

**Changing the Narrative: Alternative Media Bias and Its Ties to Political Economy**

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## Abstract

Alternative media is a term used to refer to the various forms of media that provide the audience with content that varies from the mainstream one. According to Jeppesen's theory on alternative media (2019), mainstream media tend to show the audience through its news one side of the story which is based on the political agendas and ideologies of the elite; however, the alternative media covers the story from different perspectives. Alternative media as a term is debatable and this is due to the lack of knowing its exact meaning. This also causes a major challenge for media literacy as several outlets use this term differently. According to a study done by Internews and Maharat Foundation (2021) young people in Lebanon started relying heavily on alternative media to get information amid the events of October 17. Due to the deterioration of the Lebanese political situation, mainstream and alternative media played a role in creating unawareness and a lack of transparency. This raises the issue of following the media outlets without understanding the political economy and media literacy. Thus, alternative media should be viewed within this context. Based on recent studies (Al-JANA et al., 2020, Internews, 2022, FNF & SKF, 2021 ) have assumed that the prominence of alternative media is due to its alleged coverage of the voice of the Lebanese audience. However, the problem is that these alternative media claim that they have their funding and are not politically or economically affiliated. There is barely any research on the political economy of Lebanese alternative media. Thus, my research will fill this gap. It will examine the difference between alternative media and independent media, and the political economy of the Lebanese alternative media 961 News, Daraj Media, Raseef22, Megaphone, and The Public Source.

**Research question:** How does the political economy of the Lebanese alternative media shape their coverage of news?

**Keywords:** political economy, funding, independent, alternative media, mainstream media, biases.

## Introduction

The media system in Lebanon has undergone major changes in the past years, as the country is facing economic issues and political instability. The Lebanese media landscape is multifaceted, with deep historical roots connected to various aspects of Lebanese society. Yet, the political context in the region also is involved in affecting how the media sector works. Lebanese media organizations vary between mainstream and alternative media outlets. The public misuse or misunderstand the terms mainstream and alternative media. Thus, this paper will explore the characteristics of each type of media and its exact definition that the public may be unaware of. Mainstream media often presents the news from the perspective of the elite, while alternative media claim to reflect the perspectives of diverse groups in society. Alternative media outlets in Lebanon claim that they are not affiliated with any political agenda. However, they are funded by external and internal organizations that are politicized which will affect the way they cover the news. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the political economy of these outlets. In addition, it will provide an analysis of the content produced by certain alternative media outlets to understand the relation between the funding and the agenda of the media outlet and how it shapes the public discourse. I will also investigate the political affiliations' effect on the bias of the media content in Lebanon. The country's political scheme is highly partisan and sectarian which is reflected in media coverage. Overall, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of alternative media outlets in Lebanon, by shedding light on the political economy of these outlets and the presence of bias in their content.

## Literature Review

### The controversy of definitions:

#### 1. *Alternative media*

There is a controversy among researchers regarding how they define alternative media since each one provides a different meaning. Armstrong (1981) was one of the first scholars who have done academic work regarding the work of alternative media without providing its definition. He believes that the clandestine press that was contributing to social movements caused the emergence of alternative media. Therefore, it is a tool for causing a shift in society's structure. A few years later, Comedia, a British research group, provided the first definition of alternative media (1984) which is anything that opposes the mainstream or traditional media and is against the establishment and the capitalist system. However, Demir (2023), argues that researchers back then did not consider this definition as 'satisfactory' (p.40). He adds that other authors, later, comprehended other definitions.

Alternative media as a term is defined as a way to voice the public who fight against the government and a platform that covers social movements and has a more democratic approach than mainstream media. Downing (2001) defines alternative media as radical. In his book, he explains that alternative media presents minor ethnic groups, expresses the ideas of the public who oppose the authority, and contributes to fighting the policies and powerful structure of the government. Similarly, Atton (n.d., as cited in Waltz, 2005) argues that alternative media is linked to raising the voice of minorities. He notices that alternative media cover publications related to ethnic minorities because historically, this group has always been underrepresented in mainstream media. According to Downing (2003), alternative media covers social movements;

thus, it should be looked through as a type of activism. In addition, Downing states: “These media are typically small-scale, generally underfunded...” (p. Xi, 2001). He claims that these media are sometimes unrecognized by the public and that they work without getting financial support from other parties. He also mentions that alternative media tends to be more democratic than mainstream media. In other words, Downing conceptualizes alternative media in a radical approach; it is a mediator of developing an oppositional culture and power; thus causing social changes.

On the other hand, some authors have different opinions regarding what alternative media is. Rodriguez (2001) argues that it is not necessary to define alternative media by checking its relationship with mainstream media because each type of media should be inspected solely through its objectives and outcomes. She explains that based on the role that this media plays and the impact it has on the public, we can know what alternative media means. Also, Rodriguez (2001) suggests that citizen media is a better fit than alternative media. She believes that this term encompasses activism, open access, and without-profit orientation. Forde (2009) expresses alternative media as independent media. He discusses that the definition of this term varies continuously because it can be defined in several ways such as independent media, any media that is outside the mainstream one, or any other definitions. Similarly, Jeppesen (2019) describes alternative media as a collective medusa in several forms. It can be identified as radical, critical, or independent, unlike other authors who provided one definition only. This variety in definitions suggests a need for a more comprehensive and objective approach to defining alternative media.

## 2. *Mainstream media*

Mainstream media refers collectively to media outlets that target a vast majority of people in a country and provide them with local and international news. Several scholars have discussed the characteristics of mainstream media and its definition as a term. According to Sobieraj (2011), mainstream media is a main tool that offers the public open access to news. Gitlin (1980) (2005) agrees that mainstream media contributes to the exposure of social movements and as a reverse effect, the media institution's role becomes more effective on the public. However, Taylor (2017), indicated that certain movements are covered by the mainstream media to serve political agendas. This highlights the potential political bias in the media outlets and increases the spread of fake news. When a political party controls a mainstream media outlet, it will try to distort the image of other political parties and be biased in their news. As a result, several fake news stories would be spread without the audience being aware of them. Taylor (2017) not only defines mainstream media but also compares it to alternative media. She points out that mainstream media is the organizations that seek to gain profit, are owned by big corporations, and aim to reach a higher audience, while alternative media is designated for small groups that fight against the status quo. Mainstream media outlets are owned by large conglomerates that prioritize profit over journalistic standards. This makes the corporations vulnerable to market pressure as the audience's interests can shape the priorities and the content produced by mainstream media organizations because the big corporations are forced to respond to the public's demand to maintain profitability. However, alternative media outlets aim to raise the voice of underrepresented groups, but due to the limitations of financial sources, these outlets may be forced to get funding from big corporations and follow their agenda. Therefore, alternative media will not play its role of being independent and not biased. Similarly, Lobzhanidze et al. (2013),

define mainstream media as the content which is produced by big companies to attract an audience. In addition, the stories covered are those that entail major public interests.

Some studies showed that mainstream media is majorly the coverage of news stories following traditional ways of newsmaking which is collecting the information and sharing it with the public on newspapers and televisions (Gans & Herbert 1979; Shoemaker & Reese 1996). As previous authors described it, Apuke (2016) also calls mainstream media traditional mainstream media. Also, Wright et al. (2010) consider that traditional media is the same as mainstream media and they identified it as all the media forms (newspapers, radio, TV...) that were initiated before the origination of the new media which is any media applied through technology advances. Other scholars interrelate the mainstream media with the protest paradigm. Sjöqvist (2018) explains that the protest paradigm is the negative coverage of the protests by the mainstream media. McLeod and Hertog (1999) think that all mainstream media cover marginalized demonstrations; thus they look at this media as a part of the protest paradigm approach.

### **EU's Involvement in the Lebanese Political and Economic Stance**

The European Union's involvement in Lebanon reflects its major implications on the political and economic situations of the country. The EU's relations with Lebanon became keen after they signed an agreement in 2006 which resulted in establishing a Free Trade Area (EEAS, 2021). In addition, the EU has supported Lebanon financially and politically after October 17th events. The EU has urged Lebanon to elect a new cabinet and supported the reformation of the tax system and monetary policy (ANND, 2019). The EU has encouraged the Lebanese government to quickly find solutions and suggest reforms that would solve the economic and



political instability. Also, the EU has provided Lebanon with more than €30 million in aid after Beirut's explosion in 2020 (EEAS, 2020).

The EU has also been supporting the media sector in Lebanon, claiming that its goal is to foster independent and free media. However, the immense involvement of the EU in Lebanon raises the concern that the EU's intention may not be to evolve freedom of the press but to serve certain geopolitical priorities. This reflects that the EU's motivation may be fragmented, and its support for the media sector may power political and media polarization.

### **The Political Economy of Alternative Media**

The political economy of media refers to the correlation between media, politics, and the economy. This term started being used in the eighteenth century to refer to the control of the state's economy. Caporaso and Levine (1992) discuss the term from two major approaches which are the self-regulating market and the public agenda. The first approach examines how the state can succeed in satisfying its wants with limited sources. And the second approach discusses the relationship of the public with the private sector's interests. According to McChesney (2008), political economists believe that media work is affected by policies made by the state. These policies are claimed to be a result of the public's interests; however, political economists believe that the policies are made without the public's consent. In other words, the content of the media is produced by the state under the name of the public. McChesney (2008) argues that the media system does not convey the public's voice; it is a result of the state's agenda. In addition, McChesney (2008) highlights the significance of understanding the political economy of media. By studying the nature of the media's political economy, scholars can then indicate how society works, and the role of media in affecting social issues such as racism and sexism. Moreover, the

political economy of the media demonstrates the reality of the political system. Similarly, Klaehn (2010) argues that the political and economic elite of society controls the media's content; thus they have the power of influencing the public perceptions of what is happening around them.

The content published by the alternative media is a result of information provided by the owners of the organizations and the participation of the audience in the formation of what is published. Fuchs and Sandoval (2015) discuss that alternative media content is produced by both the audience and media owners. Audiences of this media contribute to developing critical and interesting content different from the mainstream media. In addition, Fuchs and Sandoval (2015) believe that media owners and consumers cannot be distinct in alternative media as both have the power and control of what is published. To study the political economy of the media, it should be looked at within the creation, dissemination, and consumption of information in the context of dominance, capitalism, and the relation of power (Mosco, 2009, as cited in Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015). This is considered a normative approach since the information is connected to the nature of society, the media system, and social movements. Fuchs and Sandoval (2015, p.) state: "The political economy of capitalism imposes a fundamental limit on contemporary alternative media: within capitalism, to reach the broader public requires money, people, reputation and political influence, but capitalism is a society grounded in the asymmetric distribution of political, economic and cultural resources" (p.168). He continues that the elite, despite its division into opposing groups, tends to control society as a united hegemonic alliance. Alternative media's role is focused on criticizing the ruling class and as a result, the alternative media would not receive funding from the elite, as its work has been voluntary since its establishment. These media frequently lack funding and exposure; thus they have two flows to abide by. The first one is receiving funding from political power (mainly from the political parties), and other sources

such as advertisements. But in this case, alternative media will lose its main goal which is being a platform that criticizes and faces societal and political norms. Alternative media will also have to follow the agenda of those who are in power. In case the alternative media organizations tend to work independently, without receiving any funds from a political party, they would face a financial problem and this can affect their role; thus they will be marginalized (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015).

Due to the absence of research on the political economy of Lebanese alternative media, this paper focuses on five major alternative media that are mostly used by the residents of Lebanon. On their platforms, all the alternative media outlets claim that they were established as platforms that aim to present the news objectively and independently. However, they state that they receive funding from several organizations which means that these alternative media have hidden political affiliations. Three out of the five selected outlets, International Media Support, funds them. IMS is an international non-profit organization that is based in Denmark. According to its annual report (2021), IMS has invested 18% of its total money 28,389,579 euros. IMS (n.d) claims that its main goal is to support journalists' freedom of expression and promote democracy, as it mainly works with countries that have passed through armed conflicts. There are concerns regarding the organization's strategy given that it primarily works with countries that have experienced wars. Working with countries that need assistance after a conflict is beneficial for such nations; however, it is crucial to realize that unstable and violent environments can harm and threaten journalists' lives. IMS works also in neighboring Arab countries such as Syria, Jordan, and Occupied Palestine. The main funders of this organization are the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish embassies in Denmark and the European Union. As the Lebanese alternative media receive funding from this organization, there is a possibility to follow

the funders' political agenda to maintain the funding. Although IMS does not openly mention its political affiliations, receiving funding from the European Union can provide a vision of its political stance. For instance, on its website, IMS clearly shows the activities and projects it works on to support Ukrainian journalists. Since it is funded by the EU, the IMS would have a similar political agenda as its funders. The EU has always been involved in the Lebanese political situation. For example, the EU tried to blacklist and ban Hezbollah's military wing in 2020 (ELNET, 2020). Therefore, the EU has certain affiliations that will also be reflected in the organizations it supports. The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) is also another European organization that funds Daraj media and Megaphone. This organization is established by the EU and claims that its goal is to foster democracy in several regions and support independent journalists. While the EED's support appears to have a positive influence on media organizations, there are some concerns about the organization's underlying motives. The EED can act as a tool for the European Union's geopolitical interests. EED'S agenda aligns with the EU's policies. Thus, the EED may be promoting the EU's political agenda which may affect the agendas of the organizations that are funded by the EED. Rodriguez (2007) discusses that non-profit organizations claim that they fund some countries to support them due to their economic and social problems; however, in fact, they are funding the governments to promote a certain political agenda. Rodriguez (2007) defines it as a "non-profit industrial complex". He argues that Western NGOs and state organizations join forces and pretend to be working on social changes, but in reality, these organizations spread political agendas that benefit their interests. These organizations have a major goal which is white supremacy.

In addition, The Public Source is funded by Rosa-Luxemburg, an NGO in Germany which is affiliated with the German Left party Die Linke (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, n.d.). Die

Linke (2009), on their website, recognizes Israel as a state and supports it. Germany has always been supporting Israel and has a close relationship. In addition, the German government contributed to Israel's security and defense and provided it with military equipment and funds. On the other hand, as Germany funds foreign media outlets it raises concerns about the influence of the funding on the media landscape, globally. The German-Israeli relationship would affect the portrayal of Israel in the media outlets funded by Germany and can influence the Middle East's political landscape.

The Asfari Foundation (UK-based), Open Society Foundations (US-based), and Canal France International (French) are also Western funding that helps several alternative media outlets financially. Open Society Foundations (OSF), owned by the Hungarian-American businessman George Soros, aims to support left-progressive groups (Influence Watch, 2022). And in 2021, OSF spent \$43.7M on funding for the MENA countries. OSF can have a significant influence on the political situation since Soros has political affiliations. Therefore, the funding from OSF will also affect the media's work by promoting a particular agenda or ideology.

On the other hand, some alternative media outlets receive Arab funding from Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) and Arab Fund for Arts and Culture. All these organizations claim that they promote the same goal which is freedom of speech and democracy. SKF is a Lebanese organization that claims it is not politically affiliated; however, while looking at its content, its news coverage is fragmented. Despite the allegations of independence, these funders have political agendas. And this can affect the funded organizations as they have to follow their ideologies to sustain financial stability. Looking into the content of Daraj, Megaphone, and SKF they have articles that directly attack one political party which is Hezbollah instead of criticizing all the parties.

Regarding the other media outlets 961 News and Raseef 22, they do not openly talk about their funders. However, they also focus on negatively covering Hezbollah's news. As an alternative media, they are not supposed to frame the news. This may also indicate that they are either not credible media outlets or receive funding from politically affiliated sources.

### **Lebanese Media System**

Each country has its own media system that differs from other countries, even though it may have common societal norms. When using the term media system, the communication literature refers to it as a set of mass media in a certain society (McQuail, 2000). Media systems are the result of historical, social, and ongoing technological advancements that constantly change with the shift that occurs in society. McQuail (2000) considers that the media system is made up of how much the politics are included in the work frame and funding, scale, and regulation of the audience. Hallin and Mancini (2004) also study the media systems based on the inclusion of politics, market, and professionalism in work.

The political power in Lebanon is divided among sects that share the power and benefit from it (Richter & Kozman, 2021). The size of the country, minimal resources, and limited financial situation play a role in shaping the media system and the political sphere. In addition due to the corrupted government and clientelism, the media system is affected. Richter and Kozman (2021) discuss that political parallelism and partisanship control the work of media. This is done through direct ownership or indirect affiliations. Political parties or religious groups mainly control the media organizations except for two channels which are LBCI and Al-Jadeed, as claimed by Richter and Kozman (2021), that are internally pluralized.

The financial needs of media outlets need to be monitored to maintain the independence of their content. The Lebanese Ministry of Information is supposed to be responsible for monitoring the finances of the organizations to maintain their independence; however, the Ministry has chosen not to carry out any financial affairs (Richter & Kozman, 2019). As a result, the media institutions had the freedom of providing their financial needs from benefactors, foreign countries, and political parties without being asked about their funders. This causes the reliance of the media on political money which affects their coverage of political topics.

According to Richter and Kozman (2021), there are currently major problems that the media system in Lebanon faces. The limitless options that the Internet provides to the audience, cause their fragmentation. Consequently, the “eyeballs” have been scattered and the advertising revenue has decreased. Moreover, with the constant urge for knowing local news regarding the economic and political situation of the country, the media started encountering major problems such as closures, high costing, and layoffs of employees. The political funding of media organizations aims to force the political figures’ control over these organizations. Therefore, the media outlets work under the power of the political parties and shape their content in a way that serves the agenda of the elites instead of covering the news objectively.

All the problems that the Lebanese media system is facing affect both mainstream media organizations and alternative media outlets. The major mainstream channels are LBCI, MTV, Al-Jadeed, Al-Manar, and OTV, and there is a range of alternative media outlets.

## **Overview of Lebanese alternative media outlets**

This paper will focus on five major Lebanese alternative media as mentioned earlier: 961 News, Daraj Media, Raseef22, Megaphone, and The Public Source. These media outlets are chosen based on the high presence of the audience on their social media platforms and their high coverage of the October 17th events. According to De Lapparent (2021), Megaphone was one of the main media outlets that covered the events and its audience increased from 8000 to 60000. Currently, Megaphone's Instagram account is verified and has more than 132,000 followers. De Lapparent (2021) added that the Public Source started a new section that focuses on covering the protests' news and it is called " Dispatches from the October Revolution". And 961 News has more than 123,000 followers on their Instagram page, Raseef22 has a verified Instagram account with 316,000 followers, and Daraj Media's Instagram page is verified and has more than 50,000 followers.

### **961 News**

961 News is an online news website that only covers local news or news directly related to Lebanon. It was established in 2016 as a blog and it evolved to be Lebanon's leading English outlet according to their identification on its website. On the "About" page, there is a brief biography of the owner who is Anthony Kantoura (961 News, 2022). The biography says that he has expertise in several fields such as marketing, real estate, and media. On the same page, there are also the cores and beliefs of 961 News. They claim that it is an independent outlet and they do not have any political connections or affiliations. In addition, they state that they aim to fight the traditional affiliated coverage of news by presenting credible news to their audience.



## **Daraj Media**

Daraj Media claims to be an independent online news website that is founded by several journalists. Their mission is focused on providing their audience with alternative media that does not receive any funding from political parties or any Arab media organizations that may influence their coverage of news (Daraj Media, 2020). They also claim that one of their most significant goals is to share the truth with the public, and the topics covered are mainly related to the marginalized communities or underrepresented social issues in the country such as women's rights, gender, climate change, and other topics. Not all of their content is done by them as they collaborate with other outlets. The co-founders of Daraj are Hazem AlAmin, Diana Moukalled, and Alia Ibrahim who worked in the journalism field for several years. On their "who we are" page they include the name of organizations that donate to them which are three: Open Society Foundations, International Media Support, and European Endowment for Democracy.

## **Raseef22**

Raseef22 was launched in August 2013, and it claims to be the first independent digital media outlet in Lebanon. This media outlet claims that it was the first regional media to focus on underrepresented communities such as women, religious minorities, the LGBTI community, etc. Although there were limited resources, Raseef22 assumes that it succeeded in inspiring journalists to work with them and stand against the traditional media that works in favor of the status quo (Raseef22, n.d). This outlet claims that it is not affiliated with any political party or businessmen, nor is it funded by states or religious institutions, and that it is independent and has decision-makers from all sects, social and economic backgrounds, and educational levels

(Raseef22, n.d). According to Raseef22 (n.d), its supporters are several regional and international organizations such as IMS, ICFJ, Open Society Foundations, and other organizations.

### **Megaphone**

Megaphone claims that it is an online independent media platform and its main goal is to “bring Lebanese politics closer to audiences that feel alienated by traditional media”

(Megaphone, n.d). Like other alternative media outlets, they claim that their coverage focuses on the ignored groups in society. They started as a Facebook page and then widened their presence on their social media platforms (Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, and website).

According to their “About Us” page (n.d), they claim that they are politically independent.

However, they have main sources for funding which are The European Endowment for Democracy, International Media Support, Open Society Foundation, Samir Kassir Foundation, Canal France International, The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, and The Asfari Foundation.

### **The Public Source**

The Public Source claims to be an independent media outlet that focuses on releasing investigations on major topics related to the social, environmental, and political spheres in Lebanon (Public Source, n.d). On their “About Us” page they state that their main mission is to reveal the abuses done by the political power and work on providing credible news. As it was established, The Public Source follows a non-hierarchical and voluntary system (The Public Source, n.d), and their funding is from Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung's Beirut Office, International Media Support, and Medico.

## Methodology

Collectively, this paper aims to look into the political economy of five major Lebanese alternative media. And to conduct this analysis I needed a research method that would provide me with diverse information related to my main topic. Thus I conducted a content analysis on articles from five alternative media outlets that I researched their political economy 961 News, Daraj Media, Raseef22, Megaphone, and The Public Source. According to Krippendorff (2018), content analysis is considered to be “one of the most important research techniques in the social sciences” (p. xii). Berelson (1952) states that: “Content analysis is a research technique, for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication,” (p.18). It means that content analysis is a tool that is used to study, observe and interpret content that is produced by means of communications such as articles, movies, and other communication forms. It helps to detect the presence of themes, biases, and words in qualitative data. And the content analysis process is divided into three steps sampling, coding, and interpretations (Seale and Tonkiss, 2012 as cited in Brylla, 2018). In my research, the sampling is articles from five alternative media outlets, and coding and interpretation is the search for the presence of the themes: political biases, affiliations, and the portrayal of political parties in the articles and analyzing them. I chose two articles from each media outlet. I chose to analyze the content of the media outlets: 961 News, Daraj Media, Raseef22, Megaphone, and The Public Source because these outlets have a high number of followers on their social media platforms, and are known by the Lebanese society. The time frame was 2019-2022, from the beginning of October 17th. And I searched for articles that talk about October 17th events and the involvement of the Lebanese political parties in these events so that I can check how the media outlets are presenting the political powers, whether objectively or were they biased. The analysis was based on checking

the words and themes of articles that show political bias and how the political parties were portrayed. Before I start my content analysis, I looked into the political economy of the five alternative media outlets, so that I can examine if they have certain affiliations and political agendas.

Besides the content analysis, I started an Instagram page and a feature story that will serve as my multimedia component for this Capstone project. The Instagram page is named "mediaVerse " which aims to educate the audience about several terms in the media field and introduce knowledge about political economy, funding, and political agendas. Major alternative media outlets are present on Instagram, and their audience mainly follow them on their Instagram pages; thus I chose to start my page where the audience of alternative media outlets are highly circulated because they are my primary target audience. Also, I wrote a feature story that focuses on showing how Lebanese media experts and political analysts define alternative media and the effect of funding on how alternative media outlets cover the news. It aims to reflect how Lebanese alternative media works according to experts within the media field.

### **Coding Rules:**

Category: Under what category the media outlet put its article.

Visuals: The images and videos included within the articles show any biases.

Biases: words that the author uses show bias towards a certain group.

Author: writers of the articles because not all of them are journalists.

Political affiliations: any political affiliations presented by the author.

Foreign funding: the money that the media outlet receives from other countries.

### **961 News**

Article 1: Why the Lebanese Revolution Doesn't Need Leaders..Yet.

Article 2: Russia and U.S. Are Fighting Over the Lebanese Revolution

### **Daraj media**

Article 1: Lebanon Uprising: On a Headless Revolution

Article 2: The October 17 Revolution has someone to represent it

### **Raseef22**

Article 1: How did the Hezbollah media Distort the Lebanese Revolution?

Article 2: Hezbollah and the October 17 Uprising.. The first week's vows

### **Megaphone**

Article 1: Outside and Inside in the October Revolution

Article 2: October 17th and the Ghosts of March 14

### **The Public Source:**

Article 1: Beyond Charity: Our Critical Need for Mutual Aid (Part 1 of 2)

Article 2: The People Want.. Social Justice! The October 2019 Social Movement and the Impact of Aid Politics in Lebanon

	961 News		Daraj media		Raseef22		Megaphone		The Public source	
	Article 1	Article 2	Article 1	Article 2	Article 1	Article 2	Article 1	Article 2	Article 1	Article 2
Year of publication	2019	2019	2019	2022	2019	2022	2019	2020	2020	2020
Category	Opinion	News	Event	Event	Politics	Politics	Analysiss	Analysiss	Dispatches from the October 17 Revolution	Dispatches from the October 17 Revolution
Presence of political affiliations	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Biases	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Visuals	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No

### Content Analysis

The article titled “Why The Lebanese Revolution Doesn't Need Leaders... Yet” (2019) from 961 News highlights the protests at the beginning of October 17th events in Lebanon and the absence of a leader for these protests. The article’s opening sentence claims that the foreign media consider the protests in Lebanon do not have a leader. Anthony Kantara, the author of this article and the owner of 961News, in the whole article uses words that imply their support as a media organization for the protests and calls them a revolution. He constantly uses phrases such as “ Lebanese revolution is special,” “natural ultimate reaction,” and “ the revolution is an idea, a dream, a vision” that show the alignment of this media outlet with what was happening on the streets. In addition, the article focuses on the idea that the Lebanese protests should not have a leader because if a leader comes, the political parties will have the opportunity to control the

protests. The author claims that people are brainwashed by the idea that they should be following someone since historically people were ruled by a leader. The author insists on the same idea through many sentences such as “We don’t need one right now,” “We are not used to leading ourselves,” and “You are the leaders”. The content of this article suggests to the audience that there should be no leader for this movement, and showcases the failure of the political system in Lebanon. Moreover, the author accuses the government of being corrupt and blames the political parties for the struggles the people are facing. This article is under the “Opinion” category; however, it is written by the owner of the outlet which shows the agenda of the media outlet itself. There is no presence of biases towards any political party; however, the author showed that he opposes the elite. In the article, there are three videos and two images embedded. The videos are shared from their Instagram page and show the support of people from different countries to the protesters and how the Internal Security Forces are also helping the protesters. The images are from the protests. The first one shows the protesters with the Lebanese Army; however, the second image which is inserted at the end of the article shows someone who has food on a table and is offering it to the protesters for free. On the table, there is a sign that says “Free food, Not from an ant embassy”. This image can be interpreted from two angles. The first way someone will understand this image is that the protesters do not need the support of any embassy or leader to be on the streets. The second way can be understood from the angle that the media outlet is claiming that the protests are not funded by anyone. During that time, there were accusations that the protesters were driven by a party or Western country to cause chaos on the streets (The New Arab, 2019). However, there was no evidence that it was not funded, and in this case, the media is responsible for showing if it is funded or not instead of raising claims without clear proof.

The second article by 961News titled “ Russia and U.S. Are Fighting Over the Lebanese Revolution” (2020) discusses the intervention of external powers in the protests in Lebanon during the October 17th events. The article begins with an introductory paragraph that implies several countries are competing to influence the protests in Lebanon. This sets the aim of this article as being critical of the involvement of foreign countries in Lebanon’s political affairs. The article represents what is happening in Lebanon as a proxy war between international powers rather than a grassroots action and movement by the people. In one of the sentences, the author claims that the Russian government “invalidates” the Lebanese revolution. However, there was a statement for Russian Minister Mikhail Bogdanov that was quoted in the text, which shows Russia’s support for Lebanon’s independence and stability. This presents a contradiction between what the author is claiming and the Russian’s Minister stance on Lebanon’s protests. Then the article presents the United States' position towards Russia’s accusations. The spokesperson of the U.S. has reported that the U.S. assists Lebanon financially, as stated in the article. The representation of the U.S. suggests a positive view of its involvement in Lebanese politics. At the end of the article, the author raises a question: “Where did all that money go when Lebanon is bankrupt?!” without providing a clear answer to it. The image included in the article is a collage of the U.S. spokesperson and the Russian minister, besides a photo from the protests. Some embedded posts from Instagram and Twitter are statements on behalf of each government. Although the article states that the U.S. has rejected the claims of its intervention in Lebanon’s ongoing protests, the author states that Lebanon has received funding from the U.S., but he does not know where the funding has gone. This contradicts what the media outlet presented in the previous article. In the first article, the author claimed that the protests are led by the people and not controlled or funded by a political party or external power. However, in this article, another



author is stating that the Lebanese government is receiving funding from the U.S. but did not propose the possibility that this funding was involved in the protests.

The second media outlet that its articles will be analyzed is the Public Source. The article titled "The People Want ... Social Justice! The October 2019 Social Movement and the Impact of Aid Politics in Lebanon" (2020) discusses the patterns and the outcome of the aid distributed in Lebanon. Throughout the article, the author remains neutral in terms of political affiliations or biases. It is mainly an informative text that presents the effect of aid on the Lebanese economy. However, the article does show some criticisms of the politicians who implement "sectarianism" and "clientelism" while guiding aid distribution. The author argues that such implementations have caused the loss of resources, poverty, and empty promises. Due to this, there was social unrest that contributed to the October 17th events. The image included at the top of the article is a scene from the ongoing events in October 2019 and does not show something controversial or biased. The article affirms that to solve the economic crisis and achieve the protesters' goal, there should be an intervention by the International Monetary Fund or other organizations that may support Lebanon financially. However, the article suggests that the intervention of such agencies will contribute to the continuity of nepotism and corruption in the Lebanese political system.

Another article from The Public Source titled "Beyond Charity: Our Critical Need for Mutual Aid (Part 1 of 2)" (2020) discusses charity and mutual aid and their differences, and how sects play a major factor in the distribution of resources. The article highlights the disparities in receiving aid and the negative impact it has on marginalized communities. Throughout the article, the language is carefully selected to reflect the author's stance on the topic. Words such as "ignored," "oppressed," and "excluded" are used to represent the unequal distribution of resources among different social classes. The article argues that the old forms of charity reinforce

systemic inequalities because they give wealthy donors the authority and management over how funds are distributed. The article also presents a persuasive argument for mutual aid, using phrases and words such as “self-sustaining,” “build communities of solidarity,” and “reduce the coercive power.” In the article, mutual aid is described as a way for communities to be self-sufficient and is unlike charity because it resists oppressive structures by the government that maintains inequalities. The article also highlights that the aid offered during October 17th events was “free legal aid” and the people on the streets were only helping each other. This claim denies any intervention of foreign funding or the involvement of political parties in the protests. The text also discusses that local communities that are organizing aid and providing it to the protesters are small; thus, people have to organize their work to maintain long-lasting networks. The author assumes that mutual aid is the best way that would support the protesters. The image included at the top of the page shows women who are packing donations. There is a caption under the image that says the donations are from Dafa, an NGO for the politician Paula Yacoubian. The article calls for the protesters to have mutual aid instead of referring to NGOs because they are politicized. At the same time, the image is for a donation from an NGO that is owned by an MP who has a political agenda. This indicates a contradiction between the content of the article and the image and shows confusion about the author’s perspective on aids. Overall, the language used emphasizes the significance of mutual aid instead of the traditional forms of charity. The author is persuasive and tries to support his argument by providing evidence from October 17th events to support his claims. However, the image can skepticize the credibility of what the author is saying in his text.

The two articles chosen from Raseef22 discuss October 17th events and Hezbollah’s relation to it. The first article titled “How did the Hezbollah media Distort the Lebanese

Revolution?” (2019) focuses on showing how Hezbollah’s media channel Al-Manar was covering October 17th events. The author states that Al-Manar was standing by the protesters’ side and raising their demands; however, after a few days, it started showing its real intentions regarding the protests. Then the author discusses how Al-Manar intended to make accusations that the protests are led by partisan forces and international powers. He continues to claim that Hezbollah’s media aimed to distort the image of the “revolution” as he named it. Additionally, the author uses phrases such as “Hezbollah's media portrayed it as a result of foreign political interference,” “soft power complemented by the hard power of some parties,” and “knowing that the revolution is an exceptional event in the history of Lebanon” to defend the claims regarding the intervention of foreign countries in the track of the protests. As he continues, the author accuses Hezbollah of portraying a negative image of the protesters and convincing Shiites to oppose the protesters. Regarding the image, the background shows Hezbollah’s flags and a TV that has Al-Manar’s logo and a scene from the protests which presents the content of the article. In conclusion, the article shows bias against Hezbollah and aims to attack this political party instead of presenting the portrayal of the October 17th events on all media channels.

The second article from Raseef22 Titled “Hezbollah and the October 17 Uprising.. The first week’s vows” (2022) discusses Hezbollah’s intervention in the October 17th events. The author begins by stating Hezbollah’s perspective on the October 17th events and quoting Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, who discussed that there are no embassies behind the protests. Then the author moved to talk about Al-Akhbar newspaper which he says is close to Hezbollah and states that in the first week of October 17th events the newspaper was not covering news related to Hezbollah’s allies. But, later it started critiquing other political parties and mainly the Lebanese forces. The author highlights one of Al-AKhbar’s articles which argues

that the protesters are divided. Part of them are demanding their rights and the other part is led by the Lebanese forces and Kataeb. In addition, the author raises a claim “Nasrallah placed Hezbollah in a position similar to that of the ruling party, the force qualified to maintain the political system” that he interpreted from a speech from Nasrallah. The image in this article shows cars that have Hezbollah’s flags and some people who are holding signs that show their support for Hezbollah. In the text, the author says that the Shiites were split into several groups. There is part of them that is called “Embassies’ Shiites” who were attacked by Hezbollah members as he claims, another part who are Shiites that were coming from Khandak El Ghamik and Ring’s Bridge, and another group of people who were supporting the protesters and had been physically abused. The author of this article is negatively portraying the involvement of Hezbollah and Shiites in the protests. In addition, the author was focusing on the battle between Hezbollah and Lebanese forces.

Another article from Daraj Media “Lebanon Uprising: On a Headless Revolution” (2019) discusses the October 17th events and their effect on the political scheme in Lebanon. The author starts by claiming that the revolution is not led by anyone “It is a free revolution! The absence of clear leadership is its strength”. Then the author talks about the importance of the continuity of the “revolution” as she calls it, and the resignation of the government does not mean the success of the “revolution”. The author is urging the public to keep on participating in the protests. In addition, she highlights that the biggest loser of the government’s resignation is the former Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil. Next, she states that the other loser is Hasan Nasrallah and says “For the first time, Nasrallah's word was dropped so clearly.” As she continues, the author claims that during October 17th events, the protesters were attacked by Hezbollah and Amal Movements. In addition, she argues that there is a part of Shiites who started opposing their

political parties; however, the Shiites will take time to turn against their parties. She adds that Hezbollah is unable to use its weapons against the Lebanese if they are united. The author also described the Sunni political parties as “Sunni monster” whose power was absent in Tripoli during the protests, and described other areas like Nabatieh, Tyre, and Baalbeck as “threatened areas”. She claims that political parties in these areas control the people and prevent them from participating in the protests. And she adds: “ Any TV channel can be afraid and withdraw from Nabatieh, but it cannot control those who hold the microphone in Tripoli...” The images within this article show protesters from October 17th events with only the Lebanese flag. The author in this article is showing her opposition to two main sects, Sunni and Shiite, and their political parties. She claims that these parties have failed in preventing the protests, and they do not allow the people from the areas they control to protest.

The article “ The October 17 revolution has someone to represent it” (2022) from Daraj Media was written after the new parliamentary elections. The article claims that the “revolution” now has representatives in the parliament and contributed to the exclusion of some ministers who the author called “obsolete tools”. And he says that this mainly affected the Shiite duo and Gebran Bassil. He started talking sarcastically about how the Lebanese politician, Mohamad Raad, treated the legislative authority as if it is the Al-Ahed football team that is affiliated with Hezbollah and Al-Mahdi Scouts. Then he discusses that it is unusual for Hezbollah to lose seats in the parliament, and despite this, Shiites are still supporting their political parties which means the “miracle” is not achieved yet. The author also states that Gebran Bassil’s main problem is not the “revolution” and he is facing an “American-Israeli war”. Then he says: “Gebran Bassil does not need Israel to destroy the Free Patriotic Movement, Gebran Bassil is enough”. The image at the beginning of the article is for several members of the parliament that claim they are

independent and represent the “revolution” in the new government. However, all these members have hidden political agendas and affiliations. In conclusion, the author of this article was trying to show that the biggest loss in the elections was for the Shiite duo and Gebran Bassil and that the “revolution” became more powerful. He clearly shows bias against specific political parties, neglecting other parties.

Another media outlet that highly covered topics related to the October 17th events is Megaphone. One of Megaphone's articles, titled “Outside and Inside in the October Revolution” (2019) explains the external and internal interference in October 17th events. The author started by stating how Hezbollah and its supporters are against the “revolution”. He raises a question that he claims that many protesters are asking: “Why do Hezbollah loyalists go so far as to consider the Lebanese revolution a conspiracy against them...” The author uses phrases such as “violent reaction,” “attack on the demonstrators,” “they are Shiites like them” to claim that people affiliated with Hezbollah were going on the streets and brutally attacking the protesters, even the Shiites. Then the author highlights the Iranian involvement in the Lebanese political system, describing it as a negative intervention of “militias,” “Holy Trinity,” and “turns our country with American approval and support, into a platform for attacking Arab countries.” In addition, the author assumed that what is happening in Lebanon is similar to what happened in Iraq since Lebanon has become occupied by the Iranian powers and under American cover. As he continues, the author discusses that to achieve a civil state, sectarian relationships among leaders should be destroyed including Hasan Nasrallah. This article does not include any images or videos. Overall, the author was attacking Hezbollah and Iran and blamed these powers that they are negatively affecting the “revolution” and the political system in Lebanese generally;

thus, he is convincing the audience to resist these powers so that Lebanon can become independent and the “revolution’s” goals can be achieved.

Another article by Megaphone titled “October 17th and the Ghosts of March 14” (2020) under the Analysis category, focuses on the March 14 alliance and how the October 17th events contradict their goals. The author refers to the years after the Taif agreement when several corrupt acts were revealed. He provides examples only for corrupted companies that were affiliated with Hariri. The author also claims that the March 14 alliance was spreading hatred toward Palestinians and Syrians and that the alliance’s media promoted “Shia phobia”. He states that Samir Geagea, president of Lebanese Forces continuously attacks the Syrian regime. Moreover, the author discusses that this alliance tried to promote itself as “non-violent”; however it failed because, during October 17th events, the security forces and the police who come under the Minister of Interior which is affiliated with the March 14 alliance, have shown “violence” towards the protesters. The author ends by saying that the March 8 alliance is also involved in corruption; however, this alliance has supported the “revolution” since day one. In conclusion, the author’s main argument focused on showing that Hariri’s political party, The Future Movement, is not an advocate of the October 17th events, and the March 14 alliance was trying to portray itself as innocent and not involved in the government’s corruption although it is aligned with the state’s fraud.

### **Discussion**

Based on the content analysis and overview of the funders of the five media outlets it seems that the alternative media outlets contradict their missions. Firstly, according to the “About page” of all the media outlets, they claim to be independent; however, on the same page,

three media outlets share the name of their funders. The funding of Lebanese alternative media outlets is majorly foreign, and its impact varies. On the one hand, Lebanese alternative media outlets may struggle to afford their financial needs, so they may resort to foreign organizations that would support them financially. However, in this case, these outlets cannot call themselves independent if they do not have editorial and financial independence. The foreign funding of alternative media outlets raises concerns regarding their editorial independence and bias. The media outlets may promote a particular agenda or specific interests of their funders, which may not necessarily align with their interests. In addition, the funding comes from external powers that have foreign policy interests; thus, it can create a foreign influence on Lebanon's media sphere. The articles analyzed to show that the media outlets have political agendas since their coverage of the October 17th events is fragmented. Out of the 10 articles, one article is under the category "opinion"; however other articles are under categories such as politics, events, and analysis. Thus, the media outlets are presenting their opinion and ideologies as facts for the public. The majority of these outlets targeted specific political parties, mainly Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement. Several foreign countries are considered enemies of Hezbollah and its allies; thus, these governments tend to misrepresent Hezbollah in their media. And through funding to local media outlets, they succeeded in distorting this party's image even in Lebanon. The constant focus on Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement in the Lebanese alternative media outlets shows the bias towards these parties and the media's blackout of other political parties. Consequently, the outlets frame the news in a way that aligns with the agendas of the funders. In conclusion, alternative media outlets in Lebanon claim that they are independent and not affiliated; however, their content contradicts their claims and reveals their biases. Alternative media outlets should emphasize credibility, and objectivity and provide a narrative that opposes



the mainstream media to serve their mission and should take into consideration the impact of funding on their editorial work.

### **Limitations**

Although this research provided a detailed description of several terms and Lebanese alternative media outlets, there are some limitations. While conducting the literature review, the research that has been used is all done by Western universities or publishers which can discuss terms from a Western point of view which may also not apply to the Lebanese media case. Also, the paper only analyzes two articles from five media outlets. And the results found do not affirm that the whole content of the outlets is similar, and the bias of these media outlets does not provide a representation of all the alternative media in Lebanon. In addition, there is no research on the political economy of the Lebanese alternative media which lessens the credibility of the final results. And, most of the research that the paper relies on is old research since there is not much new research that defines alternative media and mainstream media.

### **Conclusion**

There is constantly a misuse of certain words, especially in the media sector. The terms that I explained at the beginning of the paper are commonly used by the public, which is unconscious of their exact meaning. According to previous studies, there is no literal definition for these terms. However, there are common characteristics that scholars look into while defining these terms. Concerning the term alternative media, research shows that it mainly refers to the outlets that cover the injustice of the governments, social movements, and any other news from an unbiased perspective. Some scholars define alternative media as independent media. Being an independent outlet means it is financially independent, but Lebanese alternative media outlets

receive funding from many organizations. Thus, these two terms should be separately defined. And mainstream media is also sometimes called traditional media since it follows the old ways of covering news, and other scholars explain it as a platform for the elite to promote their agendas. The Lebanese media system is mainly a democratic one that opens the space for both mainstream and alternative media to be consumed by the public. After the problems that Lebanon faced since 2019, alternative media has imposed itself as a main communication tool in the country. After examining the funders of the five alternative media outlets and their role in shaping the news, it signifies that funding plays a crucial role in the attitude of media outlets toward specific issues. The majority of the funding for these five outlets was Western (mainly European). The funders are affiliated organizations that work on promoting their political motives indirectly and through these outlets. Due to the heavy reliance of the alternative media on Western funding, they are working under the control of funders and promoting their biased ideologies, which was present in the articles I analyzed. As the Lebanese government cannot secure financing for these institutions, these outlets look for alternative resources which are mainly Western support. Also, there is a major point that future research should focus on which are the biases of alternative media towards a specific political party which is the Shiite duo (Hezbollah and Amal Movement) and the Free Patriotic Movement. The alternative media are not just biased towards Hezbollah in their news, but they also tend to promote false accusations about it, and without talking about any other political party. This will shift the public's view to be more concentrated on one political party and neglect the negative action of other political parties. As alternative media, if they tend to criticize political parties, they should criticize all the parties in the most objective way possible. My study aimed to explore the relationship between foreign funding and the coverage of news by alternative media. This is the first study to investigate the

fundings of Lebanese alternative media outlets and their promotion of political affiliations and agendas. By exploring the foreign organizations, choosing samples from several alternative media outlets, and analyzing their biases, I was able to establish a relationship between the political economy of alternative media and changing the narrative. Based on my study findings, there are some suggestions for future research. Firstly, it would focus on strategies that alternative media outlets can follow to maintain financial stability rather than relying on foreign funding. Secondly, it may discuss the effect of alternative media biases on the public's opinions. Thirdly, future studies could provide content analysis on articles that discuss events other than October 17th, or analyze more articles on the same topic. Finally, alternative media has a major impact on the public, and the audience should be aware of potential hidden agendas and biases. By understanding the involvement of the funders in the media outlets' work, the public can begin to be media literate and address biases.

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## Appendix:

Interview questions for the feature story:

1. What is your definition of alternative media?
2. Do you think alternative media outlets are being biased? If yes, in what terms?
3. How does the political economy of alternative media outlets affect the representation of the political parties in Lebanon?
4. What is a major political agenda you think alternative media outlets are promoting?
5. How do media outlets work on distorting some political parties' images in Lebanon?
6. How do alternative media outlets' biases affect the public's opinions?
7. What challenges do alternative media outlets face?
8. Who are the most influenced by alternative media outlets?

Links for the multimedia components:

**Instagram page:** <https://instagram.com/the.media.verse?igshid=NTc4MTIwNjQ2YQ==>

### Feature Story

English version:

[https://medium.com/@shazawa24/the-perils-of-alternative-media-uncovering-the-hidden-funders-agendas-634a553e5f6f?source=friends\\_link&sk=e534d7f7cd879362e652e6c31a7a680e](https://medium.com/@shazawa24/the-perils-of-alternative-media-uncovering-the-hidden-funders-agendas-634a553e5f6f?source=friends_link&sk=e534d7f7cd879362e652e6c31a7a680e)

Arabic version:

[https://medium.com/@shazawa24/8-حدين-للمجتمع-ذو-سيف-البديل-الإعلام-bd7866f039b?source=friends\\_link&sk=2d8b9841427dc09310120ebf1ece50ec](https://medium.com/@shazawa24/8-حدين-للمجتمع-ذو-سيف-البديل-الإعلام-bd7866f039b?source=friends_link&sk=2d8b9841427dc09310120ebf1ece50ec)