

The Challenge of Media Quality and Ethics

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The amount of information available in the world today is more than significant than ever, with the advent of new communication technologies and twenty-four hour media coverage. Yet according to Antoine Messarra the important question is how to ensure across the media sphere the quality and the diversity of information. Taking the Lebanese example, Messarra stresses on the ethical role of journalists as opinion-shapers and observers of truth with an ever increasing responsibility to communicate the complexities of the Mediterranean landscape.

Media pluralism, easy access to information, multilingual traditions as well as the geographical location and quality of Lebanon as a crossroad of exchange and encounters make Lebanon special. According to the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll, more than 40% of the Lebanese have either heard or read in the media about facts and analyses which have positively changed or consolidated their perception of people in Europe. The average value in five other non-European countries is 31.9%. In Lebanon, sources of positive information are movies (15%), TV (57.8%), printed press (4.2%), documentaries (12.8%), blogs (1%), other web resources (6.8%) and the radio.

Evidently, the main sources of information are films and television. One would tend to rely on these data to assume that visual TV information is privileged, irrespective of the problem of quality and content of information on dialogue between the people offered by Lebanese and Arab TV channels in general. However, most substantial information on the Euro-Mediterranean space is to be found in supplements of Lebanese dailies. Additionally, a selection of European movies during 2009 has expanded the qualitative knowledge of culture and artistic creativity of other people. A series of conferences on Switzerland (Lebanese Association of political science and Swiss Embassy in Lebanon, 2008) were held in various regions of Lebanon. A cultural programme was also organized by the sports, cultural and social center of the Collège Notre-Dame de Jamhour called 'Flânerie à travers le monde' (Strolling across the world), France, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Spain, (Ateliers culturels, 2007-2008) to give the insight of a foreign country. Both activities were conducted to ensure delivery of qualitative information with a cultural character.

The Lebanese Public and Audience

One thousand respondents in Lebanon were surveyed through the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll, taking into consideration the relative representation of various social strata, the age pyramid, communities and regions.

To which extent do birthplace, migration, travel and knowledge of other countries influence the mutual knowledge among people and the positive perception of the Euro-Mediterranean space? The Survey question: 'Were you or one of your parents born in another country?' was met with a variety of answers, which showed that the ratio of people born abroad was small (2.9%), in spite of the strong tendency of the Lebanese to migrate. In comparison, the ratio of people born abroad in the 13 Euro-Mediterranean states was even smaller (1.9%).

In contrast, the ratio of born-abroad parents in the 13 countries was high (4.4%), given the strong professional mobility in the European space and was similarly high (3.2%) in Lebanon. When the focus is on Arab Mediterranean states other than Lebanon, mobility is relatively weaker, given that immigration from Morocco, Egypt and Syria is definitive.

Which foreign nationalities were the birthplaces of respondents and their parents? To rephrase the question, which foreign countries did respondents know best, at least by birth? The distribution of the countries of origin was widely diverse, encompassing 250 countries in various continents, and proved insignificant. The long percentage list is on the margin of the countries listed in the questionnaire since Lebanese immigration is generally definitive and Lebanese siblings born to migrant parents settle in the host country without ever returning to their homeland.

In response to the question: 'Do you belong to a particular religion or a religious confession?', only two Lebanese out of the 1000 respondents denied belonging to any creed. All other respondents declared belonging to a religious community. Out of the 13,116 respondents in 13 Euro-Mediterranean countries, 1431 (10.9%) denied belonging to any religion compared to 0% in Lebanon. The response to the question: 'Are you a true believer?' yielded a weak percentage (6.9%) for a total of 13 surveyed countries. Surprisingly, only 52 out of the 1000 Lebanese respondents (5.2%) declared

being true believers. This is even more surprising given that all Lebanese declared belonging to a creed. Could this indicate a regression in Lebanese faith towards a socio-political and cultural belonging? or could it point towards the progression of religious ideologies under the cover of faith, religious identities and 'soul-less' religions? This is beyond doubt the most surprising result in the Lebanese chapter of the Survey.

How did respondents rate themselves in terms of their standard of living: poor, rich or average? The question stated: 'Taking into consideration the various data, how would you rate the standard of living of your family?' The majority of respondents rated themselves at various levels of poverty (on a scale from 1 to 6), while only 360 respondents out of a total of 13116 (0.8%) rated themselves as belonging to the 'rich family' group. This observation is particularly significant because it indicates that, although the Euro-Mediterranean intercultural exchange favors mutual knowledge and understanding, it may give rise to perceptions of relative deprivation in case of acute socioeconomic divide between Euro-Mediterranean populations. The term 'relative deprivation' indicates the perception of the standard of living in comparison with people and groups with which the comparison is held, and not in terms of exclusively objective 'data' as in the questionnaire. How do Lebanese respondents rate the regions in which they dwell? A high ratio of respondents in the 13 countries rate themselves as living in rural regions (30.8%), while 6.3% of Lebanese respondents rate themselves as living in rural regions, 14.1% in small or medium-sized towns, 34.1% in the suburbs of a large city and 45.5% in large cities.

The geographical area of Lebanon is limited and, despite its poor public transport, urban proximity affects the geographical perception of vital space, even in the absence of sound urban infrastructure and technological equipment. More than half Lebanese respondents (58.3%) are married, and either maintain a family life (4.4% vs. 5.1% for the group of 13 countries), or are divorced (1.3% vs. 6.7% for the group of 13 countries). A total of 23.1% of respondent Lebanese are either job owners or freelance workers, employees (25.6%), in school or university (14.5%), home workers (27.1%), retired (4.2%) or jobless (3.4%). The career fields of the Lebanese respondents encompass agriculture (4.5%), industry (12.5%), administration (9.7%) and private enterprises (58.4%).

The excessive opening of the Lebanese to enemies and real or equivocal brothers (at the top of the survey scale) has cost them dearly in terms of independence and sovereignty of their small country. Such an excess must be constantly associated with a culture of legality, professional ethics and caution in foreign relations.

The gains of the Lebanese since February 14, 2004, with the Cedar Revolution, The Beirut Spring and The Independence

Intifada have been carefully targeted by expert politicians who excel in manipulating the masses. They have often delivered putschist speeches in the televised media and undermined republican values and the foundations of legality. This phenomenon is almost universal nowadays in consolidated democracies, as often seen in young or transitory democracies (Sciences Humaines, 2008)

Media and the Future of Democracy

Information in today's world is more geared towards the spectacular than the informative. In this context, the analysis of the role of information in promoting dialogue and intercultural exchanges must be more concerned with information quality and ethics, rather than flow, data, numbers and percentage values of receivers. The future of democracy depends on such qualitative considerations. The Anna Lindh Foundation aims at "sharing qualitative and plural information" (Mauriac, 1970). However, wherever media are free and multiple – particularly in Lebanon – public life pollution increases in the media, particularly in television. Aimless discourses are only a means to spread sterile debates which rely on such vocabulary that would be used in the pugilistic arena of power and mobilization conflicts. François Mauriac declares: "Politics have voided substance from language." (Issa, 2009). Progress in human and general science as well as in professions related to information and journalistic training is not always followed by improvement in quality information or in journalistic performance. Such progress is accompanied by further development of sophisticated manipulation techniques used by hegemonic powers and politicians in a policy that resembles more a spectacle than anything else. The Survey shows how poorly the media contribute to intercultural comprehension, if not downright negative when the message is conveyed via conflicting and debating speeches on TV. It also shows the importance of school and university education and the value of culture conveyed qualitatively via school books in the Euro-Mediterranean space.

Alfred de Vigny had already tackled the issue towards the middle of the 19th century when he wrote in his Journal the following about the press: "The press is a mouth forced open that has to speak all the time. This entails that it says a thousand times more than what it should and that it often talks nonsense and is extra vague ... The same goes for an orator, be it even Demosthenes, who is forced to talk without interruption all year long." (de Vigny, 1951)

Lebanese TV viewers have watched a verbal storm of artificially argumentative insults, putschism, fascism, Nazism and no-go in a TV series broadcasted in the Lebanese society which enjoys a heritage of pluralism, legality and conviviality, yet harshly aggressed by putschist tendencies following the terrorist attack against Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and his convoy on February 14, 2005. Never before, especially since the Spring of Beirut has the propensity towards rationalization

Lebanon - Public Information Initiative

In a multiple community pluralistic society such as the one encountered in Lebanon, insisting on diversity may contribute to fragmentation. Acting on what joins common and shared interests in the public scene, like daily relations between citizens and the administration, is a pioneering and normative action towards what approximates. More than fifty newspaper articles, radio and TV programmes by young journalists have become normative examples of genuinely public information, destined to public service users and neither official nor limited to officials. The programme was organized through the Lebanese Administration Rehabilitation Assistance Program (ARLA) in cooperation with the European Union. Themes were addressed in over fifty media productions: 'venture into public administration'; 'organisation of workspace and access to services'; 'administrative formalities'; 'how public service users in Lebanon are informed today'; 'journalists facing administrative information and news'; 'local news in Lebanon today'; 'communication between municipalities and local citizens.'

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been so widespread and daunting, with slogans, legal reform, reformation and ratiociner exaggeration (ratiociner is derived from Latin, ratiocinari, from ratio, reason, reasoning, losing oneself in endless reasoning and cinis-cineris, ashes). Rationalization has become the daily bread and butter of TV programmes which persistently hide the essential. Journalists who limit themselves into merely reproducing declarations of politicians are responsible and even accomplices and guilty ... Politics weave debate, manipulate national and elementary national reference and end up by uniformly brainwashing spirits in talk shows ... This anecdote of Woody Allen perfectly fits TV programmes: "In Hollywood, everything's clean. They don't throw away garbage. They use it for TV programmes."

Depollution of the Media Space

Journalists who believe that they are engaging into a democratic dialogue and debate face the risk of being exploited as a public tribune of pollution of the minds, spread of vulgarity and becoming a political spectacle. Is the journalist a passive robot facing insults and confronting menacing fingers, putschist talk and even trivialization of crime and terrorist attacks? Even apparently corruption denouncing and transparency promoting TV programmes introduce financial scandals in a game of power and competition stakes between politicians instead of focusing on investigating the effects of embezzlements on the quality of life of the citizens. Neutrality, objectivity, impartiality ... all – unfortunately – help camouflage the lack of professional rigor, the lack of authenticity, lack of ethical engagement. Journalists are neither passive robots merely conveying insults, nor a camera capturing pointing and menacing fingers, nor amnesiacs which moderate a televised debate in which politicians contradict their own declarations and programmes, nor moderators of a debate where politicians are confronting each other without even exposing a problem ... The problem!

TV media pollution has become the worst type of pollution. All that is needed is to reprogramme aimless spirits, in a totalitarian putschist version of the 21st century. The

'Journée des dupes' had only lasted a day, but certainly had long lasting consequences. TV night shows of today are likely to be a lifetime of hoax. Max Weber had insisted on the break – claimed to be civilized – between sense and existence. It is only through televised media that the risk is maximal under the apparent cover up of tele-reality. One has to scrutinize the reality of the real, armed with the virtue of caution (phronésis), a central piece of Aristotle's philosophy. In other countries, particularly in Europe, fundamental issues such as love and family, turn to fun in a cogitation supermarket and a generalized nonsense. Is TV information more geared towards amusement, shows and entertainment as Pascal meant it, rather than information? Credible, unless the person you are talking to is told that we are on a stage for debate and information and not a stage for exhibition or gladiator arena. Nothing could be performed with professional rigor and authenticity if, from the outset, one is not extremely strict in word usage. Talleyrand said it with the clairvoyance of a great diplomat: "Words were given to man to give him the chance to hide his thoughts."

Speech is not innocent. One must always be cautious, elicit it, but apprehend it discerningly, carefully, with a critical mind. We are witnessing and participating in – often without being aware – a pollution of republican values that are the essence of our society, with an unlimited propensity to rationalize. Journalists – especially those of televised media – report on declarations and cover facts. Journalists, as observers and witnesses, are called upon nowadays to be lucid careful witnesses. How difficult indeed it is, nowadays, not to be fooled!

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