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# In Time of Crisis, a Changing Role of the Media in Lebanon [1]

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As I write this it is late evening and Lebanon's Future Television is deep into its nightly talk show. Four hours, more or less, on where the country is headed. In the upper left corner of the screen a black mourning band cuts across the station's logo. Next to it is the legend "40 ... for Lebanon." The number marks the days since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The words are part of the Lebanese opposition's slogan: "The Truth ... for Lebanon."

Much of central Beirut is festooned with pictures of Hariri and banners calling for "The Truth." Hariri has been buried in Martyrs Square, the historical heart of the city, and the scene of some of the fiercest fighting during the civil wars that wracked Lebanon from 1975 until 1990. The demonstrations that took place in the square for nearly a month after Hariri's assassination have ceased, but Christians and Muslims continue to trek to the grave day and night, a sign that the tensions of Lebanon's war years are buried, but far from forgotten.

The media's role in all this has been extraordinary.

"TV and newspapers are not only following the news, they are part of it," says Yusef Bazzi, a columnist for Al-Mustaqbal, Future Television's sister newspaper.

It is a view seconded by Gebran Tueni, publisher of one of the country's oldest newspapers, An-Nahar. "We have a clear agenda now for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon .... The Syrians have been behaving very badly with all of Lebanon and now there's a snowball effect."

The weeks since the assassination have been a defining event for this country's media. "My impression is that the media has had a huge impact at several different levels. It was the vehicle that promoted mass mobilization ... providing a sense of solidarity. Even just by watching the media at home you felt fortified and you felt part of something big," says Rami Khouri, editor-at-large of the English-language Daily Star.

The effect, Khouri says, has been similar to that of the first Gulf War on CNN: bringing the young network into the big leagues, and instilling it with a sense of mission.

Future, a television station set up by Hariri in the early '90s, has stayed with the story in ways the rest have not. Its anchors are required to wear black mourning clothes and Hariri pins with blue ribbons, another symbol of Lebanon's opposition. The regular programming schedule of movies and soap operas has been abandoned, and almost any statement by an opposition

political leader is carried in full.

The station's staff argue that none of this compromises their objectivity as journalists. "All Lebanese TV stations are owned by somebody. Everyone understands this," says Elsa Yazbek, an anchor/reporter at Future TV. "The first mission is we want the truth. The first mission is to keep the subject alive in the minds of the people."

"The owners of the media are politicians," Bazzi says. And objectivity? "It's very relative."

Yazbek and others come close to arguing that the media's open partisanship serves some sort of higher purpose. Her refrain, "people are not afraid anymore," is one a visitor to Beirut hears often these days.

Not all stations have taken the same approach. Hizbollah's Al-Manar television seems to do its best to minimize the opposition's activities, while Lebanon's most popular station, LBC (which is Christian-owned and is widely identified with some of the wartime Christian militia leaders) has almost completely returned to its regular schedule, which is long on soap operas and relatively thin when it comes to news.

Khouri decries a lack of "detached analysis" in the Arab media generally, something he says the performance of Lebanese newspapers and television stations has only made more glaringly obvious over the last month.

There's a dearth of balanced interpretation, he says. "They've provided a megaphone, rather than a microscope."