

On New Media and Creativity in Lebanon

People in Lebanon are obsessed with their country. Technological networks have become sites where utopian models of Lebanon are continually being shaped. However, when interacting with these networks, the active citizen is often passive in receiving content. Many people in Lebanon are generally very receptive to mass media and the huge amount of often contradictory information it provides. Consequently, personal identities are blurred.

One trap many fall into is fragmentation of their identities. Some are ready to defend a new but fake identity, although its real owner may have thrown it away and the new owner found it somewhere in the information-sphere. Real values can be found within one's "deeper" (cultural, national and familial) identity, not only in one's economic value. The economy can change rapidly in a lifetime, unlike one's "deeper" and real identity. Subjects discussed over a morning coffee with neighbors were once static but have now become varied, variable and scrambled, depending on the media perceived on the screen.

Turning points in Lebanese social behavior include the introduction of the satellite dish, Short Message Service (SMS) and the mobile phone. A 60-year-old woman who once sat on her balcony, observing and even supervising activities taking place in the street below, noticing the tiny changes and micro-events happening here and there, now has a new favorite spot at home: on the sofa in front of the TV set with its wide choice of satellite channels. The (literal) Lebanese term for this is "sitting in front of the 'Dish.'" The large variety of channels has provided this person with a new way to spend her spare time. This citizen needs to find ways to fill the emptiness of what is left of her life: what remains after a spouse's death, children's marriages, children's trips abroad for work or study; what remains after the role of telling stories and leading discussions in the family is eclipsed and defeated by new technologies. This citizen, like many others, is convinced that academic study in Lebanon is good, but not good enough. Work in Lebanon is also fine, although it is not always available or safe due to uneven security and the fluctuating economic climate. Thus, young people leave Lebanon for good in order to seek stability, security and a better future for their children. They seek a second nationality; a sort of social security document enabling easy evacuation from the country should another war start. Then, in their absence, the parents of these young people start to enjoy the multitude of channels . . . hundreds, even thousands of channels!

Once they become channel-zappers they are no longer desperate Lebanese. They have a reason to live again. They wake up in the morning and start zapping. The remote control becomes their favorite tool. Even if they do not know how to fully use its features, they are at least able to locate the channel and volume buttons. Once they become advanced zappers, they discover that they can zap whenever they feel bored. Zapping thus becomes a means to escape boredom, control the media and react against the passivity associated with TV. These viewers keep zapping and only stop for brief moments to watch fragments they find interesting. They enjoy these "peak points" that connect them to life. Each peak point is a link followed by the search for another peak point. There is a red alert, however, whenever the next link is hard to find. This creates some mutuality between the viewer and the broadcasting company providing the content. Because the viewer uses the moving images to construct

a new, coherent, although edited, meaning, the broadcasting company has to provide interesting quality content, and the viewer has to hunt for it. Hence, hunting is added to zapping.

The ever-changing screen illustrates how broadcasting companies now promote their programs to these active viewers, who continue to avoid bad content and search for good material. In addition to rerunning a program up to five times a day (in order to satisfy viewers who might live in as many different time zones), broadcasting companies have fully invested in the loop tactic, that is, continuously showing the same movie in loop mode. Thus, each time the viewer clicks on a certain channel, he will get a fragment of a movie he traditionally would have viewed from beginning to end, just as in a movie theater. Nowadays, zappers will inadvertently view many fragments from such a movie. Then, eventually, they realize that it is in fact the same movie being shown over and over again on the same channel.

This repetition or loop mode, however, does not incite them to ask any questions. To them, it is the local cable guy who is running the same movie again and again and not the channel itself; they think this Lebanese guy ran out of movies or maybe does not know that he is showing the same movie again. They might even call him and notify him of this technical problem with his cable connection. In other instances, however, some viewers may not find themselves bored with the repeat viewing; they actually enjoy it. While they would not enjoy the movie itself, they do enjoy the looped movie. It is absolutely a new mode of perception, a new meaning for images on the screen, because for the viewers, these are forgotten moving images, or simply the only images that the cable guy has to offer. They watch the movie to express their solidarity with him.

Big broadcasting corporations also replicate traditional marketing strategies to deal with zapping. Zapping can be compared to an individual shopping in a *souk*, a market. The shopper can pass from one store to another in order to seek better quality and better prices. Whether or not this person knows that all these stores belong to the same trader/owner does not matter as long as the product being sought can finally be found. Similarly, whether or not it is the same broadcasting company that runs all these channels is not really an irksome question; a company can easily announce that it runs many channels, each dedicated to a specific genre: movies, songs, cartoons, etc. Consequently, the same company will show many fragments viewed by different zappers, albeit on different channels. So, for broadcasters, zapping is not considered a means of “escape” because of a major motivating element: money. While it is certain that ads will generate material benefits for broadcasting companies, the more profitable source of money is the viewer him- or herself—for example, the woman who wants to communicate with her daughter living abroad. Now, with SMS technology, she can send a message to her daughter in the United States to tell her how much she loves her. The SMS message can be sent through a TV channel, which presents the message on a scrolling marquee at the bottom of the screen when the message is sent to a specific 4-digit number.

The mother now waits for the message to appear . . . for a new meaning to appear. Suddenly, her message is on TV! She is famous! She is also someone who has done something. She simply exists now, in this tiny but nonetheless precise moment of media power. She is no longer waiting on her sofa for her death. From now on, life means a lot to her; these SMS messages become the oxygen she breathes to carry on. They replace the children with whom she cannot play, for whom she cannot make sandwiches, and anyone else to whom she might ever have been close. The SMS concept thus operates as a nerve that has one of its roots in the strength of love.

In addition, SMS use and zapping add a dimension to TV viewing. SMS users shape the style and identity of channels: Zappers know the subject of each channel by reading SMS messages scrolling at the bottom of the screen. Since the viewer now enjoys looking at the screen much more than before because of the scrolling messages, these messages have been inserted into all sorts of TV programs. As they become more active and less passive, viewers want to express their power over TV by affecting stories, results and realities via SMS. A major reason why this option is enabled for viewers is to generate more money for broadcasting companies. The cost of each SMS message is divided among all those entities that make up the working mechanism of the technology network industry.

It is noteworthy that a single on-screen horizontal line showing SMS messages has proved not to be enough: Space is now always available to insert more horizontal lines for scrolling SMS messages. Thus, one line is now reserved for private messages; a second is for news; a third is dedicated to celebrity news; a special space is reserved for “matching tests” that measure compatibility based on a couple’s names; another space is used to show pictures and names of ringtones that can be downloaded to mobile phones; a space is reserved to enable special song requests; another space is left to display political candidates for whom people might vote; and yet another special space is used for playing games! Consequently, the screen is covered with SMS messages of all sorts. However, one means to cope with all those spaces and lines is to use anamorphic framing, leaving black spaces available for SMS messages and topics. Music channels have become famous for this phenomenon because they are the channels that use SMS strategies the most. Nowadays, a video-clip director tends to use anamorphic framing to satisfy SMS users. This is how economics and global networking affect ad strategies, which in turn affect the aesthetic choices of the screen’s composition.

In fact, SMS mass-voting for this or that result greatly enhances nationalism among the Lebanese people. It may be assumed that, in a vote for a Lebanese singer versus a singer from another country, any citizens of the latter will vote for the non-Lebanese candidate. Lebanon is a small country in terms of population. This means that if the Lebanese candidate wins, people will believe that art and creativity still exist, and this is what made people from other countries vote for the Lebanese candidate. However, if the Lebanese candidate loses, the Lebanese will become furious against the voting system and even against the fanaticism of the citizens of the other candidate’s country. There is no democracy there, only fanaticism and totalitarianism, as can be proven by many facts, such as this or that president or governor’s offer of free-of-charge SMS votes for his country’s candidate. The fact that the number of Lebanese voters is much smaller than any other country’s voters guarantees the victory of the non-Lebanese participant. Likewise, if a Lebanese citizen prefers to vote for a foreign candidate and his patriotic friends learn about this, they will try to raise his awareness of the duties that bind him to his country. If this citizen is convinced, he will double his votes to make up for the votes he gave to the other candidate, and will continue voting to increase the Lebanese candidate’s chances of winning. Such examples show the implicit belief that, to the Lebanese, the concept of democracy—where the largest number wins—should never be applied, because it would put an end to minorities, which would be practically annihilated. SMS messaging makes the Lebanese people conscious of the dangers of mass voting and referenda, given the fact that Lebanon is based on an unstable equilibrium between Christians and Muslims—especially since all factions consider themselves majorities in Lebanon. However, playing the role of a minority has its own specific contexts; for example, when that role is considered to serve the best interest of the community. In Lebanon, anything can be taken both for what it is and for its opposite. SMS messaging, in this manner, indirectly promotes (a) the need to maintain self-security and (b) the lack of complete trust in the government. Information and communications technology (ICT) has shaped a new perception of received ideas in Lebanon. For example, the 1975 Lebanese war still does not have an official written history, or one affirmed by all sectors of Lebanese society. With the Internet, however, innumerable versions of the 1975 war are widespread. Thus, today, when one sees a possible trace of this war (a physical injury, a psychological trauma), one tends to ask whether this trace is due to the war itself or to something else (some accident or personal experience) that has nothing to do with it. In other words, access to information on a network introduces new possibilities for new explanations and discoveries that a Lebanese person might never have thought about. This is also the case for current Lebanese sociopolitical events.

Social relations in general operate in a manner similar to the practice of SMS communication on the TV screen discussed above. Many couples maintain their relationships through technology networks—especially given that cohabitation is not widespread in Lebanese society, and partners are apt to live in different countries for work or other economic purposes. Lebanese people also meet in cafés and nightclubs. There the youth seek any possible type of relationship that could be maintained by networking, which also helps to create relationships in the first place. Many Lebanese couples first met on the Internet. The network thus operates

as a place for “e-face-to-face” relations advancing the relationship through network mechanisms, such as the temporality of the network in question: non-real-time e-mails, delayed text chatting and voice chats, and emoticon and avatar practices. Although distance does not have a significant effect on the chat mechanism, people prefer to chat with people located in the same geographical region, because the main goal in chatting is to meet a partner face to face and get married. It is also noteworthy that men who work abroad remain connected to their wives in Lebanon through the media: That is, the network plays the role of sex replacement.

Chat rooms have, in addition, become venues for casual on-line sex. Although families used to monitor their children’s actions more successfully, parents find themselves unarmed when facing the Internet. Since the parents are not technologically savvy, their children develop parent-free spaces on-line. The number of girls having lesbian sex in Lebanon is decreasing, because girls who are overprotected by their parents no longer have to divert their sexual urges toward their girlfriends or to resort to hidden real-life hetero-relations. Nowadays, with the Internet, romantic communication environments are safer, easily accessed and wider in range. Text-based relations are safer in this context, unlike 2D/3D avatars; when used to simulate real-life behaviors, these latter can visually render what is going on in a manner that is clear enough to the children’s parents or others around them.

The language of globalization today is English. While parents in Lebanon are fluent in French, a language they mastered before the age of globalization, during the period of the French Mandate in Lebanon, English is the language used in chatting. Also, chat users have established numeric codes for those Arabic phonemes that have no equivalent Latin symbols; this also is a practice foreign to parents.

The positive effects coexist with side effects that are not very pleasant: New media technologies such as mobile phones create nerve problems that prevent people from moving certain organs, such as their fingers. Child-parent relations can also be affected. Everything is fine as long as the children can watch their favorite cartoon shows. Sometimes, however, the local dish provider may have a technical problem that causes the loss of transmission, or the provider may simply lose connection with the satellite when the electricity goes off. If this happens during peak times, a sub-community is formed: parents shouting, complaining and begging the owner of the dish to solve the problem quickly because their children are deprived of their favorite cartoon channel and are crying, panicking, getting hysterical. Parents worry about how this may affect their children’s mental stability in the future. The psychological consequences of such an obtrusive event can be overwhelming. Children may think that their parents are behind the cut transmission. Parents can easily feel this tacit or explicit accusation and want to remove the guilt they suddenly face.

Globalization and ICT in Lebanon have resulted in changes to habits of interaction with traditional and new media. One can mention the creative phenomenon of the consumer, who tackles issues of temporality and continuity as well as of fragments and intervals in order to seek a better life in an unstable sociopolitical and cultural environment. Eavesdropping and voyeurism have changed the perception of private and public spheres. Global tendencies and forces have shaped the local behavior on the ground, forming the basis of human evolution and knowledge. Whether humanity is facing an autoimmune syndrome or actually progressing toward utopia, the breakdown of social cohabitation in Lebanon is preciously maintained and frozen into a continuous struggle over power and belonging, while the country still seeks a minimally habitable model.

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