Ethics and the Media: The Lebanese Experience

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While media systems obtain their legal authority from press laws, honesty and integrity in reporting are necessary to gain public confidence. Concern for ethics and public responsibility was always a declared goal of media systems and calls for fairness and impartiality of the press were regularly voiced. Journalistic "codes of ethics" were acknowledged for decades.

Media ethics generally focuses on accuracy and fair play. These require honesty and integrity which are usually tarnished by numerous problems. Among these problems are: commercial exploitation, the tendency of the media to focus on big and sensational reporting; conflict of professional interest of the media owners and their commercial and/or political interests; and the new media technologies that allows manipulation and the production of fake material.

Concern for the proper performance of the media became more vocal at the end of the Second World War and was powerfully voiced by two landmark reports : the British Royal Commission of the Press[1] and the US Commission on Freedom of the Press which is better known as the Hutchins Commission[2].

The first report was written by a special commission appointed by the British government to investigate the performance of the press in the UK. It recommended the creation of a Press Council to govern media behavior and promote public interest as well as to conduct research into the effect of the print media on the British society. The recommendation was accepted and a British Press Council was set up in 1953.

The US Commission on Freedom of the Press was formed by an initiative from the then publisher of Time magazine, Henry Luce, who asked the president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, to chair a commission to inquire into the function of the media in the US. The report concluded that the media has a moral

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[1] Great Britain, <u>Royal Commission on the Press 1947-1949</u>.
[2] The Commission On Freedom Of The Press, <u>A Free And Responsible Press (1947)</u>, The University Of Chicago Press

obligation to be socially responsible and that this responsibility be imposed on the media

From the recommendations of the two landmark reports was born what is known as the Social-responsibility Theory of the press. This theory argues that the press can be free in as much it is socially responsible. The theory notes that misuse of press power would necessitate regulation but that such regulation should not be drafted by the government.

Debate on the operation of media institutions in society continues to be live in public and professional discussions. Attention was recently focused on the role of state and large corporations in media corruption. Among scholars who addressed this issue are Robert McChesney and Noam Chomsky. Chomsky argued that "the media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly." [3] He claims that the public relations industry expends vast resources "educating the American people about the economic facts of life" to ensure a favorable climate for business. Its task is to control "the public mind" and wants the public to accept the position that "If the freedom to persuade happens to be concentrated in a few hands, we must recognize that such is the nature of a free society."[4] Machesney asserted that "the corruption of journalistic integrity is always bad, but it becomes obscene under conditions of extreme media concentration as now exist." [5]

The July 2011 phone-hacking scandal by a leading British newspaper, News of the World, provoked further investigation of earlier recommendations about the role of media and modern technology in society. A judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press was commissioned under the chairmanship of Lord Justice Leveson, This time the focus was on the media guardians themselves and the concern was on answering the question: "who guards the guardians?"

The Leveson Inquiry published late in November 2012 a 2,000 page final report reviewed the general culture and ethics of the British media, and recommended that a new, independent, body replace the existing Press Complaints Commission. It also recommended measures to protect data and to define relations between the press, the police and politicians.

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[3] Noam Chomsky, Thought Control in Democratic Societies, South End Press, 1989, p10
[4] Ibid p. 16.
[5] Robert McChesney, Rich Media, Poor Democracy, The New Press, 1999, p xvii

The Leveson report recommended that "political leaders should [publish] … a statement setting out, for the public, an explanation of the approach they propose to take as a matter of party policy in conducting relationships with the press"[6]. It also recommended that "online publication should be included in any market assessment of consideration of plurality,"[7] and that "the Information Commissioner's Office should take steps to prepare and issue guidance to the public on their individual rights in relation to the obtaining and use by the press of their personal data, and how to exercise those rights."[8]

I have briefly presented here the general thinking about media ethics I now plan to present my reflection on this position[9] and then move to discuss the Lebanese experience in media ethics.

Accuracy in reporting, I was taught in an introductory journalism course, some fifty years ago, was the central journalistic canon. The importance of accuracy was reiterated in every subsequent journalism course I took. To arrive at the truth, I was told; journalists need to be accurate in observing the five Ws and H of an event. (Who did What, When, Where, How and Why.) I was instructed that to accomplish this one needed to develop "a big nose". With experience and maturity it became apparent to me that being nosy is only the beginning of the road to accuracy and fairness in journalism. I realize today that journalistic training, here and especially in the west, is deficient and not practical.

Our journalism students are trained to go after news like a dog is trained to go after his dig. What they lack is the training to be critical of what they observe, to subject their observation to the scrutiny of the socio-political as well as cultural contexts of the news event. Because people are subjective, an event involving human actors is most often, not what a reporter may assume it to be at first observation. The five Ws that one supposes to have "actually" observed may not be the "real" ones of the news event a journalist is covering. The journalist needs to be trained to fit her/his observations within the socio-cultural context of the news event. Only then will the journalist contribute to her/his readers in their search for the "truth."

This prerequisite is the beginning of a difficult undertaking to being "accurate" in reporting and "fair" to one's audience and profession. And by being critical is not

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[6] Article 82.

[7] Article 86.

[8] Article 60

[9] Interventions made at seminar on "Professional Ethics, Media Legislation and Freedom of Expression<" LAU, March 2002.

meant to be a cynic. It means logical and continuous scrutiny of one's skills of observation and ability to fit observations within a proper socio-cultural context as well as a universal moral professional code.

Examining news coverage in the western and Arab media today, one is conscious of how lacking these media are in undertaking their role as accurate and fair communicators. One can easily observe that western and third world media systems present the same news events in different, sometimes contradictory, "factual contexts".

This problem is being proliferated by fanaticism not only of the media systems of the deprived and the underprivileged but also, and mainly, by those of the affluent and the powerful, particularly after September 11, when US officials and media assumed that US culture was universal and that other peoples want to be like Americans. US press critics began to criticize journalists who were objective and balanced in the coverage of what they termed "the war on terror." Suddenly journalists were accused of upholding the very lack of bias that they usually are accused of betraying. Patriotism now was good enough for the US media critics to demand bias in coverage. Of course, the rationale here is that appraisal of "facts" need to be developed in a news story.

September 11 exposed the domination of the powerful in dictating a new code for media operation that is far from accuracy and fairness. According to the Washington Post, CNN chairman Walter Isaacson told his staff to balance images of civilian casualties in Afghanistan with reminders of Americans killed in the US terrorist attacks, saying it seems "perverse to focus too much on the casualties and hardship in Afghanistan." And how would one explain why the former US Secretary of State Colin Powell asking the Emir of Qatar, in October 2001, to exert influence on al-Jazeera news channel to pull back its so-called anti-American elements? According to Eric Deggans of the St. Petersburg Times of Florida, this is "an ironic move, coming from an official of a country with a free press of its own."

The phenomenal leap into the development and adoption of communication technology that took place during the past half a century produced numerous structural changes in the world information systems. Given that structural changes are easier to carry out than moral changes, especially for the powerful and affluent, this change often took place at the expense of morality. Consequently, the materialistic values of the rich and powerful dominate today the media practitioners. Little attention is being paid to the social and moral responsibility of the media.

The social and moral responsibility of the media in their local and regional settings needs to be taken into account in order to provide a factual and fair coverage of events. One cannot assume a universal model of media operation. Rather, one needs to recognize that the structure, content, and, therefore, operation of the media institutions are unique to the society within which they operate. However, this does not prevent developing a universal moral code for fairness in reporting.

The disease in the present world communication order was moral before it became structural. No matter how good the structure is, it is doomed if the morals are bad. In the final analysis, the driver is more important than the car and the one who uses the technology determines its output.

Structural changes that are required in the present world order are not to be determined by the dominant world powers. Rather the necessary changes are those that will allow the moral thrust for which the world order is in bad need. Thus, in a world dominated by materialistic forces and convenience the moral thrust into the new world information order should come, if at all it is to come, from countries that uphold their spiritualism and stand firm to their moral values.

Without a global moral order we will continue to have divergent national and regional outlooks and interpretations of world developments and news, there will be no opportunity for a global logic. There will be no accuracy or fairness in the world media.

National and regional outlooks are usually ethnocentric and are often charged with hatred and negative stereotypes of nations and regions having different cultural backgrounds. The world will never become a "global village." Each country will continue to have its own national model of dealing with events.

National and regional models also determine the prominence that their respective media give to the different regions of the world and the topics on which these media focus. Research on the news flow suggests that news events are shaped by the physical and cultural space of the region concerned. Thus, one sees in the media coverage of the recent world events lack of balance in reporting about the plight of innocent people in different world regions. Lives in countries of the third world don't seem to be valued at the same level of American, European or Israeli lives.

We also see that "democracy", "freedom", and "human rights" seem today to be subjects that may be put on hold whenever this is suitable for the powerful. "Free

debate and, by implication, democracy in third world countries are criticized if threatening to the powerful states." We are indeed living in an age in which media gatekeepers believe that "people are equal, but some are more equal than others," to paraphrase George Orwell.

Even with the unparalleled development of communication technologies, it is impossible for the "big" news agencies, or any other corporate and regional player in international news provision, to set the agenda of foreign news in the media of any country. They can set the agenda only of foreign news outside the physical and cultural space of any national system. The foremost effect these powerful media players can produce is to provide their own ideological interpretation of foreign events outside the "space" of the national media concerned.

While indeed the big news agencies continue to dominate the field of distribution of news and provide their own conscious or "unconscious" ideological interpretation of these news events, it is highly unlikely that they will ever be able to unify the view of their audiences across the globe to these foreign events. The national media systems will continue to select the news they receive and edit them to agree with their own ideological "consciousness." Thus a 'terrorist' in a wire service may become a 'member of the resistance' or a 'freedom fighter' in the national media, or vice versa.

Media institutions are manned by gatekeepers who are to a great extent influenced in their national and regional news selection and coverage by the socio-cultural contexts of their regions. In as much as these gatekeepers are human beings and thus by definition are subjective, it is impossible for media institutions to be completely accurate and fair in their reporting. However, by applying a professional code within a universal moral order a journalist may be able to approximate accuracy and fairness in reporting by applying critical scrutiny to her/his socio-cultural biases and by observing news events within a proper moral context.

The call for an equal and balanced flow of information and communication between nations, which was voiced by the UNESCO and adopted by the UN general assembly in the late 1970s, need also to include a call for an equal and balanced flow of information within nations: between the rich and the poor, the ruler and the ruled, the powerful and the weak, the minorities and the majority. And this brings me to the discussion of the Lebanese media situation.

Media Situation in Lebanon

It is often stated that that the Lebanese media are the most free in the Arab region. I argue that this is a myth. The freedom of the media in Lebanon is restricted like the situation of media in other Arab countries. The only difference is that the restriction on the Lebanese media is more from Lebanon's sectarian and business bosses than from the government. The Lebanese media are relatively free from government because Lebanon does not have a "real" government but rather a coalition of tribal-sectarian bosses. The power of these bosses is usually more than that of official institutions.

While Lebanon has relatively liberal laws regulating its media institutions the application of these laws is selective. The print media operate under the 1962 law of the press that was introduced by President Fuad Chihab. This law provided the press with minimal formal state censorship and established the limits within which the freedom of the press might be exercised. These limits were determined by the special nature of the Lebanese system.

The 1962 law organized the Lebanese journalists into two separate syndicates: the Lebanese union of publishers (Nakabit as-Sahafa), including owners of press licenses, and the Lebanese Union of Editors (Nakabat-al-Muharireen) including all active journalists. A Lebanese 'Higher Press Council' was also created by this law. This Council was entrusted with the power of dealing with 'all problems of common interest to journalism and journalists in general.

Because of the sectarian nature of Lebanon and its media the different Lebanese media institutions usually focus on addressing a religious sect more than the total Lebanese population which already too small to allow for the financial self sufficiency of 110 licensed political papers and the bundle of radio and television stations. In the absence of financial self-sufficiency the Lebanese media are forced to seek outside subsidies and salaries of the average media practitioners are low.

The audiovisual Lebanese media operate under the 1994 of the Audiovisual Media that established a Higher Council for Audiovisual Media. This Council is ineffective as its decisions are advisory and its 10 members (5 appointed by the Council of Ministers an 5 elected by the Parliament), are selected more for their sectarian affiliation than their media experience.

The serious problems of the Lebanese media are, in fact, not related to their freedom

from government. These media have always managed to "outsmart" the government by going around regulations and maintaining their freedom to operate. The problem of the media lies in their inability to serve the genuine interests of Lebanese society within existing societal structures that regulate the organization, management and financing of these media.

Indeed, the early tendency of Lebanese journalists to speak for specific sectarian groups and to promote their interests led newspapers in Lebanon to concentrate more on the presentation of views and opinions than on news and facts. This gave outside powers and interests the opportunity, through the Lebanese media, to play active roles in the affairs of Lebanon. Each media institution came to support a certain sectarian group, and came to be looked upon as representative and spokesperson for that group. The Lebanese media institutions have, thus, accentuated differences among people. This characteristic became so apparent during the civil war and today. Any claim to objectivity made by the media is viewed with skepticism.

The predisposition of the Lebanese media to speak for certain social, political and sectarian groups can also be attributed to the structure of the media system in Lebanon. Today Lebanon has 110 licensed political publications for a population of about four million. While circulation and audience figures are a carefully kept secret by media institutions my information suggests that none of these publications sell more than 10,000 copies a day. The vast majority of Lebanese publications could hardly support themselves from circulation and advertising revenue alone. The situation is similar with the audiovisual media. All the Lebanese media are not financially self-sufficient. This situation predisposed them to accept financial assistance from outside sources.

The conditions of media systems in Lebanon make them open to overtures of financial assistance from foreign groups in exchange for editorial support.[10] They also make foreign and business interest groups turn to the Lebanese media as an intermediary through which to present their interests and exert influence on internal and regional affairs.

Bribes to newspapers and journalists are commonly accepted as normal. A leading Lebanese publisher announced in a seminar held in Beirut in 1974 that "the present situation of Lebanese print media is such that the publisher who does not take bribes is an ass".[11] At another seminar discussing the need for a code for media ethics in Lebanon a prominent journalist, Faysal Salman of al-Mustakbal newspaper, declared

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[10] Baha' Abu-Laban, "Factors in Social Control of the Press in Lebanon; *Journalism Quarterly,* 1966, No. 43, p. 514.

[11] Gubran Hayek, editor publisher of *Lisan al-Hal,* a leading afternoon Beirut paper, at a seminar on the "Freedom of the Press in Lebanon", Club of the Alumni Association of the American University of Beirut, January 24-25, 1974.

that "what we've listed in the code's clauses has made us prophets or missionaries and we've written commandments, which we're prepared to preach. I ask you, and ask myself to be more modest, and urge you to be objective and rational and to simplify matters and understand the reality we live in Lebanon and every Arab country." [12] He added:" We're not here to one-up each other. We're responsible men and women. Therefore, let's be up to the challenge, and not go too far in dreaming up what's unattainable. We all know each other. Why do you want me to fight the dragon? I won't be able to defeat it. I first want to provide a plan to face the dragon, so where is the plan? Where's the logic of having a journalist's pay set at $200 and you ask him to be an angel from heaven? This isn't in defense of deviation, but a call for rationality, of objectivity."

Responding to Mr Salman the then President of the Lebanese Journalists Association Mr. Melhem Karam, said: "What my colleague, Mr. Faysal Salman, said was frank. He said what every journalist must say."

This situation should not cause astonishment, for Lebanon is essentially a country of services. Its economic service role was and continues to be that of a middle-man who transports consumer goods from the West to Arab markets, and participates in exploiting these markets. The prosperity of Lebanon after independence was neither the result nor the cause of genuine national development. Lebanon's role, no matter how one justifies it was and still is reflected in the country's mass media (particularly the print media) which tend to take the color of the money poured into them.

A consequence of this characteristic of the media institutions in Lebanon is that they do not hesitate to express interests other than their own, and sacrifice credibility for material profit. The absence of a national consensus in Lebanon is, to a large extent, exacerbated by this state of affairs. Financial assistance, or other forms of subsidies, pours into Lebanese media from foreign embassies, companies and business firms, as well as from local groups, including the Lebanese government.[13] In return, the recipient medium is expected to propagate and support the policies of its subsidizer.

The services rendered by Lebanese papers to their patrons can be classified in three general types: 1) Complete editorial commitment and news slanted in favor of the country or group; 2) Planting articles of "news" items, either supporting and defending, or attacking and defaming a group, country, policy, or an official."[14], and 3) Promotion of policies. Lebanese media institutions often make contracts with more

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[12] Op.Cit "Professional Ethics, Media Legislation and Freedom of Expression<" LAU, March 2002.
13 This author had access to an official Ministry of Information payment voucher in the early 1970s for services rendered. The voucher lists 'secret' payments to several prominent journalists.
[14] Punishment for libel is extremely mild in Lebanon.

than one patron to promote more than one policy. Sometimes two or more opponents patronize the same paper.

A clash, in 1973, between the publishers of two leading magazines provided a clear expose of a similar situation. One of the publishers replying to the accusation of the other that he received foreign subsidies accused the latter of handling his magazine as if he was renting out furnished apartments. He alleged that the pages of this publisher's magazine are rented out to a mosaic of sources: "One page is rented to a revolutionary regime; another to a sheikhdom in the Gulf, another page is rented to the Soviet Union, while a facing page is reserved for the promotion of activities of U.S. international arms dealers..."[15]

Subsidies to Lebanese papers come in a variety of forms. One is when the patron government or group rents out the entire publication for a certain yearly or monthly fee. Under this condition, the patron pays for all the costs of production as well as for the staff during the period of the contract.

Another form of subsidy is through payments to promote certain programs or causes. The amount of such payments depends on the patron but can be quite handsome, as was revealed in 1967 during a press conference held by the former President of the Lebanese Order of Publishers, Zuhayr 'Usayran. 'Usayran held a press conference to announce his resignation from the presidency of the Order because of a disagreement with his cabinet members over a one-million Lebanese pound (at that time worth $200,000) payment he received from the late king Saud of Saudi Arabia. He said the money was paid to him personally in return for promoting the image of the deposed king in the Arab world and he, therefore, would not share it with other members of the Order. 'Usayran also revealed at this conference that he had earlier distributed to Lebanese publishers another payment - which he claimed he could document - of $ 100,000 from the former king.[16] Commenting on this incident at the time, the English daily paper, The Daily Star, remarked:

> *What was shocking about the million-pound-deal is that none has questioned the principle; the outcry centered on why hasn't the amount been shared among the various newspapers...* [17]

A somewhat similar public announcement was made when a publisher of a leading magazine reported that he turned down, in 1962, a "first payment" of $200,000 from an Arab country to issue a newspaper, and an offer for an exclusive interview, to appear in the first issue of the paper, with the President of that country. He wrote that the "first payment" had been delivered to him through that country's embassy in

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[15] Laouzi, SaJim, *"Mabadi' Said Frayha al Wataniyyah",* (Arabic: The Nationalistic Principles of Sa'id Frayha), *Al Hawadith* 18, 1973. No. 882, p.27

[16] *An-Nahar*, 1 March, 1967.

[17] *The Daily Star*, 4 March, 1967.

Beirut, but that he returned it "because daily journalism was not his specialty." He wrote that he recommended to the President of the Arab country to give the money to another Lebanese publisher. "I am your soldier", he reported telling the president, "but I prefer the work of weekly journalism"[18]

Subsidies to journalists are also given indirectly through gifts of equipment or paper. Sometimes they are in the form of salary payments to one or more employees. On some occasions payments are made to employees directly and without the knowledge of the media institution, particularly when that institution is supposed to be neutral, as in the case of the government-run radio station and the government-supervised television station. Such types of payments were exposed by the former President of the Order of Publishers, the late Riad Taha at a press conference. Taha reported that "there are contracts and secret deals which link certain television announcers and non-Lebanese parties to promote the news of other countries, thus giving the impression that the Lebanese state is biased in its Arab and foreign policies.[19] He said he had presented evidence about this to the Lebanese government and to the television authorities. No official statement was made in reply to Taha, nor has any action been taken by the authorities.

Still another form of subsidy is through concentrating the advertisement budgets of some business firms in papers of favorable political, secterian or ethnic background. Most Lebanese newspapers face large financial expenditures which can only 'be met through relatively large advertisement contracts or through high circulation figures. At a public meeting the Lebanese Minister of Information suggested that by concentrating the advertisements of its supporters in a particular paper a political group or personality can request the support of that paper in return.[20] Many companies advertise in newspapers on the basis of the paper's editorial policy and the political identity of the editor.[21]

Complementary to this, political and religious factions as well as interest groups pay newspapers to keep silent about certain issues or events which are unfavorable to the image they are trying to present of themselves. Support of one group may place another at a disadvantage. The media institution is paid, then, not to support that group.

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[18] Louzi, *Op.Cit.*, p. 28.

[19] *Al-Anwar,* 7 September, 1973.

[20] The Lebanese Minister of Information, Albert Mansour, during a discussion following the presentation of a paper by Talal Salman, editor and publisher of as-Safir newpaper, on "The Role of the Lebanese Press in Protecting Freedom and the Dangers of the Politicization and Monopolization of Advertising," at the international forum "Gateways to Reconstruction" organized by the Lebanon Chapter of the International Advertising Association, Beirut, Bristol Hotel, September 19-20 1990.

[21] Abu-Laban, *Op. Cit.,* p. 514.

The policy of the Lebanese Union of Publishers itself has accentuated the commercial nature of the Lebanese media. Indeed, prior to the 1962 press legislation a commonly circulated statement about the state of affairs of Lebanese journalism was: 'Lebanon is full of journalists, but does not have journalism.' The statement described accurately the situation then. Journalism at that time was a means of gaining political power or financial success. The practice was saturated with people whom journalism was a means to an end, not a profession. Such people drifted into this profession and corrupted it. An associated press official told me that shortly after AP began its operation in Lebanon a well-known journalist walked into his office to tell him: "I've been studying your wire service and I like it. How much would you pay my paper for using your copy?"

Most of the present holders of licenses for media institutions could not objectively be classified as professional journalists. Thus, when the 1962 press law gave newspaper publishers the power to manage the affairs of the Union of Publishers, they introduced restrictions on the proper functioning of the successful papers. The Union made it difficult for the better papers to develop into large national papers as well as with to have an audience cutting across confessional, political, and socio-economic boundaries.

The Union of Publishers did not permit newspapers to increase the size of their papers without increasing their price thus setting limits to the size of the papers. The Union also controlled the freedom of the editors to publish Sunday supplements. Papers, furthermore, were not allowed to appear more than six times a week.[22] These and other similar measures hampered the growth of successful professional papers and gave smaller papers unnecessary protection. The measures also increased the fragmentation and disorientation of Lebanese public opinion.

The Lebanese media generally do not take into consideration their accountability to the people. What is lacking is not only the reliable communication of information but also the ability of the Lebanese media to contribute information directly to the flow of socially and politically constructive ideas. What we see in Lebanon is a social system that gives opportunities and advantages to people on the basis of their wealth and seniority within a tribal sectarian system. The concentration of control over this powerful one-way medium by a select few who are driven by narrow tribal/sectarian interests carries with it the potential for damaging the democratic process.

Lebanese media pay little attention to the development of an environment of genuine dialogue between the ruler and the public on the one hand, and among the people

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[22] A number of papers, however, went around such limitation and appeared seven times a week, either by defying the union or by purchasing or hiring additional licenses, and using their logotypes once a week.

themselves on the other. The media sector is dominated by a market mentality culture that gives little thought to social responsibility. As a consequence there is confusion between the freedom of the media to inform the people, their freedom to propagate tribal/sectarian dogma, and their freedom to seek material profit.

The problematic nature of mass media in Lebanon lies in a wrong visualization of the meaning of freedom. It does not lie in the issue of censorship or lack of a free media environment. This distorted visualization of freedom leads to private interests that both override and overwhelm social responsibility. Censorship is no longer the right perspective to discuss the subject of freedom of expression. The proper perspective for freedom of expression is the subject of human rights, particularly the right of the individual to communicate in order to improve the quality of her/his life and to practice true democracy.

True democracy requires the active participation of citizens in public debate as well as involvement in decisions that concern public affairs. Freedom of expression by the media does not bring about democracy except when access to all media channels is made possible to all Lebanese groups. True democracy cannot be achieved when the media serve as advocates, limiting access to some factions and denying this access to others.

The claim that the media merely reflect reality and that the responsibility for any negative political atmosphere in the country falls on politicians is inaccurate. While it is true that the media derive their content from the people and government, it is also true that they play an active role in selecting and shaping the content of their messages. The media set the agenda of events and consequently they play a major role in determining what issues are to be debated by the public.

A serious problem of the media today rests in the aversion of media gatekeepers to releasing information that disagrees with either their views or those of their backers. This practice can and does divide Lebanon into polarized and fanatic groups, as was the case during the past civil war. It can result in producing closed enclaves or "ghettos," where members will only accept content that agrees with their views.

Another problem is in the tendency of the media to spend more time attempting to avoid information that disagrees with its gatekeepers than in seeking objective facts about issues of general public concern. The concept of "freedom of expression" is exploited to give the media a special status that places it above social regulations and above institutions. Perhaps the term "freedom of information" is the most misused in Arabic. The human rights covenant and all other democratic conventions require the media to find ways to serve the public, and not the reverse. The citizen today is the target of persuasion by television at a time when her/his interests should be, ethically and in principle, the basic significant factor in the selection of media content.

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The citizen must be the focus of attention, and not the media or the journalist. Media protection does not automatically imply the protection of the individual or society. There need to be checks that will guarantee access to the media by those who have no media outlets. Freedom of the press thus becomes a legal right only inasmuch as it guarantees the right of the citizen to receive truthful information about public issues. The media cannot demand the freedom to report if their practice violates public interest and transgresses the right of the individual to obtain accurate information that provides the opportunity for citizens to play an active role in building a proper and enlightened civil society. Public interest should be placed ahead of the private rights of journalists and the media. The state needs to legislate and facilitate setting up public media channels that can serve as a model to the private media.

A basic starting point for fruitful and effective involvement of the media in social development is to establish a balance between public, private and government interests. Accordingly, the Lebanese media have failed to contribute to national development. None of the Lebanese media channels speak for all of Lebanon; instead they have braced and encouraged division in society with each medium serving as a voice for a religious or a sectarian faction.