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Alternative Media in Lebanon: The Role of Digital Platforms in a Polarized Hybrid Media System

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to the literature about the roles and limitations of alternative media activism in different hybrid media systems by scrutinizing the organizational and discursive counter-hegemonic agency of digital alternative platforms in the Lebanese media system that is prone to high political parallelism, elite control, and polarization. To achieve this objective, semi-structured interviews with Lebanese journalists and a qualitative framing analysis for the alternative and mainstream media coverage of the Beirut Port explosion, which took place on the 4 August 2020 and led to the death of hundreds of people, were conducted. Our results show that Lebanese alternative media strive to escape the hegemonic control of sectarian and political groups by trying to achieve editorial and financial independence. Besides, they attempted in their framing of the explosion to develop a different narrative of the political conflict as a meta-sectarian one between the people and the ruling class from all the sects. However, they face the challenge of distinguishing themselves from the mainstream oppositional media that stands against the current regime. These results highlight the challenges and new possibilities opened by digital technologies for alternative media to escape the political hegemony in a polarized hybrid media system.

KEYWORDS

Alternative media; Lebanon; hybrid media system; Beirut explosion; digital media; framing

Introduction

With the digitalization of the media and the unprecedented possibilities of less controlled mass distribution of information, the debate concerning the roles, contributions, and even the dark side of alternative media is coming to the spotlight. This debate displayed certain limitations concerning the understanding of this phenomenon. One limitation is the restraining concentration on the progressive left-wing media without taking into consideration other forms of alternative media, especially with the rise of

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right-wing populist media (Heft et al. 2020; Holt 2018). Accordingly, a need has risen for a general conceptualization of alternative media that encompasses all its forms, regardless of its ideological or political affiliations.

Another limitation pertains to the asymmetric focus on Western countries, precisely those with a liberal democratic political context, leaving an epistemic lacuna concerning the role of digital alternative media within non-Western contexts (Waisbord 2022). Consequently, many of the conceptual and empirical analyses of alternative media were developed within relatively democratic media systems (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019, 866). Another ensemble of studies inspects the role of alternative media vis-à-vis an autocratic regime and its affiliated controlled mainstream media (Badran and Smets 2018; Filimonov and Carpentier 2023). Still, both approaches investigate the agency of alternative media versus a coherent, precise cluster of mainstream media outlets associated with the hegemonic, homogeneous institutions and regime, whether in a democratic or an autocratic context. These political systems represent – more or less – the ideal types of "democratic" or "autocratic" systems, but there are many "messy," "hybrid," or "idiosyncratic" cases. For instance, less is known about alternative media within fragmented media systems, wherein the "mainstream" media are not homogenous but structured between different conflicting groups. Against this backdrop, this article scrutinizes the role of digital alternative media in a highly polarized media system that is prone to crisis and conflict (El-Richani 2016, 186), namely Lebanon. Thus, Lebanon is utilized as a touchstone for the advancement of analyzing alternative media in different forms of media systems.

As a result of the sectarian fragmented social and political structure of Lebanon after the civil war, its media system has developed into a radically polarized one suffering from a small, impotent state and radical political parallelism along confessional identities (Dajani 2019; El-Richani 2016). In contrast to the relatively consensus-oriented institutionalized media systems of the democratic corporatist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 196), the Lebanese media system is heavily polarized and prone to intra-state conflict and clientelism (El-Richani 2016; Selvik and Høigilt 2021). Thus, alternative media in Lebanon have to operate and maneuver within this peculiar media system and the ongoing digital transformation of the country's communicative sphere. Accordingly, this article aims to analyze the roles, potentials, and limitations of digital alternative media in Lebanon with a focus on the analogy between their organizational structure and discourse in contrast to the traditional mainstream media. On a theoretical level, the article strives to give a nuanced analysis of the alternative media's transformative role in a polarized media system within the developing digital transformations of our societies.

Conceptualizing Alternative Media

Many previous scholarly trials to conceptualize alternative media faced essential epistemic and empirical challenges. The first challenge was the empty significance of the term "alternative," as it gains its meaning from a relationship with a "mainstream" (Waisbord 2022, 1432). Thus, if the mainstream is ideologically affiliated with conservatism, then the alternative will be progressive and vice-versa. However, the word "alternative" does not carry any ideological significance in itself. Accordingly, Holt,

Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019, 826) proposed a general relational definition for alternative media:

> Alternative news media represent a proclaimed and/or (self-)perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system.

Among the myriad definitions for alternative media, this relational conceptualization represents one of the most helpful starting points for studying alternative media in dissimilar countries, but some epistemic precautions should be considered before applying it to a different non-Western context. Per this conceptualization, regardless of ideological affiliation, alternative media acquire their raison d'être by opposing allegedly dominant mainstream media (Holt 2018). However, as Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019, 861) emphasize, the simplistic dichotomy between alternative and mainstream media has its pitfalls. Nuanced examinations of different public spheres elaborate on how they are less homogenous and more dynamic and that it is more accurate to depict the public sphere as a "dynamic network" with "cluster" not as a "space" for separated publics (Friemel and Neuberger 2023). Accordingly, Kenix (2011, 4) highlights that the compartmentalization of all mainstream outlets as a singular institution affiliated with economic and political powers impedes the recognition of the dissimilarities between them. In contrast to that simplistic dichotomy of alternative and mainstream media, in reality, they operate "as an entire continuum and not as silos of content that draw nothing from one another" (Kenix 2011, 163). Therefore, it is necessary to conceptualize alternative media and study its mutual relationship with mainstream media within this continuum (Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019).

Another warranted precaution pertains to the challenge that the above-mentioned conceptualization entails a purely formal definition of "alternative media," which can be filled with different constellations of actors and meanings of "alternative" in terms of political aims. Thus, the complete diversity of "alternatives" can only be reviewed if we overcome the limitation of research objects (Western media systems). That correlates with the second mentioned limitation in the scholarship about alternative media, namely the focus on Western media systems. Within such systems, the alternative and mainstream are defined according to ideological classifications and discourse, such as populist right-wing (Heft et al. 2020; Holt 2018) or progressive leftist (Atton 2002; Fuchs 2010). In other words, they are ideologically demarcated media systems. Many media systems, especially in the Arab hemisphere, are divided along sectarian, ethnic, or religious identities in addition to ideological demarcations (Richter and Kozman 2021, 325). That makes it even more difficult to cut clear lines or talk about homogenous institutions.

Hence, in light of the abovementioned definition and necessary precautions, we attempt to elucidate how to conceptualize alternative media in Lebanon and their roles within the Lebanese media system.

Role of Alternative Media

Alternative media can play a transformative role for media systems as they strive to achieve hegemony and power for a social group that is perceived as marginalized.

Within this process, the counter-hegemonic agency of alternative media takes place on different dimensions (Cammaerts and Carpentier 2009). Since there are various classifications for these dimensions in the literature (see, for example, Büteführ 1995; Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Ihlebæk et al. 2022), for the sake of this study, we categorize them into two main general dimensions. The first is the organizational and professional one. This dimension entails three central aspects: (1) Bypassing mainstream media's gatekeeping to reach new audiences and empower ordinary citizens and marginalized groups so that they can have their voices heard in the public sphere (Cammaerts and Carpentier 2009; Kenix 2011). (2) Developing an anti-hegemonic ownership structure for alternative media away from the elites' ownership and political financing (Büteführ 1995; Kenix 2011). (3) Formulating a new understanding of their journalistic roles and aims whereby journalists strive to achieve social and political change (Büteführ 1995, 168 and 169).

The third aspect highlights the dilemma of alternative media moving away from the classical normative paradigm of objective journalism into a commentary news coverage style aiming at directing the public toward a particular social change (Kenix 2011), which in turn obfuscates the demarcation between being a journalist or an activist. In that regard, scholars highlight how the professional normative roles of alternative media are developing with the rise of digital media (Ihlebæk et al. 2022), also beyond the Global North (Chadha and Bhat 2022; Medeiros and Badr 2022). In the Arab hemisphere, studies have shown how journalists, in general, and in alternative media in particular, struggle to achieve professionalism and autonomy from political instrumentalization and control (Badr 2022; Mellor 2009; Selvik and Høigilt 2021). In addition, digitization opened up new avenues of political engagement and advocacy for alternative media beyond the grip of mainstream gatekeeping, which in turn add new dimensions to the negotiation of their liminal position between journalism and activism and their relationship with the traditional mainstream media (Medeiros and Badr 2022).

Thus, to comprehend this organizational and professional dimension, it is warranted to take into consideration the digitization process which leads to the transformation of traditional media systems into *hybrid* ones (Chadwick 2017). A *hybrid media system* is one "built upon interactions among older and newer media logics – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms – in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics" (Chadwick 2017, 4). In the context of Lebanon, this concept helps in delineating the role of new alternative platforms and their media logics in affecting political power relations in the country. Within such *hybrid media systems,* new opportunities open for alternative media to bypass mainstream media gatekeeping barriers and reach more audiences, facilitating its counter-hegemonic agency (Chadwick 2017; Neuberger 2018).

The second dimension is producing *counter-hegemonic discourse*. One of the best operationalizations of this concept is alternative media spreading different frames for recurrent events than those frames communicated by mainstream media (Cammaerts and Carpentier 2009; Kenix 2011). Such a counter-hegemonic framing process encompasses different identification of the self/opponent, the main crisis in society, and the suggested solutions for it (Entman 1993; Kenix 2011; Snow and Benford 1988). Consequently, alternative media shall formulate a new narrative for the current political

situation and struggle against dominating strategic narratives (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014).

On a more empirical level, recent studies that analyzed the roles of alternative media in very different contexts show the myriad ways whereby journalists in those media define their roles (Ihlebæk et al. 2022). In autocratic countries, it is more straightforward as alternative media focus on resisting the regime, escaping its repressive control (Medeiros and Badr 2022, 1356), and formulating new frames vis-à-vis the hegemonic ones of the regime (Badran and Smets 2018). In India, alternative right-wing media act as a discursive tool of the broader right-wing populist movement and attack mainstream media by accusing them of acting in a partisan, pro-elite, pro-minorities harmful way against the Hindu majority (Chadha and Bhat 2022). Such studies highlight how alternative media is very context-dependent, as it gains its roles through its position inside the media system and the discursive structures within which it operates. Hence, these contextual structures shall be studied before analyzing the agency of alternative media in any country.

Lebanese Media System

Since the establishment of the Lebanese state, its political contest has been characterized by powerful confessional patrons (*Zuʿama'*) and external regional and global interfering forces fueling intra-state sectarian conflicts (Hirst 2010; Salibi 1988). Sectarian politics have dominated the social and political life of the country, impeding the construction of a strong secular state (Nötzold 2009; Young 2014). As a result, the Lebanese political system has for years suffered from intra-state conflicts, political patronage, sectarian politics, and an impotent weak state. These pitfalls culminated in the extreme economic crisis and led to the 2019 uprising. The uprising raised the slogan "all of them means all of them" and demanded the overthrow of the "corrupt sectarian oligarchy" who exploited sectarian tensions for their own benefits (Majed 2023).

This political structure played a role in shaping a media system that has been predominantly controlled by powerful political and economic actors (Dajani 2019; Nötzold 2009). Reflecting on Hallin and Mancini (2004) analytical framework, El-Richani emphasizes how the Lebanese media system is characterized by low newspaper circulation, low professionalism, a weak role of the state, and high political parallelism. Besides, this system has been continuously prone to intra-state conflicts and ongoing political crises (El-Richani 2016, 174). This ongoing crisis, besides the weak role of the state, plus the prevalent financial challenges facing the media outlets from shrinking advertisement revenues, all add up to deepening the already existing political parallelism (Selvik and Høigilt 2021). This cycle led to a situation wherein almost all Lebanese media outlets became dependent on their political patrons, sectarian leaders and parties, for subsidies and protection (Dajani 2019; Nötzold 2009). and vulnerable to political instrumentalization by "politicians and their religious sectarian patrons" (Harb 2024, 360; Selvik and Høigilt 2021). Hence, scholars highlighted the need for alternative, independent journalistic discourse (Dajani 2019; Nötzold 2009; Riegert and Ramsay 2013).

Journalists gradually invented a repertoire to maneuver and resist this instrumentalization. Some journalists tend to utilize the cleavages between the political elite

to ally with one actor against the other and obtain relevant information (Selvik and Høigilt 2021). Another avenue of resilience manifests itself in journalists who are against the whole system en masse, with all the political and economic elite representing it (Riegert and Ramsay 2013; Selvik and Høigilt 2021). Initially, many of these independent journalists utilized the new opportunities opened up by digital media and published their work as blogs (Jurkiewicz 2018).

Nonetheless, with the 2019 uprising, a new form of digital platforms began to rise (Kozman 2023) and – often founded by experienced journalists – claimed to be independent media. They have learned from the accumulated experience challenging the mainstream media structure within their former newsrooms and have formulated new business models (Gomez Sobrino 2021). These models capitalize on the new possibilities of digital media to become independent from the traditional way of political funding. This has allowed them to strive for a counter-hegemonic narrative against the whole sectarian system and its affiliated mainstream media, although this demarcation of us-versus-them has not been that simple or straightforward (Geha 2019, 22). Political actors act against each other and mainstream media are themselves polarized. This became clear, for instance, when some of the mainstream media stood with the protestors in the 2019 uprising, who, among others, called for a reform of the clientelist-political system (Kozman 2023). In other incidences, political opponents stood together, like during the anti-sectarian protests in 2015. Geha (2019) elaborates on how they strategically formulated a counter-narrative to frame the protestors as a threat to internal security and sectarian co-existence in Lebanon. These shifting tensions and imbalances within the media system obscure the discursive sphere and obstruct the process of discerning a clear hegemonic discourse to act against. Nevertheless, the new digital platforms have started to claim to be "alternative media." Accordingly, within this study, the term "alternative" media pertains to those new platforms that self-perceive themselves and claim to be independent of and opposing the sectarian political system as a whole. In contrast, the term "mainstream" pertains to the traditional platforms that are financed and owned by political actors who are connected with different sects and big political parties. However, as mentioned in the conceptualization for alternative media, there is no clear-cut dichotomy between the two, as the "alternative" outlets can be more or less opposed to the sectarian system, while the "mainstream" media can also be more or less for preserving the status quo that is based on sectarian power sharing. As a result, a new hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017) is emerging in Lebanon, whereby the mainstream media co-exist with the new alternative platforms (Harb 2024; Kozman 2023).

Research Questions

Building on the theoretical framework of the conceptualization and role of alternative media within the new emerging digitalized media systems, this study examines the role of the Lebanese alternative media within this contemporary hybrid media system post the 2019 upheaval. To achieve this objective, in our research questions, we reflect on the two dimensions of the counter-hegemonic roles of alternative media emphasized in the theoretical framework, namely, the *organizational professional* and the *discursive* dimensions.

Our first question focuses on the organizational and professional dimension, i.e., the three abovementioned aspects of bypassing the mainstream media gatekeeping, financial independence, and a new understanding of their journalistic roles and their strive for social change.

RQ1: Organizational and professional dimension: What is the role of the Lebanese alternative media within the media system?

The second research question is connected to the discursive dimension and compares the content of the mainstream and alternative media platforms in framing the 2020 port explosion in Beirut. The port explosion was chosen because it represented a transformative event in Lebanese politics and a pivotal juncture in the development of the anti-sectarian movement. The explosion and the investigation process surrounding it represented a climax of the failure of the sectarian power-sharing system and a structural opportunity for the anti-sectarian movement to challenge the system. Besides, for the alternative media, the explosion was a major moment to crystallize and formulate their counter-hegemonic discourse (Gomez Sobrino 2021, 316; Kozman 2023, 128). Hence, analyzing the coverage of the port explosion helps to discern the mechanism whereby alternative media frame major events.

RQ2: Discursive dimension: What are the differences and similarities in the alternative and mainstream media framing of the Beirut explosion?

Methodology

Semi-Structured Interviews

To answer the first research question, the methodology of semi-structured expert interviews was implemented (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2014). The interviews were conducted between March 2022 and April 2023, with an average length of 1 hour. According to the adopted definition coined by Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019), alternative media shall be understood through a relational mechanism in which they define themselves in relation to mainstream media. Therefore, the two alternative outlets were mainly selected according to their journalistic mission, as explained on their websites,[1] as they self-perceived their roles as alternative outlets to the mainstream outlets.

Hence, we conducted 17 interviews with Lebanese journalists from dissimilar media organizations. After reviewing the literature about the media scene in Lebanon, the journalists were recruited using the snowballing technique, still, we tried to diversify the sample of interviewees as much as possible to incorporate the different experiences and points of view. The main criteria for the selection of alternative media platforms was to have an editorial position inside the organization to have the required information about the funding and the mission of the platform. In our selection process, we focused only on the journalists who co-founded an alternative platform or had an editorial role at the time of interviewing them. Within the continuum of alternative-mainstream media, 10 journalists work in outlets that are positioned more

on the alternative side (such as *Naqd, Megaphone,* and *Sarde*), while seven work in outlets that are more or less within the mainstream spectrum (such as *MTV, LBC,* and *Al-Nahar*). The aim of interviewing journalists from mainstream outlets was to go beyond the confines of self-praise of alternative media journalists by also studying the mainstream journalists' views about alternative platforms, especially those views that are critical of these platforms.

Only four of the interviewees were women. Of the 10 alternative media journalists, 1 is a blogger, 2 host podcasts, 1 runs a YouTube channel, and 6 work at online platforms. With the exception of one journalist from an online platform, all the others were either (co)founders of the platform or the podcast host. Of the seven mainstream media journalists, four worked in TV stations and three in newspapers (Supplementary Fig. 1). From the sampled seven mainstream news organizations, we tried to diversify their political and sectarian affiliations between different political groups and sects as much as possible. Nevertheless, we failed to reach the pro-Shiite and pro-Hizbullah media, such as *Al-Manar*, as our requests for an interview were denied. It is worth noting that the 17 interviewed journalists do not represent all the views of their profession in Lebanon as many perspectives remain missing or underrepresented in our sample. All the quotations were anonymized. The only mentioned information was whether the quoted journalist worked in an alternative or mainstream outlet.

The semi-structured interview questions were classified into three broad categories to answer the first research question concerning the organizational dimension of alternative media. The first was the analogy of the roles of digital and social media outlets and the mainstream traditional ones. This one encompassed the most relevant questions about the role of digital alternative outlets and how they reach their audience. The second category revolved around the dynamic relationship between the political structure and the media system, such as how the Lebanese political conflict affects the media and vice-versa. Also, this category included the role of political funding and ownership structure within the media system. The third one examined how the journalists understood their roles in relation to the political conflict in Lebanon, in addition to their perception of the most relevant problems in the Lebanese media system and the best approaches to achieve positive social change. To analyze the interviews, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the transcripts (Mayring 2022).

Qualitative Framing Analysis

Concerning the second research question, a qualitative framing analysis (Scheufele 2003) of the alternative and mainstream media coverage of the Beirut port explosion was conducted. As mentioned, the categories alternative and mainstream are not binary demarcated. However, two alternative (*Daraj* and *Megaphone*) and two mainstream outlets (*Al-Nahar* and *Al-Manar*) were chosen. Another factor that affected the choice process was how comparable their content was with the content of mainstream outlets. In that regard, the objective was to achieve methodological comparability in the analysis process. For instance, although some alternative outlets are very popular and effective in Lebanon, their content is only available as long interviews without news format (such as *Sarde*), which makes it methodologically challenging to compare

them with a newspaper website like *Al-Nahar*. For the traditional media outlets, the decision was mainly to choose from different political groups. Therefore, we chose *Al-Manar,* which is the central mouthpiece of Hizbullah (Khatib, Matar, and Alshaer 2014), and *Al-Nahar,* which is affiliated with the 14 March coalition (El-Richani 2016, 104), which has been against Hizbullah and the Syrian's growing presence in Lebanon in the 2000s. Three out of the four chosen outlets (*Megaphone*, *Daraj*, and *Al-Nahar*) were represented in our interviews. The interviews were generally helpful in the selection process as we had an idea about their editorial policy before digging deeper into their media discourse to examine how this policy is operationalized in their coverage. Especially regarding the two alternative platforms, it was not enough to just ask them about their perceived role and organizational aspects but also to analyze their framing of the news. The analysis of the two dimensions warrants two different methods to approach them: interviews for the organizational dimension and framing analysis for the discursive one.

Although the four outlets represent relevant political orientations in Lebanon, they are not generalizable for all alternative and mainstream media in Lebanon, which in turn restricts the applicability of our conceptualization of alternative media in other different political contexts. Nonetheless, combining the two mentioned methods and studying both the organizational and discursive structures of alternative media in contrast to mainstream media shed light on the complexity and nuance of the alternative-mainstream continuum within the specific context of the polarized Lebanese media system.

To choose relevant content from the four outlets to answer the second research question, purposeful sampling was applied (Bryman 2016, 408). The rationale behind that was to choose articles that frame the same particular event and that are comparable to their counterparts from the other outlets, with respect to the size of the content, to achieve the maximum possible level of methodological comparability. Generally, the main events were the explosion on 4 August 2020, the appointment of judge Sawan to lead the investigation on 13 August 2020, replacing Sawan with judge Bitar on 18 February 2021, the first anniversary of the explosion on 4 August 2021, and the Tayouneh clashes on 14 October 2021 (Oueiss and Zgheib 2023).

Accordingly, as a first step, we manually searched all the articles about the explosion in the period 4 August 2020 – the day of the explosion – to 23 December 2021 – the day the investigation is halted after many sues and accusations against judge Bitar. Thereafter, a histogram was made to gauge the number of articles published in the four outlets in each month before choosing the months with the most relevant content. Per this histogram, the 3 months with the most coverage were August 2020, August 2021, and October 2021. Whereas August 2020 and 2021 were expected to be of that relevance as the months of the explosion and the first anniversary, October 2021 was highlighted in the coverage due to the escalation in the political contestation surrounding judge Tarek Bitar's[2] investigation after Hizbullah's protests and the consequent clashes (Oueiss and Zgheib 2023, 7). Twenty articles were chosen from each outlet, 10 from August 2020, 5 from August 2021, and 5 from October 2021. The aim for this selection process was to have an equal number of articles in 2020 and 2021. Also, we decided to take more articles from August 2020 compared to the other 2 months since it was the month of the event itself, which gave it more

relevance. One aim of this sampling process was to elaborate on the development of the framing of the explosion and the investigation by each outlet. Another criterion in the choice of the articles was their comparability with the article's format in the other outlets. For instance, the very short one-paragraph articles of *Al-Manar* were excluded because they are different in format from the longer analytical articles of *Daraj.* Similarly, the long analytical articles from *Al-Nahar* were chosen.

The 80 sampled articles were examined through a qualitative framing analysis (Scheufele 2003, 118). In this analysis, a deductive-inductive code system was established, wherein the first broad categories were deductively formulated from Entman's (1993) framework of the roles of framing: *problem definition, causal interpretations, moral judgment,* and *treatment recommendations*. The second categories were inductively developed from the text itself to investigate the main frames utilized in each dimension of the four broad categories. For each category, a specific definition for it and an example of the coded segment from the sampled articles were added (Mayring 2022, 100). The computer software MAXQDA was used to analyze the interviews and the articles.

Results

The results are presented according to the dimensions of the roles of alternative media that were explained in the theoretical framework and reflected in the two research questions. Firstly, we examine the organizational professional dimension through the results of the interviews. This dimension is categorized into the three aspects mentioned above. Thereafter, the results of the framing analysis are presented.

Organizational and Professional Dimension

Bypassing Mainstream Gatekeeping within the Hybrid Media System

The central part of the interviewees' depiction of the contemporary Lebanese media system revolved around the effect of the digitalization process, precisely, the rise of social media and digital alternative outlets. On the one hand, alternative media journalists highlighted the positive consequences of social media in enabling independent platforms to infiltrate the elite-controlled public sphere. Per this narrative, one central point was continuously highlighted: the political and elite control over traditional outlets, turning them into a mouthpiece for the political establishment. In that regard, it is worth noting that the interviewees used the term "*Sulta*" (which literally means power) for the establishment controlling the media. This word encompasses not only political actors but also any form of economic or social power in society. This depiction correlates with these journalists' framing of the Lebanese conflict in general, as a meta-sectarian one between the *people* and the ruling corrupt elite from all the sects and professions, i.e., political, economic, and religious elite.

> "And in Lebanon, people who have money are bankers and politicians because they stole the country. So, they come, and they have an influence on the editorial policy, if you want, the editorial rule of the media. So, traditional media today in Lebanon, if you really want to know what's happening in the country, you don't watch them. You watch

> alternative media (…) They are against the power and the 'sulta' like we call the regime, the political class." (Alternative journalist - 6).

Besides, alternative media journalists elaborated on how they use their social media platforms to reach their target audience, who are predominantly young people. According to this depiction of the Lebanese media market, the younger generation depends on the new digital platforms for the news, whereas the older generation still relies on traditional TV channels, especially those outlets affiliated with their political group or sect.

> "And I think that their (TV) reach is also significantly bigger than our reach (…) And we also mostly reach younger audiences. (…) But we are a serious competition to traditional media, in a sense that it's not that we are margin, and they are mainstream; it's not the divide." (Alternative journalist - 7).

On the other hand, the interviewees from the traditional media outlets elaborated on the dark side of social media[3] and the new digital outlets. They stressed the chaotic nature of social media and the huge amount of fake news on it. Furthermore, they mentioned that people trust traditional media more because it still has professional rules in objectivity and fact-checking in contrast to uncontrolled digital outlets. For some interviewees from traditional outlets, there is no difference between social media and new alternative outlets; they all fall under the overarching category of non-professional digital outlets.

> "On the traditional media, we still (until now) have some rules when you have the news, when it is about the credibility and other good things. But on social media, here in Lebanon, this is like a disaster." (Mainstream media journalist - 5).

It is worth noting here that some of the alternative media journalists actually acknowledged the chaotic and dark side of social media but in the context of inevitable collateral damage for having a free communication sphere in contrast to the traditional politically controlled one. Moreover, journalists from both outlets mentioned the negative dividing role of cyber armies. They alluded to the organized political cyber armies' role in spreading disinformation and hate speech, sometimes even targeting the journalists themselves to threaten or defame them.

Financial Independence and Ownership Structure

Similarly, journalists from alternative media stressed refusing the technological dichotomy between social media and traditional media. However, they preferred a different frame of demarcating two ensembles of media: the politically dependent one, whether online or traditional, and the independent one. They also highlighted how they preferred to be called "independent" or "new" media, not "alternative." Per this argument, online media, which are still dependent on political funding, shall be categorized as mainstream.

> "I do not like to call it alternative media. I call it new media because (the) alternative is like to replace something that is like/that is not/we are here to continue something that they created. So, this is not what we want (…) It is independent and new. (…) So, the difference between the independent new media and the traditional media is that the new media is independent." (Alternative journalist - 10).

In order to maintain this independence, they have to overcome a crucial challenge: funding. With the rising economic crisis, the media is becoming more dependent on political funding. Against this background, the alternative outlets are trying to optimize a business model in which they take funding from non-political and non-governmental organizations, besides increasing their profits from advertisements as much as possible.

> "It is true that we are a funded media outlet, but we never get money from any political party or political agenda side. We don't take money from the governments (…) So, to us, it is a critical question to maintain our editorial independence, and we know that independence, editorial independence, comes from financial independence." (Alternative journalist - 1).

Although several alternative media outlets received funding from different institutions, including European Union funded ones, they claim that those donors do not have any say in the editorial policy and give them the political independence they need. Following that logic, within the economic crisis and the shrinking of the advertising market in the country, the crux of the independence question becomes not whether the media get funding but whether the donors control the editorial policy of the media or not. Still, this funding policy opens the door for criticism from the mainstream media and political parties that those alternative platforms are not really independent and are working for whoever funds them if they claim otherwise, especially NGOs funded by the West.

> "I have a very high sensitivity towards any role of civil society organizations funded by the West, and any initiative related to freedom of the press or related to such matters, because I believe that their background is never innocent (…) There are dozens of websites in Lebanon where journalists work and get paid high salaries supported by funding institutions in Germany, in America, in France, in Britain; they are supported from all these countries in order to promote one point of view in Lebanon." (Mainstream journalist - 4).

A New Understanding of Their Role as Journalists

Concerning the normative role of journalists in society, there was a significant difference between the journalists from alternative outlets and their counterparts from traditional outlets. Interviewees from traditional outlets concentrated on being objective and non-biased. In contrast, interviewees from alternative media did not mention being non-biased as a journalistic role. They mentioned reporting facts but not being neutral. Alternative media journalists focused on their political and social duty to advocate for social change, take political positions, and watchdog the politicians. Their answers reflect a particular normative role of journalists as agents for positive social change against the corrupt elite.

> "Yes, we want to be independent, but we are not neutral. There is a difference between being neutral, being independent, and being objective. This is not the same thing. I do not like the term objective. I prefer the term honest. We want to be honest about reporting the facts and explaining the situation." (Alternative journalist - 5).

> "We have a very critical tone of the establishment, but also of all forms of power, religious authorities, the financial power through the banks and the corporations, obviously sectarian political parties (…) We have a particular focus on shedding light on groups that don't

> get access and visibility, so marginalized groups (…) We also have an eagerness to deconstruct official narratives (…) from traditional media or from politicians themselves." (Alternative journalist - 8).

In contrast, the interviewees from mainstream media focused more on the classical journalistic roles of being objective and avoiding opinionized coverage of the events. While the difference in the perception between the journalistic roles was not clear-cut between alternative and mainstream journalists, the focus on advocating social change and taking political positions was more salient in the discourse of alternative media journalists.

> "I shall, as any journalist in the world, firstly not interfere with one letter of my opinion. I shall just investigate for them the truth and what is happening." (Mainstream journalist - 7).

Discursive Dimension

The framing of the alternative media, *Daraj* and *Megaphone,* of the explosion in the first month of its occurrence was very similar and fostered a precise, coherent narrative, which is that the explosion is the climax of years of the ruling of corrupt criminal elites from all the sects running an entirely failing system. The main problem definition was that the whole Lebanese system is corrupt and failing, while the leading cause was the corrupt elite and ruling class who were explicitly accused of being morally corrupt and criminals. Accordingly, the suggested solution was to deconstruct and transform the whole system and hold all the ruling class members, regardless of their sect, accountable. With the exception of a few times when they specified Hizbullah as the leading actor in this corrupt system, the articles used broad terms that encompassed the whole ruling class from all the sects.

> "It feels like everybody of us felt his body had fallen or frozen; and that for one moment this body does not want but revenge, revenge for the sake of revenge, for all the pain the gang has caused." (Megaphone, 5 August 2020).

> "If we contemplate a little bit the years before the 4th of August explosion, we will find that the ruling class has been preparing the details of a coming death, everybody knows about, except its victims." (Daraj, 24 August 2020).

In August 2021, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbullah, gave a pivotal speech in which he attacked Judge Bitar and accused him of being a front for Hizbullah's political opponents who wanted to politicize the investigation, and accordingly, Hizbullah started leading the campaign against the investigation and Bitar. Therefore, the two alternative media started to specify Hizbullah and Nasrallah as the leading actors and representatives of the establishment's campaign to hide the truth and obscure the investigations. The problem definition shifted into the efforts to impede the investigation and hide the truth, while Hizbullah became mentioned a lot as the cause of this problem.

> "Beyond Judge Bitar, yesterday's protest was a reminder from Nasrallah to all the ruling class that he still possesses his main weapon: the civil war weapon, and that he is ready to use it regardless of the cost." (Megaphone, 15 October 2021).

Meanwhile, *Al-Nahar,* similar to *Megaphone* and *Daraj*, depicted the problem as an extensive complete failure of the system due to the corrupt ruling officials. However, for *Al-Nahar*, the suggested solution in August 2020 was holding this elite accountable and conducting an international investigation. Besides, some articles in that month focused on the humanitarian aid to the Lebanese people and holding Hizbullah responsible for the explosion.

The basic narrative underlining the framing possessed many similarities between the three outlets, especially in August and October 2021, when Hizbullah decided to lead the campaign against Judge Bitar. During these 2 months, the framing of *Al-Nahar* became more critical against Hizbullah per se instead of attacking the government or the regime as a whole.

The differences between the framing of *Al-Nahar* and the two alternative outlets were subtle ones and not much about the explosion per se, but other issues, primarily in their depiction of the mainstream politicians, from the government officials and members of the civil war involved sectarian families and militias, opposing the regime and Hizbullah. *Al-Nahar* has been much less critical toward the mainstream anti-Hizbullah figures like Samir Geagea[4] and the Sunni parliament members, whereas *Megaphone* writers always mentioned Saad Hariri[5] and Geagea with other politicians' names as "the criminal gang" or at least the reason for the catastrophe. To put it simply, for the alternative media, the political actors opposing Hizbullah, like Geagea, are part of the problem, too. While for *Al-Nahar*, they can sometimes be part of the solution or victims of Hizbullah's dominant attitude.

> "And the leader of the Lebanese Kataeb party, MP Samy Gemayel[6], mentioned that Hizbullah is using all its tools to control the state (…) and now it has shifted to the judiciary system to break and dominate it, in reference to Hizbullah's call to stop judge Bitar's investigations in the explosion of Beirut's port." (Al-Nahar, 15 October 2021).

Nonetheless, after Hizbullah ignited the campaign against Bitar's investigations, these differences became trivial in the framing analysis. In other words, Hizbullah's campaign polarized the Lebanese discourse, which in turn obscured the differences between the digital alternative outlets and the opposing mainstream media (see Table 1).

On the other side of the aisle, *Al-Manar's* framing was totally different. In August 2020, the problem was defined as a humanitarian loss due to an unintentional mistake, which consequently needed humanitarian aid from the allies. The articles revolved around the humanitarian loss and the allies', especially Iran and Gaza, efforts to help the Lebanese people. Furthermore, the suggested treatment was mainly conducting a local investigation instead of an international one, as the opposition, revolutionary groups, and NGOs demanded. During this initial phase, *Al-Manar* articulated its trust in the Lebanese local authorities and judicial system. However, in August 2021, their framing changed significantly.

After Nasrallah's speech in August 2021, *Al-Manar* followed his steps and transformed its framing of the explosion and the investigation into a classical communication technique from Hizbullah, whereby its media adheres to Nasrallah's discourse and echoes it (Khatib, Matar, and Alshaer 2014). As a result, the problem became the politicization of the investigation, while the blame for the causing actors shifted to the "dividing Lebanese political groups who conspire with the West, Israel, and the

Table 1. Framing of the 2020 port explosion.

Media	Time	Problem	Cause	Moral judgement	Solution
Daraj & Megaphone	August 2020	Failure of the whole sectarian system	Corrupt establishment	Establishment and political class are criminals	Complete regime change
	August and October 2021	Intentional efforts to hide the truth	Corrupt establishment led by Hizbullah	Establishment and political class are criminals	Complete regime change
Al-Nahar	August 2020	Failure of the whole system	Corruption and Hizbullah's control over the state	Establishment and political class are criminals	Complete regime change and humanitarian aid
	August and October 2021	Intentional efforts to hide the truth	Hizbullah's actions and campaign	Hizbullah strives to dominate Lebanon	Not in the focus
Al-Manar	August 2020	Humanitarian loss due to the explosion	An unintended mistake	No clear moral judgments	Humanitarian aid
	August and October 2021	Politicization of the investigations	Conspiracies between the divisive Lebanese movements and foreign enemies	Other political groups are opportunistic and divisive	Having an unbiased, non-politicized investigation

House of Saud to utilize sectarianism for their political gains." Per this narrative, the NGOs were part of these dividing conspiring forces. In October 2021, after the Tayouneh clashes,[7] this conspiracy frame became more aggressive and explicit. Firstly, from Nasrallah himself and thereafter, from Hizbullah's media in follow.

> "The agents of Israel and the USA did not like a strong Lebanon, so they were assigned a collaborative American Israeli Saudi mission with the aim of attacking (Syria) and drowning Lebanon and the resistance in a sectarian war." (An opinion article on Al-Manar from 9 October 2021 commenting on the Tayouneh clashes).

Discussion

Since the central aspect dominating the Lebanese media system has for years been the dependence of media on political funding and protection from the parties and their affiliated sectarian groups (Dajani 2019; El-Richani 2016), achieving financial independence is the main avenue for alternative media to reach political and editorial independence (Gomez Sobrino 2021). Consequently, alternative media acquire their raison d'être from arguing that mainstream media in Lebanon are predominantly puppets for the corrupt ruling elite. Nevertheless, the economic crisis and shrinking advertising market create a paradox for alternative media. If any outlet wants to expand, it needs funding, and since it is hard to sustain a huge media organization only from advertising and crowdfunding, they accept funding from mostly international NGOs or political organizations. However, accepting such funding makes them vulnerable to criticism from the mainstream media and their opponents for being dependent on them. Despite this dilemma, the proliferation of social media platforms paved

the way for alternative media to develop a low-budget business model beyond the dependence on political funding. However, social media has also enabled a huge amount of disinformation and cyber armies to be instrumentalized by political parties. Within this developing hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017), social media is not only an exclusive tool for alternative media but also for the political leaders and parties who are still the most effective actors in forming public opinion.

Within this media system, alternative media face the challenge of differentiating themselves from the mainstream oppositional ones. Nonetheless, this task is not that easy. In the case of the framing of the explosion, the differences between *Al-Nahar* and the alternative media platforms became less clear when Hizbullah started its campaign against Bitar and pushed for escalation. Therefore, when society became so polarized between pro and against the investigation, the dissimilarities between the different actors inside the pro-investigation camp became more ambiguous.

This challenge highlights one of the central limitations of alternative media inside a polarized conflictual media system. Since in democratic media systems, alternative media operate against the mainstream media altogether; they compartmentalize all mainstream outlets as part of the hegemonic system (Kenix 2011). Within such systems, it is easier to argue that all the mainstream media are part of the overarching broad political and economic system led by the strong state and official political institutions. In contrast, within polarized media systems with weak states like Lebanon, the high level of conflict and fragmentation makes it harder to categorize all the media, including the oppositional ones, according to the ad hoc political alliances, as part of the regime. As a result, alternative media become simply accused of being just another front for the mainstream political oppositional groups, such as the accusation made by Hizbullah that all these alternative outlets and NGOs are proxies for the West and their affiliated Lebanese parties. Against this background, in such media systems, alternative media strive to develop counter-hegemonic frames against the whole system while acting from outside the system by being independent of the sectarian groups.

This notion of acting from outside the system is particularly relevant in defining being "alternative" in a fragmented and polarized media system with a weak state like Lebanon. Within the sectarian power-sharing system in Lebanon, some groups possess more political power than others at a certain moment. Hence, the weaker groups and their affiliated mainstream media act at this particular moment as an opposition and alternative to that hegemonic one, but from within the sectarian power-sharing system itself, in contrast to the "alternative media" that (claim to) act from outside the system which is criticized as dysfunctional. This "alternativeness" in such a polarized media system manifests itself in two dimensions: organizationally and discursively. Organizationally, being alternative means being financially and politically independent from all the hegemonic sectarian groups and leaders. Discursively, it means developing a counter-hegemonic narrative against the broader hegemonic sectarian one overarching the whole system. Nevertheless, due to the discursive and political polarization between the sectarian hegemonic groups themselves, discerning such a clear hegemonic narrative (to counter) becomes hard for the alternative media therein. Alternative media acquires its meaning from its relationship with the mainstream and the broader hegemonic system (Waisbord 2022). Thus, alternativeness in a polarized hybrid media system like Lebanon is not defined by being digital or new or even oppositional to the current government but by being independent of the grip of

traditional hegemonic groups and critical against the broader social system overarching all those groups not only the current ruling ones in the temporal governmental coalition.

By scrutinizing the case of Lebanon, our article contributes to broadening our understanding of alternative media in a certain type of media systems, that is the fragmented and polarized ones with weak state institutions. In a democratic or an authoritarian system, alternative media act against the ruling hegemonic political groups (and their affiliated mainstream media) represented in the strong state institutions. However, in polarized media systems where the political power is fragmented between different groups and the state does not possess that power, being "alternative" becomes more complicated, as it manifests itself in being "alternative" to all the conflicting hegemonic groups, not only certain stronger ones. Further research can study the roles and limitations of alternative media within other types of media systems, especially those in under-researched countries. For instance, much less is known about the role of alternative media in war-torn fragile states.

Notes

1. https://megaphone.news/about?lang=englishand https://daraj.media/en/who-we-are/.
2. Judge Tarek Bitar was appointed in February 2021 by the Higher Judicial Council to head the investigations in the port explosion.
3. Herein, the term social media is used to refer to platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter previously), Instagram, and YouTube. In contrast, the term "digital media" here is utilized in a broader aspect to refer to any sort of media that is online on the Internet, whether it is social media platforms or websites.
4. Samir Geagea is the leader of the Lebanese Forces, which is a Christian party.
5. Saad Hariri is the former prime minister of Lebanon from 2009 to 2011 and 2016 to 2020.
6. Samy Gemayel is the seventh leader of the Kataeb party, which is a Christian party.
7. The Tayouneh clashes took place on the 14 October 2021 in Beirut when snipers on rooftops attacked protesters from Hizbullah and its allies, who were demanding the removal of judge Bitar from leading the investigations.

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