

## **Television and Public Action in the Beirut Spring**

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In February 2005, Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, was killed by a bomb targeting his motorcade. Hariri's death catalyzed an unexpected popular uprising in Lebanon, in which protestors insisted to know the truth behind his assassination and, blaming Syria as the culprit, demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. It also resulted in the formation of a coalition of Muslim and Christian factions, who declared themselves the 'opposition' to the government and eventually played an active role in steering the uprising that they came to term the 'Cedar Revolution'. The uprising brought together Muslim and Christian Lebanese citizens, who converged on downtown Beirut in a series of demonstrations between February and April 2005. That period of public action is referred to in this chapter as the Beirut Spring. Coverage of the demonstrations and other incidents of public protest related to Hariri's death dominated the airwaves of Lebanese television.

Television in Lebanon remains in the hands of political figures with diverse agendas. All television stations other than the state-owned Télé-Liban are commercial and privately owned. Terrestrial channels in operation during the period in question were: LBCI, affiliated to the Christian Maronites; Future TV, owned by the family and associates of Rafiq Hariri and second only to LBCI in terms of audience reach; NBN, a channel affiliated to Nabih Birri, the Shiite speaker of the Lebanese parliament; New TV, run by opponents of the Hariri government; Télé Lumiere, a Christian religious channel;

and Al-Manar, the commercial channel owned by Hizbullah. All the channels, apart from Télé Lumiere, offer mixed programming, presenting news and current affairs as well as talk shows and entertainment programmes, from live entertainment to soap operas. Television is Lebanon's most popular medium; almost every house in the country has a TV set.<sup>1</sup> The chain of public protests that the country witnessed marked a transformation of the role of television, and the media in general, in Lebanon. For the first time, television spoke for the Lebanese public, and the public was able to speak through television. This chapter charts and analyzes this change in the relationship between television and the public in Lebanon during the events of the Beirut Spring.

Nabil Dajani's work on the state of the Lebanese media just after the end of the 1975-90 civil war reveals how much room there was for this relationship to change. In a work published in 1992, Dajani wrote:

The Lebanese media... have contributed to the alienation of the citizenry by not helping them participate in the affairs of their society. This alienation takes place by making the citizenry feel that they are distant and separate from the political process in society. The common Lebanese citizen cannot find in the content of the mass media any relationship to real life problems. He/she realizes that what the media tell them about what is happening in their country is beyond their reach.<sup>2</sup>

When Dajani revisited this study a decade later, he reached a similar conclusion. He wrote that television still did not address the need for different sectarian groups in Lebanon to unite. The media, he argued, still focused on the 'disorienting views of the

different political, sectarian, and ethnic groups ... and consequently ... failed to bring about national accord'.<sup>3</sup> While this chapter does not argue that a media revolution took place in Lebanon in 2005, it does identify the Beirut Spring as a media landmark that challenged what Dajani had only recently described as the status quo. The chapter starts with a brief exploration of theories about the role of visual media in social change and goes on to examine the Beirut Spring as an event in which both television and the public took an active role. It shows how television was used as a symbolic battlefield between the different actors in the protests, and how the Beirut Spring, as a television event, calls for some refinement of our understanding of media events and their relation to physical public space. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the uprising and its aftermath, and considers the nature of the relationship between these events and the democratizing potential of the media.

### **The power to show**

Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as 'a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion'.<sup>4</sup> Monroe Price elaborates that the public sphere is 'a zone for discourse which serves as a locus for the exploration of ideas and the crystallization of a public view'.<sup>5</sup> He agrees with Habermas that the public sphere should have a 'limiting effect on the state'.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the public sphere is seen as a space where people may organize themselves into a counter-hegemonic force,<sup>7</sup> and where 'access is guaranteed to all citizens' so they may 'confer in an unrestricted fashion'.<sup>8</sup> An idealized public sphere thus ensures the availability of undistorted information to all citizens, enabling them to communicate and

engage in political decision making.<sup>9</sup> This is why it is regarded as an essential requirement ‘for the conduct of a democratic polity’.<sup>10</sup> Democracy here is defined as those ‘procedures for arriving at collective decisions in a way which secures the possible and qualitatively best participation of interested parties’.<sup>11</sup>

John Hartley writes: ‘The public domain is in modern times an abstraction; its realm is that of representation and discourse, it is graphic and photographic but not geographic’.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the public sphere, as a representative space, is ‘literally made of pictures’.<sup>13</sup> Media institutions and media representation are meanwhile seen as forming important dimensions of the public sphere,<sup>14</sup> insofar as they are able to contribute to democratic practice by informing the public about the political structure and enabling them to engage with this structure. Democratic practice makes a number of demands on the media: surveillance of the sociopolitical environment; agenda-setting of key issues; platforms for expression by politicians and interest groups; space for dialogue between power holders and the public; a watchdog over the performance of officials; involving citizens and ensuring their activity; upholding their independence; and respecting their audience.<sup>15</sup> The visual media are seen as having the potential to play a crucial role in sustaining democracy and even in creating social and political change.<sup>16</sup> Television, in particular, has been identified as the primary medium in such a process. For example, Pierre Bourdieu argues that television’s visual nature marks its uniqueness in creating social change.<sup>17</sup> As he puts it, the ‘power to show is also a power to mobilize’.<sup>18</sup>

One way in which mobilization can take place is through what Nicholas Mirzoeff terms the ‘visual-popular’, meaning the way people are brought together by shared

images.<sup>19</sup> Mirzoeff's term is based on Antonio Gramsci's concept of the national-popular, which refers to how popular culture brings together disparate groups in a nation.<sup>20</sup> Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz have also shown how television serves as a medium of national integration. They coined the term 'media event' to refer to televised happenings that have an assimilating impact on the nation, because they interrupt routine and are broadcast live by all television channels simultaneously.<sup>21</sup> Such events, although organized by the establishment, have the unpredictability that goes with live broadcasts. Yet Thomas Meyer prefers the term 'pseudo-events',<sup>22</sup> to emphasize the artificial nature of events that are politically staged. In view of such potential contradictions, Margaret Morse's concept of 'televisual event' is useful,<sup>23</sup> since it distinguishes between the staged media event and the televisual event, which is spontaneous. Morse argues that televisual events occur when a media event is disrupted. In this sense, the Olympics are a media event, but the Romanian revolution of 1989 was a televisual event due to its spontaneous domination of the Romanian television broadcasts. In this case, the underlying assumption is that the camera can be used as a weapon, that

the camera as an *active* mass tool of representation is a vehicle for documenting one's conditions ... ; for creating alternative representations of oneself ... ; of gaining power (and the power of analysis and visual literacy) over one's image; of presenting arguments and demands; of stimulating action; of experiencing visual pleasure as a producer, not consumer, of images; of relating to, by objectifying, one's personal and political environment.<sup>24</sup>

What these theories also have in common is the challenge they present to arguments such as those of Jean Baudrillard, that today we live in a world saturated by images that have no resemblance to any outside reality.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, they challenge Thomas Meyer's view that the visualization of culture has resulted in viewers' unquestioning acceptance of images and paralysis of their 'critical faculties'.<sup>26</sup>

### **The active role of television**

Several local commentators' instinctive response to Lebanese television's extensive coverage of the rallies in downtown Beirut in March 2005 echoed Bourdieu's argument about television's power to mobilize and Hartley's comments about the role of journalism being to visualize the 'truth'.<sup>27</sup> Ghassan bin Jeddou, chief of Al-Jazeera's Beirut bureau, said on March 1st that the Lebanese 'intifada' (uprising) had used the Ukrainian Orange revolution as a template, and he praised the opposition for being media-savvy.<sup>28</sup> On March 4<sup>th</sup>, *Al-Safir* journalist Zainab Yaghi highlighted the changing role of television by arguing that the Lebanese audience wanted to 'see' to believe. In her opinion, in today's visually saturated world, 'history is seen, not told'.<sup>29</sup> Evidence also suggests that the Lebanese media, and television in particular, not only enjoyed the power to mobilize but actively used this power.

The protests in downtown Beirut created a convergence between public space and the media space in the sense that television gave the public access to salient political issues. For a whole week after Hariri's assassination, the leading Lebanese channel, LBCI, focused on the crime and related issues, including the protests in downtown Beirut. It continued to devote a significant portion of its airtime to this coverage during

the Beirut Spring. Hariri-owned Future TV went even further. Almost all its airtime was used to cover Hariri's killing and its aftermath for a full 40 days after it happened. After that the issue continued to dominate the station's schedules. Both LBCI and Future appealed to the audience not only through news reports and political programming but also through popular culture products specifically aimed at mobilizing the public behind the protest at Hariri's assassination. Contestants on LBCI's reality TV show *Star Academy* gathered together to sing a song specially commissioned as a tribute to Hariri. Future TV gave significant airtime to video clips devoted to Hariri, with a number of songs sung by former contestants on its own reality television show, *Super Star*, such as singer Ranin al-Shaar.

Both stations deliberately contributed to a new public discourse in which Martyrs' Square, where the protests at Hariri's killing took place, became known as Freedom Square. In place of their usual practice of referring to downtown Beirut as 'Beirut Central District', they started to call it *al-balad* (city centre), which was the area's colloquial name before the civil war. Ever since the post-civil-war reconstruction of downtown Beirut, the area had come to be popularly known as either 'Downtown' (in English) or 'Solidère', after the name of the company (largely owned by Hariri) that rebuilt the centre. By resurrecting the term *al-balad*, television stations seemed to be trying to reconnect with the public, invoking a lost language relating to a shared experience of a time before the civil war.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, television played a role in mobilization through its dominant images, which were those of the Martyrs' Square protestors. The images were often panoramic ones taken from high-rise buildings surrounding the area, and therefore dramatized the events by showing the vastness of the demonstrations. They

became a symbol for the ability of the crowd to say things an individual cannot say,<sup>31</sup> and therefore to create a change in the political landscape.

There was also an element of calculated mobilization in the way television stations sought to bring audiences together and create a sense of collectivity among them. Because of what was being shown live on television, politicians and people relied on the medium to create a sense of connectedness. Live television connected the public to events and fulfilled the need felt by members of the public to connect themselves with others through those events. Television's creation of collectivity manifested itself in two ways: a focus on religious togetherness through the representation of Lebanon's diverse religious symbols, and an emphasis on national unity through the representation of national symbols. The first method was seen as early as Hariri's funeral on February 16th, which was a public, not a state funeral, and drew thousands of mourners. Hariri was buried next to Al-Amin mosque, which he was building near Martyrs' Square. Television images included that of a nun and a Muslim sheikh praying side by side at Hariri's grave. Pictures of the gathering at Hariri's grave a week after his death showed a man carrying a cross, a Quran and a Druze skullcap. In the coverage of later protests, people who had painted a crescent and a cross on their faces became a familiar sight on television screens. This marked a significant departure from custom and practice on Lebanese television during the years since the civil war, when media personnel shied away from alluding to the country's different religious affiliations in the same report. As Dajani had noted, television previously never represented a Christian and a Muslim together in the same program.<sup>32</sup>



National togetherness was meanwhile portrayed visually through the striking imagery of the Lebanese flag. After Hariri's funeral, the Lebanese flag started to have a prominent presence in the downtown Beirut protests. Protestors would carry the flag or even wear it on their heads. The flag dominated the space of downtown Beirut and beyond, being hung from buildings and perched on car aerials. Again, this was in stark contrast to norms during and after the Lebanese civil war, when Lebanese people had been alienated from their flag and their nation. With the country fragmented, the flag was a marginalized and empty symbol, seen only inside government buildings and at official ceremonies. Like the lost moniker *al-balad*, the Lebanese flag was resurrected during the Beirut Spring as a symbol of the pre-war nation. It finally gained acceptance as a sign of national unity, its presence symbolizing the need for the Lebanese to come together at a time of national crisis. Television camera crews clearly contributed to this as they picked up on the imagery in covering the events.

Television, through its persistent and blanket coverage, also played an indirect role in connecting the Lebanese people. Viewing live television is partially motivated by the 'need to know others are watching at the same time'.<sup>33</sup> Or, as Claus-Dieter Rath puts it, '[t]he experience of watching television may... be described not so much by the words "I see", as by the words "I am among those who will have seen"'.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to Dajani's assessments of the Lebanese media in the early 1990s and early 2000s as being party to a process of fragmentation,<sup>35</sup> television's representations of the crowds, the religious symbols and the flag in the Beirut Spring played a key role in creating a sense of community.

## **The active role of the public**

What is significant about the role of television during the Beirut Spring events is not only its reflection of the events, or even its attempt at mobilization of the people, but also its use by the people themselves. In other words, not only did the media seek to mobilize the audience, but the process also worked in reverse, in that the audience mobilized the media. Much has been written on the role of the public in the creation of mass media messages. Such writings tend to converge on the idea that the public plays a limited role in this context, which in turn has serious implications for the role of the media in creating a public sphere. For example, Price argues:

Broadcasting often creates the illusion of a public sphere ... [I]n the ideal public sphere the reader or viewer is an engaged participant; in the simulated model, the audience takes part in the debate only vicariously, only as spectators.<sup>36</sup>

Others agree, saying that people ‘mainly figure... as the recipients and users of visual culture’.<sup>37</sup> Members of the public are defined as being an audience as well as citizens, with a separation between each status.<sup>38</sup> It is their *response* to media messages that is seen as determining the extent of their participation in making political judgments.<sup>39</sup> What those arguments imply is that first, the public are consumers of media messages, rather than creators. Secondly, there is a distinction between media consumption and citizenship. And thirdly, the public’s role is limited.<sup>40</sup> As Michael Gurevitch and Jay Blumler argue, ‘[o]f the three main elements in a political communication system — politicians, journalists, and audience members — it is the audience that ... is least powerful’.<sup>41</sup> In other words, at best, the public’s role is seen as merely to receive media messages, whereas the role of agenda setting falls to the media, since theirs are the

frames that ‘define problems ... diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies’.<sup>42</sup> By presenting their own frames of events, the media not only ‘have the power to be selective about what is covered but also the power to interpret events and issues’ for the audience.<sup>43</sup>

The Beirut Spring events and their interaction with the media complicate the above arguments. The events marked a challenge to the idea that the media always have their own separate role in framing events, because the Lebanese protestors participated in framing the events by communicating directly with the audience through the television cameras. The public/audience acted as a creator of media messages. Direct audience participation in the media events meant the audience was not just ‘active’, but also ‘acting’.<sup>44</sup> This activity blurs the lines between spectatorship, consumption and citizenship. The protestors used text to address both other citizens and the state through the media. The use of text was through the carrying of placards and posting of signs carrying written statements. The earliest attempt by the public to send messages intended for television (and press) cameras took place on the day after Hariri’s funeral. Television stations showed a young man carrying a sign in English saying ‘Enough’ at Saint George, the site of Hariri’s assassination. Soon similar textual messages would spread across the demonstrations and the public spaces in downtown Beirut. Large black and white posters were stuck around the statue in Martyrs’ Square, spelling out ‘The Truth’ in Arabic and English. The use of Arabic and English continued during the demonstrations, not only signifying Lebanon’s linguistic hybridity but also the intention of protestors to communicate through television with an audience beyond the Arab world.

The proactive use of text was coupled with proactive use of images, which reached a climax on March 14th. Following a pro-Syrian demonstration in Riad al-Solh Square on March 8th, opposition leaders called for an even bigger one on March 14th, one month after Hariri's assassination. That demonstration was the climax of the events of the Beirut Spring. The heavy reliance on and use of media messages by protestors on March 14th illustrates Bourdieu's argument that demonstrations have to be produced for television in order to be effective.<sup>45</sup> The March 14th demonstration presented the protestors as having a high degree of media literacy. They appropriated familiar media discourse and used it in a new context. Texts from popular advertisements were used to comment on the political situation. The slogan 'Keep walking' from a television advertisement for Johnny Walker whisky was used on a placard, on which the map of Lebanon was drawn, with the Syrian map to its right blacked out, and an arrow pointing in the direction of Syria, signaling to Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon. An advertisement for the fabric detergent Persil was used for the same purpose. A placard carrying the picture of what looked like a box of Persil declared '1559 removes them from the Beqaa, all the Beqaa'. This play on the slogan about Persil's power to remove stains alluded to UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. But it also contained a pun on the name of Lebanon's Beqaa valley, with its significant Syrian military presence, and the Arabic word *boqaa*, meaning stains.

Popular culture also provided a reference for the slogans. A line from a song by Madonna, 'Papa don't preach, I'm in trouble deep' was written on a placard carrying the photographs of Syrian president Bashar Assad and his late father Hafez, the former

president. The words ‘We surprised you, mooo?’ (‘mooo?’ is colloquial Syrian Arabic for ‘no?’) were written in black and white on several placards, using the punch line in a popular joke to refer to the Lebanese people’s defiance of Syrian dominance. The use of posters carrying pictures of wanted criminals, familiar from the film genre known as Westerns, also provided an inspiration. Some demonstrators carried a photo of then Lebanese Minister of Justice, Adnan Addoum, seen as collaborating with Syria, captioned with the word ‘Wanted’. Some also carried photos of Lebanese president Emile Lahhoud and of Assad with the caption ‘Sign Out.net’, a phrase familiar to the millions of users of Microsoft’s e-mail facility, Hotmail. The images, beamed across the Arab world through LBCI and Future TV’s satellite channels, as well as through pan-Arab channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, were striking in their ‘peaceful’ nature. As Ghassan Rizk commented, the public protests were a first for the Arab world; by the end of February, 100,000 people were demonstrating without any confrontation with the state.<sup>46</sup> The power of the people was at the time hailed as having a great impact on democratization. Satellite television was regarded as a facilitator for this phenomenon to spread across the Arab world.<sup>47</sup>

### **The ‘television-scape’ as a field of battle**

The television-scape during the Beirut Spring was used as a symbolic field of battle: between the opposition leaders and the public; between the opposition on one hand and supporters of the Syrian presence on the other; and between television stations that backed the opposition (Future Television and LBCI) and those that did not (NBN, New TV and al-Manar). Opposition leaders and the public battled over the steering of the

Beirut Spring events. Dissatisfied with the spontaneous public protests, political leaders actively tried to direct the mass gatherings. On February 26<sup>th</sup>, they organized the formation of a human chain composed of 30,000 people carrying the Lebanese flag, which extended from Saint George to Martyrs' Square. Future TV covered this event, and aired a speech by MP Ghinwa Jalloul in which she proposed that the protestors needed new slogans to chant. In this way the slogan 'Freedom, Sovereignty, Independence', which opposition leaders had initially taught to the protestors on February 18<sup>th</sup>, turned into 'Truth, Freedom, National Unity'. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, opposition leaders organized the formation of a human mosaic in the shape of the Lebanese flag near Martyrs' Square. Politicians also used television to send other non-verbal messages. Rafiq Hariri's sister, MP Bahia Hariri, started wearing a blue badge signifying 'the truth' during her television appearances. All presenters on Future TV later started to wear the badge too. In an episode of LBCI's talk show *Kalam En-nas* (People's Talk) on February 28<sup>th</sup>, politician Samir Frangieh waited until he was live on air to carefully wind a scarf in the colours of the Lebanese flag around his neck.<sup>48</sup>

The beginning of March marked a media contest between pro- and anti-Syrian demonstrators over the same symbols and issues. The saturation television coverage of anti-Syrian demonstrators did not go unnoticed by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who announced that he was well-versed in camera techniques. He accused Lebanese television of zooming their cameras in on the Martyrs' Square crowd of protestors to make the crowd look bigger than it actually was. On March 8<sup>th</sup>, Hizbullah took part in organizing a pro-Syrian demonstration that was given as much airtime by Lebanese stations as the anti-Syrian protests in downtown Beirut. The pro-Syrian demonstration utilized the same

symbols as the anti-Syrian protestors. Religious symbols were deployed to signify the agreement of all Lebanese factions on their loyalty to Syria. A number of demonstrators were shown carrying a Quran and a cross at the same time. And although the demonstration saw a lesser presence of the Lebanese flag than in the opposition gatherings, the flag was still used as a background in signs carrying slogans such as 'No for [sic] the Foreign Interference' and 'Thank you Syria'.

The Lebanese flag had also been invoked just two days earlier, when Hizbullah's Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah was seen speaking on television with the Lebanese flag as a background. Instead of the usual Hizbullah flag, which was this time placed marginally to the right of the Lebanese flag and was barely visible on screen,<sup>49</sup> the Lebanese flag was taken to signify the national loyalty of the pro-Syrian Hizbullah. Placards carried by March 8<sup>th</sup> demonstrators reinforced the meaning of this symbolic message when they declared 'No to divisions among the Lebanese'. To refute the accusation that Syria was responsible for Hariri's assassination, the March 8<sup>th</sup> demonstrators carried placards demanding 'We want to know the truth'. They likewise emphasized Lebanon and Syria's affinity against outsiders through placards stating 'No to American intervention'. Perhaps most interestingly, the demonstrators carried signs saying 'Zoom out USA (camera)', in a direct reference to Bashar Assad's comment on camera 'bias'. The opposition's response to the March 8<sup>th</sup> event was to organize the March 14<sup>th</sup> demonstration, in which participants responded directly to Assad's allegation about camera angles and the use of 'Zoom Out' signs by the pro-Syrian demonstrations. Some placards instructed the television cameras to 'Zoom out and count'. One placard commented directly on the demonstration itself as a television event, carrying the Arabic words 'isn't the

demonstration obvious [a phenomenon]?’ (the words for ‘phenomenon’ and ‘obvious’ are the same in Arabic).

Lastly, there was a symbolic battle between different Lebanese television stations. The events of the Beirut Spring were significant in their interaction with Lebanese television because, although the channels remained faithful to the ideologies they represent, the events were something they could not ignore. With the exception of Télé Lumière, all the channels took part in covering the protests in downtown Beirut and related issues, and interrupted their normal schedules to air live footage of the protestors in downtown Beirut on March 14th. Differences in coverage, between Al-Manar, NBN, and New TV on one hand and LBCI and Future TV on the other, were seen most clearly in reporting of the pro-Syrian demonstration on March 8<sup>th</sup>. LBCI and Future Television, which supported the opposition, focused their cameras on Syrian nationals in the crowd, implying that Lebanese people generally were not participating in this event. In contrast, New TV seemed to be trying to present a progressive image of Syria’s supporters by singling out attractive women demonstrators to interview. The opposing television stations offered wildly different estimates of the number of demonstrators on March 8<sup>th</sup>; estimates reported by LBCI and Future ranged around 235,000 whereas Al-Manar, NBN and New TV put the number at 1.6 million.<sup>50</sup> It was later confirmed that there were some 300,000 people on the March 8<sup>th</sup> demonstration, compared with around a million on March 14<sup>th</sup>.<sup>51</sup>

### **The ‘Truth Camp’ as a public-private space**



By bringing about a convergence between media space and public space, the Beirut Spring events highlighted the importance of physical space to public action. Hartley has argued that democracy ‘is conducted through representations circulated in public, even though no public ... assembles in one place to constitute and govern itself’.<sup>52</sup> Yet what happened in Beirut relied on virtual (media) space and physical space being closely linked. Downtown Beirut became a space open to citizens from all factions, who could congregate there to air their views and exchange ideas with others about salient political issues. This was not the first time downtown Beirut had functioned as a physical public sphere. Samir Khalaf maintains that the events of the Beirut Spring were only the latest in a series of incidents in the history of downtown Beirut, in which it functioned as a forum for public action. From the anti-Ottoman national struggle between 1880 and 1908 to the struggle for independence in 1930s, to the student movement demonstrations in the 1970s, downtown Beirut has acted as a host for public protests.<sup>53</sup> The significance of the Beirut Spring was the return of the space of downtown Beirut to this role after 15 dormant years during the civil war and the 15 years that followed.

Also significant, however, was the way in which the Martyrs’ Square ‘Truth Camp’ challenged established ideas about boundaries between the public and the private and about the ‘*place of citizenship*’<sup>54</sup> as shifting from public space to the family home in modern times. On February 27th the Lebanese government declared Martyrs’ Square a no-go area as a general strike was announced. The army erected barriers around the square, allegedly to prevent people from gathering there. But a number of soldiers moved the barriers slightly, deliberately creating gaps that allowed people to ‘sneak’ inside. A planned demonstration was cancelled, but students decided to stay in Martyrs’ Square

and the Truth Camp was born. The next few days would see the erection of tents in the square, where demonstrators decided to stay until all Syrian troops would be withdrawn from Lebanon. Television cameras covered daily life in the camp as students and young people from different political parties in the opposition moved in. *Al-Safir* newspaper commented that it was as if the squares of downtown Beirut (Martyrs' Square and Riad al-Solh Square) had been transformed into television studios.<sup>55</sup> The camp protestors lived there 24 hours per day, transforming the site into one that was simultaneously private and public. This blurring of the lines between private and public prompted Rasha al-Atrash to refer to the television coverage of life in the camps as being similar to reality television.<sup>56</sup> Reality television combines drama with the voyeuristic pleasures of watching the 'real'. Arguably, television 'calls for *dramatization*'.<sup>57</sup> Drama in turn calls for '[p]rofound emotions about human triumph and defeat', following 'archetypal narratives' that present binaries such as friends and enemies, powerful and powerless.<sup>58</sup> The camp protestors in particular and the Beirut Spring protestors in general became protagonists in a classical narrative of good and evil. They were an illustration of Hartley's argument that today we only see the drama of democracy at times of social and political crisis.<sup>59</sup> The camp gave shelter to people from different political parties, and therefore functioned as a democratic public sphere because the citizens within it were equal in their representation of political interests and in their expression of opinions.<sup>60</sup> The camp also acted as a tool of material expression. It was used both functionally and symbolically, acting as a concrete expression of dissent that goes beyond the fleeting nature of speech.<sup>61</sup>

### **Aftermath of the Beirut Spring**

By the end of March the protests in downtown Beirut lessened and became more fragmented. Television's coverage of the events followed the same path. The beginning of April saw Future TV create another media campaign, this time aimed at reviving the ailing Lebanese economy that had suffered under the strain of the political crisis in the country. The campaign included the airing of short videos urging the public to visit downtown Beirut not as protestors, but as consumers. As Bradley Butterfield put it in an article on the aftermath of 9/11, the 'implicit promise ... is that to consume is to live'.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, Bahia Hariri launched a campaign to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. Up to that point, ignoring the civil war had been a defining feature of post-war Lebanese society — a feature which seems to validate the thesis that, in the creation of national memory, people 'are bound together as much by forgetting as by remembering'.<sup>63</sup> Bahia Hariri's campaign was considered crucial as the country was seen as being at risk of disintegration; the act of commemorating the start of war was presented as a warning against repeating past mistakes.

Future TV was the mouthpiece for this campaign. Instead of images of protestors carrying Lebanese flags, the channel used the flag as a motif in advertisements that it aired for a week-long commemoration to take place in downtown Beirut. This new project included sports, music and arts events as well as food and flower markets. A concert by Lebanese singer Majida al-Roumi took place on April 13th, the precise anniversary of the start of war, and was broadcast live on Future TV. The jubilant nature of the concert, which took place a few meters away from Martyrs' Square, was in striking contrast to the solemnity surrounding Hariri's grave and the Truth Camp nearby. LBCI

chose to mark the anniversary on April 13<sup>th</sup> by airing a game show entitled *See the Difference and Do Not Discriminate*, in which questions revolved around the theme of Lebanon's confessional diversity. The spontaneity of the Beirut Spring came to an end. Television time was devoted to politicians once again. While some engaged in giving familiar ideological speeches, others supplemented their words by performing symbolic acts. Thus Bahia Hariri was shown releasing a white dove during the commemoration week. Pop stars also benefited from the media exposure, and singers such as Nancy Ajram and Haifa Wehbeh were shown reading to children in downtown Beirut. People were still seen wearing the Lebanese flag as a scarf or a hat, but the flag was also used in advertisements for products ranging from banking services to cosmetics. The flag ceased to be a national symbol per se; it also became a fashion item and even a brand.

In the months that followed the Beirut Spring, Lebanon was to witness a series of assassinations of politicians and journalists that triggered a proliferation of smaller, shortlived 'Beirut Springs'. For short periods of time, television schedules would be interrupted so as to cover the funerals of Samir Kassir (*Al-Nahar* columnist), George Hawi (former leader of the Lebanese Communist Party), and Gibran Tueni (editor of *Al-Nahar*), as well as the public tribute to May Chidiac, a LBCI journalist and presenter who was severely injured in an attempt on her life. The funerals resembled the Beirut Spring protests in their public nature, but the Lebanese flag was by then slowly being dwarfed by the flags of different political factions, who used the occasions to get media coverage. Downtown Beirut gradually lost its role as a homogenizing space and instead became a source for 'reawakening segmented and parochial identities'.<sup>64</sup> A new government was elected in Lebanon and the United Nations released a report on the investigation into

Hariri's murder, but without thereby ending the dispute between pro- and anti-Syrian officials and their followers. Television meanwhile continued to try to mobilize people. An episode of talk show *Sireh w'infatahit* aired by Future TV on December 19<sup>th</sup> 2005 had the presenter Zaven Kouyoumdjian offer to bring members of the opposition and Hizbullah to the studio to air their views and reach a common ground. In instances like these, television tried to perform the democratic role still missing from the political realm, albeit to little or no effect.

## **Conclusion**

It can be argued that the Beirut Spring protests would not have had the impact they did had it not been for the media. Unlike state-sponsored media events, the Beirut Spring protests were controlled by the people and opposition leaders, not the government. They were important for the impact they had on the Lebanese government, in that they led to the resignation of members of parliament and the prime minister, and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon after three decades of occupation.

The Beirut Spring protests have elements of both 'media events' and 'televisual events'. Dayan and Katz argue that media events are the interruption of routine. They are live and unpredictable but monopolistic, as all television channels cover them simultaneously.<sup>65</sup> The Beirut Spring protests, as illustrated above, had all those elements. Dayan and Katz also find that, where media events invite a 're-examination of the status quo', they can be liberating for the people.<sup>66</sup> Their findings shed light on what happened during the Beirut Spring protests, except that in this case the protests themselves constituted a re-examination of the status quo. Reception of coverage of the protests in

people's homes also conformed to Dayan's and Katz's view that media events transform the home into a public space.<sup>67</sup> By the same token, the Beirut Spring events illustrated Margaret Morse's argument that the televisual event can turn viewers into 'on-screen protagonists'.<sup>68</sup> But given the relationship of mutual dependency and symbolic exchange between television and the protests in this case, it is perhaps more accurate to dub the Beirut Spring a 'television event'. A television event may be seen as sharing elements of both the media event and the televisual event, while at the same time differing from both. The Beirut Spring was staged not by the establishment but by the opposition. Whereas television was mobilized almost accidentally by protagonists in the Romanian revolution, in Lebanon the mobilization was direct, calculated and deliberate. In this sense, the suicide attacks of September 11th 2001, including specifically the televised collapse of the World Trade Center's twin towers, were also arguably a television event. In sharp contrast, the Beirut Spring protestors were peaceful. But they were notable for the degree to which they capitalized on television's power to show and mobilize.

Television contributed to the shortlived existence of a democratic public sphere during the Beirut Spring. Yet it is crucial not to overestimate the role of Lebanese television in the process of democratization, since prominent television images of protest do not in themselves bring about political transition. Images can perform a significant role in mobilizing people and providing means of expression, but they can also be seen as filling the gap left when major questions remain unanswered. White refers to the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle in 1986 as an occasion when images were relied on as substitutes for answers.<sup>69</sup> He quotes the news commentator Tom Brokaw, who explained why television stations repeatedly showed the same image of the shuttle

exploding by saying simply: 'What else could we do? People wanted answers'.<sup>70</sup> As Dayan and Katz have shown, images can act as catharsis for viewers.<sup>71</sup> In Lebanon, with no closure in the search for those who assassinated Hariri, Kassir, Hawi and Tueni and killed many others in the process, and with the internal clash of political ideologies unresolved, television images of a proactive public provided a glimmer of hope to the Lebanese audience and a chance for emotional release after the many years during which they were publicly mute.<sup>72</sup>

However, we cannot disregard the importance of the mediation of the Beirut Spring. Although the protests were an act of resistance in themselves, it is their mediation through television that became the focus of attention, making the narrative of the protests an event in its own right. This follows Lyotard's argument that stories neither follow the axis 'real history → narration → narrative' nor 'narrative → narration → referential history', but rather that there is a 'synchrony or total achrony of the story, the narration and the narrative'.<sup>73</sup> As a television event, the Beirut Spring protests carved a space in Lebanon's national memory. They did not act just as protests against the past and the present, but also as an example of the writing of history. The Beirut Spring was a television event that served as an 'electronic monument'. As such it has an effect on public memory, transforming what has been and what will come.<sup>74</sup> 'The event is the occurrence after which nothing will ever be the same again. The event, that is, happens in excess of the referential frame within which it might be understood, disrupting or displacing that frame'.<sup>75</sup> In this way, the Beirut Spring confirms Walter Benjamin's statement: 'History does not break down into stories but into images'.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nabil Dajani, Disoriented Media in a Fragmented Society: The Lebanese Experience (Beirut, 1992), pp 175-176.

<sup>3</sup> Dajani: 'Lebanese television', p 138.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'The public sphere: an encyclopaedia article', New German Critique, 3/1 (1974), p 50.

<sup>5</sup> Monroe E. Price, Television, the Public Sphere, and National Identity (Oxford, 1995) p 24.

<sup>6</sup> Price: Television, p 25.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Louw, The Media and Cultural Production (London, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Habermas: 'The public sphere', p 49.

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<sup>11</sup> John Keane, The Media and Democracy, (Cambridge, 1991), p168.

<sup>12</sup> John Hartley, The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media (London, 1992) p 36.

<sup>13</sup> Hartley: The Politics of Pictures, p 35.



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- <sup>22</sup> Meyer: Media Democracy, p 67.
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<sup>66</sup> Dayan and Katz: Media Events, p 20.

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<sup>68</sup> Morse: 'News as performance', p 218.

<sup>69</sup> Hayden White, 'The modernist event', in V. Sobchack, (ed.), The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event (London, 1996), pp 17-38.

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<sup>76</sup> Walter Benjamin, quoted in White: 'The modernist event', p 17.

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