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**Potential Change in Media Discourse on Sexuality in Lebanon:
"Cinema Plaza" and Beyond**

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Abstract..... | 3 |
| Acknowledgments..... | 4 |
| Introduction..... | 5 |
| Setting the Scene: Lebanese Newspapers and TV Channels..... | 9 |
| Newspapers..... | 10 |
| Television Channels..... | 12 |
| Cinema Plaza and Dekwaneh Cases..... | 15 |
| "New Kids on the Block"..... | 17 |
| "Ready or Not?"..... | 18 |
| Sources of Influence..... | 20 |
| Conclusion..... | 22 |
| Bibliography..... | 23 |
| Appendix | 24 |

Abstract

July 2012 marked a significant transformative event in the Lebanese mainstream media's discourse on sexuality, an event that even though it did not occur in a vacuum, it felt as if it did. This change can't be located at a precise moment or at one major turning point, but rather it has been an accumulation of changes occurring on three levels: within Lebanese media, within larger socio-political structures, and as a result of progressive activist efforts.

In this research, I analyze the development and accumulation in the current media scene that led to this precise televised event in order to understand its fundamental nature: is it a one-time exception, or a marker of a potential change the media discourse on sexuality?

An outline is given of the major Lebanese TV channels at the level of ownership/administration, general sets of journalistic values and precisely those relating to sexuality issues. Then, starting from an account of what came to be known as the 'Cinema Plaza case' an examination is carried out through personal interviews of the existence of a group of young and mid-career journalists/editors, coming from secular and mostly print media backgrounds, who have built partnerships with an active civil society on issues of gender and sexuality. These journalists were directly and indirectly involved in the Cinema Plaza turn of events, and they represent the professional build up around issues of sexuality in the last ten years.

The two key questions throughout the research remain: is Lebanon witnessing a radical change in media attitudes towards issues of sexuality? If so, what are the factors that contribute to this change, and those that obstruct it?

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1. Introduction

July 2012 marked a significant transformative event in the Lebanese mainstream media's discourse on sexuality, an event that even though it did not occur in a vacuum, it felt as if it did. This change can't be located at a precise moment or at one major turning point, but rather it has been an accumulation of changes occurring on three levels: within Lebanese media, within larger socio-political structures, and as a result of progressive activist efforts.

In this research, I analyze the development and accumulation in the current media scene that led to a precise televised event known as the Cinema Plaza case in order to ultimately understand its nature: is it a one-time exception, or a marker of a potential change in media discourse on sexuality?

I start my introduction with a brief presentation of the Lebanese private television scene legalized in the 1990s within the larger socio-political climate, then I move to briefly narrating the Cinema Plaza case, and finally to outlining the two chapters that form the body of my research.

In 1989 the representatives of different Lebanese sectarian parties signed the Taif Agreement to end the civil war that had been brutalizing the country for 15 years since 1975. The agreement acknowledged the abolition of political sectarianism as a national priority, yet set no timeframe for doing so. Instead, the agreement institutionalized it, whether in the Parliamentary electoral system, the high ranked public sector jobs, or in the media. In the 1990s, the private television broadcast licenses were issued on the basis of "equal" representation of Lebanese sects, resulting in a field owned and controlled by the post-war leaders of the country: the ex-warlords and the newly emerging class of businessmen. A balance between sectarian/political traditions and business necessities have prevailed in the private TV sector in Lebanon ever since.

During the 1990s, post-civil war Lebanon witnessed extensive economic liberalization, privatization, and rapid NGO-ization¹ at the expense of formerly powerful leftist student-workers unions and syndicates. This era was marked by openness to Euro-American and Western cultural and economic intervention,

¹ This was a distinguishable trend of establishing NGOs through funds offered by international institutions such as the UN, or other countries such as the US or European states and embassies. Currently, the number of registered NGOs in Lebanon amount to more than 5,000, and they work on various social, legal and political causes as well as providing certain services to those in need. Many NGOs however, are haunted by accusations of corruption, inefficiency and political annexation to foreign agendas.

that sat comfortably with the modernizing and reconstruction discourses promoting the image of a unique “modern” Lebanon under late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. This facilitated greater tolerance of debates on sexuality and personal freedoms. New secular civil movements started to emerge calling for sexual and personal liberties; relatively “sexually liberated” bars and pubs started to open in central Beirut, especially those tolerating same-sex flirtations, which evolved to “gay bars” and “gay beaches” later on. In parallel, sexual policing over homosexuals and heterosexuals alike was increasingly deployed to soothe the growing social panic over morals, traditions, gender roles and “authentic masculinity” in the country.

Sexuality in Lebanon is regulated through a large body of legal articles and laws that penetrate the whole legal system, inherited in its modern form from the French colonial era. However, the most publicly debated regulation is Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code which criminalizes “unnatural sex”. This vague term implies every sexual practice that does not involve marital coitus, and thus does not serve the aim of procreation and reproduction of new citizens within a nuclear heterosexual family (i.e. homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, anal sex, and so on). Article 534 also reflects the religious norms and the moral value system prevailing in society which remains largely a traditional one premised on traditional gender roles and relations. This set of norms and values tends to manipulate and frame the public debate on sexuality, and especially the one occurring on influential mainstream TV channels.

Therefore, despite the severe political division among TV stations, the different televised debates on sexuality adopt a very similar format, abiding by a more or less moralizing and judgmental set of values: a show would often host a person who identifies as a homosexual or a non-virgin single woman (with a blurred face and/or voice) as a case study examined by a religious figure (Muslim and/or Christian), a social scientist (most likely a psychologist), and sometimes a lawyer and/or an activist. These shows, which were usually put on screen after pressure from civil society or a need to raise viewership rates, normally conclude by reasserting the “perverted” nature of homosexuality, or endorsing marital rape as a debatable concept rather than an act of violence, etc.

But in July 2012, a turning point in the discourse on sexuality emerged, and destabilized the relatively homogeneous conservative discourse, moving in the course of one week from shaming homosexuality to shaming institutional homophobia.

This one event, known as the Cinema Plaza case, involved two mainstream prominent TV channels (MTV, and LBCI), civil society (a viral social media boycotting campaign, and a demonstration), many newspapers (Assafir, Al-Akhbar, Daily Star, L'Orient Le Jour, and others), in addition to the Lebanese national Police, the Syndicate of Doctors, and the Ministry of Justice.

The story began when a tabloid primetime TV show ("*Enta Horr*" / You Are Free) on the mainstream Lebanese channel MTV, aired videos secretly shot in abandoned cinema houses, showing men engaging in sexual acts and viewing pornographic material. The reporter filming the videos actively lured some men to join him in the bathroom for sex, in order of course to gather more "exciting" material for the show. The men sounded hesitant and doubtful, yet they joined him, and were therefore "accused" by the show of homosexual debauchery.

The anchor of the show, a young man newly-rising-to-stardom with a tabloid-background called Joe Maalouf, expressed his anger and disgust upon showing the videos, and bluntly asked the police to raid the cinemas, shut them down and arrest the "perverts". He also addressed the Muslim Mufti and Christian Cardinal using a sensational religious speech, urging them to intervene and put pressure on police officers to act should they fail to intervene and "correct" the situation on the spot.

The police did not disappoint Maalouf. On the 28th July 2012, 36 men were arrested in a police raid on Cinema Plaza, and were allegedly accused of "having unnatural sex". They were forced to undergo the "anal test" – considered an act of rape by Lebanese civil activist groups – in an attempt to be proven "innocent" or "guilty".

Major groups and NGOs within civil society revolted immediately, starting a social media campaign that called for the boycott of MTV. Unexpectedly, the news made the leading story of another mainstream TV channel, LBCI, a main competitor of MTV.

The LBCI news introduction² adopted a stubbornly progressive discourse, backing up civil society agitation, and shaming the Lebanese state for "raping" the 36 detainees and oppressing sexual

² The News introduction is a tradition in Lebanese audio-visual media wherein editors present a summary of the major news pieces, weaved in together in a manner meant to convey certain messages or to make a clear political statement that represents the TV's stance and allegiance.

freedoms. A report that followed included an interview with Charbel Maydaa, the coordinator of the Lebanese LGBT³ organization “Helem”, as a legitimate main party in this issue.

The links to the LBCI news intro and report went viral on social media. The next day witnessed many of the main newspapers in the country celebrating the LBCI intro. As-safir Newspaper even republished the whole LBCI introduction, saluting it in its media watch section, under the title: “News Bulletin on LBCI: Goodbye to the Media of Shame”. The Syndicate of Doctors issued a statement asserting a previous ban on the Anal Test practice in police stations, and the Minister of Justice in his turn issued a statement confirming the ban.

After this unexpected turn of events, MTV was severely criticised in social media and in newspapers. Cornered, the TV administration decided to prove its progressive politics, and responded with a statement reducing the matter to MTV being the target of a conspiracy prepared by the head of news department at the LBCI TV station Khaled Saghieh, and his brother Nizar, a lawyer-activist known to be a radical defender of human rights . The statement proudly announced that the MTV has been always known for supporting sexual freedoms and "marginalized" homosexuals.

This “media battle” signified a major change in moral codes circulated and abided by in media discourses on sexuality, for it suggested a reformulation of attitude from taboo-ing homosexuality to taboo-ing homophobia.

However, before one rushes into naïve optimism, one must examine the possibility of this event being an exception in a deep-rooted tradition of conservatism. My objective in this research is to analyze the structural conditions of this event, the actors behind it, and whether or not it symbolizes a new "revolutionary" tradition in the media discourse on sexuality.

In chapter two, I set the scene through outlining major Lebanese TV channels at the level of ownership/administration, general sets of journalistic values and precisely those relating to sexuality issues.

In the third chapter, I build on the Cinema Plaza case to explore through personal interviews (listed in the Appendix), the existence of a group of young and mid-career journalists/editors, coming from secular and mostly print media backgrounds, who have built partnerships with an active civil society on

³ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered.

issues of gender and sexuality. These journalists were directly and indirectly involved in the Cinema Plaza turn of events, and they represent the professional build up around issues of sexuality in the last ten years.

In these interviews, I investigate the current strongholds and setbacks for a potential change in the Lebanese private TV scene, articulated around the following axes:

- 1- The competitive neoliberal economy promoting a globalized set of “human rights”, freedom of love, liberated behavior and privacy.
- 2- An active civil society raising issues of gender and sexuality on its main agenda, including an open LGBT organization (HELEM) active since 2004.
- 3- The emergence of social media platforms as alternative forms of interactional media, heavily used by activists against what they view as backwards and oppressive media. Simultaneously, these platforms came to be perceived by media makers as useful mediums to assess audience reactions and responses through *Likes, Shares* and *Comments*.
- 4- Daily newspapers as a mainstream media field, hiring journalists that paved the way in offering a progressive approach to sexuality. Some newspapers, like Assafir, Al-Akhbar, The Daily Star, and L’Orient Le Jour, were actual partners in the civil fights for rights and freedoms.

The investigation of these axes with activist journalists and prominent figures from the LGBT scene aims to account for historical changes in the media scene at the levels of personnel, political-economic and administrative structures as well as journalistic values. It also aims at understanding how activists assess the media’s performance, and if they see any radical change happening or about to happen.

2. Setting the Scene: Lebanese TV stations and newspapers

Lebanon has the reputation of being a media pioneer in the Arab world for two main reasons: first, Beirut was witness to the publishing of the first independent Arab political daily “Hadiqat Al-Akhbar” (Garden Of News) by Khalil El-Khoury in 1858⁴. And second, Lebanon was the first Arab state to launch a public sector television “TeleLiban” in 1958, and to legalize private sector television and radio broadcasting through the Audiovisual Media Law n.382 (Republic of Lebanon, 1994).

Article 13 of the Lebanese constitution (Republic of Lebanon, 23 May 1926) clearly states the right to freedom of expression through oral or written means, and stipulates ‘freedom of the press’. Yet, this free press faces numerous “red lines” drawn legally through regulations stated in the Law of Publications (Republic of Lebanon, 1994) and the Audiovisual Media Law (Republic of Lebanon, 1994). These laws clearly prohibit the publishing of any material that insults any of the religions recognized in the country or incites religious or racist feuds, or endangers the national security, national unity or state frontiers and international relations (Republic of Lebanon, 1994: Article 5). On the contrary, they do not prohibit the violation of human rights or discrimination based on gender, sexual, or class biases.

The media map in Lebanon reflects the system of political governance as described by the former Prime Minister Dr. Salim Al-Hoss (1984) who contends that the system has always had plenty of freedom but suffered from a lack of democracy (Al-Hoss, Salim (1984), pp. 217-219). The print media sector for instance, survives on the open secret of political sectarian funding, and television outlets are owned and/or directly affiliated with the Lebanese post-war political sectarian ruling class. Yet journalists as individuals are highly politicized, viewing their job as the frontline in a battle of beliefs and opportunities as well. This sense of polarized political commitment is well captured in the words of American researcher Tom J. McFadden (1953: 14) “[t]here is a striking amount of agreement [among Arab editors] that fighting for causes is primary, and informing is secondary”.

The strong links between the press and raw politics in Lebanon have sidelined social issues in favor of local, regional and global politics. This dereliction of social concerns has been encouraged for a long time

⁴ The first Arab daily was *Al-Tanbih* (The Awakening) published in Egypt in 1800.

by the conservative sectarian regime that prevailed both in politics and the media. Yet the relative hyperactivity of civil society along with the liberal competition imposed by the open market economy in 1990s, introduced notable changes to the traditional agenda of the last decade. A young progressive group of journalists started to emerge in different journalistic outlets, and interest in social issues and “grassroots” causes became contagious. Increasingly, these journalists started to see themselves and be seen by civil activists as substantial partners and supporters.

I will start exploring this journey by introducing an outline of the currently active and influential newspapers and television channels in two separate sections.

Newspapers

Lebanon has a total of fourteen political dailies: eleven local Arabic-speaking, one French-speaking (L’Orient Le Jour), one English-speaking (The Daily Star) and one pan-Arab printed in Beirut (Al-Hayat). There are no official figures concerning the circulation of newspapers due to an unspoken agreement among owners to preserve the “advertising power” of their newspapers. Yet, it is widely acknowledged that the two widely circulated newspapers across the country are: An-Nahar (The Day – 1933), and As-Safir (The Ambassador – 1974). A study published by the European Journalism Centre (November 2010), stated that As-Safir sells 50,000 copies and An-Nahar 45,000 copies⁵ a day. At the time of their establishment, An-Nahar represented what was considered the right wing Christian conservatism while As-Safir⁶ represented left wing Muslim progressivism.

Despite the political “feud” between them, both newspapers avoided adopting a clear discourse on issues of sexuality and sexual rights. ‘When Helem⁷ was established in 2004 the media was mostly impressed by the presence of “a gay organization in Lebanon”, so some covered our activities neutrally while others opposed it aggressively. At this stage nobody dared to be supportive except for a handful of

⁵ These are the publicly declared numbers, which many think they are quite exaggerated.

⁶ Both newspapers are family-owned businesses that evolved into shareholders companies keeping the majority of share-ownership within the family.

⁷ HELEM (Dream) is a Lebanese NGO that actively advocates for LGBT rights on legal, social and healthcare levels.

brave journalists who broke the taboo in the print media and showed direct support,' says Georges Azzi⁸, a former coordinator and active member of Helem.

Another former coordinator and founding member of Helem, Ghassan Makarem⁹, believes that 'the media was not very positive at the beginning but then "capitulated" quickly...the current polarization in the media concerning sexuality was not too clear then. But in general there were some leftist and liberal media outlets or individuals who wrote positively, while others clung to "customary" homophobia'.

Currently, both As-Safir and An-Nahar publish every now and then articles by journalists, psychologists and activists boldly defending sexual rights. In March 2013, As-Safir published a short interview sympathizing with a young homosexual man as he disclosed his violent personal narrative of coming out to his father (Farid, March 2013). Next day in the editorial meeting, the editor-in-chief and the "old guards" criticized the decision to publish such an article arguing that there are "more important issues to discuss", but were countered by other editors who insisted that this was one of the important issues too. Such editorial quarrels around issues of sexuality are not uncommon, and increasingly daring articles are being published despite editorial reservations. An example of pushing the limits is an article published on the 15th January 2013 in An-Nahar by psychologist Pierrot Karam, making the case for the bisexuality of all human beings. Bizarrely however, the same newspaper published another article few weeks later describing same-sex practices as "perverse".

At the level of terminology, As-Safir has stopped using terms such as "deviance" or "perversion" to describe homosexuality since 2004, following an internal memo issued by the senior editor and shareholder Hanady Salman. This decision came in parallel with the establishment of Hurriyat Khassa¹⁰ (Personal Liberties) and Helem that both actively promoted a general public discourse on issues of human rights, and sexual and personal liberties.

In 2006, a new newspaper Al-Akhbar (The News) was born with younger staff and a confrontational leftist agenda, combining fierce anti neo-liberalism politics with a liberal approach to sexual freedoms.

⁸ Author interview, March 2013.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ "Hurriyyat Khassa" is a non-profit association founded as a collective in 2002 and registered in 2004, mostly by a group of lawyers and activists. It launched through panel discussions concerning the right to civil statutes, decriminalization of homosexuality, equality inside the family, marital rape, freedoms of association and expression, and the banishment of slavery (domestic workers, and sex workers).

Al-Akhbar's open frontline involvement in defending sexual freedoms impacted both conservative establishments, As-Safir at the level of its leftist identity, and An-Nahar at the level of its liberal identity. 'The importance of Al-Akhbar is that it began dealing with LGBT's existence as part of the social fabric and not as an outsider phenomenon, while other papers remained more or less stuck in this discourse of othering' says Makarem.

The conservative ambivalence adopted by As-Safir and An-Nahar is the "natural" result of social and journalistic evolution in Lebanon, and simultaneously a better strategy than open confrontation when it comes to sensitive issues such as sexuality, according to Salman¹¹. She says that 'in 1998, when we first started imposing social issues as a priority in the newspaper's editorial policy, we were laughed at'. That is not surprising, given that Lebanon was struggling with Hariri's neo-liberal economic politics, Israel's occupation in the South, and a male-dominated journalistic body made up of older men with highly patriarchal mentalities fixated on "what mattered" in the Civil War: security and military politics. Salman points out that 'a study of the press during the Civil War showed that out of all material published in the eighteen newspaper pages, only one paragraph addressed the lack of electricity', while everything else focused on daily updates of the military and political conflict.

Even though Salman believes that 'women's rights and sexual rights are a package', she recognizes that the conservative character of the Lebanese audience outside the middle-class districts of Beirut forces her to make difficult choices about priorities. 'When prioritizing, I definitely choose to begin by supporting the mother's rights to custody and to pass her nationality to her foreign husband and children and to be protected from family violence... these are essential issues that lead to a more open-minded society which will eventually accept, with time, sexual freedoms,' she says. Salman's suggestion is thus to remain more or less dormant about sexual rights except in cases of extreme legal or physical aggression. For her, the journalist when writing about sexuality 'has to be equipped enough to be at the Golden Mean: neither to repel conservatives, nor to preach among believers'.

Indeed, this "gradual gain" theory is very controversial. For many activists, Salman's approach might sound compromising and falling into the trap of prioritizing human rights in the name of vitality and urgency, which is an argument made by other editors in order to relegate women's rights issues until "major problems" are resolved. For instance, Makarem insists that 'the gradual gain strategy is not necessarily useful or applicable in all situations...certain gains will not automatically lead to more

¹¹ Author interview, April 2013.

progressive gains...on the contrary, many see that family rights gains have played into the conservative religious conception of family'. Furthermore, he asks 'who defines priorities? A majoritarian dictatorship?'

In all cases, the impact of print media is incomparable to the mass influence of audiovisual TV channels. The editor-in-chief of LBCI news department, and former Senior Editor at Al-Akhbar newspaper Khaled Saghieh¹² contends that 'a thousand articles on homosexuality will reach only a limited group of elitist readers including decision makers such as CEO of LBCI Pierre El-Daher, while a handful of progressive audiovisual reports on a TV station such as LBCI have proven to have a great mass influence even in sensitive cases such as Cinema Plaza and Dekwaneh'.

What then does the audiovisual journalistic scene look like in Lebanon?

Television Channels

Lebanon has seven private television channels each with a distinguishable political affiliation to one of the major political-sectarian parties. The only public TV channel is TeleLiban, and has been marginalized during the post-civil war era due to the legalization of the private sector and low funding from the state budget. Thus, it lies now outside the competition.

The seven private channels are carefully crafted along lines of political sectarian "balance": two Christian Maronite channels (LBCI, OTV), one Christian Orthodox channel (MTV), one Muslim Sunnite channel (Future TV), two Muslim Shiite channels (Al-Manar, NBN), and one independent channel with a traditional leftist agenda (Al-Jadeed).

Al-Manar (The Lighthouse) which is officially owned and operated by Hezbollah¹³ abides by the religious teachings of the Muslim Shiite doctrine in all that relates to social issues, and accordingly its discourse on sexuality is restricted to religiously-regulated marital intercourse. So far, it has completely avoided participation in any of the media open discussions and conflicts around homophobic 'anal tests' and police raids against gay bars and cinemas.

¹² Author *Interview*, April 2013.

¹³ A Lebanese Shiite armed group known for its armed resistance against Israeli occupation which led in 2000 to the liberation of the vast majority of Lebanese Southern occupied lands.

Despite open affiliation with sectarian politics, the rest of the channels are considered “secular” in the sense that they do not adopt a religious discourse such as that of Al-Manar or the exclusively religious-oriented Christian Tele Lumiere. Yet they maintain a degree of conservatism and celebration of religious clergy both Muslim and Christian alike, stressing them as moral and ethical references. Among them, LBCI and Al-Jadeed¹⁴ enjoy a wider margin of independence and thus more diverse audience, despite the fact that in a highly polarized country, sectarian-political affiliation is unavoidable. As stated by the Lebanese doctoral candidate *at the University of Erfurt* Sarah El-Richani (2011): ‘LBC remains the most popular... [n]onetheless, Al-Jadeed and MTV are in constant and heated competition for second place and have at times overtaken LBC’.

On these “secular” screens, two types of programs usually deal with issues of sexuality: comedy shows and socially concerned talk shows. The first type has been recently using explicit language, making homophobic jokes and reinforcing stereotypes about women’s/men’s/migrant worker’s sexuality, “gayness” and rape. The second type, trying to adopt an “objective” yet morally-charged discourse out of “concern over social wellbeing”, reinforces stereotypes and conservative discourses albeit in different tones.

These socially-concerned programs are usually aired at night, and often employ sensational “outfits” in the name of guarding morality. Their favorite topics-scandals revolve around issues of homosexuality, trans-sexuality, extra-marital sex, virginity, sex work, domestic violence and marital rape. Typical guests are usually “practitioners” of these practices, psychologists, social scientists and religious clerics. “Enta Horr” (You Are Free, MTV), “Ahmar Bil Khat El Arid” (The Bold Red Line, LBCI), “Sireh W'nfatahet” (Let’s Discuss, previously on Future Television), “Lil Nashr” (Material For Publishing, Al-Jadeed TV), have competed during the past few years over these salacious topics. Despite varying degrees of conservatism and tones, altogether they have created a sensational voyeuristic mood around issues of sexuality, exoticizing and/or criminalizing them while reinforcing religious norms and social mores. Sometimes they have led to more dramatic results such as the police raid on Cinema Plaza and the arrest of 36 allegedly gay men there, following an instigative episode of “Enta Horr” on MTV. I shall return to this case in details later on in my research.

¹⁴ Both were previously owned by political parties (LBCI by The Lebanese Forces, and Al-Jadeed by The Lebanese Communist Party), and are currently owned by businessmen.

Saghieh considers the main problem of local TV channels to be their rural character resulting from either their geographic location, or the fact that the majority of their staff come from rural backgrounds. Most of the staffs have lived their lives in the suburbs, studied there and worked for suburban TV stations owned or launched by suburban owners. The only exception to this rural character is Future Television which is located at the heart of Beirut and funded by the Hariri family known for its global neo-liberal business network. Yet, it is heavily plagued by the political burden of Hariri's political party Al-Mustaqbal (The Future), thus leaving narrow margins for social progressive expression. Despite this, its urban modern spirit shows in the creative choice of shows, the quality of visuals and the diversity of staff.

Al-Jadeed is also situated in suburban Beirut and attempted at the beginning to break the traditional TV scene with leftist 'ornaments' as Saghieh puts it, but it wasn't long before it fell back into sectarian conservatism. This is partially due to the suburban conservative ethical background of its staff, and its heavy involvement in sectarian politics. Thus, aside from the traditional leftist agenda of resisting imperialism, defending workers' rights and standing for Palestine, Al-Jadeed lacks a serious approach to civil rights. Saghieh rhetorically asks: 'why gossip with Lebanese dames de salon in a report about racism against migrant workers in Lebanon? Why joke about women harassing men in a report on sexual crimes against women? This tendency is not an urban or urbanized one'. Salman echoes Saghieh as well in her criticism of lack of professionalism and reliance on sensationalism in TV programs: 'one can't take these people seriously when they deal lightly with an issue such as marital rape...many programs on different channels have actually hosted abusive men as counterparts to raped and abused wives, aiming at seeming "objective"! The whole topic became a joke!' She believes that two problems feed into each other; the first is social conservatism and the second is "professional" conservatism whereby many TV staff and crews are at best detached from civil causes and at worst against them.

Salman's pessimistic view is contested by Saghieh's positive experience in LBCI with the Cinema Plaza case and the Dekwaneh case, described in the next chapter. Saghieh moved from Al-Akhbar to LBCI in 2012, but his progressive impact has been genuinely felt and highly celebrated by civil activists precisely in the domains of sexual rights and class struggles. He describes his move as the following: 'LBCI was in a severe need to drastically raise the viewership of its news bulletin...so I struck a package deal with them...I said I guarantee you a higher viewership on the condition of bringing with me this agenda'.

3. The Cinema Plaza and Dekwaneh Cases

The LBCI Cinema Plaza news introduction on the night of July 31st, 2012 marked an unexpected change in the mainstream media discourse on sexuality not only by turning the target of public shaming from homosexuality to homophobia, but also by referring the policing of sexuality to an incompetent state failing to provide major services such as security and electricity.¹⁵ By doing so, priorities were rearranged in the public agenda. It was one of the rare times wherein issues of personal freedoms were not pushed to the margins behind more “vital” concerns as security, but rather appeared intrinsic to the collective societal struggle for justice, equality and decent citizenship.

Clearly, Saghieh benefited from what he calls ‘a political void and a social unrest that prevailed among citizens during this exact phase’ to introduce this different discourse on sexuality. Moreover, LBCI followed up with another report titled ‘The recurrence of homosexuality tests at police stations’ (LBCI, March 29th, 2013) exposing the imposition of the infamous anal test on one detainee at a police station; this was despite the ban issued by the Ministry of Justice in August 2012 and intense activist agitation against the subjection of Cinema Plaza detainees to this test.

The positive backlash of the LBCI news item among social media activists and the remarkable amount of articles¹⁶ that built on it drove the media outlets disagreeing with its content to restrain from reacting negatively. ‘They were taken by surprise, especially when they saw the underground media celebrating for once an action taken by the mainstream media’, says Saghieh. Indeed, this unspoken cooperation between activists and mainstream media outlets initiated by LBCI resembled a first-of-its-kind incident worth capitalizing on in the future.

¹⁵ The English text of the introduction, published on the website of the LBCI, says: “We are living under the “republic of shame” since its apparatuses do not waver over subjecting detainees to virginity and homosexuality tests. (...) In that same republic of shame, officials threaten to inflict collective punishment on the Lebanese people by depriving them of electricity. This comes in the wake of the “alliance of political corruption and opportunism” against contract workers. (...) That same republic is persisting in depriving their employees and teachers of their rights and is indifferent to their fate and to that of thousands of students. That same republic is turning a blind eye to 11 Lebanese hostages, leaving the street as the sole option for their relatives who granted the state 48 hours before utter escalation. That same republic is not capable of engaging in a national dialogue while the Syrian situation is worsening at different levels”. *Introduction available at <http://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/43379/introduction-to-the-evening-news-31-07-2012>*

¹⁶ The articles that directly celebrated the LBCI news introduction, or followed up on the Cinema Plaza case using a similar approach, were published in outlets clearly and consistently supporting sexual freedoms like The Daily Star English speaking newspaper, Al-Akhbar newspaper, and NOWLEBANON website, as well as in a less confrontational outlets like As-Safir and An-Nahar and the French speaking L’Orient Le Jour newspapers.

In April 2013, the Dekwaneh case came to benefit from this build up, marking a possible consistency in LBCI's new discourse on sexuality, and suggesting that violent invasive actions by the state against individuals were becoming new material in many other mainstream media outlets.

On Saturday the 21st of April 2013, the police raided GHOST, a gay night club located in the Dekwaneh district, in the eastern suburb of Beirut. Three allegedly homosexual men and a transsexual woman were arrested, harassed verbally and physically, forced to strip naked, photographed, shamed, violently beaten, and forced to simulate intimate acts under the supervision of the mayor of Dekwaneh, Antoine Shakhtoura, who incited and participated in the raid. Social media activists exposed the details of the raid, allowing media outlets to pick up the news as well as the arguments. The LBCI news bulletin broadcast a report by Loyal Haddad-Nakhleh on April 22nd severely criticizing the police actions, and offering the space for the hyper-masculine Shakhtoura to "celebrate" the event using homophobic aggressive terms, bragging about his "glorious" past as a former fighter in the civil war. The report incited a viral social media campaign against Shakhtoura as a violent mayor who should be held in custody and interrogated for his violation of human rights and for his racism against Syrian refugees taking refuge in "his" area. It is highly important to highlight the fact that some of the GHOST detainees are Syrian, meaning that they are extremely vulnerable legally and socially precisely at this moment due to their status as war refugees.

But unlike the positive reaction shown by the Ministry of Justice in the case of Cinema Plaza, the Minister of Interior Marwan Charbel clearly supported the Mayor of Dekwaneh, stating in a press conference that 'Lebanon is against *Liwat*¹⁷', and 'now that France approved same sex marriage, I wonder whether we should allow gay French citizens to enter Lebanon'.

The Minister's statements were intensively criticized among social media activists, as well as in mainstream media. One report (Al Amin, Al-Jadeed TV, April 29th, 2013) broadcast on New TV evoked the same linkage between political politics and social causes showing the Minister of Interior having no problem with visiting military sites of armed Salafi groups, while "proudly" announcing his intolerance of homosexuals and transsexuals.

LGBT rights activist Georges Azzi monitored the coverage of the Dekwaneh case on different mainstream radios, televisions, newspapers, magazines and websites, and posted a blog titled "With or

¹⁷ *Liwat* is a derogatory term used to designate men who have sex with men.

Against Us?” (Azzi, 1 May 2013) categorizing them in two lists: nine media outlets made it to the “list of honor”, while six were relegated to the “list of shame”.

It is interesting to note that MTV made it this time to the activist’s “list of honor”, specifically through the coverage of none other than Maalouf’s ‘Enta Horr’ (Maalouf, MTV, May 1st, 2013). Surprisingly this time, Maalouf appeared on his show as a fierce defender of human rights and personal freedoms of GHOST detainees against the abuse and violation of Shakhtoura and his policemen. This approach led directly to a scandalous expulsion of Maalouf from MTV, due to what he stated as the “influential position” and “good connections” of Shakhtoura (Lutz, May 31st, 2013). However, the Executive Manager of MTV Jihad El-Murr had a different story. On May 11th, he posted on his Facebook and Twitter accounts an explanation for Maalouf’s expulsion, referring to it as the latter’s systematic bias and growing arrogance according to his words, and his deliberate dismissal of the “other party’s opinion” (in this case Shakhtoura’s) in favor of a “one sided pretentious monologue”¹⁸.

Why did Maalouf’s ‘systematic bias’ lead to his expulsion in this case, but not in the first case of Cinema Plaza which stirred boycott campaigns against MTV on social media and forced it to an indirect public apology? The answer to this question lies in the person whose opinion was “deliberately dismissed”. In the Cinema Plaza case, the targeted were vulnerable immigrant and working-class men who were attacked and framed by Maalouf, while in the Dekwaneh case, it was a powerful mayor.

This interaction between the social, the political, and media discourse is the backbone of this research: Is there an emerging mainstream media discourse on sexuality that in some way reflects the emergence of a progressive group of activists and civil actors, regardless of the socio-political intolerance for such change?

“New Kids on the Block”

In the same way Bourdieu defines television as ‘[s]uch a formidable instrument for maintaining the symbolic order’ (Bourdieu, 2011: 16), the Lebanese mainstream media uses the modern technologies and the “regulated freedom” discourse while capitalizing on the political sectarian funding and audience

¹⁸ The statement was posted on Mr. Murr's personal Facebook and Twitter accounts.

to maintain a conservative order, dealing lightly with social change issues and frequently mocking those to do with sex.

Yet in this scenario, competition and competence have paved the way for young progressive journalists who entered the market more than a decade ago, to prove the attractiveness of their thoughts and practices, and to cooperate with older progressive journalists and decision makers to earn the recognition needed to protect their “product”.

Saghieh is one example of how a ‘non-mainstream person’ as he describes himself, is now making editorial decisions in the most viewed Lebanese television channel. Another example is the editor of the media watch daily section (Sawt-w-Soura) in As-Safir newspaper Sanaa’ Khoury, who published an article approving of the LBCI famous news introduction in an independent decision which got equally criticized and defended in As-Safir’s editorial meeting the next day. This was an example of an unspoken alliance between progressive journalists working in different mainstream outlets which were able to create an influential precedent on a highly sensitive issue.

The presence of these progressive journalists was first noticed by activists working on social justice and personal freedom issues. They became the partners of civil society. Makarem, who’s been active on sexuality rights for the last decade, recalls the ‘battle fought by progressive journalists’ in an environment that ‘lacks legal reforms and an effective syndicate for journalists’. Back then, he notes ‘nothing was able to stop homophobic journalists except their peers or their editors’.

Saghieh believes that these progressive journalists adopted ‘new ways’ to promote their ‘new ideas’ in a humdrum classical work environment: ‘their updated, open-minded, and personalized approaches proved over the years to be appealing to a bigger audience’. In the television sector, “a bigger audience” directly means a larger advertisement investment.

Saghieh believes that the newly emerged social media crowd is a hot target for TV stations, and appealing to this crowd has become a main concern for numerous channels such as LBCI. This crowd is overwhelmingly made up of progressive activists and liberal individuals, especially the most influential ones within them. Accordingly, social media have come to represent a powerful support front for social struggles not only by spreading underground news and making them accessible to editors, but also by producing high quality videos, catchy posters and constantly updated vivid slogans. ‘The visual material circulated by online activists on social media is now replacing the classic videos of boring formal political

meetings or the Sunday procession in the primetime news bulletin,' confirms Saghie, who himself knew about the Cinema Plaza raid from the Facebook campaign led by LGBT activists in support of the 36 detainees.

But one has to face at this level a major question: does this progressive trend backed mainly by social media community, fail to break the borders with the "offline" society which is the actual vehicle for a possible change?

"Ready or Not?"

In a country where plurality is a substitute for freedom and morality can be used to maintain a constantly threatened national unity, policing the sexualized body becomes a celebrated procedure involving complicated social and religious components. So the question of whether society is "ready" or not sounds naïve and simplistic. The issue is much more complicated, and numerous factors intervene in making or un-making social climates around issues of sexuality. The dichotomy between 'ready' and 'unready' flattens out historical and contextual specificities and contingencies which must be analyzed and understood in a nuanced manner. On another level, the very definition of "society", social inclusions and exclusions, and the "measurement" of social "readiness" are highly problematic issues. Yet the question in this specific research is, how do the media understand "social readiness"? How do decision-makers "read" their society and react to it?

Both Saghie and Salman notice that the privacy of the home has become the environment that embraces the expression of homophobic thoughts and sentiments among journalists and intellectuals who seek to avoid public shaming for being "backwards". Saghie understands this as a sign of increasing public awareness, while Salman considers it a sign of 'hypocrisy that will become elusive when the current vogue of shaming homophobia is over'. She perceives this 'vogue' as a series of circumstantial temporal profits that will not evolve into a consistent discourse.

In fact, Salman has a different explanation for LBCI's famous introduction on Cinema Plaza case. She believes that it would not have been possible if the aggression had not been so obvious and pervasive with the public exposure of the men and subjecting them to maltreatment and anal tests. She considers that Lebanese media and society are way behind a possible change in approaches to sexuality, noting

that there are still 'honor crimes in some regions of the country, and racist sexist daily shows broadcasting on liberal and non-liberal channels'. Salman's pessimism is based on her own version of class analysis. 'Change is usually initiated by working classes, while middle classes are generally conservative, while upper class and elites are usually practicing freedom in private and preaching against social change in public,' she says. Salman also refers to the increased levels of conservatism in rural areas and among working classes in post-civil war Lebanon, and to the replacement of leftist social climates with highly sectarian and religious sentiments and ideologies. Such societal development is a contributing factor to practices of moralizing and sexual policing.

In brief, for Salman media should restrain from publishing homophobic or aggressive material against specific segments of society, yet it should not engage in a liberal discourses on sexuality unless under exceptional circumstances, until 'society is ready'.

For Saghie, the picture looks brighter. He believes that the latest events prove a slight change that promises more if a follow-up is maintained at the level of monitoring mainstream media by activists. 'A battle is won, but the war goes on,' he asserts.

This divergence between Salman's and Saghie's perceptions may follow the potency of the journalistic medium; Saghie views the mainstream television as a tool of power capable of effecting change in public opinion, while Salman views the newspaper as a medium that is in vital interaction with its community of readers. Yet, as stated above, "social readiness" is a highly problematic and sensitive issue that can neither be measured nor claimed to be measurable by anyone. The complications of societal networks along lines of gender, race, class, nationality, religion and sexuality produce various forms of interactions, intersections and social formations. Thus, what Salman and Saghie speak of is their own perception of social readiness as they see it from their journalistic and personal standpoints.

Sources of Influence

Television channels in Lebanon survive on the profits reaped from the advertising industry, which means that the viewing rates – whatever the content - have the final say in the survival of any given program. Added to this conventional viewership is the emergent social media viewership and activity which is of increasing concern for TV CEOs as Saghie asserts. 'No CEO wishes to wake up and find his TV subjected

to shaming or boycott campaigns all over Facebook or Twitter', he says. Moreover, social media offer a new tool to measure behavioral patterns among audience including the degree of virality, numbers of "likes", "shares" and "tweets", and the demographic characteristics of the audience and the types of the stories they favor. According to Saghieh, the intensive sharing and positive backlash of the LBCI Cinema Plaza introduction on social media attracted advertisers back to a news bulletin that was losing its time on air due to its low viewership rates.

Political affiliations also play a major role in shaping TV content, sometimes at the expense of profit as we have seen in the case of Maalouf's expulsion from MTV despite his program being highly viewed in Lebanon.

On the other hand, the economy of the newspaper in Lebanon does not rely so much on advertising, but rather on political funding. A newspaper 'will keep on printing as long as it is securing its political and sectarian umbrella', says Saghieh. It survives through expressing a specific community's point of view, and thus its discourse is shaped and limited by this community. The social discourse becomes added value to the political core, varying from one newspaper to another and creating its "unique" identity. 'For instance, As-Safir is known to be on the traditional left, while An-Nahar is on the conservative right,' says Saghieh.

However, independently from community limitations, print journalism 'was definitely far more advanced than TV stations during the past decade when it comes to sexuality' Azzi confirms, maybe due to 'the more sophisticated nature of some newspaper writers and readers', he speculates. Azzi even believes that TV stations were encouraged to break the sexual taboo by the progressive discourse presented by some of the print media'. Examples of such a progressive¹⁹ discourse and approach to issues of sexuality can be found in the archives of different newspapers during the last decade, proving the major role played by individual journalists despite structural limitations such as social conservatism, editorial traditionalism or even political/sectarian funding.

Indeed, the influence of hardworking and devoted activist groups is to be noted in this context, especially groups working on sexual freedoms and rights such as Club Free (in the 1990s), then Helem (2004), KAFA (2005), Nasawiya (2009) and others. These groups have worked hard to establish alliances

¹⁹ Much of this archive belongs to the period before the launching of newspaper websites, but can still be found in the paper archives (unavailable on the newspaper's website).

and unspoken agreements with journalists, thus effecting major changes in journalistic attitudes and discourses. This influence became even more highlighted with the rise of social media and public exchange of information and support.

All these factors interact and influence each other to produce a complicated map of the current Lebanese media, one that oscillates between extremes and all that is in between. Journalistic discourses range from liberalism to conservatism, and from hyper-activity to silence. Accordingly, public and personal speculations swing between pessimism and optimism, depending on where one stands. There is no one final answer when the question is about change.

4. Conclusion

The direct involvement of the media in the Cinema Plaza and Dekwaneh cases highlighted the birth of a discourse that had been already building up throughout the 1990s in post-civil war Lebanon. The country has witnessed an extensive economic liberalization, promoting its image as unique, liberal and "modern". The proliferation of fresh secular civil movements calling for sexual and personal liberties went in parallel with the emergence of young journalists who started to challenge conventional discourses in the media. More recently, social media have offered a much needed platform for activists and artists to share news and ideas and to mobilize for civil causes, especially when the most influential Lebanese bloggers come from progressive and/or leftist backgrounds. Social media have increasingly been gaining an effective authority of surveillance over the mainstream media, as the two cases show.

This environment has allowed a space in mainstream media where open debates around issues of sexuality are "accredited" as possible topics of discussion and (dis)agreement. At this level, a change is certainly obvious despite the fact that the media structure, the social setting and the political actors have not changed.

But what has happened really?

At first sight, it appeared as if the "new" discourse on sexuality had sprung from a vacuum due to the omnipresent homophobic discourse that usually fills the audiovisual media. But in fact, the Cinema Plaza case marked only one, albeit significant, event in a historical continuity. It highlighted the consistency of a coalition of journalists and activists, supported by a relatively well-spread public opinion that turned out to be fed up with the social status quo in a corrupt state that continuously guards its precarious authority through policing bodies and desires. It was time for a progressive move, and it happened.

However, it is very early to state that a consistent and radical change is taking place due to a range of factors that require more investigation and expansion than this research allows. It is clearly the case that an "environmental" change has occurred in the media and in the socio-political spheres, and is starting to sustain a new discourse around issues of sexuality, gender, racism and rights. There will be more significant milestones like Cinema Plaza that will expose discursive developments and disagreements in debates about sexuality. Discourses will keep oscillating, alternating and transforming, precisely when

dealing with sexuality. However, what matters is that these debates have started to happen and will continue to do so.

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Appendix

These interviews were conducted by the author with each of the participants as follows:

Participant 1

Georges Azzi: co-founder and former Executive Director of Helem. The interview was conducted on 11th, March, 2013 via e-mail correspondence due to different geographical locations. Transcript available upon request.

Participant 2

Ghassan Makarem: co-founder and former Executive Director of Helem. The interview was conducted on 17th, March, 2013 via e-mail correspondence due to different geographical locations. Transcript available upon request.

Participant 3

Hanady Salman: Senior Editor and shareholder at As-Safir newspaper. The interview was conducted on 26th, March, 2013 in As-safir offices in Beirut. Transcript available upon request.

Participant 4

Khaled Saghieh: Editor-in-chief of LBCI news department, and former Senior Editor at Al-Akhbar newspaper . The interview was conducted on 1st, April, 2013 in Raqda Cafe in Beirut. Transcript available upon request.