Solidere and was headed by none other than the former head of Hariri's Saudi Arabian construction firm.³¹ In all of these projects, a process of legislation and politics was at work that saw state power employed at the expense of public consultation and transparency, while advancing the interest of political and business elites. In subsequent chapters, I will show how this post-war modus operandi has been significantly interrupted by the efforts of digitally-empowered activists, raising questions about the possibility of projects on the scale of Solidere succeeding in the present.

³⁰ Battah, Al Jazeera, 2014, Ibid

³¹ Ibid

3. Changing perspectives: Early activism and the problems of activist research and normative evaluation

It was not only state institutions involved in the reconstruction effort that came to be dominated and manipulated by political elites in the aftermath of the war. It was also the traditional avenues for dissent and collective action. Lebanon's unions as well as non-government organizations had been significantly weakened in their ability to represent members' interest as a result of attempts to divide or delegitimize the leadership and pacify the activities that might be viewed as subversive to the status-quo.

As Clark and Salloukh point out, Lebanon's labor movement dates back to the French mandate and coalesced under the General Labor Federation in the 1970 with demands for employment rights that pitted workers against the business and political elite. And despite the divisive nature of the war, the GCL survived "as one of the few institutions to rise above sectarian divisions"³² Yet the post war period, a coalition of political actors, including both Hariri and ex-warlords, mobilized against an anti-establishment GCL president who was critical of Solidere and Hairri's neoliberal economic policies. This was accomplished by subverting 1997 GCL elections through police harassment of members as well as the creation of alternative election procedures and new chapters loyal to incumbent politicians that ensured the victory of their candidate. But in subsequent years, the same subversive GCL candidate was brought back to power as a result of tension between Hariri and a Lebanese political block that had formerly sided with him. Political loyalties have subsequently divided the GCL over the last two decades, pitting workers against each other during strikes and other organizing activities.³³ Clark and Salloukh conclude that elite strategies to control the GCL undermined the strength of the labor movement in general: "The politicization of the GCL is a primary cause of its weakness in defending labor

³² Clark, Janine and Salloukh, Bassel "Elite Strategies, Civil Society and Sectarian Identities in Post War Lebanon" *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Nov. 2013

³³ *Ibid*, 736

rights and engaging in collective bargaining with employers. It also has hindered the emergence of a truly secular national labor movement capable of representing workers' interests beyond sectarian considerations."³⁴

Similar patterns of state actor manipulation can be seen in the development of non-government organizations in the post-war period. For example, The Lebanese Council For Women, established in the 1950s, has emerged as the largest umbrella group for women's organizations, including 170 NGOs spread across the country, inclusive of all sects and regions. However the post war period has seen the vast majority of member NGOs joining as sectarian-based, and the penetration of political elites has hampered decisions over group actions, which must be taken by majority vote. Thus the LCW is "often silent on sensitive issues or drops out of political events" and "controversial issues are simply voted down or avoided and topics that may divide the membership are eschewed."³⁵

Clark and Salloukh also identify "Alternative NGOs" which include a handful of secular or leftists organizations formed before the outbreak of the war in the early 1970s, as well as some that have formed over the last decade. But as a result of laws and procedures regulating their formation and licensing by the Ministry of Interior, the authors warn that "alternative NGOs cannot avoid relations with sectarian elites."³⁶ For example, during the period of Syrian military occupation of Lebanon throughout the 1990s, the ministry reportedly refused to license organizations deemed political.³⁷ The ministry can further interfere in the right to free assembly and speech by demanding its representatives attend NGOs meetings, impose pro-government members, encourage the establishment of counter organizations, or even dissolve associations without any legal basis.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid 733

³⁵ Ibid 739

³⁶ Ibid 741

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

But of “far greater significance” for Clark and Salloukh is marginalization by media coverage, arguing that sectarian elites “control of the media” offers little hope for coverage of controversial NGO’s events, curtailing their visibility and thus existence:

Without mainstream media coverage, NGO-related events receive little to no public attention and have limited public impact, since new social media such as the internet and blogs target the already converted.³⁹

As evidence of this sweeping statement, the authors offer the example of a 2007 mock trial known as Popular Court, set up by a network of NGOs to try politicians for atrocities they carried out during the civil war. Yet “according to several NGOs, not one media outlet covered the launch” and due to resulting political pressure on funders, several NGO withdrew. The authors also cite cases of NGO’s being lured by political elites with the promise of better salaries. On college campuses meanwhile, they argue that independent student groups are often threatened or curtailed by more powerful student parties allied with mainstream sectarian parties.⁴⁰

Perhaps most cynical of all is Clark and Salloukh’s conclusion that despite their stated goals, NGOs tend to work strictly with either side of Lebanon political divide, represented by the pro-US March 14 and pro-Hezbollah March 8 coalitions. Thus “...alternative NGOs are highly sectarian in nature themselves, whether or not this is recognized or acknowledged” and adding that “there are clear networks within the alternative NGO community that divide it and reduce its transformative potential.”⁴¹ The authors go further, claiming Alternative NGOs various goals: secularism, democracy or fighting violence cause division and reveal that “few... seek profound change to the political system... the kind that would eliminate sectarian autonomy and the provisions in the constitution that support it.”⁴²

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid 742

⁴¹ Ibid 743

⁴² Ibid

Interestingly, these claims do not clarify what is specifically meant by “profound change” and neither are the statements substantiated with any direct evidence. More troubling is the further claim that sectarian loyalties are often “expressed indirectly, usually symbolically and most likely unconsciously” and that they underscore the stickiness of sectarian identities and how difficult it is to transcend them.”⁴³

Clark and Salloukh end by striking a pessimistic note, arguing that elite control of institutions and resources at the disposal of NGOs sabotages efforts to challenge sectarian interests, instead reproducing “a postwar culture of sectarianism” that only further secures elite political power and economic interests. The findings “bode ill for democratic institutional engineering in Lebanon” and indicate that change is only possible through a radical underpinning of the country’s governing political system.

Any attempt to invent alternatives to sectarian identities and modes of political mobilization, and hence to sectarianism, requires breaking this reciprocal relation through fundamental socio economic, monetary, and political reforms.⁴⁴

Thus, in their view, the resilient sectarian system in Lebanon is “more durable than some authoritarian Arab regimes.”⁴⁵

In setting up this comparison between Lebanon and other Arab regimes, the authors seem to be subscribing to the mainstream media narrative of absolute Arab regime power, a type of centralized, all-encompassing power that remains seemingly static and can only be altered through a physical upending of its structures. Such an uncomplicated view of regime power—one that is also frequently propagated by both Western and Arab governments—serves the uncomplicated criteria for Western media coverage of Arab uprisings as either successes or

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid 745

⁴⁵ Ibid

failures, gauged largely by the downfall or resilience of a dictator or the onset of physical violence and war. But such binary analysis lacks a nuanced view of the many subtle social and performative dynamics at work within a regime as well as the individual views and behaviours among its support network of political and financial elites, which broaden the scope of state power considerably while problematizing notions of a regime's centrality.

To view "profound change" as the author's call it, in purely coercive terms, i.e. the "breaking" of deeply embedded ties between sect and power or the 'elimination' of sect-codified electoral and institutional districting structures, assumes that such change should ideally happen at once or in singular strokes— yet in the absence of any sort of replacement structure or actors capable of developing or leading it.

Essentially the authors are elucidating a normative view, as have many a media pundit throughout coverage of the so-called Arab spring that encourages a collapse of the pillars of power to make way for change, while ironically at the same time admitting that alternate systems do not and cannot exist due to a kind of sectarian or cultural backwardness.

One only needs to look at the long and ongoing histories of political and economic change in Western countries to realize that such movement of persons, regimes or capital is neither simultaneous, all-inclusive nor temporal and thus cannot be read as a teleological process, but rather as a multifaceted and continuously changing development of power dynamics. Indeed viewing the battle against Arab regimes with starting or ending points serves a somewhat reified reading of the region with an over focus on sectarianism or so-called repressed culture as its explanatory and exoticized defining characteristics. This is further illustrated by the authors' assertion that sectarian loyalties can be expressed "unconsciously," a cynical if not Orientalist claim that ignores the complicated intersectionality of identity and feels out of place in an academic text.

In the Lebanese context, grading movements as successes or failures is not only problematic but ignores the complicated and changing dialectics between activists, elites and mainstream

media in impacting public opinion in the age of new technologies. These relationships and the contributions they are embedding in political culture are the subject of the following chapters.

4. New activism and activist collectives: connective, collective and concurrent action

Overlooking the heavily fortified interior ministry and central bank, Information Minister Walid Daouk sits in a deep-buttoned leather couch in the living room section of his stately office. He leans back and laughs when asked about the state of a controversial internet regulation law he tried to pass in early 2012. “Unfortunately, at that time I didn’t have any experience to pass a law, one must admit.”⁴⁶

In March 2012, Daouk’s smiling face had appeared in an internet meme below the words “You Won’t Kill Our Internet!,” which had gone viral over Twitter along with the hashtag “#StopLira.” The campaign had begun after a copy of Daouk’s draft internet law was leaked to a local newspaper and then reposted by a blogger and translated into English. This post was in turn reposted by an online internet collective, known as Ontonet that had a lawyer parse through every paragraph of the one page piece of legislation, which called for registration of all websites with the government while prohibiting “unethical” content.⁴⁷ The lawyer critiqued the law pointing out that its vague language could lead to abuse. Meanwhile Lebanese blogger Imad Bazzi designed a meme with a red handprint accompanying the text “Hands Off My Freedom: Stop Lira: Lebanese Internet Regulation Act.” Thus Daouk’s draft law was given an easy to remember acronym and the hashtag #StopLira began trending along with hundreds of tweets and statuses, mentioning and insulting the minister on social media.

Popularized by Bazzi and others, the four-letter acronym resembled the #StopSopa campaign of late 2011, which succeeded in halting the US congress bill known as Stop Online Piracy Act. Yet in the US, the battle against the bill, which would have tightened controls on copyright content, was backed by blackouts from major websites and corporations such as Google and

⁴⁶ Interview with Information Minister Walid Daouk, March 4, 2013

⁴⁷ Abu-Fadil, Magda “Activist, Bloggers Stop Lebanese Internet Regulation Act, for Now” The Huffington Post, April, 10, 2012 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/magda-abufadil/lebanese-internet-regulation-act_b_1412276.html

Wikipedia. In Lebanon however the campaign made little impact in the press and was largely led by bloggers as the memes kept pouring in, such as an image of Daouk under the headline: “Big Browser Is Watching You.” Meanwhile the Ontonet online activist collective requested an interview with Daouk to clarify the draft laws problematic details. During the interview, which was later posted online, Daouk appeared to be backtracking adding that the bill would be “optional.” The bloggers and activists claimed a victory and discussion of the draft law disappeared from public discourse.

Sitting in his office a year after the shaming scandal, Daouk appeared to concede defeat, admitting with a laugh that his draft law was “still somewhere in Parliament... with other draft laws” when asked about its status. Chalking it up as a “good experience” Daouk said he learned he needed to consult stakeholders and even activists before attempting future legislation.

“I would first go and see each group and see his opinion and then pass law,” he explained. “I think officials have to meet with all the activists and be close to the activists, very close to activist and everybody that cares for the society and the community.”

“Definitely, there is a new force in society, everybody has to acknowledge this. And this force is driven by youth and this is very important and we are very happy about it.”⁴⁸

In the militia politics of postwar Lebanon, where laws have been passed with no public involvement, it is hard to imagine such a conciliatory tone from an incumbent minister. And over four years since this interview, little has been said about Daouk’s draft law.

The type of social media sharing and shaming that pressured Minister Daouk is described by Bennet and Segerberg as a form of connective action and more specifically—due to its critical mass and largely uncoordinated nature—a form of “crowd-enabled” connective action, organized to some extent around the hashtag #StopLira. Other recent hashtag campaigns in Lebanon

⁴⁸ Interview with Information Minister Walid Daouk, March 4, 2013

include #CivilMarriageLeb which began trending in early 2013 following years of unsuccessful activism to legalize inter-sectarian marriage in Lebanon, long prohibited by political and religious authorities. Yet amid a groundswell of tweets, Lebanon's president tweeted in favour of the move, which was followed by the issuance of a fatwa by the country's leading Sunni cleric.⁴⁹ But Lebanon's Sunni prime minister backed the President and sharply criticized the cleric in a rare show of defiance toward a religious edict and the community's religious leadership, which was celebrated by activists and prominent bloggers⁵⁰ Less than three months later, Lebanon's first civil marriage was registered, hailed as a historic moment in the country's history and paving the way for a potential threat to the sectarian political order.⁵¹ Yet by 2016, laws regulating civil marriage still do not exist and with a non-functioning parliament, the fate of some 40 civil married couples remains in limbo.⁵² However, activists continue to campaign, and while the #CivilMarriageLeb hashtag comes after months and years of demands for secular weddings, connective action has helped enable and popularize it as a national conversation that emboldens unprecedented public political defiance.

When asked, Minister Daouk expressed awe over the President's use of twitter to communicate such a subversive statement: "This would have never happened five years ago. People are still in shock that the president of the republic addressed the issue and it ignited the debate."

One of the most powerful aspects of connective action is that it enables communication and campaigning outside of the mainstream political and media hierarchies such as television air time or political party membership. It allows average citizens as well as digital elites to participate in and influence national debates at a very low cost– in this case as simple as a tweet, share or like. But this connective participation need not be limited to completely spontaneous and uncoordinated action. In addition to crowd-enabled networks, Segerberg and

⁴⁹ "Lebanon's top cleric issues fatwa against civil marriage," Al Arabiya, Jan. 30, 2013 <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/01/30/263407.html>

⁵⁰ "Hariri supports legalizing civil marriage, criticizes Lebanon's Grand Mufti" Al Arabiya, Feb. 1 2013 <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/01/263819.html>

⁵¹ "Lebanon's first civil marriage: a sign of change" Al-Monitor: April 28, 2013 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/lebanon-first-civil-marriage-political-change.html#>

⁵² "Lebanon reconsiders civil marriage" Al-Monitor, Feb 5 2015

Bennett also define organizationally-enabled networks. These are not strictly traditional card-carrying government-licensed organizations, but rather hybrid organizational forms that operate between the space of crowd-enabled and conventional collective action networks. While these organizationally enabled networks have more centralized and clearly defined hierarchies, they employ many of the same personalized action frames and allow opportunities for public involvement that are successful in crowd-enabled actions.

In many ways, organizationally enabled networks are changing how we define an organization and this is particularly true in the Lebanese context. While Clark and Salloukh look strictly at government-approved, conventional organizations, they largely if not completely overlook the impact and influence of connective action. In fact, the only reference to connective action in their study is a parenthetical mention of it as a “limited” alternative to mainstream media coverage, “since new social media such as the internet and blogs target the already converted.”⁵³

The conflation of “the internet” and blogs is an awkward one even considering that the piece was published in November 2013, over a year after the #StopLira campaign and nine months after the #CivilMarriageLeb campaign had gone viral. But it is perhaps close enough—considering the delay between publishing and research— to bookend a period of increased connective activism in Lebanon, a period that saw a move away from conventional collective action as an effective protest space to one of both crowd-enabled and organizational-enabled connective activism. Because these types of movements do not necessarily involve the type of government registration and licensing that Clark and Salloukh describe, they may be subject to less of the elite and sectarian meddling they predict. Indeed as Bennett and Segerberg, note, in connective action, digital media act as “organizing agents,” thus communication helps organize action and communication becomes a form of organization.⁵⁴ The more fluid structure of connective action and its lesser reliance on strict ideology and more flexible identification makes it easier to for individuals to get involved on their own terms and contribute to political action.

⁵³ Clark and Salloukh p. 743

⁵⁴ Bennett and Segerberg p. 8

In recent years, Lebanon has seen a surge in organizationally-enabled connective action campaigns, much of them centred on the politics of contested urban space. These efforts have involved a combination of actors that do not exclude existing NGOs but may incorporate their sometimes autonomous digital platforms as well as non-official collectives and loose alliances between these various entities. This compares to research on connective action trends in Western countries where Bennet and Segerberg have found that collective and connective action often co-concur.

The space for urban contestation in Beirut is configured to a large extent by a boom in real estate and construction in the post war years, which has seen the unregulated razing of historic neighborhoods and the privatization of seafront areas for private marinas. A list of 1,000 heritage buildings in the city has dwindled to less than 300 according estimates by urban planners.⁵⁵

Yet this trend has been attenuated to some extent by organizations such as Save Beirut Heritage, which took off largely as a Facebook group that allowed citizens to post about demolitions happening across the city. The group has since evolved into an NGO, with a telephone hotline and links to the Ministry of Culture, where it says lobbying efforts have intervened in halting the demolition of some 60 buildings.⁵⁶ But many of these interventions began on the Save Beirut Heritage Facebook wall, where photos and albums are regularly uploaded from nearby residents or passersby of buildings that either show signs of abandonment or are being gutted.

Many posts generate conversation threads that may reveal ownership information and updates on the case. Frequently, the posts have gone viral and inspired bloggers and activists to take up a building's cause, in some cases subsequently arousing interest from television and print media.

⁵⁵ Wood, Joshua "Beirut's Old Buildings Again Under Threat" The New York Times: Jan 26, 2011

⁵⁶ Karam, Zeina, "Construction frenzy in Lebanon alters Beirut skyline, as high rises replace old heritage"

Posts can be a springboard for controversy and political performance with heated responses or counter posts from high-level officials. Beirut Mayor Bilal Hamed maintains his own Facebook fan page and frequently replies to comments that criticize city projects.⁵⁷ The city's governor is also active on his page and recently posted a Facebook rebuttal denying an MP's accusation that he failed to take action over the demolition of a listed art deco building in the historic neighborhood of Gemmayze. The MP had cited a blog post inspired by a Save Beirut Heritage wall post documenting the demolition, and in turn, wrote his own piece in a party mouthpiece publication lambasting the governor. The Facebook spat between the two politicians garnered media attention, culminating in a press interview where the governor claimed to have issued police orders to stop the works. The following day the demolition was halted after a part of the building had already been demolished.⁵⁸

The multi-layered interactions between the Save Beirut Heritage NGO, its autonomous Facebook wall, the walls of city officials and parliamentarians, the interventions of bloggers and mainstream media outlets creates unique spaces for interaction between citizens, citizen groups and decision-makers. Chadwick describes this assemblage of events as a sort of opportunity structure that forms part of a political information cycle. The political information cycle can be distinguished from the traditional news cycle in that it comprises assemblages of "new" online media hybridized with so-called "old" broadcast and print media. "This hybridization process shapes power relations among actors and ultimately affects the flows and meanings of news."⁵⁹

For Chadwick, an assemblage can be read as both a process and an event "composed of multiple, loosely coupled individuals, groups, sites and temporary instances of interaction involving diverse yet highly interdependent news creators and media technologies that plug and unplug themselves from the news making process, often in real time."⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Animated discussions can be found in the comment threads of the Mayor's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Dr-Bilal-Hamad-Mayor-of-Beirut-Official-Page-122945217741906/>

⁵⁸ "Update: Beirut governor halts demolition work at Gemmayze building" Beirut Report: Dec. 16 2014 <http://www.beirutreport.com/2014/12/update-beirut-governor-halts-demolition-work-at-gemmayze-building.html>

⁵⁹ Chadwick 2013 p. 63

⁶⁰ Ibid 64

Significantly, these assemblages involve both elite and non-elite participants and often culminate in the contestation of news coverage and media framing of specific issues. The impact of activist contestation of news production has already been underscored in the 1990s by Gamson and Wolfsfeld who noted: "It is a major achievement of some movements that they succeed in moving issues from the uncontested to the contested realm."⁶¹

Today, the multi-platform digital realm and the opportunity structures it makes possible is allowing access to this contestation strategy to be expanded beyond career activists as part of a broader reconfiguring within the political information cycle. As Chadwick notes:

"Political information cycles work on the basis of cross-platform iteration and recursion. This serves to loosen the grip of journalistic and political elites through the creation of fluid opportunity structures with greater scope for timely intervention by online citizen activists."⁶²

In contemporary Lebanon, assemblages have come together around varying circumstances, including both uncoordinated crowd-enabled action and more loosely coordinated organizationally-enabled networks. Thus impact on the political information cycle can arise out of deliberate campaigns as well as more spontaneous high interest driven events.

As noted earlier, the Save Beirut Heritage page has been a springboard for a number of pressure campaigns to halt demolitions of individual historic buildings. On an even larger scale however, have been efforts to contest and often halt private and public sector projects worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Among these are the cancellation of a \$150 million luxury mall and tower, the halting of a \$75 million municipal highway project and the dramatic contestation and subsequent legal challenge to a sprawling development on Beirut's most valuable seafront property that could be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Interestingly, many of these projects

⁶¹ Gamson, William and Wolfsfeld Gadi "Movements and Media as Interacting Systems" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political Science*, Vol 528 Citizens, Protest and Democracy (Jul. 1993) pp. 119

⁶² Chadwick pp 64

involve the Hariri political dynasty and real estate empire that so successfully pushed through a series for projects in the 1990s and 2000s with little significant opposition.

The first of these major urban battles took place in early 2013 when the Landmark, one of the largest projects in downtown Beirut was scheduled to break ground. The project occupied one of the most coveted spots within the rebuilt Solidere district and comprised of luxury shopping complex, hotel and residential tower to be built by celebrity French architect Jean Nouvel. This author played a role in this case after taking a few photos of the site through a gap in construction fence revealing what appeared to be ancient ruins, and then uploading these images onto a personal blog⁶³. These photos were then seen by an activist from the preservation group The Association for the Protection of Lebanese Heritage (APLH), who commented that the site was one of the most important archeological digs in the city and believed to contain a Roman-era city gate and fourth century church. But these discoveries remained hidden from the public due to wood construction panels erected around the site. Upon the advice of APLH activists, this author took extensive photos of the site from a rooftop position that provided an aerial view of the ruins and produced a series of posts⁶⁴ that were then shared on open wall of the popular Save Beirut Heritage Facebook page. Soon the images had begun to get wide distribution, sparking shares and repost coverage from popular bloggers⁶⁵ as well as an article in local paper The Daily Star, where an archeologist was quoted as saying the Culture Minister—who had already approved several controversial demolitions that year— was adamant that the real estate project should go forward.⁶⁶ Yet just two days after the aerial images were

⁶³ “Stealing a peek at the past at Riad Al Solh dig” Beirut Report, May 11, 2013
<http://www.beirutreport.com/2013/05/stealing-peek-at-past-riad-al-solh-dig.html>

⁶⁴ “Possible Roman gate and road found in Beirut dig” Beirut Report May 17, 2015
<http://www.beirutreport.com/2013/05/possible-roman-gate-and-road-found-in.html> and “Hidden Mosaics may reveal Lebanon’s oldest church” May 19 2013 <http://www.beirutreport.com/2013/05/hidden-mosaics-could-be-lebanons-oldest.html>

⁶⁵ Fares, Elie “Lebanon’s oldest church discovered and will be destroyed soon?” A Separate State of Mind May 19 2013: <http://stateofmind13.com/2013/05/19/lebanons-oldest-church-discovered-will-be-destroyed-soon/>

⁶⁶ “Archeologists believe Roman gate found in Beirut” The Daily Star, Beirut, May 15, 2013
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/May-15/217122-archeologists-believe-roman-gate-found-in-beirut.ashx> (paywall) Cached here:
<http://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/possible-roman-gate-found-in-beirut.html#.Vvh2tMfsRE4>

published, the minister made the surprise announcement that the Nouvel project would be halted.⁶⁷

While this largely unplanned assemblage of actors and media resembles Bennett and Segerberg's notion of crowd-enabled connective action, similar assemblages have been seen in more organized and deliberate campaigns. These include the successful effort to contest and pause a multi-million dollar resort in the coastal town of Byblos, north of Beirut in 2015. At stake was the destruction of a historic Armenian orphanage and cemetery for genocide survivors, known as Bird's Nest.

Here, early organizing by a handful of activists (descendants of those buried) led to the production of a website, archive materials, legal documentation and visual mapping⁶⁸ that were shared with bloggers and activists and eventually landed the story in the mainstream television media in Lebanon as well as the influential Armenian newspapers in the United States. Initially the Bird's Nest Church and Orphanage administrators, who had agreed to exhume the graves as part of a deal with the resort developer, attempted to delegitimize the activists with statements in the press⁶⁹ and a public Facebook post (now private) denouncing them as "disturbed" individuals spreading "false information"⁷⁰ But just one day after a lengthy expose in a major US-based Armenian newspaper that used activist maps and documentation of the linkage between the Church and the developer (an ex minister), the church relented and the project was indefinitely suspended following a statement by its highest priest.⁷¹

⁶⁷ "Archeological ruins halt \$149 million landmark project" The Daily Star, May 21 2013
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/May-21/217804-archaeological-ruins-halt-149m-landmark-project.ashx#axzz2TG9673Dn>

⁶⁸ Protect Bird's Nest activist website: <https://protecbirdsnestbyblos.wordpress.com/news/>

⁶⁹ Boghossian, Garin "Stirring up the bird's nest?" The Armenian Weekly July 14, 2015
<http://armenianweekly.com/2015/07/14/birds-nest/>

⁷⁰ "Bodies of Armenian genocide survivors to be exhumed for beach resort" June 30 2015
<http://www.beirutreport.com/2015/06/bodies-of-armenian-genocide-survivors-to-be-exhumed-for-beach-resort.html>

⁷¹ "Catholicos Aram I Suspends Plans Regarding Bird's Nest Cemetery" The Armenian Weekly, July 15, 2015
<http://armenianweekly.com/2015/07/15/aram-i-suspends-plans-regarding-birds-nest-cemetery/>

The relatively ad-hoc nature of both the campaigns to defeat The Landmark project in downtown Beirut and the Bird's Nest in Byblos come as a slight organizational contrast to the seemingly unprecedented campaign to resist a major highway project in early 2013. Here individual activists joined forces with established non-government organizations to create connective action that impacted both the mainstream media and political elites.

The effort began when the municipality of Beirut had quietly begun preparing to revive a decades-old 1 kilometer highway connection project that would destroy a historic neighborhood and one of Beirut's last remaining green spaces. Activists from Save Beirut Heritage kicked off the campaign by creating before and after visuals showing the destructive path of the road, and these went viral over social media and blogs, setting the stage for a public outcry. Soon prominent architects and engineers began weighing in on the plan both on social media and in op-ed pieces calling the \$75 million plan wasteful, antiquated, ignoring urban planning norms and lacking in basic feasibility studies, potentially creating more traffic problems than it proposed to solve. A group of these young and mid-career professionals set up a petition to oppose the project, proposed alternatives, launched a website and developed a coalition of 20 registered environmental and youth associations.⁷² Newspaper and magazine articles poured in picking apart the project and questioning the lack of studies.

Fighting back, the mayor of Beirut, city council members and other officials denounced activists in the press, rejected their proposals, and claimed there was no need for environmental or urban impact studies.⁷³ One government engineer went so far as to nonchalantly suggest "... we don't build public consensus on projects. It's never happened since I've been here since 1996."⁷⁴ Yet countering the criticism the community had not been consulted, the municipality

⁷² The Stop the Highway coalition launched a website challenging the municipality project on technical grounds and documenting its multiple media appearances:
<https://stopthehighway.wordpress.com/?s=the+highway>

⁷³ Battah, Habib "Activists decry Boutros Highway project" The Daily Star June 5 2013
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Jun-04/219337-activists-decry-boutros-highway-project.ashx>

⁷⁴ Ibid

held a rare “town hall meeting.” However when pressed, city officials later admitted major activists organizations were not invited.⁷⁵

By March 2014, the still-stalled project was over six months behind schedule and online protests soon coincided with off-line action as a couple of hundred young activists took to the streets, blocking a major road near the highway project, holding placards denouncing it. Although the number of demonstrators was not huge, the well-coordinated media campaign drew journalists from every major television station.⁷⁶ Less than ten days later, the municipality had announced it was undertaking a comprehensive environmental study, despite its previous rejections.⁷⁷ The mayor of Beirut, Bilal Hamed, went on the defensive, arranging a talk in front students at the American University of Beirut where he repeatedly dubbed his project as “green” and called the activists “long-haired romantics” and “liars” lacking basic qualifications to comment on the issues.⁷⁸ Interestingly, the media was barred from attending the talk, adding more currency to the claim the municipality lacked transparency and didn’t even have a website to communicate with the public.⁷⁹ As the environmental surveying dragged on into 2015, the mayor continued to blame the activists in public appearances, at one point accusing them of “not letting us serve the east Beirut community.”⁸⁰ By mid-2016, three years after announcing the project and dismissing the activists, the Boutros Highway plan remains dormant and some analysts have said the political will to push it through has been sapped.

⁷⁵ “Media shut out of municipality talks once again” Beirut Report March 31, 2014
<http://www.beirutreport.com/2014/03/media-activists-shut-out-of.html>

⁷⁶ “Police stand down at Boutros road protest” Beirut Report March 2, 2014
<http://www.beirutreport.com/2014/03/protest-against-boutros-road.html>

⁷⁷ “Beirut mayor defends Boutros highway project” The Daily Star, March 12, 2014
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Mar-12/249966-beirut-mayor-defends-fouad-boutros-highway-project.ashx>

⁷⁸ AUB talk by Mayor Bilal Hamed, April 2nd 2014, quoted in the Stop the Highway blog:
<https://stopthehighway.wordpress.com/2014/10/> and the notes of the author, who also attended.

⁷⁹ “Media shut out of municipality talks once again” Beirut Report March 31, 2014
<http://www.beirutreport.com/2014/03/media-activists-shut-out-of.html>, also see event banner, restricting attendance to students.

⁸⁰ The mayor was speaking on April 28, 2014 in a press conference announcing his achievements, viewed by some as part of his bid to run for a parliamentary seat. I interviewed two attendees who confirmed his remarks. These include the head of Green Line Lebanon Ali Darwiche and landscape architect, activist and AUB professor Nahida Khalil.

Although not always definitive, the power of contestation and delay has important implications on political capital and political will. Packages of projects that were once pushed through easily, such as much of the post-war reconstruction effort, now potentially face individual contestation. Interestingly, Beirut mayor Bilal Hamed is a member of former Prime Minister Hariri's political party and is widely viewed as Hariri appointee. Meanwhile the government engineer who noted that public consensus had not been a planning policy "since 1996" (the peak of the reconstruction effort) is part of the Council for Development and Reconstruction, the once-all powerful arm of the reconstruction process, headed by a Hariri associate.

5. Repertoires of discursive action: lobbying, cultural production and post-sectarian narratives

The sweeping influence of the Hariri dynasty has not only been challenged in public sector projects but also in its private ventures. This materialized when some of Hariri's children purchased one of the last public shores in Beirut with plans to build a multi-million dollar private project, erecting a 370 meter fence that blocked public access to the site known as Dalieh.

Located just meters from Beirut's Pigeon Rocks, a landmark seen on countless postcards of Lebanon, Dalieh is the last rocky outcrop of the city and has been a public watering hole for generations of local families. But a group of legal and urban planning activists discovered that Hariri family members had quietly purchased the massive 100,000 square meter property, which had been restricted to public use. Yet this legal distinction was overturned by senior Lebanese politicians in the twilight years of the civil war, allowing for private resort development. Activists discovered that this veto legislation was not made public and thus disputable by other bodies of government. The activists launched a lawsuit on constitutional grounds. They also documented how the senior Hariri used the same legislation to conveniently increase the allowable levels of construction along the coastal area, driving up the value of his property even further. Finally, and despite denials in the press from Hariri associates, the activists revealed through investigative research that a major development was indeed being planned on the site of Dalieh and that the architect was renowned Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas.⁸¹

The activists, a collective of architects, lawyers, urban planners, artists, college students and professors, had organized under the banner of the Civil Coalition to Protect Dalieh. In addition to launching the lawsuit, which was announced at a press conference before a mainstream media audience, the group began compiling environmental, archeological and anthropological data to prove the importance of the site. They discovered Lebanese government documents and international surveys that listed Dalieh as a protected natural habitat, museum documents that

⁸¹ Battah, Habib "City without a shore: Reem Koolhaas and the paving of Beirut's coast" The Guardian

indicated the site's importance in the Bronze Age as well as oral histories and historical photographs recalling the social heritage of Dalieh for generations of Beirut residents. This material, along with an in-depth legal analysis of the series of laws that diminished Dalieh's protective status was eventually published as a booklet, featuring maps and timelines, as well as a website.

A summary of the research presented by the Dalieh campaign was also sent as an open letter⁸² to Koolhaas, who responded publicly in an appreciative tone, while claiming his patron, the Hariri-owned company was aware of "its importance as a public space" and "it is our intention to actually enhance public accessibility of the site."⁸³

Yet this reasoning came as a stark contrast to the tone of actions taken months earlier by the Hariri-owned investment company that purchased the land and promptly erected a fence to "protect the private property from squatters and encroachments" according to a spokesperson interviewed in the local press.⁸⁴ When asked about public access, he added that the land was worth "hundreds of millions of dollars" and thus "it wouldn't be cost effective to turn it into a park." Yet the spokesperson, speaking in August 2014 also denied that there were any plans for a major project at Dalieh. Not only was this debunked by the activists who revealed the Koolhaas plans, but after Koolhaas' response in December 2014, another company spokesperson offered a dramatically different narrative in an interview published a few weeks later in February. Now the Hariri real estate firm representatives admitted Koolhaas was commissioned, adding that public access and green space would be a priority. The

⁸² The Civil Campaign to Preserve the Dalieh of Beirut, "Open letter to Mr. Rem Koolhaas" *Jadaliyya* Dec 15, 2014 <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20264/open-letter-to-mr.-rem-koolhaas>

⁸³ *Ibid*, see comments section for response from Koolhaas's firm, OMA.

⁸⁴ Nash, Matt "No project, no public but no public: Raouche's coast will not be developed... yet" *Executive Magazine*, Beirut, Aug. 21, 2014 <http://www.executive-magazine.com/business-finance/real-estate/raouche-no-project-but-no-public>

representative said the project would serve “everyone, for nature, for Beirut, for the public, for us.”⁸⁵

But the activists were not satisfied with the mere change in tone. After some of the area fishermen cut a hole in the fence, the Dalieh campaign organized events to occupy the space including music performances, cultural festivals, tours and press conferences that drew coverage from mainstream television stations and newspapers. They also held a series of university lectures to speak about the site’s ecological and archeological importance as well as the manipulation of laws and the lawsuit they had launched. At the same time, Dalieh campaign members were also engaged in intense lobbying with the minister of environment, culminating in a press conference where the ministry announced that a draft law had been submitted to label Dalieh as a protected natural site, banning major construction.⁸⁶ Although it was doubtful that the draft law would be passed by parliament, with the influence of Hariri loyal MPs and allies, the announcement was seen as a major public opinion win for the campaign. The ministry had also agreed to sponsor a crowd-funded international design competition for public use of Dalieh, created by the campaigners. Their strong connections to the architectural community drew the interest of prominent local and international architects who participated in the competition jury, with the winners announced from the ministry of environment. An exhibition of some 40 submitted projects travelled to culture centers around Beirut drawing large crowds.⁸⁷

By enlisting the environment ministry as a sponsor of the competition, as well as lobbying the minister to produce draft legislation in its favor, the Dalieh campaign has been able to achieve tangible political gains and in some sense, harness the ministry’s political power. But the campaign’s production of discursive power may be equally significant. Through its series of events, lectures, press conferences, book publishing, online publishing, social media posting,

⁸⁵ Nash, Matt “The coast of progress: gridlock persists over the development of Dalieh” Executive Magazine, Beirut, Feb. 10, 2015 <http://www.executive-magazine.com/business-finance/real-estate/dalieh-the-coast-of-progress>

⁸⁶ “Ministry announces decree to protect Dalieh coast” Beirut Report, May 24, 2015 <http://www.beirutreport.com/2015/03/ministry-announces-law-to-protect-dalieh-coast.html>

⁸⁷ “Exhibit proposing coastal alternatives draws crowds” Beirut Report, June 8, 2015 <http://www.beirutreport.com/2015/06/exhibit-proposing-coastal-alternatives-draws-crowds.html>

photography, archiving and legal research, the campaign has produced a body of knowledge that has put Dalieh, an otherwise undeveloped plot of lucrative real estate capital, on the map of city and national heritage, environmental uniqueness, political and legal discourse, as well as a key case study in the politics of real estate, development and elite power in Lebanon.

This type of discourse production was seen in the cases of #StopLira, the Armenian cemetery, the Roman ruins and the Boutrous road. In many of these cases, activists' literature and media output—composed of maps, visuals, historical and legal research—helped to define and frame a public debate around issues that had not been subject to significant mainstream media reporting. In fact, it was activist reporting that revealed and highlighted parliamentary legislation, constitutional rights, real estate ownership registers, historical data, dubious legislation, conflicts of interest and abuses of power.

It was the activist discourse on these issues that not only inspired blog posts, mainstream newspaper articles and television reports, but also informed the language and questions used in that reporting. In some cases, this meant focusing reporting on specific pieces of legislation or specific technical, legal or engineering problems with projects. In other cases, the activist act of merely naming an issue, project or law carried a certain weight and accessibility for public dissemination. For example, the creation of the acronym LIRA out of an obscure legislative title lent itself to an easy-to-remember hashtag. In the case of the Boutros Highway, the activists had popularized the term much to the anger of the municipality which preferred the title “Boutrous Road or Boulevard”—language that downplayed the size and destructive nature of a four lane road and its series of bridges and tunnels. Finally, in the case of Dalieh, activists often used the phrase “The Dalieh of Raouche” invoking the nearby famous pigeon rocks that are pictured on so many postcards of Beirut. By including Raouche in their campaign title, activists were able to capture public attention and underscore the project's proximity to a major national landmark.

Discourse production has also meant the popularization of concepts advanced by the activist community, which had been given very little attention in popular media such as newscasts and political talk shows. In the post war years, these mainstream media entities have been

dominated by news of individuals, their travels, speeches and rebuttals, rather than issues related to public goods. While activists are sometimes popularizing new language, such as digital rights, urban planning and architectural heritage, they have also been reviving concepts that had historically been part of Lebanese public life before the civil war. These include the right to green space, public space and public transport, all of which had both been widely available before the urban sprawl of the post-war years and the commodification of the city by real estate firms such as Solidere. Thus while picnics in parks and open spaces had been traditions practiced by Beirut families throughout the last century, the rapid urbanization of the city has meant these spaces are often provided as luxury amenities— i.e. as gardens and beach access—for private developments, leaving the lower classes with few outlets for recreation. And while projects such as Solidere and highway building by the CDR became symbols of the so-called reconstruction process, very little was done to revive the state's history of public transportation, including trains and tramways or even well-maintained buses and bus stops, which are virtually non-existent in the present.

This neoliberal post war development strategy that favored elite real estate capital over social diversity and citizen empowerment came to the forefront of public debate during an incident that occurred during the height of anti-corruption protests related to the sanitation crisis referenced at the outset of this paper. Much of the demonstrations related to the “Youstink” movement and various spin-off groups such as “We want accountability” took place in a public square facing the prime minister's office in the reconstructed downtown district managed by Solidere. Among the protesters, one could often find a few sandwich and drink vendors who took advantage of the opportunity although street vending, a long hailed Beirut tradition, is now strictly forbidden in the upscale district. Thus during a press conference, a group of businessmen had bemoaned the impact of the protests on luxury businesses in the Solidere area, with one, the local Channel distributor, complaining that the high streets were no place for “Abou Rakhousa” a colloquial term for cheap products. The businessman probably never imagined the reaction he would get.

Within hours of the press conference, the hashtag #AbouRakhousa began going viral as activists and average citizens took offense to what was seen as the manifestation of years of

elitist economic planning. They began mocking the businessman with memes and angry social media posts. A group of activists made use of the opportunity to discuss elitism and inequality in the central district and organized a series of “Abou Rakhousa” flea markets near the prime minister’s offices, defying the ban with music, dancing and dozens of vendors who vowed to sell products for under one dollar. This came in stark contrast to the prices of goods in the Solidere area, where meals can be priced in the hundreds of dollars.

Several TV stations covered the Abou Rakousa festivals, where vendors and citizens spoke freely on camera about the inequalities of Solidere and the post-war reconstruction process.⁸⁸ Online, a Facebook page was set up, and individuals created memes and even songs mocking the businessman, who had unknowingly coined a convenient new term encompassing the messy amalgamation of neoliberal development and confronting class difference as an indicator for corruption. In some ways, there are parallels between the language of #AbouRakousa and “the 99 percent,” popularized by the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. Both terms provide citizens with easy access to complicated social grievances and systems of power that are not easy to articulate. They provide a vocabulary of dissent that helps engender a public discourse on accountability for elites that had previously been relegated to intellectual circles.

Much of the new activist discourse production that we have seen both in Lebanon and other countries has been made possible by recent breakthroughs in digital documentation and dissemination. This ranges from cellphone photography that creates better coverage of everyday issues to digital maps, memes and infographics that create new languages of dissent to social media networks that have the potential to create viral distribution. As technology advances, this digital documentation may continue enhance activist repertoires, reporting and discursive power. Satellite imagery has been used by some groups to document the construction of illegal resorts, which are endemic across the Lebanese coast. One civil society group called Mashaa combined aerial screenshots of illegal resorts, combined this with legal

⁸⁸ Battah, Habib “Abou Rakhousa and the politics of poverty” Bold Magazine, Beirut, Oct. 2015
<http://www.beirutreport.com/2015/11/abou-rakhousa-and-the-politics-of-poverty.html>

data, ownership information and simple photo editing to produce a series of Facebook posts that featured politicians' pictures next to images of their illegal properties and information on the size and violations of those properties.⁸⁹

Satellite images have also been used by the "YouStink" movement that emerged out of the garbage collection crisis. One of the government's initial solutions to the problem was to tender new bids for sanitation contracts, and among the leading candidates was a firm based in the Netherlands. After a little bit of internet research, the activists quickly realized the firm's website contained no specific track record, so they punched in its physical address on Google Maps and revealed that the company was located in a private home. They took screenshots of this home and created a viral post that cast doubt on the bidding process and the company's ability to handle hundreds of tons of waste. As the story began to gain traction, the firm was suddenly disqualified from the bidding process.

The Youstink movement also became known for its use of viral videos to highlight the garbage crisis ranging from cell phone footage to more produced videos of activists stunts such as delivering garbage bags to politician's front doors, launching ping pong balls down parliament hill, egging official motorcades and even unveiling a medieval style catapult to hurl bags of garbage at riot police. These videos often accompanied by music, graphics and increasingly sophisticated editing effects have shamed the state and earned millions of combined views. The most popular of these so far was a parody of a government-produced tourism video showcasing Lebanon's natural beauty. The activists took the tourism video's relaxing music and shot their own drone video hovering over giant mounds of garbage, adding the tourism ministry logo. The video provided a rare perspective at the scope of the garbage crisis, documenting dump sites both on the outskirts of the city and in rural areas that were largely hidden from public view. The drone footage was soon picked up by several international news sources and yet the minister of tourism responded by threatening to sue the activists for their use of the logo and music and for

⁸⁹ A series of post such as this one highlighting the parliament speaker's coastal resort can be found on the Mashaa Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/masha3.org/photos/pb.386748061397079.-2207520000.1460418511./418569584881593/?type=3&theater>

“harming Lebanon’s image.” This move only added more sarcasm to the international news coverage, further shaming the minister for prioritizing copyright infringement over an environmental and public health disaster.⁹⁰

Drone footage has also been used by mainstream television stations to document party loyalists beating activists during recent anti-government protests. This footage countered denials from party representatives who disavowed the violence and refuted claims that their members were not involved.⁹¹ Other stations have used footage of police beating protesters to contrast claims by Lebanon’s interior minister that no violence would be used and free speech would be protected.⁹² Some activist groups have also used slow-motion editing effects and graphics overlaid on video to document how police aimed teargas projectiles directly at protesters in violation of international policing norms.⁹³

⁹⁰ Battah, Habib “River of garbage: parody drone video mocks Beirut’s rubbish crisis” The Guardian, March 11, 2016 <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/mar/11/river-garbage-parody-drone-video-mocks-beirut-lebanon-rubbish-crisis>

⁹¹ “Who has been attacking protesters in Beirut” Beirut Report, Sept. 28, 2015 <http://www.beirutreport.com/2015/09/who-has-been-attacking-protestors-in-beirut.html>

⁹² LBC video juxtaposing minister’s assurances with images of police brutality as published on the LBC Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/LBCILebanon/videos/907605922621141/>

⁹³ Slow motion video published on the activist Facebook page Mahkamat Alchaab: <https://www.facebook.com/MahkamatAlchaab/videos/527966930692389/>

6. Reconfiguring power dynamics: new elites, adaptive elites and post-sectarian political practices

The impact of digital activism on political power and political culture in Lebanon can be gauged not only by the success of activist interventions but also on how their digital tools are being used by traditional elites such as politicians and mainstream media, and in some ways, influencing their rhetoric and practices. Several politicians and government institutions, such as the Internal Security Forces, are very active on social media platforms and maintaining regularly updated Twitter and Facebook accounts is becoming important to narrative production. The police for example, have used their social media accounts to highlight injuries to officers and property as an effective way to de-legitimize protest action and spread fear about the danger of participation.

Indeed, tweets and posts by decision-makers are now a regular feature on Lebanese mainstream evening newscasts, increasingly taking the place of statements made in writing or delivered through respective propaganda outlets. Twitter battles between rival politicians have also made headlines.⁹⁴ But beyond purely technical message relay purposes, some politicians have increasingly used social media to interact with constituents in ways uncommon to the country's archaic, feudal and military-driven political system that has not lent itself to personal engagement with a broad spectrum of constituents. We have seen some of this in the comment threads of posts by elites, such as the mayor and other business leaders who have sometimes engaged in arguments with activists. But other politicians have used social media to such an extent that their tenure in office has largely been defined by it.

Lebanon's former telecom minister Nicolas Sehnaoui had even hired a young social media consultancy firm⁹⁵, which designed a number of repertoires to engage constituents and create

⁹⁴ Kamel, Kenzi "Lebanese Telecom Minister Sidesteps Internet Issues, Again" Beirut.com, Jan. 3, 2013 <http://www.beirut.com/l/20826>

⁹⁵ Dalakian II, Glen "4 simple reasons why a young digital agency in Lebanon is turning a steady profit" Wamda.com, Oct 24, 2013 <http://www.wamda.com/2013/10/digital-agency-lebanon-profit-csr>

an image of youthfulness and “trust.”⁹⁶ Not only did the minister engage in regular tweet sessions and tweet his favorite comic books and YouTube clips, his team also designed online competitions with an interactive website that forced participants to guess the ministers’ accomplishments to win.⁹⁷ Prizes included free phones, tablets and internet bundles. The minister also used this strategy to engage bloggers that had previously been critical of his track record. One blogger was even awarded a free trip to Silicon Valley and his highly promotional blog post⁹⁸ was retweeted by the minister as the official record of the official trip. The minister was blunt about his strategy in an interview with a local magazine. He noted:

For example, a blogger who is 100 percent negative. I would call and arrange to sit together and tell him the whole reality of what we are facing. Tell him everything. We found they would leave the meeting completely transformed, blogging positively or at least neutrally. We found that this contact strategy worked...⁹⁹

Minister Sehnaoui also courted journalists, inviting them to parties at his lavish villa and sharing the pictures on Instagram. Full of praise, the glowing interview above titled “9 Ways Nicolas Sehnaoui Has Changed The Youth of Lebanon’s Opinion Of Their Government” featured several full page photo spreads of the minister and was penned by a journalist who was allowed to tweet from his phone and Twitter account to tens of thousands of followers.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ “Telecom Review Magazine Launches “Human to Human” (H2H) Initiative during its Summit “The Human Side of Telecom” Summit Telecom Review, August 12, 2013, <http://www.telecomreview.com/summit/human-side-of-telecom/>

⁹⁷ Dalakian II, Glen “Lebanese Telecoms Ministry Asks Citizens to ‘Be The Minister’ with New Game” Wamda.com, Beirut, Feb. 13, 2013 <http://www.wamda.com/2013/02/lebanese-telecoms-ministry-asks-citizens-to-be-the-minister-with-new-game>

⁹⁸ Raidy, Gino “Silicon Valley Trip Round-Up” Gino’s Blog, May 6, 2013 <https://ginoraidy.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/silicon-valley-trip-round-up/>

⁹⁹ Chaaban, Fida “Flashing lights: learning to trust all over again, Nicolas Sehnaoui is reaching Lebanon’s youth one megabyte at a time” Rag Mag, Beirut, March 2013

¹⁰⁰ See full tweet here: <https://twitter.com/NicolaSehnaoui/status/302013231659089920>

But in reality, Lebanon's internet speed improved only marginally under Sehnaoui and remained one of the slowest internet connections in the world, well after he left office in 2014.¹⁰¹

The minister frequently laid blame on one of his political rivals, the manager of the state-owned telecom firm, for blocking progress. Borrowing yet another activist repertoire, Sehnaoui organized a viral hashtag campaign of his own "#freethebandwidth"¹⁰² to enlist followers, who developed several memes to support the campaign which was reposted by bloggers he had befriended.¹⁰³ Absent however from this campaign were any technical details or evidence-based documentation on how the rival bureaucrat was technically preventing the flow of internet connectivity, which far from resting on the shoulders of one man, involves a complicated web of hierarchies related to antiquated systems of traffic flow, distribution infrastructure and international bandwidth procurement. Contrary to the unquestioned claim that he would respond to requests from bloggers by "telling them everything" Sehnaoui repeatedly avoided specific questions on the bandwidth bottleneck when I interviewed him for a local magazine.¹⁰⁴

Today, two years after the minister's departure, Lebanon's internet remains dysfunctional with most users connecting at under 2 mbps, less than half the global average, in contrast to Sehnaoui's frequent claims that the country would become a world leader in web development. Yet despite the lackluster performance, the minister's web rankings have still grown exponentially with his tenure in office, with nearly 100,000 likes on his Facebook page and over 80,000 followers on Twitter.

¹⁰¹ Murray, Livia "Four Reasons Lebanon's Internet is Slow" Executive Magazine, April 8, 2014
<http://www.executive-magazine.com/economics-policy/four-reasons-lebanons-internet-is-so-slow>

¹⁰² "Sehnaoui to Abdel Menhem Youssef: #FreeTheBandwidth #FtahElHanafiyye" LBC News site, June 7, 2013
<http://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/94363/sehnaoui-to-abdel-menhem-youssef-freethebandwidth/en>

¹⁰³ Raidy, Gino "The Childishness That Makes Your Internet Slow" Gino's Blog, June 10, 2013
<https://ginoraidy.wordpress.com/2013/06/10/the-childishness-that-makes-your-internet-slow-fta7-el-7annafiyyeh/>

¹⁰⁴ Battah, Habib "The Elusive Mr. Youssef" Bold Magazine, Beirut, August 2012 issue:
<http://www.beirutreport.com/2012/08/the-elusive-mr-youssef.html>

It's worth noting that Sehnaoui, the heir of a wealthy banker and manager of a construction equipment business, had no track record or experience in web activism or internet industries before coming to public office. But Sehnaoui's social media popularity has translated into a rise within the ranks of his party, one of Lebanon's most influential, as he has recently been appointed vice president on new party platform of engaging youth.¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, Sehnaoui does not advertise his prominent political role on his social media platforms and it does not even appear in his Facebook or Twitter bios, which contain titles such as "Lebanese citizen" "Former Minister", "Geek" and "Fan of Superheros", perhaps in a bid to keep his large following amid Lebanon's divisive political arena. In fact the former minister has launched a number of technology business ventures after leaving office and even disavows politics in interviews with local tech magazines.¹⁰⁶

But what is politics in contemporary Lebanon? Whether or not Sehnaoui wants to admit it, his party is one of the country's most powerful political entities, led by one of the most active and most violent civil war participants, former general, Michel Aoun. And whatever Sehnaoui's track record in office, he has succeeded best at creating a citizen-centric, issue-centric discourse (or at least the appearance of one) in a political environment dominated by tribal and sectarian identity politics. Even Sehnaoui's own party makes frequent reference to the rightist narrative of so-called "Christian rights" and Christian primacy as a pillar of its political platform. Perhaps he is trying to distance himself, with a focus on the language of tech and entrepreneurial empowerment, devoid of religious affiliation. His Twitter bio reads: "Believer that the power of a young digital lobby can change Lebanon."

Emerging as a virtual unknown, Sehnaoui's reliance on digital networking as a key component of his political rise is uncharacteristic in the traditional trajectory within Lebanese militia politics, where physical numbers of armed men and loyalists or bank account size have been a primary

¹⁰⁵ "Bassil Delivers First Speech as FPM Leader: No One Will Take Aoun's Place" Kateab.org Aug. 27, 2015 <http://www.kataeb.org/local/2015/08/27/bassil-delivers-first-speech-as-fpm-leader-no-one> and "Inauguration speech of Minister Gibran Bassil" Tayyar.org, Aug 30, 2015: <http://www.tayyar.org/News/Lebanon/24701>

¹⁰⁶ Knight, Lucy, "What I know about life: Nicolas Sehnaoui" Wamda.com, Beirut, Oct. 5, 2015: <http://www.newsjs.com/url.php?p=http://www.wamda.com/2015/10/what-i-know-nicolas-sehnaoui>

indicator of power. Sehnaoui is open about his misgivings in a recent interview with a tech magazine that made no reference to his party position. “I don’t miss politics. I mean, I’m not out of it. For me it’s sacrifice. When I’m there with all the negative things that come out I wonder if it’s not too much to bear.”¹⁰⁷

Chadwick speaks at length about the problematic fetishisation of dichotomies such as old and new media in academic discourse, arguing that the liminal space in between needs to be studied more thoroughly. As he notes: “systems are always in the process of becoming.” Undoubtedly a similar argument can be made about politics, and in some ways, actors like Sehnaoui are traversing onto that liminal space. To illustrate this, it is important here to unpack the arbitrary distinctions between both media and politics and old and new media.

As Chadwick notes, media and political systems are not separate. In the Lebanese context, this much is clear to any student of local politics. Media ownership has been a prerequisite of power both during and after the war as militias and wealthy businessmen have relied on friendly or beholden news outlets to broadcast their speeches, pseudo-events or rebuttals to attacks from other politicians. Media in Lebanon have served not only as mouthpieces but as a key tool to remaining relevant in an antiquated political system, substituting detailed discussion of issues or accountability with the theatre of speeches, fear-mongering, sectarian and geopolitical demagoguery. Rather than investigate their war crimes and business interests, ex-militia leaders are given an open microphone to attack rivals and make vague claims of authenticity, appear on talk shows, even make jokes that humanize their criminality and contribute to cults of personality. But the rise of social media platforms and the increasingly reliance on alternative media and activist publishing is increasingly chipping away the dominance of a handful of licensed—and thus politicized—mainstream television stations and newspapers. Indeed the exponential reach of Facebook groups and blogs with tens and hundreds of thousands of potential readers is eclipsing that of party-owned television stations, particularly the most propagandistic among them, with dated programming formats and falling ratings. It is not just

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

the fatigue of viewers, major local corporations are increasingly advertising on Lebanese blog sites and online celebrities are emerging by posting videos on social media.

Chadwick explains: “Existing media and political elites both have much to lose from the emergence of newer media. Both must adapt or see their power decline and occasionally newer media technologies create new elites”¹⁰⁸

Yet it is not just the emergence of new elites, but also new discourses that they bring to topics of public concern. By organizing around issues such as public services, the right to digital expression, the politics of real estate and community spaces, activist collectives are engaging in political practices that are evolving outside of the traditional outlets of political negotiation, namely militia politics, beholden media outlets and sectarian parties. In short, individual activists and activist collectives are rising to prominence through post-sectarian practices. Equipped with new tools, documentation technologies and repertoires of defiance and accountability, they are producing alternative publishing outlets that are facilitating assemblages that contribute to the political information cycle.

It is important to note that these post-sectarian practices are not restricted to new elites with large followings. As we have seen in the examples of crowd-enabled connective action, it is the active participation of average consumers and concerned citizens be it through posing questions or posting their own images and videos that provide a key component in such assemblages. Even the simple act of sharing, liking or reposting is instrumental to elevating a post, image or meme to a viral/influential level, giving average citizens a low-cost entry point to participation in political debates. According to Chadwick: “Ordinary citizens using digital technologies that enable them to cross from the outside to the inside of the elite political-media nexus may now, on occasion, affect the meaning.”¹⁰⁹ Again, on the Lebanese level, this impact is multiplied by the fact that politics has been so difficult to access within a political culture and institutional framework codified and policed by feudal and sectarian interests and gatekeepers.

¹⁰⁸ Chadwick p. 21

¹⁰⁹ Chadwick p. 88

All this is not to say that traditional elites and media outlets will remain entirely static or decline in the shadow of new elites and post-sectarian spaces. As is seen by the examples of the changing behaviour and rhetoric of municipal officials, telecom and information ministers, some old elites are either utilizing activist repertoires or becoming the object of them. In turn, these activist repertoires and discursive actions are increasingly informing official pursuit of or abandonment of major state projects.

The popularization of activism has also opened up spaces for cooperation in the mainstream media, and among media elites, with some channels devoting large amounts of coverage to activists and their causes. Indeed, mainstream coverage is still highly influential and a key component of the viral process that gets activist voices heard. But this is not a one way street. Activist pages are increasingly sharing mainstream news packages that deal with topics of their interest on their walls and social media platforms. This is facilitated by the increasing trend of news channels uploading individual stories on their Facebook pages or activists capturing and sharing individual clips. Whereas in the past viewers would have to sit through an entire newscast (largely populated by dogmatic elite speeches and counter speeches) to find a short piece on an environmental cause, now those clips are delinked from the broader elite-dominated production and can be shared separately. And by sharing these individual news stories on their walls, activists are also increasing the reach and brand recognition/loyalty of traditional news channels. It may even be argued that activists' role in popularizing mainstream content they find to be favorable or relevant could provide an incentive for mainstream outlets to continue producing content that touches on topics of activist interest.

The changing relationship between some mainstream outlets is also tempered by personal networking and shared experiences with the activists. For example, when reporters from channels such as LBC and Al Jadeed were covering protests, not only were they able to capture police brutality firsthand, they were also often subjected to it themselves, as correspondents were sometimes tear-gassed or assaulted during recent protests, often while live on air.

Of course the picture is not entirely rosy when it comes to coverage of activism. A number of media outlets still cling to militia-era politicians, and have run stories discrediting activists and the journalists that cover them as tools of international conspiracies. Yet these often speculative accounts also provide a space for debunking or mockery and their fantastical nature can also convey a sense of desperation or insecurity. In some cases, political parties have even tried to delegitimize activist through claims of authenticity.

At the height of protests in 2015, Lebanon's biggest Christian party, the Free Patriotic Movement claimed that it had originally popularized the anti-corruption discourse and organized counter rallies to the Youstink movement. But activists were quick to mock the low numbers such rallies drew and preponderance of old party slogans and colors, waived by those in the crowd. On the other hand, one of Lebanon's oldest parties, the Kataeb, encouraged its members to join Youstink and other protests during rallies held in 2016. Many activists decried the move as a form of infiltration. But whether the reaction was supportive or critical, that major parties including still-feared civil war militias find themselves reacting to or participating in the discourse of a group founded by college-age activists, seems indicative of the growing influence of activist narratives and the seriousness by which their actions are read by elites.

Looking back at the many examples of connective action and its wide impact in Lebanon and elsewhere, it's easy to attach positivist values and normative enthusiasm to what are essentially technologically-assisted and amplified repertoires of traditional networking and collective action. Bennet and Segerberg provide a useful note of caution: "Just as collective action can fail, there is nothing preordained about results of digitally mediated network processes."¹¹⁰

Indeed for all the movements profiled in this paper, many others have failed to achieve goals that they set out. These include calls by existing groups such as Youstink and other anti-corruption collectives to banish sectarianism in politics, demands for the resignation of ministers and new elections. Entire collectives have also dissipated. These include Ontor-net, the group that called for faster and more affordable internet and was key to the #StopLira campaign; Take

¹¹⁰ Bennet and Segerberg p. 60

Back Parliament, which aimed to form an alternative political party and demand new elections; and a handful of secular-identified groupings that organized a series of protests in 2011 calling for the downfall of the sectarian political system. In the public space realm, there were dozens of demolitions that went forward despite social media publicity. These include the demolition of the home of prominent Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf as well as the razing of Beirut's Roman-era chariot race track.

At the same time, it is also worth noting that many of the activists who supported and populated such defunct campaigns and collectives also joined movements such as Youstink, the campaign to stop the Boutros Highway, Dalieh and others. Repertoires tried and tested in previous movements would reemerge in later ones; pre-existing networks and friendships become assets for recruitment in future causes. The popularization of discourse and repertoires may create momentum and inspiration for entirely different causes.

As this paper goes to print, a group of activists including architects, professors and lawyers who are veterans of previous campaigns have come together to form a new political gathering to run in municipal elections in May 2016.¹¹¹ The party "Beirut Madinati" translates literally to "Beirut My City" and is being promoted by Facebook videos of the candidates discussing the concepts of public space, right to the city, urban mobility, accountable government services, and transparent and participatory city management.

Beirut Madinati faced stiff competition by running in districts dominated by supporters of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who had even allied with his rivals from General Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and Amal ahead of the poll. Hariri's electoral campaign branded as the "Beirut list" and claimed to represent the city's "true inhabitants" insinuating that Beirut Madinati was a foreign element, largely made up of elites and non-city residents. This much was partly true because due to antiquated electoral procedures, Lebanese are largely forced to vote in

¹¹¹ Haines-Young, James "New group sets out issue-based Beirut manifesto" The Daily Star, March 23, 2016 <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Mar-23/343620-new-group-sets-out-issue-based-beirut-manifesto.ashx>

their ancestral villages, disqualifying thousands of Beirut residents who moved to the city in recent decades from voting in the capital's municipal elections.

And yet with a massive billboard campaign that went up across the city a couple of weeks before the polls, and several personal visits from Hariri, who lives in a self-imposed exile in Paris, the former prime minister seemed to be taking the competition from previously unknown Beirut Madinati quite seriously. In television appearances, the Hariri candidates even began using the language of activists from Beirut Madinati such as right to public spaces and beaches, protection of heritage and transparency and public participation in government affairs. Ironically, Hariri's party, which had dominated the Beirut municipality for decades, had already been infamous for the unilateral destruction of much of the city during the mandate of Solidere. Other post war projects were built without public consultations as well as failure to meet the minimum transparency criteria such as having a municipality website.

Hariri's robust marketing and campaigning efforts (as well as allegations of vote buying seen in videos broadcast by local TV channel Al Jadeed¹¹²) proved successful and Beirut Madinati only received 30 percent of the vote. But many analysts viewed the number as high considering that Hariri usually wins loyal districts by a landslide and Beirut Madinati was considered an outsider with a very small budget and support base. Beyond the numbers, Beirut Madinati's messaging and the sharing of it by prominent supporters with large social networks helped advance a grammar of post-sectarian concepts. Even the group's name "My City" comes as a contrast to the politics of personality, sectarian fear-mongering and militia affiliation that have been a hallmark of parliamentary electioneering in Lebanon. More specifically, the claim of personal ownership comes as a contrast to the politics of demagoguery and delegitimizing of activists and citizen input in city projects as advanced by some members of Beirut's municipal council.

¹¹² "Lebanese protesters claim Future Movement stiffed them in 'cash-for-votes' deal" StepFeed, May 12, 2016, Beirut: <http://stepfeed.com/more-categories/big-news/lebanese-protesters-claim-future-movement-stiffed-cash-votes-deal/#.V6lPX1fsRE4>

For many the elections revealed a growing weakness among mainstream parties, who despite decades of support from warlords and bankers, found themselves in an intense battle with novice activists to sustain their electoral supremacy.¹¹³ But that the established parties could still pull off a victory despite their chronic mismanagement of a city that is literally falling apart—plagued by derelict public services and little to no accountability—also exposed a weakness among the new activists. With their campaigning efforts largely focused on middle class neighborhoods, critics, particularly from the left, saw the Beirut Madinati as isolated from the working class and poor and criticized the ties that some of their candidates had to the local business community, with a number of architects and entrepreneurs among the new movement’s supporters. At the same time, Beirut Madinati was little match for the uber elite businessmen and their ties to ex-militiamen and party leaders, who have built up an impressive political machine through decades of patronage.

Despite allegations of war crimes and corruption, establishment leaders still boast large followings, due largely to the benefits they continue to offer segments of Lebanese society, particularly the poor and disenfranchised. While many new activists often criticize those who vote for warlords blaming ignorance, what is often ignored is the very tangible benefits and handouts established parties offer. These include education, healthcare and jobs provided by private and often sectarian institutions run by career politicians. They can also provide political backing to pull strings in favor of constituents. As outsiders to the system, Beirut Madinati and other activists must reconcile the sobering reality that they will have neither the budget nor the institutional resources to provide the poor with the types of handouts they have come to rely upon.

But returning to the themes of this paper, the expectation that activists like Beirut Madinati could lead revolutionary change in one fell swoop, should be tempered by the reality of deep-seated and multi-layered post war power structures. In other words, observers should pay close attention not only to the number of votes Beirut Madinati received, but also to the ways in which

¹¹³ Salloukh, Bassel “We are all Beirut Madinati” The New Arab, May 11, 2016, London: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/Comment/2016/5/11/We-are-all-Beirut-Madinati>

media, citizens and existing politicians react to their campaigns and the discourses they are advancing.

Undoubtedly, the Beirut Madinati campaign impacted the rhetoric of elite parties such as those on the Hariri list who mimicked the activists' language of accountability and participatory governance. Movements like Beirut Madinati have also exposed the decreasing sway of old party elites, who must work increasingly harder to keep their grip on power as seen by Hariri's intense last minute lobbying efforts.

In addition, following their election loss, Beirut Madinati members have continued weekly meetings and vowed to continue the fight for better governance as a shadow municipality. To this end, the Beirut Madinati candidates have already posted pictures on Facebook of a meeting with the new Hariri municipal council team and the two rival political teams have pledged to work together. Analysts should be watching to see how this relationship will play out. Will the establishment try to co-opt the activists to help legitimize their rule under the guise of cooperation, as some have feared? Or will the activists have a greater impact on the establishment, in its time of increased vulnerability and waning political clout? Many Beirut Madinati supporters are also wondering if the group will also stand in parliamentary elections scheduled for 2017. Whatever the turnout, the changes are likely to be far more subtle than the type of revolutionary change many in Lebanon yearn for. However, seen in the context of the broader post-war period, one would be hard-pressed to equate the power militias once held over the streets with their more recent desperation to win elections and appear to appeal to the needs of an increasingly frustrated electorate.

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